

**AN EXAMINATION OF POSSIBLE CAUSES, EFFECTS AND SOLUTIONS OF
STUDENT ABSENTEEISM IN SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN
ZOMBA DISTRICT**

A Thesis

By

YAMIKANI DALITSO BWEYA

Submitted to the Faculty of Education

University of Malawi

In partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

(Sociology of Education)

APRIL 2009

CHANCELLOR COLLEGE

UNIVERSITY OF MALAWI
Chancellor College
Faculty of Education

We, the undersigned certify that this thesis entitled: **AN EXAMINATION OF POSSIBLE CAUSES, EFFECTS AND SOLUTIONS OF STUDENT ABSENTEEISM IN SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ZOMBA DISTRICT** by **YAMIKANI DALITSO BWEYA** is the student's own effort. It is submitted to the Postgraduate Studies and Research Committee and University of Malawi Senate with our approval.

Dr Jimmy J. Namangale
Main Supervisor

Date: _____

Mr. Demis Kunje
Co-supervisor

Date: _____

Dr. Bob. W. Chulu
Head of Education Foundation Department

Date: _____

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation entitled: **AN EXAMINATION OF POSSIBLE CAUSES, EFFECTS AND SOLUTIONS OF STUDENT ABSENTEEISM IN SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ZOMBA DISTRICT** is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted before for similar purposes to this University or any other institution of higher learning. Acknowledgements have been made where work from other sources has been used. I am responsible for both strengths and short-falls in this thesis.

YAMIKANI DALITSO BWEYA

Signature

Date

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my sons, Tikondwere and Mtendere, my husband Gilbert Chilinde, Mum, sisters Lucy and Florida for their untiring encouragement and moral support.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express profound gratitude to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology for paying my tuition fees, which enabled me to pursue the course. I also thank the Management of South East Education Division (SEED) for allowing me to conduct the study in their jurisdiction, teachers and students for their voluntary participation in the study.

Special thanks should go to my supervisors Dr Jimmy Namangale and Mr Demis Kunje for their technical and academic guidance throughout this study. Many thanks to all people too numerous to mention who provided constructive comments towards the production of this thesis.

ABSTRACT

Student absenteeism is a recurrent problem in Malawian schools despite various efforts within the country to fight the problem. Although there have been many studies on the problem worldwide, considerable knowledge gaps exist on the subject in Malawi because many of the available studies were conducted in primary schools. In a bid to feed into that gap, this study aimed at investigating the possible causes of student absenteeism; its effects on teaching and learning in Malawian secondary schools and finding possible solutions. Purposive sampling was used to select secondary schools, teachers and students in Zomba District. The study employed interpretive qualitative and quantitative approaches to collect information directly from affected individuals within the social context in which absenteeism occurs. The study revealed the underlying causes of student absenteeism as emanating from the institution due to problems related to subjects or teachers, school administration and inadequacy of school facilities. Students' laziness and tiredness, punctuality, peer pressure, home responsibility, lack of parental encouragement and poverty are among social and economic causes of absenteeism. It was established further that absenteeism has damaging effects on school image, effective teaching and learning that make it difficult for absentees to connect and understand lessons, use time effectively and lose interest in both learning and extra-curricular activities. The study suggests the need for the promotion of information flow between teachers, students, parents and the community, observation of work ethics, school rules

and regulations and community participation in supervising, monitoring and evaluation of both student attendance and teacher performance in secondary schools.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration	ii
Certificate of Approval.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgement.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	vii
List of Tables and Figures.....	ix
List of Abbreviations and Acronyms.....	x
 CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	 1
1.0 Chapter overview	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Background information	2
1.3 Definition of terms.....	4
1.4 Statement of the problem	5
1.5 Objectives of the study.....	6
1.6 Significance of the study.....	7
1.7 Problems and limitations of the study.....	7
1.8 Organisation of the thesis.....	8
 CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE RIVIEW	 9
2.0 Chapter overview	9
2.1 Incidences of student absenteeism	9
2.2 Empirical evidence on causes of student absenteeism.....	10
2.3 Empirical evidence on effects student absenteeism.....	14
2.4 Arguments on remedies for combating student absenteeism.....	16
2.5 Psychological and sociological theories of absenteeism	17
2.6 Theoretical Framework: Interpretive approach	21
2.7 Chapter summary	22
 CHAPTER 3 STUDY METHODOLOGY	 24
3.0 Chapter overview	24
3.1 The study area	25
3.2 Sampling design.....	25
3.3 Selection of study sites.....	26
3.4 Sampling frame.....	26

3.5 Data collection period and methods.....	27
3.6 Data analysis	29
3.7 Quality assurance mechanisms	29
3.8 Ethical issues.....	30
 CHAPTER 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS	31
4.0 Chapter overview	31
4.1 Characteristics of the sample	31
4.1.1 Respondents per class by gender	31
4.2 Forms of student absenteeism	32
4.2.1 Day absenteeism	32
4.2.1.1 Days students were likely to be absent	33
4.2.2 Lesson absenteeism.....	35
4.2.3 Gender absenteeism	38
4.3. Causes of absenteeism in secondary schools	39
4.3.1 Institutional causes of student absenteeism	39
4.3.1.1 Problems with the subject	39
4.3.1.2 Problems with the Teacher	41
4.3.1.3 Administrative problems	43
4.3.1.4 Inadequate school facilities	44
4.3.2 Social causes of student absenteeism.....	45
4.3.2.1 Laziness and tiredness	45
4.3.2.2 Punctuality	45
4.3.2.3 Home responsibilities.....	46
4.3.2.4 Lack of parental guidance	46
4.3.2.5 Peer and social pressure.....	47
4.3.3 Personal causes of student absenteeism	48
4.3.3.1 Lack of emotional control	48
4.3.3.2 Stubbornness	49
4.3.4 Economic causes of student absenteeism.....	49
4.3.4.1 Poverty	49
4.4 Place and activities students go and do when out of class.....	50
4.5 Impact of absenteeism.....	52
4.5.1 Difficulty to connect and understand lessons	52
4.5.2 Loss of interest in subjects	53
4.5.3 Poor performance in extra-curricular activities.....	53
4.5.4 Wastage of quality time for teaching	54
4.5.5 Damage to school image.....	55
4.6 Strategies to reduce student absenteeism	57

4.6.1 <i>Improvement of school facilities</i>	57
4.6.2 <i>Student supervision and counselling</i>	57
4.6.3 <i>Enforcement of the school rules</i>	59
4.6.4 <i>Participation in extra-curricula activities</i>	60
4.6.5 <i>Rewards and in service education and training (INSET)</i>	61
4.6.6 <i>Community empowerment</i>	62
4.7 Chapter summary	63
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION AND STUDY IMPLICATIONS	64
5.1 Conclusion	64
5.2 Study Implications	65
REFERENCES	64
APPENDICIES	75
Appendix 1: Student questionnaire	75
Appendix 2: Focus Group Discussion checklist	80
Appendix 3: Interview guide for the school head, subject and guidance teachers	81

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLES

Table 4.1 Respondents per class by gender	32
Table 4.2 Number of students who had ever skipped a day in 2007	33
Table 4.3 Number of lessons a student was likely to miss per week.....	35
Table 4.4 Reasons for skipping lessons	39
Table 4.5 Places where students go when out of class	50
Table 4.6 Activities students engage in after skipping a lesson	51

FIGURES

Figure 4.1 Days students were likely to be absent in all school categories	32
Figure 4.2 Lessons students skip frequently in all school categories	35

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ADEA	Association for the Development of Education in Africa
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
CRECOM	Creative Centre for Community Mobilisation
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GOM	Government of Malawi
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
INSET	In-Service Education and Training
JCE	Junior Certificate of Education
MOE	Ministry of Education
MPIF	Malawi Policy Investment Framework
MSCE	Malawi School Certificate of Education
NSO	National Statistics Office
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SEED	South East Education Division
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USA	United States of America

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter overview

The chapter introduces the study and the thesis. It gives the background, a statement of the problem, study objectives, significance and limitations of the study and outlines how the thesis is organized.

1.1 Introduction

Every child needs to acquire an education in order to participate meaningfully in social and economic development of a country (Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), 2004). Malawi is trying to achieve this by investing in secondary school education. The shared view among stakeholders in the education sector is that educated, skilled and better informed Malawians could contribute to the development of the country (Ministry of Education (MOE) and United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2004). Achieving this requires improving the education system in terms of equity, quality, quantity and access (MOE, 2000).

The Malawi Policy Investment Framework (MPIF) for education shows that government is interested to maintain increased access to education using appropriate mechanisms to reduce or eliminate absenteeism (MOE, 2000). These include increasing the amount of

time for study and class attendance, which are some of the important aspects for students to succeed in education.

However, provisions for increased access to education in Malawi are largely dependent on successful mechanisms that deal with problems of poor attendance, repetition and dropout levels among others (MOE, 2000). Some studies have shown that although students are enrolled for secondary education, the quality of education is affected by absenteeism due to loss of interest in education among students (MOE, 2004 and 2005a). Loss of interest in education among pupils follows a gradual process resulting in frequent then persistent absenteeism and eventual withdrawal from school (Reid, 1983).

Studies on absenteeism in Malawi have focused on the effects of pregnancy and HIV/AIDS on primary and secondary schooling (Chimombo and Chonzi, 2000; Kadzamira, Banda, Kamlongera and Swainson, 2001). However, there is inadequate empirical evidence on other causes and effects of absenteeism in secondary schools in Malawi as what is available is only contained in anecdotal reports. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to find out possible causes, effects and solutions of absenteeism to address the problem in secondary schools in Zomba District.

1.2 Background information

Student absenteeism has been a topical issue in education systems worldwide. Even in countries where education is free and compulsory at all levels, absenteeism remains a major concern. Studies have shown that countries like United Kingdom (UK) (Reid,

1985), Holland (Boss, Ruijters and Visscher, 1992), Australia (Rothman, 2004), Germany (Wagner, 2004) Lithuania (Liudmila, 2005), United States of America (USA) and Canada (Williams, 2008) have been trying to solve student absenteeism problem since the early 1970's and 1980's.

In the early 1970's, student absenteeism was observed to emerge from family, individual and social factors (Reid, 1985, 2005). However, in the 1980's studies shifted focus to schools and found that institutional factors were another cause of student absenteeism. The diversity of findings influenced changes and witnessed intervention programmes aimed at reclaiming the interest of students in schooling.

Studies in Europe (Dekalb, 1999; Wagner, 2004) reported that society was concerned with the problem of absenteeism. They argued that education enables successful personal integration in society and facilitates the realization of life opportunities. However, they also found that students who attend school irregularly are poorly socialised and are more likely to drop out of school. This shows that absenteeism may lead to development of social ills as school drop outs are likely to be unemployed, poor and engage in crime and drug abuse among others.

Nonetheless, Africa is no exception as a number of studies have revealed the same problem in Zimbabwe (Machingaidze, Pfukani and Shumba, 1998), Mauritius (Kulpoo, 1998), South Africa (Dunne and others, 2003), and Ghana (Etsey, 2005). Similarly, in Malawi, Milner, Chimombo, Banda, and Mchikoma (2001) observed that absenteeism

was a major problem in schools. The study indicated that the average rate of pupil absenteeism in primary schools was 3.7%. This was higher in comparison to other Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries like Zimbabwe and Mauritius whose averages were 1.5% and 1.2% respectively (Machingaidze et al. 1998; Kulpoo, 1998; Milner et al. 2001).

A study on differences in severity of the problem in education divisions in Malawian primary schools revealed that the rate of absenteeism for South East Education Division (SEED) was 4% ranking third compared to Central West and South West Education divisions whose rates were 3% and 3.1% respectively (Milner et al. 2001). Higher rate of absenteeism in primary schools in SEED raised questions as to whether similar trends could be observed in secondary schools. Further, student absenteeism could have detrimental effects if unchecked because education is an indicator of development. Therefore, the thesis of this study is that student absenteeism is reaching crisis levels in Malawi as compared to other SADC countries such that examining absenteeism in selected secondary schools in Zomba could identify possible causes and effects and suggest solutions to the problem.

1.3 Definition of terms

Research has shown that there is no single definition of school absenteeism and thus most researchers provide situation specific definitions. Boss et al. (1992) defined truancy as pupil absence during a lesson without a reason that is considered valid by the school. Reid (2005) defined truancy as absence unacceptable to teachers and local educational

authorities. Other researchers have indicated that the term “truancy” is used synonymously with the concepts of school absenteeism, school phobia, school refusal and school tiredness among others (Tyreman 1968; Reid 1985).

However, this study assumes that school absenteeism involves both acceptable and unacceptable absences by the school authority. Even so, schools differ on what is considered as acceptable absence and there is a possibility that differences further exist within schools in determining the same. In essence, truancy implies being absent from school without providing valid reasons to school authorities. In this study, the term “irregular attendees” is used to refer to school absentees and “absenteeism and truancy” are regarded as meaning the same hence the former is used.

1.4 Statement of the problem

A number of studies on absenteeism conducted in Malawian primary schools were devoid of evidence from secondary schools. Milner et al. (2001) found that performance in primary school was low and below average as compared to other students at the same level in SADC countries due to absenteeism. The National Statistical Office (NSO) (2003) found that absenteeism was high in Malawian primary schools mainly due to students’ lack of interest in school and that some stay at home due to illness and funerals. The study cited cultural and moral reasons that society expects people to attend funerals for relatives, friends and neighbours but there is lack of empirical evidence if this contributes to student absenteeism at secondary school level.

Anecdotal reports indicate that the practice is still persistent among students in secondary schools. The Malunga commission of inquiry found that poor lesson attendance was among the main reasons affecting student performance at Malawi School Certificate Examinations (MSCE) (Malunga 2000). This is because absentees miss the instruction that other students acquire which the teachers rarely revise. Further, absenteeism disrupts school management because teachers find it difficult to control classes and deliver instruction effectively. School managers spend much of the administrative time handling discipline cases relating to absenteeism instead of attending to pertinent issues.

This raises the question to what extent does student absenteeism occur? What influences student absenteeism? What can be done to improve student attendance? However, Education Management and Information System have not found means of capturing such data in secondary schools contributing to the existing knowledge gap. This study therefore is set out to provide empirical evidence on causes and effects of secondary school absenteeism from student and teacher perspectives and suggests possible solutions that secondary schools could employ to address the problem in Zomba District.

1.5 Objectives of the study

The main aim of the study was to find out possible causes of absenteeism among students, its effects on teaching and learning and suggest solutions to the problem for secondary schools in Zomba. The following were the specific objectives:

1. To determine social, economic and institutional causes of student absenteeism in secondary schools.

2. To find out the effect of absenteeism on teaching and learning on regular and irregular attendees.
3. To devise strategies that schools could adopt to reduce student absenteeism in secondary schools.

1.6 Significance of the study

The study provides empirical evidence on possible causes and effects of absenteeism, which is regarded as one contributing factors to poor student performance in schools. The study has suggested strategies that secondary schools could adopt in order to address the problem absenteeism. In addition, the knowledge generated would inform policy on enhancing the interest of students in schooling to improve performance. The knowledge would also promote the function of the school as an equalizer of life opportunities and assist in decision making among various actors in the education sector. The findings would also be useful to other researchers in Malawi.

1.7 Problems and limitations of the study

Inadequate finances made it difficult to conduct an extensive study with a larger sample. Therefore, only 6 out of 49 secondary schools in Zomba were sampled implying that the results may not be generalised to the entire Zomba District, SEED or the whole country. Lack of past data on absenteeism such as absence rates in the MOE meant that the study had no extensive point of reference apart from the school class registers in the sampled schools. Some relevant individuals could not provide the necessary information as they

claimed that they could only be interviewed in exchange for money. Thus the researcher perceived providing financial motivations in exchange for information as unethical and compounding the financial problem encountered in the study. This reduced the number of respondents as alternative substitutes could not be identified.

1.8 Organisation of the thesis

Chapter 1 has provided the introduction, background information, statement of the problem, and study objectives among others. Chapter 2 provides a review of debates in both theoretical and empirical literature on absenteeism. Chapter 3 describes the study methodology. Chapter 4 discusses the findings and Chapter 5 draws conclusions from the findings and gives the implications of the results of the study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE RIVIEW

2.0 Chapter overview

This chapter presents a discussion of the literature on absenteeism. Incidences of absenteeism, its sources, impact and remedies have been reviewed. This is followed by a discussion on approaches that have been employed in studying absenteeism and finally a theoretical framework for this study is described.

2.1 Incidences of student absenteeism

Most researchers argue that measures of attendance are difficult to obtain and interpret. This is due to variations in records documentation on absenteeism where others record either daily, weekly, term or yearly. Furthermore, variations are also influenced by school location, time of the year and day of the week. Literature shows two forms of absenteeism, whole day absence where students are completely absent from school for the whole day and lesson absence where students are absent during a particular lesson.

A study in the USA revealed that in 1998, Detroit reported that more than 33% of 63000 students missed at least 30 days of school. In New York City approximately 15% of 1 million students were absent daily without valid reasons (Fox and Levin, 1999). Similarly, DeJung and Duckworth (1986) cited in Rothman (2001) found that lesson absence in two cities of Western USA were 15% for larger and 10% for smaller districts.

Further analysis of whole day absence revealed 4.4% for larger and 2.8% for smaller districts.

Research has further revealed different patterns of absenteeism. Galloway (1985) observed that attendance rates among students in the UK were higher at the beginning of the week than towards the end. He further found that unauthorised absenteeism tended to increase with age and in the final years of compulsory education. Similarly, Coldman (1995) cited in Sheppard (2005) found that lesson absence was more common than whole-day absence among year 10 and 11 pupils in the UK and that absenteeism increased with an increase in secondary school years.

A study in Holland (Boss et al. 1992) found overall absence rate of 9.1%. Absenteeism increased gradually from the fifth lesson among secondary school students and it was highest during the last lesson of the day. Absenteeism was also highest on Fridays than on Mondays and Wednesdays. Analysis of patterns of absenteeism between classes revealed that it was highest in pre-exam classes as compared to other classes in the same school. Such variations indicate that absenteeism is also a problem in developed countries.

2.2 Empirical evidence on causes of student absenteeism

Research has shown that absenteeism is multi-disciplinary and multi-causal in nature. The causes of absenteeism are often grouped into three major groups namely; family

background, individual and institutional factors (Galloway, 1985; O’Keefe, 1994; Fox, 1995 and Reid, 2005).

On family backgrounds, studies have shown that socio-economic pressures and poor family relationships are linked to high levels of student absenteeism. These include; families with above average number of children, living in dilapidated housing, those experiencing marital disharmony and where parents are not interested with the progress of children in education. It has been reported that good attendees are likely to have attributes that promote motivation, self-discipline and perseverance. These attributes are derived from parents and school from early primary years. This implies that absentees lack constant parental encouragement (Galloway, 1985; O’Keefe, 1994; Fox, 1995; Reid, 2005 and Sheppard, 2005).

Secondly, Reid (2005) noted that institutional related factors like poor relationship with peers or teachers, lack of attention and indifferent school culture tended to inhibit regular pupil attendance. Reid found that poor teaching and poor teacher pupil relationships promote loss of interest in schooling and erode student motivation towards education. Romer (1993) found that absenteeism was lower in classes with high quality of instruction and vice versa. Monk and Ibrahim (1984) indicated that excessive absenteeism occurs where the subject teacher is weak or a class is unruly rendering the students not to learn.

Crespo and Michelena (1981) found a steady relationship between streaming, absenteeism and dropping-out. It was found that streaming was strongly related to high rate of absenteeism in low achieving streams with approximately 39% as compared to 8% of pupils in high achieving streams. They concluded that streaming influence absenteeism among pupils. Other studies showed that bullying is another factor that restrains students from attending school frequently (Learnmonth in Milner and Blyth, 1999; Reid, 2005). Further, Cullingford (1999) found that student absenteeism was also associated with hostile school culture that is characterised by competition, rank orders, and assessment targets. He noted that such a situation embarrasses failures because pupils mock each other about poor performance in class. He concluded that student absenteeism could be understood better by taking interest in pupil experiences within the school setting.

Other studies have revealed that student absenteeism is enhanced by curricular difficulties, where pupils are not interested in some subjects. For instance, Wyatt (1992) observed that among first year students, disliking a class was positively associated with absenteeism. Some authors have attributed this to rigidity of some curricula that do not permit pupils freedom to choose according to their preferences. It has been shown that regular attendees perceive that freedom to choose interesting subjects reduces absenteeism (O’Keeffe, 1994; Reid, 1983; Malcolm and Thorpe, 1996).

The third lot of factors emanate from pupil’s well-being. Reid (1985) and Galloway (1985) noted that illness was the major cause of absenteeism for both primary and secondary school students. Although research indicated that illness rates were high in

very young children, a large proportion of school age population tend to experience maturational or medical problems (Fogoleman, 1976 cited in Reid, 1985). Many absentees have biological and/or medical problems that make them abnormal. However, studies show that in most cases, such pupils have the tendency to use ailment as an excuse whenever they are bored with school activities (Reid, 1985).

Other studies also indicate that teacher absenteeism has a negative influence on student school attendance. Ehrenberg, Ehrenberg, Rees and Ehrenberg (1991) found that teacher absenteeism reduced students' motivation to attend school. The study discovered that pupils often abscond from school when teachers are not present. This eventually leads to increased drop out cases particularly in junior classes.

In Malawi, Moleni and Ndalama (2004) revealed that teacher absence in primary schools negatively affects student attendance. Another survey reported that parents were condoning older children to be absent from school to look after siblings or do household chores (GOM and UNICEF, 2005; 2006). Kadzamira et al. (2001) found that HIV/AIDS had an impact on primary and secondary school attendance. They observed that orphans miss school due to inadequate food and learning materials, death of a close relative, lack of money and that at times were required to be at home to look after sick siblings.

Malawian teachers reported that some pupils fake sickness in order to obtain permission to go home earlier when hungry (GOM and UNICEF, 2005 & 2006; Chimombo and Chonzi, 2000). The studies also found that some pupils were reporting very late for

classes after break time as others were using the time to buy snacks at the market; others do not report back at all and higher rates of absenteeism are observed on market days

It can therefore be said that absenteeism is a result of social and academic activities taking place in both school and communities. This implies that there is much that schools and communities can do to promote regular school attendance among students.

2.3 Empirical evidence on effects student absenteeism

Various studies have found a very strong statistical relationship between absenteeism and performance. Specifically, learning processes are interrupted when pupils miss lessons regularly and that most absentees have low attainment levels as compared to regular attendees (Reid and Kendall, 1982; Durden and Ellis, 1990; Park and Kerr, 1990; Ehrenberg et al. 1991; Malcolm and Thorpe, 1996; Marburger, 2001; Etsey, 2005; and Berg and Louw, 2006).

A comparative study on academic performance in Ghana found that absenteeism was one of the major factors contributing to low performance of primary school pupils in low achieving schools (Etsey, 2005). Furthermore, Reid and Kendall (1982) found that students with poor attendance rates tend to have lower success rate in examinations. In the UK, the Office for Standards in Education (OfStEd) (1995) found a high correlation between rates of attendance and performance in public examinations. High rates of attendance were accompanied by success in public examinations and low levels of attendance revealed high correlation to poor examination results.

It has been shown that most absentees and truants tend to display extreme and strange behaviours. Cullingford (1999) noted that absentees lack self-control, which is the prime cause of irrational behaviour. This is manifested by irregular attendance and poor relationships with friends hence, such students are often bullied or teased. A greater percentage of students in juvenile criminal institutions were found to have a history of school absenteeism.

Studies in Zimbabwe and South Africa revealed that absenteeism was one of the strategies boys employed to avoid severe corporal punishments and eventually drop out of school (Dunne et al. 2003). This supports the argument that school non-attendance is often the first step to school drop out (Jenkins, 1995). Fergusson, Lynskey and Horwood (1995) confirmed that pupils who are absent frequently are more likely to drop out of school and achieve inadequate qualifications.

Studies further show that high rates of student absenteeism also affect regular attendees (Galloway, 1985; Rothman, 2001). This is true in situations where teachers provide remedial classes to absentees in the same class with regular attendees in order to help absentees catch up on lessons missed. However, Malcolm and Thorpe (1996) found that studies for regular attendees were not affected by mixing with poor attendees.

2.4 Arguments on remedies for combating student absenteeism

One urgent call has been that student attendance has to be regular and mandatory to achieve a positive change in academic performance. Various researchers have suggested a number of strategies which seek to improve school attendance.

The first is that absenteeism has to be tackled at policy level. Local education authorities and schools must enforce rules and policies pertaining to student attendance. Consistency in the application of rules will prevent problems from blossoming because students will know its direct consequences (Enomoto, 1997; Reid, 2003; Sheppard, 2005).

Secondly, Reid (2003) and Sheppard (2005) suggested that improving student motivation through appropriate revision of the school curriculum and teaching strategies is the best approach to reduce absenteeism among students. They advocate that the curriculum must be delivered by knowledgeable and experienced teachers and the curriculum should be engaging, interesting and relevant to students needs.

Thirdly, studies suggest that students, staff and guardians must be civic educated to improve school attendance. Civic education is perceived as central and effective in addressing absenteeism. For students, the topic of absenteeism ought to be included both social and educational programmes to prevent or reduce occurrences of the problem. This can be effective as it would provide students with full understanding of the long term consequences of such behaviour. Cullingford (1999) suggested that school attendance could improve if schools initiated anti-bullying schemes to protect vulnerable pupils.

For teachers, Reid (2003) argued that both old and new teachers in the education system must be oriented on attendance problems and effective ways of dealing with it at school level. Local and national awareness campaigns aimed at educating guardians to understand their responsibilities in encouraging children to attend school are essential in dealing with absenteeism in schools (Jenkins, 1995; Reid, 2003; Hinz, Kapp and Snapp, 2003).

In Malawi, GOM and UNICEF (2006), observed that introduction of school feeding programme in primary schools generally reduce pupil absenteeism. Porridge that is prepared and served to students at school motivates them to attend school knowing that they will not be hungry until knock-off time. In addition, Policy guidelines on discipline in secondary schools provide that school authorities must deal with irregular attendance just like any other discipline case (MOE, n.d.)

Thus the school is expected to provide counselling, warning, punishment, withdrawal of some privileges or rusticate absentees for a maximum period of two weeks. Furthermore, persistent absentees are expected to be suspended or excluded from school. However, these measures have proved less effective due to either laxity of school authorities to implement or students use calculative means that make teachers fail to identify absentees.

2.5 Psychological and sociological theories of absenteeism

The empirical evidence reviewed has revealed that researchers and practitioners have used a number of approaches in trying to explain and find solutions to the problem of

student absenteeism in schools. The preceding arguments on poor attendance in school have taken institutional, economic, physiological, psychological and sociological perspectives.

Psychologists argue that school absenteeism results from stress that builds up in students due to varying circumstances. It is argued further that experiences at school are stressful encounters. The sources of stress for students in school include physical environment, assessment, management styles and student-teacher relationships (Elkind, 1988; Schofield and Bourke, 1997). This is attributed to the perception of the school environment as a substitute work place where students spend considerable amount of time undertaking routine mental and physical tasks. Other strenuous but non-academic tasks in school erode the spirit of hard work in students and encourage absenteeism (Leonard, Bourke and Schofield, 1999).

Arguments from a sociological perspective of conflict contend that schools are sites for oppression as they are institutions for maintaining the dominant culture of society. They argue further that schools reflect values of the middle class, which are imposed on all children but to the disadvantage of those from lower class (Milner and Blyth, 1999). This attitude causes confusion and leaves lower class pupils in a state of dilemma. It also causes alienation because lower class pupils fail to adapt and identify themselves with a behaviour, which is not reflected at home.

Galloway (1985) observed that families with low socio-economic status experience hardships that stress up children of school going age and is one of the major causes of absenteeism. Furthermore, children from lower income families experience pressure from middle-income family peers leading to absenteeism. This makes family socio-economic background a major catalyst for absenteeism in school necessitating provision of psychological support for students to excel in education.

Schools are also perceived as centres of social control where working class pupils are expected to discover knowledge for placement in society. Schools have deliberate structures and policies that tend to favour those from middle class to succeed. School settings are also intimidating and affect pupil self-concept, which is the basis for success (Galloway, 1985). It has been shown that failure to compete academically humiliates pupils and leads to absenteeism (Cullingford, 1999).

Others have said absenteeism manifest the inability of the school to cater for low achievers the majority of whom are from working class families. Similarly, absenteeism is viewed as a sign of neglect, lack of control and anti-authority attitudes among students. Researchers in this school of thought contend that students regard school authorities as a threat such that absenteeism should be addressed through legal processes to encourage pupils to attend school (Galloway, 1985; Milner and Blyth, 1999).

Furthermore, functionalists perceive student absenteeism as a form of deviance. Absenteeism is considered as a response to an inappropriate education system because

pupils express discontent to pressures emanating from school or society values. Rothman (2001) stated that absenteeism is a symptom of school alienation originating from a dysfunctional relationship between school and students. In such a way, schools are expected to review norms or policies as necessary such as instituting punishment to encourage students to observe school rules and regulations.

Both sociological perspectives of conflict and functionalism fail to successfully find other sources of student absenteeism at school as they already have a cause from which the arguments are based. The approaches largely portray students from poor background only as having attendance problems. These further imply that it is only the institutions that have a role of developing interventions to prevent further or combat student absenteeism. It is therefore, necessary to employ the approach which has no restrictions on who to acquire information from in order to unveil the actual source of the problem. This literature implies that combating absenteeism requires a well coordinated system of support from the education ministry, schools, families and communities. No single institution can wholly and successfully address the problem alone.

The literature reviewed, has clearly showed that studies conducted on absenteeism focused on primary schools in Malawi. Although there is thorough information from other countries on absenteeism in secondary school, Malawi provides a different context implying that there are other influences and experiences different from those in other countries. It is not known what causes student absenteeism; to what extent does this affect secondary schooling and what measures are being employed to solve the problem.

The study provides information on possible causes of student absenteeism, its effects and solutions that could help to address the problem.

2.6 Theoretical Framework: Interpretive approach

According to Meighan (1986) the interpretive paradigm leads to an understanding of individual's everyday life in performing particular actions. Advocates of the interpretive paradigm argue that people see and interpret the world into meanings, which enables construction of own reality (Haralambos, Holborn and Heald, 2004).

In addition, Weber (Meighan, 1986) argue upgrading teachers through es that studying specific individual actions would enhance an understanding of both the social institution and the individual. More emphasis is placed on meaning attached to behaviour of an individual based on the argument that social action can only be understood by interpreting the basis for meanings and motives of the action (Bennet and Lecompte, 1990; Haralambos et al. 2004). It is said individual actions are based on situations and neither on culture nor social structure (Meighan, 1986). This implies that meanings of particular actions are socially constructed through social interactions. As such, the understanding of student behaviour or actions is developed through daily interactions with individuals in contact.

Thus social institutions enter into actions that shape situations in which people act and supply fixed sets of symbols that are used in interpreting situations (Blumer, 1962 as cited in Meighan, 1986). Because of this schools and families provide settings where

actions are exhibited in response to symbolic interactions and the interpretive approach can best be used to understand what goes on in schools (Bennet and Lecompte, 1990).

Thus, the interpretive paradigm was used in this study to describe pupil absenteeism within the school setting where absenteeism is portrayed. Since the paradigm values personal perspectives, this study perceived students as constructors of the culture of absenteeism through daily school interactions. Therefore, the researcher sought individual student experiences to provide a deeper understanding of absenteeism among secondary school students in the study area.

According to Meighan (1986), explaining absenteeism without referring to the perception of absentees and judgements is unacceptable because such an explanation may present a distortion for the intended action. Cullingford (1999) used a similar approach to study the relationship between delinquency and absenteeism. It was found that the openness of the approach enhanced the validity of the findings by showing a clear relationship between absentees within a school. This study employs a mixed methods approach guided by the interpretive paradigm.

2.7 Chapter summary

Both empirical and theoretical evidence reviewed unveils the complexity of poor student attendance in schools. It shows that student absenteeism is another problem that has been widely discussed in educational literature and that most countries are trying to find solutions. This study was conducted with the aim of finding possible causes of student

absenteeism in secondary schools in Zomba District, its affects on teaching and learning and possible solutions to the problem. The next chapter describes the study methodology.

CHAPTER 3

STUDY METHODOLOGY

3.0 Chapter overview

This chapter presents the study methodology. Specifically, the chapter describes the study area, the sampling frame and sampling design used for selecting the study sites, schools, respondents as well as the means employed in gathering the necessary information. The chapter also describes the data analysis methods including quality assurance mechanisms and observed ethical issues.

3.1 Research design

The study employed mixed methods approach as both qualitative and quantitative methods of collecting data were employed. This was done with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding and insight of the nature of student absenteeism. Greene et al. (1989) as cited in Creswell (1994), contend that mixed methods approach assist in adding scope and breadth to a study. Furthermore, the approach helped in enhancing the validity and reliability of results as triangulation of methods neutralised any bias that would occur if one method of collecting data was used.

3.1 The study area

The study was conducted in South East Education Division (SEED) in southern Malawi. The SEED is an administrative division under the MOE responsible for educational matters in the four districts of Zomba, Machinga, Mangochi and Balaka. This study was conducted in Zomba only due to financial constraints that made it impossible to sample from all the four districts.

Zomba district is divided into urban and rural educational zones with a total of 49 secondary schools. According to MOE (2005b and 2005c), Zomba urban had a total of 22 secondary schools. These included 2 conventional day, 4 community day, 2 grant-aided boarding; 2 government boarding and 12 private secondary schools. Zomba rural had 19 community day, 5 conventional and 3 private secondary schools adding up to 27 secondary schools.

3.2 Sampling design

Secondary schools in Zomba were categorised into four groups to enable each type to be represented. These were; government and grant-aided boarding schools, community day secondary schools, conventional day and private schools. A deliberate effort was made to ensure that each school category was represented in the sample. In total, six schools were selected purposively to participate in the study.

3.3 Selection of study sites

Table 3.1 shows number of schools from each category in Zomba District and the number of schools that were selected.

Table 3.1 Number of Secondary School selected per category

Categories of secondary schools	Number of schools in Zomba	Number of selected secondary schools
CDSS	23	2
Private	15	2
Government and Grant Aided boarding	8	1
Conventional day	3	1
Total	49	6

Selection of the six schools was done using purposive sampling for the school type and the school being within manageable distance. However, the schools were purposively selected in each designated school category if there were more than one school that met the distance criteria for selection. This process led to the selection of four schools from Zomba urban and two from rural areas.

3.4 Sampling frame

Secondary school population in Malawi is divided into four strata; forms 1 and 2 in the junior section and forms 3 and 4 in the senior section. This study included students from all the strata. Table 3.2 indicates total student enrolment at the beginning of the study for the six schools and the corresponding number of student participants that were chosen from each school.

Table 3.2 Student enrolment and selected sample

	Secondary school	Enrolment	Sample
1	A (govt. day)	578	43
2	B (govt. boarding)	520	39
3	C (CDSS)	208	15
4	D (private)	324	24
5	E (CDSS)	191	14
6	F (private)	200	15
Total		2021	150

In randomly selecting student participants, student population and sex distribution at each school and class were taken into account. A purposive and random sample of student participants was drawn based on class and period attendance registers which were also used to identify attendance patterns. The student population in each class was categorized into two sub groups and listed on the basis of regular and irregular attendees and random samples were drawn from each. A deliberate and purposive decision was taken to ensure fair gender representation in the sample. This involved making gender replacements in classes where the random sample drew either more male or female respondents.

3.5 Data collection period and methods

The study was conducted for a period of three months during the second academic term of Malawi's secondary school calendar in 2007. The study employed mixed methods approach by collecting data using quantitative and qualitative techniques. The quantitative data were collected using a closed questionnaire (see Appendix 1). The questionnaire was designed for administration to one hundred and fifty students. The data

were used to determine the extent of absenteeism and enabled a comparative analysis to be conducted.

The qualitative data assisted in capturing participant perceptions and helped in the identification of problems and solutions on absenteeism in schools. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with students in the sampled schools using a checklist that was prepared to solicit a wide range of ideas on causes, effects, patterns and possible solutions of absenteeism (see Appendix 2). The FGDs with irregular attendees were conducted separately from those of regular attendees and males were separated from females. In total, ten FGDs were conducted. FGDs for each group had a minimum of eight participants and a maximum of eleven. This was done to provide participants of the same sex with an environment for a free discussion to reflect on the topic according to Marshal and Rossman (2006).

In-depth interviews were also conducted with head teachers and other members of the teaching staff for their knowledge and experience in school absenteeism and an interview guide was used (see Appendix 3). Five school heads, one deputy head teacher, six form-teachers and five subject-teachers were interviewed. The form-teachers were targeted as they are responsible for guidance and managing of class discipline matters including ensuring student attendance. Subject teachers also interact with students on daily basis and have direct experience with student absenteeism.

3.6 Data analysis

Qualitative data from FGDs and in-depth interviews were analyzed in line with Marshal and Rossman (2006). The data were transcribed from hand written to printed notes and were edited. Outstanding themes and patterns were identified and coded accordingly. This was done as I was re-reading the notes. Coded themes and the supporting data were marked with similar colours. The coded themes and categories were integrated and generalizations were made. The transcripts were read through to compare with the generalizations to check authenticity. The quantitative data were captured and analyzed in a Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Frequencies and cross tabulations were used to generate patterns and generalizations were made and interpreted.

3.7 Quality assurance mechanisms

Before the actual data collection exercise a pilot survey was conducted at Chinamwali Private Secondary School. This school was ideal because the study targeted day and non-day scholars and this had both day scholars and boarders. The short-comings on instruments were improved upon and necessary amendments were incorporated. During the actual data collection, effort was made to ensure that all relevant questions were clearly understood and well answered. For the FGD, probing mechanisms were employed to enable participants and key informants add more information or clarify on particular issues. To avoid memory loss, the FGDs and in-depth interview notes were typed in the evening of the same day and double entry was used for the quantitative data to check discrepancies.

3.8 Ethical issues

In order to access the institutions that were sampled, formal permission was first sought from MOE through SEED. Upon approval at the school, the heads were requested about their willingness for the school to participate in the study and were also asked to assist in sensitizing the participants about the study and its importance. At every stage, the researcher briefed respondents on the objectives of the study and requested their voluntary participation.

Questionnaires and checklists were administered after scheduled learning hours to avoid disturbing participants from attending lessons. Interviews with teachers were conducted during free time while head teachers were interviewed after knock off time. At the end of each interview, participants and respondents were given opportunity to ask questions which were thoroughly answered. The study results will be disseminated to the participating schools, SEED and MOE through a thesis or booklet to be made available to the public without violating any privacy, confidentiality and integrity of any individual or institution.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.0 Chapter overview

This chapter presents and discusses results of the study beginning with the characteristics of the sample followed by forms and causes of student absenteeism and possible solutions to reduce absenteeism in secondary schools.

4.1 Characteristics of the sample

Out of 142 students who responded to questionnaire, 54.2% were male and 45.8% were female. On age distribution of the sample, 57.7% were in the age range of 14 to 17 years, 33.8 % were in the 18 to 21 years, 7% were below 14 years and 1.5% was above 22 years. Out of 99 students who participated in the FGDs, 54.5% were male and 45.5% females. In total, 251 persons participated in the study including teachers and head teachers.

4.1.1 Respondents per class by gender

There were no large differences in the number of respondents in terms of class and gender as indicated in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1 Respondents per class by gender

Class	Gender		Total (%)
	Male (n)	Female (n)	
Form4	17	15	22.7
Form3	23	15	27.0
Form2	23	14	26.2
Form1	13	21	24.1
Total	77	65	100
	54.2(%)	45.8(%)	

Source: field data

Overall, more male students were interviewed reflecting the enrolment trend in Malawian secondary schools where male students are more than females. In addition, 27% of respondents were in form 3 students, 26.2% were in form 2, 24.1% were in form 1 and 22.7% were in form 4.

4.2 Forms of student absenteeism

The study has found that student absenteeism takes different forms and these are discussed in the sections that follow.

4.2.1 Day absenteeism

It was found that some students had been absent from school for at least a whole day during term two of 2007 academic year. Table 4.2 shows the number and rates of students who had ever skipped a day from school in each school category during term two of 2007 academic year.

Table 4.2 Number of students who had ever skipped a day in 2007

School Category	Ever skipped a day			
	Yes	Total	% absent in school	% of sample
Private	25	38	65.8	17.6
Government boarding	24	33	72.7	16.9
Government day	37	42	88.1	26.1
CDSS	27	29	93.1	19.0
Total	113	142		79.6

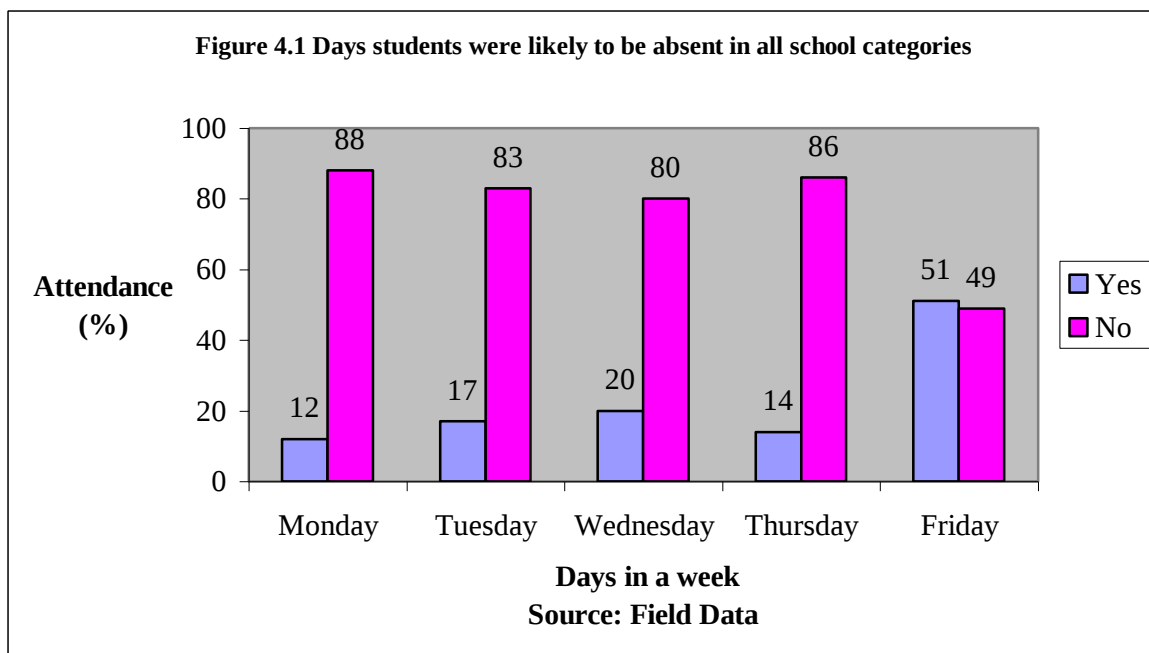
Source: Field data

It can be seen from Table 4.2 above that 79.6% of students across all school categories had ever skipped a day at school in 2007. From the results, the severity of the problem seem to be worst in CDSS, followed by government day schools, then government boarding and private schools experiencing relatively the least.

Although Table 4.2 above shows differences in rates of day absenteeism, it indicates that whole day absence among secondary school students in Zomba is common in each school category. This could be attributed to laxity by school authorities in emphasizing the importance of students to attend school regularly as reported in Monk and Ibrahim (1984) and Milner et al. (2001) or some other social-economic factors.

4.2.1.1 Days students were likely to be absent

On a day of the week that students were likely to be absent from school, Figure 4.1 below shows consolidated results for all school categories.



From Figure 4.1 above, it can be seen that the majority of students (51%) claimed that they were likely to be absent from school on Friday than any other day of the week. Though the rates of absenteeism were perceived to be low in the other days, Monday was perceived to be least likely day they would miss school. Further to this finding, participants in the FGDs indicated that students were likely to be absent on Friday because of the approaching week-end. Other reasons cited were that Moslem students tend to go for prayers on Friday; some students would try to avoid end of the week tests which are normally scheduled at the end of the week; schools tend to allocate a good number of periods on Friday for students to study independently revising for that week's material or prepare for the following week.

Counter-arguing the reasoning that Moslem students would be attending prayers, some participants in the FGDs claimed that Friday prayers were just used as an excuse because

most students were not Moslems. Participants in the FGDs also revealed that apart from Friday, Wednesday afternoon was usually set aside in all school categories as a general cleaning day and some students try to avoid participating in such activities. Participants also explained further that there was a tendency by class teachers to use attendance registers on Monday and Thursday afternoons only which were set aside for sporting activities. The claim was that students would try to be present at school for these two activities, not necessarily to attend lessons but to participate in the entertainment.

Similar findings in Holland were reported in Boss et al. (1992) that, day absenteeism was high on Friday than Monday and Wednesday. This implies that Friday lessons are largely affected by absenteeism as students are in a week-end mood and look forward to be freed from school demands.

4.2.2 Lesson absenteeism

Table 4.3 shows the number of times students were most likely to skip lesson(s) per week.

Table 4.3 Number of lessons a student was likely to miss per week

Frequency of lessons	Number of respondents (n)	Percentage of respondents (%)
1-3	96	67.6
4-6	13	9.2
More than 6	4	2.8
Never skipped any	29	20.4
Total	142	100

Source: field data

Table 4.3 reveals that lesson absenteeism was perceived to be common among secondary school students as only 20.4% thought they would not. The majority of the students (67.6%) indicated that they were most likely to miss one to three lessons per week.

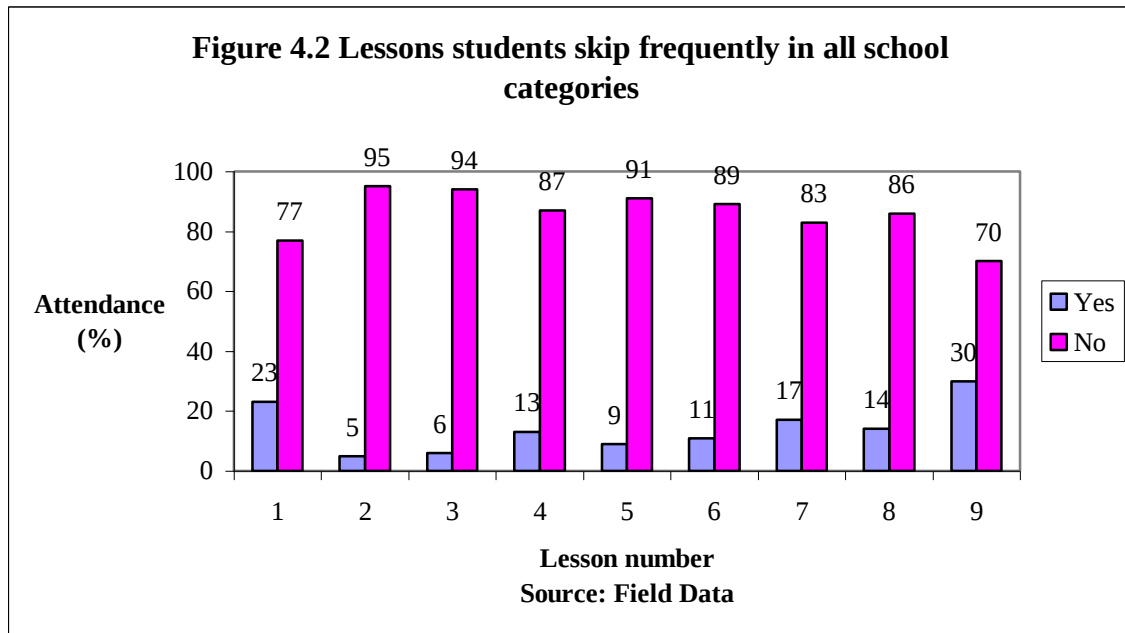
However, it was noted from class attendance registers that only 31% of 20.4% of students who indicated to have never skipped a lesson had indeed never been absent. This implies that students ensure that they register their presence with their form teacher and then skip some lessons afterwards. This perhaps reveals that class registers are not enforced effectively or that there is lack of appreciation, on part of the students, of the importance of attending all lessons or the underlying purpose of these registers.

The FGDs with irregular attendees revealed that in other circumstances students register absentee classmates by responding on their behalf when the teacher is registering students by voice call. This shows that teachers do not pay particular attention to make sure that students respond to their names only and not for friends who are absent. These findings are similar to what Reid (2005) and Stokes and Walton (1999) described as post-registration truants.

Just like day absenteeism, these results confirm clear wide perception or existence of absenteeism, but a comparison may likely suggest that students are less likely to miss lessons than being absent from school the whole day as the earlier finding referred to the whole academic year. These will, in a way, contradict with Coldman (1995) that lesson absenteeism in the UK was more common than day absenteeism among secondary school students.

Participants in the FGDs revealed that most students like skipping lesson 1; the lessons after break and the last lesson in the afternoon. It was learnt that few students return

afterwards to attend favourable lessons only. Similar trends were found from quantitative data as shown in Figure 4.2 below.



It can be seen from Figure 4.2 above that lesson 1 and 9 show the severity of the problem. Apart from lesson 1 and the lessons after breaks (lessons 4 and 7) standing out, there seems to be a general increasing trend from lesson 2 in the morning to lesson 9 in the afternoon. This trend tallies closely with what Boss et al. (1992) found in Holland that lesson absenteeism increases in the last three lessons and hence, questioned the wisdom of having lessons 7, 8 and 9.

Various reasons emerged as to why there exist such patterns of absenteeism. An excerpt from one student explaining on persistent lesson absenteeism claimed:

Some students leave during first break time at 9:30 am. Those who consider themselves as madolo (clever) leave even before break time. Most students leave during second break that is two lessons before knock off time. (Female student, FGD with truants and absentees, CDSS)

Other arguments during the FGDs pointed out that lesson absenteeism increases after first break because school heads or teachers on duty tend to relax or become tired of patrolling school premises. This laxity makes it easy for students to escape without being noticed by authorities. Some students at a boarding school said they find it easier to leave school premises during learning hours as most teachers on duty would assume everyone is in class and hence, chances of being spotted leaving premises are minimal. This calls for school authorities to put in place extra remedial measures to stop and report students that leave school premises without permission as advocated in Reid (2003, 2005).

4.2.3 Gender absenteeism

The sample revealed that 88.3% of male students had either missed a day or part of it compared to 69.2% females. Further, 11.7% of male as compared to 30.8% of female students said had never skipped a day or lesson. This shows that male secondary school students skip more days or lessons than females. Wagner et al. (2004) also found that in Germany absenteeism was high on boys than girls. This could be attributed to differences in socio-cultural influences on education among boys and girls. Girls are now equally encouraged to attend school as many parents have witnessed the benefits of education on women. For instance, the two sampled schools were from the constituency whose Member of Parliament is female and has managed to establish a number of projects benefiting the constituents.

4.3. Causes of absenteeism in secondary schools

Table 4.4 below shows overall summary of main reasons that student absenteeism is claimed to come about.

Table 4.4 Reasons for skipping lessons

Reason	Frequency	Percent
Problems with the subject	49	34.5
Laziness and tiredness	27	19.0
Problems with the teacher	26	18.3
Arrive late at school	22	15.5
Home responsibilities	6	4.2
Peer pressure	6	4.2
Illness	6	4.2
Total	142	100.0

Source: Field data

It can be seen from Table 4.4 that there are four main and common reasons that cause students to skip lessons. These were students disliking a subject (34.5%); laziness and tiredness (19%); teacher-related problems (18.3%); and late arrival at school (15.5%). It was also learnt that some teachers do not let in students who arrive late but let them wait outside only to be let in at the end of the lesson. From the table, fewer students cited home responsibilities, peer pressure and illness as reasons for skipping lessons. These reasons have been integrated with what transpired in the FGD and interviews with teachers and classified as institutional, social and economic causes.

4.3.1 Institutional causes of student absenteeism

4.3.1.1 Problems with the subject

The results show that students experience academic difficulties with some subjects. As shown in Table 4.4 above, 34.5% of students skip subjects they dislike. Participants in

FGDs confirmed that they were not interested in subjects that are difficult or boring. As put forward by one student:

Some form 2 & 4 students go out of class because they consider some subjects as difficult and declare that they are not going to write them during national examinations. Some times we are influenced by friends to get out of class. (Male student, FGD with truants and absentees, CDSS)

This finding corresponds to a study conducted in UK by Sheppard (2005) that disliking of lessons was the major reason for students absenteeism seconded by dislike of teachers. This could be attributed to what Wyatt (1992) observed in USA on first-year college students that students were likely to miss lessons they disliked than those they like. He observed further that students were finding some subjects boring because lecturers had a habit of going to class to teach using unrevised notes and mostly were unprepared.

Conversely, some students said they skip lessons whose subjects are thought to be too easy and passable even without being taught. For instance, most students in FGDs mentioned skipping Chichewa (a common local language in Malawi) considering it as not difficult. The majority of participants in FGDs were of the opinion that some subjects do not help one to realise their life or career goals. One student explained that:

We lack encouragement, here we take these subjects but we don't know if they are valuable because most of us are learning without knowing our life goals. This makes us fail to work hard at school. (Male student, FGD with regular attendee, government boarding school)

This argument reveals existence of gaps between subjects that are taught in secondary schools and their application in real life. Perhaps, teachers are doing little to guide students on the importance of various subjects and the benefits associated with them. As a result, students wrongly assume that other subjects are irrelevant or not important.

There is need to encourage students on the importance of learning for personal knowledge and satisfaction since the world one sees today will not remain the same forever.

4.3.1.2 Problems with the Teacher

The study firstly, established that many students complained about the inability of some teachers to relay the knowledge in a simple manner that would enable learners to understand and develop interest in the subject. Both quantitative and qualitative data revealed that students face problems with the competence of some teachers in lesson delivery. Students expressed dissatisfaction with teachers that do not adhere to teaching ethics. Poor lesson planning, failure to observe time, and improper teaching methods such as giving notes to students to copy for the whole period contribute to absenteeism as explained below:

If you have learnt enough, you get tired and lose concentration and then you decide to go home. For example, yesterday and today, we have learnt one subject for 4 continuous periods; we get tired. (Female student, FGD with irregular attendees, CDSS)

This shows that extended and monotonous periods deny students a chance to understand and assimilate knowledge and this affects performance. Correspondingly, when asked to indicate the factor that affects performance in examinations, 19.3% of respondents mentioned poor and uninteresting teaching strategies by some teachers. In summary, incompetent teachers will unknowingly entice some students to skip lessons. These findings are similar to what Romer (1993) found in California that students had a tendency to attend classes frequently when the quality of instruction was high.

Secondly, participants in the FGDs revealed that some teachers have a habit of absconding from duty. One student complained that:

Sometimes the teacher might not discharge his duties due to other things and we learn nothing so you just discharge yourself. Some leave during break time to go home and don't come back only to return at knock off time to collect note books (Male student, FGD with irregular attendees, CDSS).

Teacher absenteeism affects students negatively as it encourages lesson absenteeism because some find it meaningless to stay in class knowing that they will not be taught hence resort to do something else. Once students abscond from a lesson, they are less likely to come back and attend lessons that follow. This supports the finding that teacher absenteeism reduces students' motivation to attend school (Ehrenberg et al. 1991). Similarly, a study conducted in the primary schools of Malawi by Moleni and Ndalama (2004) found that teacher absenteeism results in increased pupil absenteeism from school.

Thirdly, participants in FGDs also revealed that poor relationship between students and teachers do affect lesson attendance. These include teachers commenting badly about some students; being too rough and disagreements outside the school. All these affect student – teacher relationship and students develop a negative attitude toward the teacher. As a result it was learnt that students react by skipping lessons to avoid further embarrassments or as a way of showing annoyance with the teacher's comments as a student said:

Some students have negative attitude with teachers because of the way some teachers behave e.g. when a teacher is teaching and tells a student that you will never pass because of your behaviour. As a student I may decide not to attend his/her lessons (Male student, FGD with irregular attendees, government boarding school).

This indicates that it is not good for teachers to have preconceived ideas about students or label them negatively because students may tune their behaviour to confirm the presuppositions. Liudmila (2005) described negative pupil-teacher relationships as an indication that some teachers are unwilling to understand pupils' problems hence encourages student absenteeism in school. Therefore, it is important for teachers to adhere to professional ethics to avoid affecting students' emotions which later affect learning concentration.

4.3.1.3 Administrative problems

Firstly, disciplinary measures employed may have an effect on students' school attendance in various ways. Participants in FGDs complained that offenders were given punishments during learning hours which meant the student has to miss lessons in the process. It was also learnt that some students stay away from school deliberately if they know that they have done something warranting punishment.

For instance, at one school it was learnt that one teacher like beating students and thus absenting oneself from the teachers classes is the only way of avoiding such a punishment. Reid (2003) explained that absenteeism becomes common where pupils are aware about the little risk attached with being caught, or the inefficient strategies used to implement punishments to discourage student absenteeism. Boss et al. (1992) reported that punishments that do not match the offence derail student motivation, the nature of punishment administered, if not considered well, may tend to deter students from attending lessons. Therefore, inappropriate enforcement of school rules and regulations

coupled with inconsistent or disproportionate remedies or policies are likely to be some factors that contribute to absenteeism.

Secondly, the quality of student supervision in these schools may encourage absenteeism. This is aggravated by poor administration that occurs in some schools as one teacher explained:

It is the administration style of the school head that matter. In cases where students opt to stay out of class, the practice grows if nothing is done to them (Male teacher, government boarding school).

This indicates inadequate coordination between teachers and school heads which makes it impossible to come up with proper strategies to control or monitor student absenteeism. This could be due to lack of skills, teacher commitment as a result of low morale to work. Hence, teachers need to acquire relevant skills to student mentoring and supervision and have an environment that motivates them to execute this extracurricular service.

4.3.1.4 Inadequate school facilities

Out of the six schools that were sampled, two had libraries but only one was accessible to students during learning hours. The problem is made worse with optional subjects as students who do not take a particular subject get out of class and wait outside. In such a way, students are influenced to go out of school premises and play at the market and rarely come back for other lessons. For instance one head teacher said

“Poor facilities, some learners instead of going to the library when they do not take the subject, books are not there; instead they go to the market.” (Head teacher, CDSS)

Availability of a school library would have been keeping students busy. Some students from a boarding school observed that the school library had few text books. This influenced students to sneak out of campus to photocopy some pages from scarce books in town during learning hours. Apart from the library, lack of resources at a school and other acceptable social services such as safe drinking water, medicine influence absenteeism in most day schools as students get out of the school campus in order to access them.

4.3.2 Social causes of student absenteeism

4.3.2.1 Laziness and tiredness

It was also found that 19.0% of respondents were skipping lessons due to tiredness or laziness. Students in the FGDs revealed that most students do not have keen interest to work hard in their studies. This was attributed to failure to realise the value of education in their present and future lives. Some students get contented with the possession and wealth of their parents and guardians and thus regard schooling as a waste of time.

4.3.2.2 Punctuality

Almost all head teachers complained that punctuality among most students is a problem. About 15.5% of respondents indicated that they skip lessons because of failure to arrive in time for lessons. Interviews with some school heads revealed that some students walk long distances of up to 9.5 kilometres from places such as Domasi and Kasonga on Zomba Plateau. It was learnt that such students come to school for 3 days only per week. This is not in consonant with the policy on access to education that students should not walk more than 30 minutes to the nearest school. Further analysis on students who are

usually late for classes revealed that most male 9.9% are late for lessons than female 5.6%. This implies that boys do not take their education seriously, or are mostly stubborn.

4.3.2.3 Home responsibilities

Although 4.2% only of respondents indicated that they encounter problems at home, students in the FGDs and teachers interviews revealed that students often miss school due to sickness of parents or close relatives, funerals and sometimes to carry out some errands. Some students particularly girls assume the role of mother looking after and cooking food for their siblings. Sometimes home errands take them up to 2:00 pm and in such circumstances they would decide not to report for afternoon classes. In families that have no male parent, an elderly male child assumes responsibilities of a father as shown by the following excerpt.

“I am only a boy, I usually stand as a mediator, so when there are quarrels with our neighbours I become a negotiator and I do not come to school to negotiate the quarrel.” (Male student, FGD with irregular attendees; private school)

4.3.2.4 Lack of parental guidance

The study revealed that some students decide to stay away from school due to lack of proper parental guidance. Participants in the FGDs indicated that some students, particularly those in day secondary schools, resort to live with friends or distant relatives who have less interest in encouraging them to attend school regularly. This encourages different forms of absenteeism because in the absence of proper parental guidance students have the liberty to decide when to be found at school. This is in agreement to what was reported in Jenkins (1995) that school attendance is determined by the commitment and relationship of a student and guardians.

4.3.2.5 Peer and social pressure

Interviews with head teachers uncovered that some students are taken up with social-economic activities such as selling commodities, watching movies or meeting boy or girl friends.

Most students linger around the market on market days. One day a parent came looking for her child but was found at the market selling doors he had made at home. We also know that some girls have love affairs with market vendors such that they are at times found at rest houses during learning hours (Head teacher, CDSS).

Chimombo and Chonzi (2000) also found that market days affect pupil attendance at school greatly in most rural schools in Malawi.

Participants in the FGDs revealed that their cultural surrounding influences the students' behaviour. For instance, at the beginning of third term in rural secondary schools in Zomba, some boys accompany younger ones to undergo initiation rituals. This makes both the young initiates and assistants to report very late for school. The nature of the community where such an incident was observed had some members of the community believing that going through the education system alone was doing nothing meaningful in life and was a waste of time. It was further reported that students from communities surrounding one of the army campus tended to model bad behaviours from the lower rank soldiers as the excerpt below shows.

The community around us has a greater influence towards the behaviour of students. For example, we have young soldiers who influence students to either abscond or be absent from school (Subject teacher, CDSS).

Other factors that encourage absenteeism include video show rooms located near the schools. This shows that the location of a school has a bearing on student absenteeism since most students tend to develop a divided attention between education and activities that take place in the community surrounding the school. So peer and social pressure plays a greater role on absenteeism as some students tend to influence one another to go playing at periodic market days, attend cultural activities or visit entertainment centres.

4.3.3 Personal causes of student absenteeism

4.3.3.1 Lack of emotional control

Most participants in the FGDs complained that they fail to control emotions when provoked in an event of a disagreement. Once annoyed, students decide not to attend lessons as the excerpt below shows.

If I do something wrong at home and parents happen to shout at me, I get angry and sometimes decide to be absent from school. Sometimes I leave home as if I am going to school yet I have gone somewhere (Female participants, FGD with regular attendees, government day school).

Sometimes disagreements may occur at school and have similar effects as students fail to concentrate during lessons. It was also learnt that students in co-education institutions get attracted to schoolmates of the opposite sex. As a result, love affairs between students or students and teachers become common and sometimes influence each other to leave school premises to play in secluded locations. Such practices in educational institutions are a catalyst for increased cases of early marriages, pregnancy, rape and sexually transmitted diseases among both students and teachers. Adolescent students are still exploring life and are taken up by activities in the immediate surroundings. Students are

affected emotionally which also impact upon their decision making ability to attend classes or not.

4.3.3.2 Stubbornness

It was also found that some students are stubborn, unruly and break school rules deliberately. This is done to provoke teachers to send them out of class. The following excerpt confirms this assertion:

I don't like putting on uniform. I do this deliberately and that is why I am always sent back. For example, this whole week I did not put it on, but I have it. (Male student, FGD with irregular attendees; CDSS)

The student above testifies that it is a habit of some students to commit deliberate offences with the aim of getting out of school to satisfy own intentions.

4.3.4 Economic causes of student absenteeism

4.3.4.1 Poverty

Furthermore, poverty affects students' attendance as they are not able to meet basic necessities at home and school as required. Some students are even sent to sell commodities at the market or find piecework in order to earn a living as one explained in the excerpt below.

My mum does not receive enough money so I am a technician. I repair radios or televisions and other electronic equipments. Often I am absent to do this. (Male student, FGD with irregular attendees, private school)

This implies that the education of students from single parent families is affected more since students are required to cover the role of a missing parent. So students' homes also influenced absenteeism of some of the students. This is also what Fox (1995) found in the

UK that students would miss school often due to family responsibilities such as illness of a family member and household chores.

4.4 Place and activities students go and do when out of class

Students were asked to indicate places where they often go after skipping lesson and the results are shown in Table 4.5 below.

Table 4.5 Places where students go when out of class

Place	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Hide within school premises	69	48.7
Home	29	20.4
Library	21	14.8
Play in the street /hang around town	11	7.7
Visit friends	9	6.3
Hospital	3	2.1
Total	142	100

Source: Field Data

It can be seen from Table 4.5 above that 48.7% of respondents indicated that they hide within the school premises particularly hostels, play ground, hall or behind classes. Another 20.4% indicated that they stay at home, 14.8% go to the library, 7.7% hang around town or play in the streets, 6.3% visit friends and 2.1% go to the hospital.

Similarly, students were also asked about activities they engage in after skipping a lesson and the findings are shown in Table 4.6 below.

Table 4.6 Activities students engage in after skipping a lesson

Activity	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Reading	96	67.6
Doing piecework	11	7.7
Chat with friends	11	7.7
Playing games	9	6.2
Helping parents	6	4.2
Sleeping	5	3.5
Watching movies	4	2.8
Total	142	100.0

Source: Field Data

It can be seen that among other activities, 67.6% of students who skip lessons use the time to read, and 7.7% do piecework and chat with friends respectively, while 2.8% go to watch movies.

Similar activities as shown in Table 4.6 above were also mentioned in eight of the ten FGDs that students often go to watch movies while others use the time to meet boy or girl friends, smoke or play games. At some CDSS and private secondary schools, it was found that students abscond from classes to tout for second hand clothes vendors at Songani Market as an income generating activity. Participants in the FGDs observed further that some students linger around the school to either read or tease form one students while others leave for home only to cheat parents that teachers are in a staff meeting and have cancelled all afternoon classes for the day. Such intentional absenteeism has been shown to have a bearing on student performance in examinations (Olushola, 2007; Malunga 2001; Park and Kerr, 1990).

4.5 Impact of absenteeism

Participants in FGDs and interviews presented a number of absenteeism impacts as explained below.

4.5.1 Difficulty to connect and understand lessons

From the FGDs and interviews, it was established that irregular attendees find it difficult to connect lessons because of deliberate gaps created through absenteeism. As a result, most students do not understand some parts of the subject as expected hence develop a negative perception that the subject is difficult. Sometimes the level of participation in class for absentees decline and often times such students resort to disturb classmates by making noise to draw attention hence dislodge others from concentrating on class work. Such students are often booed when they ask questions on concepts taught in previous lessons and sometimes this acts as a deterrent to lesson skipping in fear of being booed always.

“...just because they are affected in one way or the other, they disturb friends in class as they know that they do nothing.... They fail to answer a question that is why they disturb their friends in class.” (Form teacher, private school)

As a consequent students who like skipping lessons often fail to master the subject and hence perform poorly during examinations. Similarly, upon examining the link between attendance and student learning, Durden and Ellis (1995) found that excessive absenteeism had a detrimental impact on performance unlike low levels of absenteeism.

From the interviews, it was also established that irregular attendees resort to stealing notebooks from colleagues or avoid taking tests. In some cases irregular attendees are

involved in cheating during examinations in an effort to pass to avoid shame resulting from failure.

4.5.2 Loss of interest in subjects

On the one hand, it was found that 68.3% of students that were interviewed indicated having lost interest in a subject they skip most particularly mathematics. On the other hand 31.7% were not experiencing problems to catch up with missed lessons. It was found from the FGDs and interviews that most absentees like to copy notes or seek assistance from friends who attended the lesson.

It has been shown that students who lose interest in subjects perform badly in examinations and this acts as a catalyst to absenteeism and leads to dropping out. Sometimes students that are punished for skipping lessons resort to stay away from school to avoid the punishment and eventually drop out from school. Mayer and Mitchell (1993) observed that persistent loss of interest in the curriculum or poor academic achievement among students with high absenteeism were some of the causes for high drop out rates in schools.

4.5.3 Poor performance in extra-curricular activities

It was found that the behaviour of irregular attendees affects the performance of other students not only in academics but extra-curricular activities as well as described in the following excerpt.

Some students are talented in football or netball and when they are absent from school, they also disturb training sessions. As such performance of other students who were developing interest in the game dwindles. Students who would have put the school on a map through extra-curricular activities

become disappointed and it is the truants that contribute to their failure
(Head teacher, CDSS).

This means students get encouraged and motivated by friends that are equally committed to achieve a common goal such as winning games to make fame and pride for the school.

It was further learnt from FGDs that regular attendees get bored when teachers revise a lesson or part of it in the interest of absentees describing it as a waste of time. Mayer and Mitchell (1993) and Monk and Ibrahim (1984), also argued that regular attendees are adversely affected by absentee classmates particularly when teachers use class time to conduct remedial classes for absentees. As such, regular attendees are forced to give up an opportunity to learn and this becomes costly as it affects attendees academic performance. This was also the concern for the student who said:

When the teacher is busy asking questions to the absentees, regular attendees just stay idle waiting for the teacher to start teaching. Regular attendees lose out because any minute lost is never gained (Female student, FGD with regular attendees, private school).

Such a complaint affirms the assertions that regular attendees suffer silently when teachers cater for irregular attendees during lessons. This contrasts Malcolm and Thorpe (1996) that learning for regular attendees is not affected by the behaviour of irregular attendees.

4.5.4 Wastage of quality time for teaching

It was also found that absenteeism affects the teaching process in that time is used inefficiently as teachers arrange extra or remedial classes to cater for lessons not delivered. Furthermore, the learning pace becomes slow making it difficult to accomplish

planned tasks for the term. This is because lesson delivery is delayed as teachers try to ensure that all students understand the lesson.

“it hinders progress because when you have taught something and you have other 5-6 who did not come, you are affected as they ask some questions that you already covered them, and may decide to go back to revise the lessons for their benefit.” (Form teacher, government day school)

It was also learnt from FGDs that a higher rate of irregular attendees in a particular lesson affects the teacher’s morale as some teachers begin doubting their competence.

Some teachers may have less confidence to teach when many students are out of class and may think that the remaining students will not understand the lesson. The image of the teacher is damaged when most students fail examinations (Female student, FGD with regular attendees, Boarding school).

However, some teachers become disgruntled and act dangerously to the disadvantage of many students as the excerpt below shows:

I am not affected because I just continue teaching, whether they understand or not. This makes my work easier because I mark exercises for only those who have submitted their exercise books (Subject teacher, boarding school).

This shows that a hard working spirit in teachers is also influenced by student behaviour as teachers go to class just to be seen as working.

4.5.5 Damage to school image

A school is a social institution where students are socialized. As such, schools have norms and values which students are expected to follow in order to be acceptable to society. However, irregular attendees fail to conform to these norms and values and their behaviour tarnishes school image. Management of the School is perceived as failing to control student absenteeism and their competence becomes doubtful to the community.

The poor performance of irregular attendees in national examinations is perceived as the failure of the whole school.

Student absenteeism contributes to poor results. As a school we are not amused with poor results because the majority of the failures are truants. Managing a school becomes very difficult because of disciplinary issues. This takes up our time because there are cases where teachers have sat in a discipline meeting from 9:00am to 12 noon. In the end, the school head is perceived as incompetent and the school image is damaged (Head teacher, government boarding school).

Since teachers are engaged in discipline meetings much of instructional time is lost to the disadvantage of the students. Mayer and Mitchell (1993) observed that schools that experience high rates of absenteeism tend to suffer loss of learning for students and loss of instructional time.

It was also learnt that persistent absenteeism reduces the actual total student enrolment and makes management difficult. Form teachers that were interviewed pointed out that it is difficult to have a true student enrolment such that other students are denied a place because absentees occupy classroom spaces. Head teachers observed that if absenteeism is left uncontrolled, it becomes a culture among future student generations. This contributes to degradation of school morals as new students copy the behaviour from seniors within a few weeks of being in the school. This empirical evidence shows that absenteeism and absenteeism have negative impacts on student academic performance hence the reputation of both teachers and the school.

4.6 Strategies to reduce student absenteeism

Participants in the study suggested a number of strategies that can be adopted to reduce absenteeism. The general perception was that dealing with absenteeism requires collective action and cooperation of both school and community members. According to Hinz et al. (2003) and Wagner et al. (2004) an integrated support system involving the school, family and community reduces absenteeism among students as these have a direct influence.

4.6.1 Improvement of school facilities

Participants in the study observed that attractive teaching and learning environment encourages students to attend school. Participants in FGDs observed that absenteeism could be reduced if schools had well stocked libraries, a water tap and a fence surrounding the school to control absenteeism as shown in the excerpt below.

“The school must build hostels and library so that we should not go to Domasi college library since we go there during learning hours.” (Female student, regular attendee, private school)

Most students from rural schools suggested that hostels could reduce absenteeism to a greater extent as most students travel long distances which is against the policy that no student should walk more than 30 minutes to reach the nearest school.

4.6.2 Student supervision and counselling

It was found that intensifying supervision could effectively reduce absenteeism in schools. This can be achieved by involving parents in checking students work at home and occasionally inquire from school about the conduct and performance of their wards.

Parents can be assured that students are working hard by participating in monitoring and students progress as the excerpt below shows.

Parents must come to school to supervise the work of their ward. Some parents who do not realise the importance of schooling should be civic educated. Teachers play a role in this by participating in Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) meetings. Authorities must conduct community meetings and enlighten student guardians on the dangers of forcing children into early marriages (Male student, FGD with regular attendees; CDSS).

This means coordination between parents and teachers could help to strengthen student supervision. Wagner et al. (2004) suggested that parents need to participate in supervising and counselling students to reduce absenteeism. Similarly, some students pointed out that teachers must ensure that students are doing expected activities when in school by conducting frequent row calls and giving a lot of exercises to keep students busy. Other students suggested that a register should be introduced at 10 am, 1.30pm and 3.30pm to identify truants. Teachers that were interviewed observed that some school heads are reluctant to discipline students as indicated in the excerpt below.

If the administration perceives absenteeism as a problem teachers can discuss and find solutions. Sometimes teachers try to advise the students but they argue that they have met the head and he/she has said nothing. This shows that school authority is dysfunctional (Subject Teacher, boarding school).

However, strict supervision could work only when school heads are committed as a way of encouraging staff on the one hand, and as an authority figure for students to comply. Students can also play a role to report to parents and teachers whenever friends are absent without valid reasons. Some students reported that friends used to report them to parents and they changed. Participants in FGDs indicated that parental counselling would encourage students to make rational decisions because counselling helps to unravel the

root cause of bad behaviours in a group or in an individual. This calls for identification of appropriate counselling strategies that focus on student behavioural change.

4.6.3 Enforcement of the school rules

It was also observed that enforcement of school rules and regulations could help to reduce absenteeism among students. It was learnt that students take advantage of the laxity in the enforcement of rules and regulations as oftentimes offenders go unpunished hence, others perceive the actions as normal. This means reasonable punishments are necessary to maintain observance of rules and regulations in schools. For instance, some teachers suggested that students that skip lessons for five consecutive days must be suspended from school for a number of weeks to deter others from doing the same. Some students suggested that they can assist to punish truants' and absentees by denying them to copy notes for the lessons missed. This can be a demonstration that the school system does not approve truanting and absenteeism.

However, some head teachers observed that the strategy can only be effective if teachers adhere to work ethics because teacher absenteeism does influence student absenteeism.

Sometimes absenteeism is influenced by teacher absenteeism. Teachers are encouraged to plan well and teach accordingly; however, it is difficult to punish teachers who miss classes with valid reasons (Head teacher, government boarding schools).

It was learnt that teachers provide extra lessons for truants and absentees, a practice that is perceived as a catalyst for increased and absenteeism in schools. This shows that absenteeism can be controlled by discouraging remedial classes for truants and absentees as suggested in Coldman (1995) and Cullingford (1999).

4.6.4 Participation in extra-curricula activities

Participants in FGDs and interviews suggested that both students and teachers must be encouraged to take part in extra curricular activities to encourage students to change behaviour. Participation in clubs and societies enable students to interact and learn from each others experiences. These provide the best opportunity for students to assist friends to resolve personal problems that affect academic undertakings. Students indicated that problems such as and absenteeism including boy friends and sugar daddies in school for girls can be discouraged by promoting participation in clubs and societies. Clubs and Societies encourage peer counselling such that if well organised and supported they have enormous influence on behaviour change.

Many students emphasised the need for good peer and teacher relationships in school because they promote kindness, respect and support among members of the school community as explained in the excerpt below:

“We should maintain good relationship with our teachers. We must listen to what they say and become a good boy or girl and we can be assisted in many things.”
(Male student, FGD with irregular attendees; private school)

Participants argued that health relationships are best learnt in social groups clubs and societies where students and teachers are free to interact and help each other in solving social problems that affect academic work. According to Haworth and Bardsley (1999) clubs and societies help to bring students with attendance problems together where they can discuss and come up with possible solutions.

4.6.5 Rewards and in service education and training (INSET)

Rewards and in service education and training can also be used to motivate students and teachers hence reducing absenteeism. Providing incentives to better performing students in class exercises and tests encourages a hardworking spirit and competition among students. In that way students strive to use any possible and appropriate means to follow instructions in an effort to receive the best reward. As a result students may reduce absenteeism with a purpose of achieving a better reward. Participants in FGDs with irregular attendees pointed out that schools should reward regular attendees, good performers and those who report earlier for classes in order to encourage behaviour change to reduce absenteeism. Such rewards could be monetary or text books and note books or any other school utensil.

It was also found that frequent in service and education training for teachers can improve the quality of lesson preparation and delivery to encourage students to attend classes. Some head teachers pointed out the need to strategise for the reduction of absenteeism by promoting good teaching strategies that motivates students. However, the head teachers observed that preparing and delivering motivating lessons was a problem because some of the teachers were under qualified to understand teaching ethics and techniques as indicated in the excerpt below:

“We also need good teaching which motivates students. We have a problem of under qualified staff and these do not know teaching ethics, hence, sometimes students are not interested in their lessons”. (Head teacher, private school)

It was therefore suggested that under qualified teachers need to upgrade through INSET programmes to master teaching methods and class management skills.

4.6.6 Community empowerment

It was also suggested that there is need for more civic education for community members to appreciate the importance of attending school so that they can participate in discouraging absenteeism among students. Hinz et al. (2003) stipulated that the community can participate in improving school attendance by reporting truants and absentees to school authorities and parents once students are found out of school during learning hours. It was further shown that some parents fail to encourage their children since they do not realize the benefits of education.

“Some parents are ignorant and do not realize the importance of schooling should be civic educated on the importance schooling. Teachers can play a role in this by holding Parents Teachers Association or the government can conduct meetings with the community to enlighten them on the dangers of forced and early marriages”. (Male student FGD with regular attendees, CDSS)

Head teachers pointed out that sometimes community cultural activities counter school norms particularly when initiation ceremonies coincide with school calendar. Therefore, authorities in education and community have the responsibility to civic educate the community to ensure that children attend school as per calendar.

4.7 Chapter summary

The results discussed have revealed that absenteeism arise due to a number of factors and hence, confirming that it is a multi-causal problem. However, from analysis it is observed that student absenteeism largely stems from teacher and students attitudes and behaviours. On the one hand, students do not see the necessity of attending difficult or easily passable lessons and those not directly relating to ones goals in life. Most students are lazy, and lack hard working spirit implying that there is little self-motivation. This is

further depicted as they are often late for lessons; get tired easily failing to persevere till knock off time. Some have emotional problems such that any offence directed at them leads to making wrong decisions and thus stay away from classes.

On the other hand, inadequate lesson preparation due to lack of knowledge and lack of motivation results in boring lessons that worsens students views towards schooling. Teachers are unable to cultivate cordial relationship among themselves and with students thereby creating a tense atmosphere that is not conducive to teaching and learning. Such learning environments are least to be desired since the consequences counter the goals of the education system in Malawi.

Furthermore, it was clear that attendance of some students is also disrupted by demands from home, community and friends. These make students to have divided interests and thus, if not identified and checked may lead to eventual dropping out of school.

This calls for coordinated and collective efforts within the institutions that focus on changing the mind-set of both teachers and students. Adequate teaching and learning facilities can assist in raising motivation levels and hence improving teaching and learning processes. In addition, frequent INSETs would help in equipping teachers with new knowledge and skills required for effective teaching. Well organised support systems and counselling services for students would help address to a greater extent education, social and personal problems of students. However, there is a need for a study with a larger sample to provide a better statistical justification for these findings.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND STUDY IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to find out causes of absenteeism among students; their effects on teaching and learning and come up with possible solutions of the problem in Zomba secondary schools. The study used the interpretive approach to explore absenteeism from students' perspective and teachers and head teachers as school managers.

The study revealed that student absenteeism in secondary schools is influenced by institutional, social and economic factors. Institutional related causes of absenteeism ranges from disliking a subject, perceptions that some subjects are difficult, too easy or insignificant. It was also found that teachers contribute to student absenteeism through poor teaching methods which make lessons boring. Teachers who like absconding duty and poor student-teacher relationships also contribute to absenteeism among secondary school students.

It was also found that maladministration of punishment where students are given severe and senseless punishments like asking a student to dig a pit with a depth of two meters and bury it, laxity in student supervision by management and inadequate school facilities are other factors that influence absenteeism. Responsibility demands at home, peer and

social pressures, lack of seriousness, immaturity, and poverty are among social and economic causes of absenteeism among secondary school students.

The study also revealed that irregular school attendance among students had a negative effect on teaching and learning and dents public image of the school. Nevertheless, the general consensus from participants in the study was that skipping lessons does reduce the overall student performance.

A number of strategies that schools can adopt to reduce absenteeism were also suggested. Study participants perceived that school management has a greater responsibility to improve attendance through rewards, enforcing school rules and regulations, improving facilities as well as constant supervision and counselling. Parental involvement in school management was regarded as an essential way of motivating students to attend classes and instilling a hard working spirit. On the other hand, constant communication and coordination between teachers and parents and the general community was also mentioned as a way of improving information flow pertaining to student progress in education.

5.2 Study Implications

The findings as reported in this study imply that school management must enhance cordial communication between teachers, students, parents and the community in order to identify and solve problems that cause absenteeism among secondary school students. Observance of work ethics among teachers and school heads and enforcement of school

rules and regulations is essential to achieve student cooperation and understanding in dealing with absenteeism. Schools must allow the community to participate in school management especially the supervising, monitoring and evaluation of both student and teacher performance. This can improve the flow of information and promote the interests of the school which is essential in educating children.

Finally, there is a need for researchers to conduct a long-term study involving a larger sample and capable of collecting student attendance and scores data to establish the relationship between absenteeism and student performance. Replicating this study to other regions and districts is also necessary as the findings of this study may not be generalised to the whole country. Further investigations should also be conducted to establish if there is any relationship between subject location on school timetable and its effects on student absenteeism.

REFERENCES

- Bennet, K.P. and LeCompte, M.D. (1990) *The Way Schools Work: A sociological Analysis of Education*, London: Longman.
- Berg, S. van der and Louw, M. (2006). Lessons learnt from SACMEQ II: African student performance in regional context. Paper presented to the conference on Investment Choices for Education in Africa, 19-21 September 2006, Johannesburg.
- Boss, K.Tj. Ruijters, A.M. and Visscher, A.J. (1992). Absenteeism in secondary education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 18(4), 381-395.
- Chimombo, J.P.G. and Chonzi, R.G. (2000). *School Dropout and Teenage Pregnancy in Malawi: Its Causes and Magnitude*, Zomba: University of Malawi.
- Coldman, C. (1995). Truancy and the curriculum. In O'Keefe, D. and Stoll, P. (Eds.). *Issues in School Attendance and Truancy*, London: Pitman.
- Crespo, M. and Michelena, J. (1981). Streaming, absenteeism, and dropping-out. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 6, (4), 40-55.
- Creswel, J.W., (1994). *Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, United States of America (USA): SAGE.
- Cullingford, C. (1999). The relationship between delinquency and non-attendance at school. In Blyth, E. and Milner J. (Eds...) *Improving School Attendance* (pp 55-72) London: Routledge.
- deJung, J.K. and Duckworth, K. (1986). Measuring student absences in the high schools. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. San Francisco, April [ED271 889].

- Dekalb, J. (1999). Student Truancy. *ERIC Digest*, 125.
- Dunne, M. Humphreys, S. and Leach, F. (2003). Gender Violence in Schools
Background paper prepared for the Education for All Global monitoring Report
2003/4.
- Durden, G.C. and Ellis, L.V (1990). The effects of attendance on student learning in
principles of economics. *American Economic Review Papers and Proceedings*,
85 (May), 343-46.
- Ehrenberg, R.G., Ehrenberg, R.A., Rees, D.L. and Ehrenberg, E.L. (1991). School
districts leave policies, teacher absenteeism and student achievement. *The Journal
of Human Resources*, 26 (1), 76-105.
- Elkind, D. (1988). *The Hurried Child: Growing up Too Fast Too Soon*, Reading, and
M.A. Addison-Wesley.
- Enomoto, E. (1997). Negotiating the ethics of care and justice. *Educational
Administration Quarterly*, 33 (3), 351-370.
- Etsey, K. (2005). Causes of low academic performance of primary school pupils in the
Shama Sub-Metro of Shama Ahanta East Metropolitan Assembly (SAEMA) in
Ghana. Paper presented at regional conference on education in West Africa.
Dakar, Senegal 1st –2nd November, 2005.
- Fox, J. and Levin, J. (1999). Mr and Mrs Bueller's night in jail. *Christian Science
Monitor*, 92 (94), 11.
- Fox, N.J. (1995). Professional models of school absence associated with home
responsibilities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 16 (2), 221-
242.

- Fergusson, D.M., Lynskey, M.T. and Horwood, L.J. (1995). Truancy in Adolescence. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 30, 25-37.
- Galloway, D. (1985). *Schools and Persistent Absentees*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Government of Malawi (GOM) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2005). *Sentinel Sites Survey on School Enrolment and Attendance During Second Term of 2005*, Zomba: Centre for Educational Research.
- Government of Malawi (GOM) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2006). *Sentinel Site Survey on school Absenteeism in January, 2006*. Zomba: Centre for Educational Research.
- Haralambos, M. Holborn, M. and Heald, R. (2004). *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, (6th Edition). London: Collins.
- Haworth, M. and Bardsley, K. (1999). Student support groups. In Blyth, E. and Milner, J. (Eds.). *Improving School Attendance*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hinz, E., Kapp, L. & Snapp, S. (2003). Student attendance and mobility in Minneapolis public schools. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 72(1), 141-149.
- Jenkins, P.H. (1995). School delinquency and school commitment. *Sociology of Education*. 68 (3), 221-239.
- Kadzamira, E.S. Banda, D. Kamlongera, A. and Swainson, N. (2001). The impact of HIV/AIDS on primary and secondary schooling in Malawi: Developing a comprehensive strategic response, Zomba, University of Malawi.
- Kulpoo, D. (1998). The quality of education: Some policy suggestions on a survey of schools. SACMEQ policy research Report No. 1, Ministry of Education and UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP).

- Leonard, C.A.R., Bourke, S. and Schofield, N.J. (1999). Student Stress and Absenteeism in Primary Schools. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Melbourne. Retrieved on February 4 2007 from <http://www.swin.edu.au/aare/conf99.htm/leo99.452>
- Liudmila, R. (2005). Key characteristics of the teacher's activity in respect to early prevention of school non-attendance. Paper presented at the European conference on Educational Research, University College Dublin, 7-10 September 2005.
- Machingaidze, T, Pfukani, P. Shumba, S. (1998). The quality of primary education: some policy suggestions based on a survey of schools. Zimbabwe SACMEQ policy research Report No. 3. Ministry of Education and UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP).
- Malcolm, H. and Thorpe, G. (1996). Attending school: How much does it matter? The Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE). Retrieved on January 10 2007 from <http://www.scre.ac.uk>.
- Malunga, L.B. (2000). Presidential commission of inquiry into the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) examinations results. Final Report. Unpublished.
- Marburger, D.R. (2001). Absenteeism and undergraduate exam performance. *The Journal of Economic Education*, 32(2), 99-109.
- Marshall, C. and Rossman, G.B. (2006). *Designing Qualitative Research* (4th Edition). Thousand Oaks and London: SAGE Publications.
- Mayer, G. and Mitchell, L. (1993). A drop out prevention program for at-risk high school

- students: Emphasising consulting to promote positive class room climates.
- Education Treatment of Children*. 16(2), 135-146.
- Meighan, R. (1986). *A Sociology of Educating*. London and New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Milner, G. Chimombo, J. Banda, T. and Mchikoma, C. (2001). The quality of primary education: some policy suggestions based on a survey of schools in Malawi. SACMEQ Policy Research Report No. 7. Ministry of Education and UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP).
- Milner, J. and Blyth, E. (1999). Theoretical Debates and Legislative Framework. In Blyth, E. and Milner, J. (Eds.). *Improving School Attendance* (pp5-20). London: Routledge.
- Ministry of Education (MOE). (2000). *Policy Investment Framework for Education*. Lilongwe; MOE.
- Ministry of Education. (2004). *Education Statistics 2004*. Lilongwe: MOE.
- Ministry of Education. (2005a). *Education Statistics 2005*. Lilongwe: MOE.
- Ministry of Education. (2005b). *District Education Plan Year 2005/06-2007/08 Zomba Urban*. Lilongwe: MOE.
- Ministry of Education (2005c). *District Education Plan Year 2005/06-2007/08 Zomba Rural*. Lilongwe: MOE.
- Ministry of Education (n.d.). Policy guidelines on discipline in secondary schools. Lilongwe: MOE.

- Ministry of Education and The Malawi National Commission for UNESCO (1996). *The Development of Education in Malawi 1994-1996*. Report for the 45th Session of the International Conference on Education 30th September - 5th October 1999. Development (USAID), Washington D.C. Creative Associates International.
- Moleni, C.M. and Ndalama, L.J.C. (2004). Teacher absence and attrition in Malawian primary schools: A case study of four districts. Zomba: Centre for Educational Research and Training and Malawi Institute of Education.
- Monk, D.H. and Ibrahim, M.A. (1984). Patterns of absence and pupil achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 21 (2), 295-310.
- National Statistics Office (NSO) (2003). *Malawi DHS Ed Data Survey 2002: Education Data for Decision Making*. Zomba: NSO and ORC Macro.
- Office for Standards in Education (OfStEd) (1995). Access, achievement and attendance in secondary schools. A report from the Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, London.
- O'Keefe, D. (1994). *Truancy in English Secondary Schools*. London: HMSO.
- Overview of Participation in Secondary Education in Africa. In *Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) Newsletter* (2004), 16 (3).
- Olushola, A. (2007). Advocates of examination malpractice. Retrieved on February 8 2007 from <http://www.uberarticles.com/articles>.
- Park, K.H. and Kerr, P.M. (1990). Determinants of academic performance: A multinomial logit approach. *Journal of Economic Education*, 21.
- Reid, K. (1983). Retrospection and persistent school absenteeism. *Educational Research*, 25 (2), 110-115.

- Reid, K. (1985). *Truancy and School Absenteeism*. London: Hodder and Stronghton.
- Reid, K. (2003). The search for solutions to truancy and other forms of school absenteeism. *Pastoral Care*, March, 3-9.
- Reid, K. (2005). The causes, views and traits of school absenteeism and truancy: An analytical review. *Research in Education*, 74, 59-82.
- Reid, K. and Kendall (1982). A review of some recent research into persistent school absenteeism. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 130 (3), 295-312.
- Romer, D. (1993). Do students go to class? Should they? *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 7 (7), 167-174.
- Rothman, S. (2001). School absence and student background factors: A multilevel analysis. *International Education Journal*, 2 (1), 59-68.
- Rothman, S. (2004). Staying longer at school and absenteeism: Evidence from Australian research and the longitudinal surveys of Australian youth. *International Education Journal*, 5 (1), 113-123.
- Schofield, N.J. and Bourke, S.F. (1997). Absenteeism, student quality of school life and teacher stress in primary school. Paper presented to the EARLI conference, Athens.
- Sheppard, A. (2005). Development of school attendance difficulties: An exploratory study. *Pastoral Care*, September, 19-25.
- Stokes, I. and Walton, J. (1999). The effective collection and data analysis of attendance data. In Blyth, E. and Milner, J. (Eds.), *Improving School Attendance*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Tyreman, M.J. (1968). *Truancy*. London: University of London Press Limited.

- Wagner, M. Dunkake, I. and Weiss, B. (2004). Truancy in Germany: A theoretical and empirical analysis. Paper presented to Euro Conference on the Causes and Consequences of Low Education in Contemporary Europe, Granada, Spain, 18-23 September 2004. Research Institute of Sociology, University of Cologne.
- Williams, L.L. (2008). Student absenteeism and truancy: Technologies and interventions to reduce and prevent chronic problems among school age children. Retrieved on February 20 2008 from http://Chiron.valdosta.edu/are/Litreviews/vol1no1/williams_litri.pdf.
- Wyatt, G. (1992). Skipping class: An analysis of absenteeism among first year – college Students. *Teaching Sociology*, 20 (3), 201-203.

APPENDICIES

Appendix 1: Student questionnaire

INSTRUCTIONS

Dear student,

I am currently conducting research in a number of secondary schools in Zomba district to find out causes of student absenteeism its effects and solutions in secondary schools.

The information will help to contribute to academic knowledge of absenteeism among secondary school students as well as policy makers on how best the problem can be addressed.

I will be very grateful if you can spare your precious time to respond to this questionnaire in order to contribute to this important process

Your identity and answers will be treated with greatest confidentiality and so I urge you to feel free to express your views.

Please answer all questions. If some questions are not clear feel free to ask for clarification.

Thank you.

Student Personal Information

1(a) What is your gender? *(Tick the box next to the correct answer)*

01male		02 female	
--------	--	-----------	--

(b) How old are you? *(Tick the box next to the correct answer)*

Age	Place a tick here	Code
10-13		01
14-17		02
18-21		03
22+		04

(c) Who do you stay with? *(Tick the box next to the correct answer)*

Person	Place a tick here	code
Parents		01
Friends		02
Elder sister/brother		03
Aunt/uncle		04

Other specify _____

(d) In which class are you? *(Tick the box next to the correct answer)*

Class	Place a tick here	Code
Form 1		01
Form 2		02
Form 3		03
Form 4		04

School Information

2(a) What is the type of your school? *(Tick the box next to the correct answer)*

Type	Place a tick here	Code
Govt boarding		01
CDSS		02
Conventional		03
Private		04

Absence Information

3(a) During this school year, have you ever skipped a day of school or part of it without permission on at least on occasion? *(Tick the box next to the correct answer)*

01 Yes		02 No	
--------	--	-------	--

(b) How often do you skip/miss lessons within a week? *(Tick the box next to the correct answer)*

Frequency	Place a tick here	Code
1-3 times		01
4-6 times		02
More than 6 times		03
Don't skip any		04

(c.i.) Which period(s) are you likely to miss? *(Tick the most appropriate answers)*

Period number	Place a tick here	Code
1		01
2		02
3		03
4		04
5		05
6		06
7		07
8		08
9		09

(chi.) Explain why you are likely to miss the period(s) mentioned _____

4 (a.i) Which days of the week do you like missing lessons? *(Tick the box next to the correct answer)*

Day	Place a tick here	Code
Monday		01
Tuesday		02
Wednesday		03
Thursday		04
Friday		05

(a.ii.) Give reason to your answer _____

5(a) What are reasons for (skipping) missing lessons? *(Tick the most appropriate answers)*

Reason	Place a tick here	Code
Problems at home		01
Difficulties with the subject		02
Fear of being bullied or teased		03
Feeling lonely		04
Just wanted to when a chance arises		05
Not wanting to get into trouble		06
Problems with teachers		07
Do not like the subject		08
Boring teacher		09

Other (specify) _____

(b) Where do you go when you miss lessons? *(Tick the most appropriate answers)*

Place	Place a tick here	Code
Hide within the school premises		01
Play in the street/ hang around town		02
Visit friends		03
Hide in the hostels		04
Stay at home		05

Other (specify) _____

c. What do you do when you are out of class during learning hours? *(Tick the most appropriate answers)*

Item	Place a tick here	Code
Playing games		01
Watching movies		02
Helping parents		03
Doing piecework		04
Reading		05
Visit friends		
Do some piece work (ganyu)		06
Drinking and smoking		

Other (specify) _____

6(a) How does this habit affect your learning? *(Tick the box next to the correct answer)*

Effect	Place a tick here	Code
I find difficulties in understanding some concepts		01
I catch up with my work easily		02
I slowly loose interest in the subject		03

Other (specify) _____

(b) When did you start this habit of skipping/missing lessons? *(Tick the box next to the correct answer)*

Period	Place a tick here	Code
At primary school		01
Form 1		02
Form 2		03
Form 3		04
Form 4		05

7(a) What are factors that affect your performance in class? *(Tick only those that apply)*

Item	Place a tick here	Code
Poor lesson attendance		01
Poor teaching		02
Inadequate teaching & learning materials		03
Lack of enough time for study		04
Laziness		05
Lack of teacher motivation		06
Teacher absenteeism and drunkenness		07

Other (specify) _____

END OF QUESTIONNAIRE

Appendix 2: Focus Group Discussion checklist

Objective 1- To determine factors influencing pupil absenteeism in secondary schools.

- 1) Why do students miss lessons or absent themselves from school?
 - School related factors?
 - Home- related factors?
 - What are the characteristics of students who like
- 2) What made you miss lessons during first term and last year during third term?
- 3) What do you do when you miss school?
- 4) During what time of the day do students like missing lessons? Why?
- 5) Are there any special days when students like missing lessons? Why?

Objective 2 – To find out the impact of absenteeism on teaching good attendees and absentees themselves.

- 6) What are the effects of absenteeism
 - When teaching?
 - On good attendees
 - On truants and absentees
- 7) Apart from absenteeism what are other factors that affect performance of students?
- 8) How do you view schooling? Is it important to you? Why?
- 9) How do your parents/guardians view regular attendance?

Objective 4 - To find out strategies that schools can adopt to reduce student absenteeism?

- 10) In what ways can absenteeism be controlled?
 - What should students do in order to address the problem?
 - What should the school do the deal with the problem?
 - What should parents do to deal with the problem of absenteeism?

Appendix 3: Interview guide for the school head, subject and guidance teachers

Preliminary Information and Personal Details

- i. Name of school:
- ii. Type of school (Conventional Day/Private/Boarding/CDSS):
- iii. Profession qualification:
- iv. Number of years served as head teacher or teacher at the school:

Extent of absenteeism

1. Are there instances of absenteeism among students at this school?
2. What are the reasons why students skip lessons?
3. Are there any institutional factors that influence absenteeism?
4. What kind of individual characteristics are associated with students who like skipping lessons?
5. During what time(s), do students like skipping lessons? Why?

Effects of absenteeism

1. In what ways does absenteeism affect
 - i. Your teaching?
 - ii. The learning of good attendees, truants and absentees.
2. How does absenteeism affect the school?
3. What are other factors that affect students' performance?

School record system

1. How do you keep attendance records at this school?
2. Are they effective in identifying truants and absentees?
3. How do you detect absenteeism?
4. What are suggestions you can put forward that could help improve the system?

Promotion of school attendance

1. What type of measures the school has introduced in order to improve attendance?
2. How effective are the measures mentioned above?
3. Do you provide extra lessons to truants? Explain your answer.
4. How do you address absenteeism problem in your class?
5. What other suggestions can be made in order to reduce the problem?

School policies

1. How do parents view regular attendance of their children?
2. Do you have any school-based policy on pupil attendance? What does it say?
3. Is your school-based policy effective in addressing poor attendance?