

# Teacher absenteeism and its impact



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Absenteeism is a major problem confronting organisations worldwide. It causes severe hardships to colleagues, usually resulting in the loss of productive hours for the organisation and hindering it from achieving overall corporate objectives. Absenteeism is very costly since organisations are required to compensate absent workers for services with no corresponding output.

Studies within India found that teacher absenteeism vary from 15% in Maharashtra to 42% in Jharkand (Chaudhury, Hammer, Kremer, Muralidharan and Rogers, 2004). This continues to plague the country at all levels of the teaching profession. Chaudhury et al. (2006) found that absences were fairly widespread rather than concentrated among few teachers. The research also found that “ older teachers , more educated teachers and even head teachers are all paid more but have similar absence rates” (Chaudhury et al. 2004 p. 1).

Teacher absenteeism in the United State is much lower than developing countries. The estimated absenteeism rate lies between 6-8% which is reportedly rising and is of grave concern to the authorities. This estimate agrees with Clotfelter, Charles, Ladd and Vigdor (2007); Ehrenberg et al, (1991); Duflo, Hanna, and Ryan, (2008). However, teachers in highly industrialised countries are absent less often than their counterparts in American (Bowers, 2001; Bradley, Green and Levee, 2007).

Research conducted in October, 2009 by the Jamaica Teaching Commission (JTC) confirmed that classroom-teacher absenteeism was on the rise and recommended that Government install a substitute teacher programme to

stem the rise in absenteeism (Reid, 2012). In Trinidad and Tobago, the problem of teacher absenteeism has been considered to be most challenging for the society. This has caused a heightened awareness by most key stakeholders who continue to hold teachers accountable for high absenteeism in school (Hackett, 2009). Because of the chronic nature of the problem of teacher absenteeism, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, in its Strategic Plan 2011-2015, identified teacher absenteeism as one of the key challenges confronting the Ministry of education and has advanced several measures to alleviate the problem. Hackett (2009) contends that there is a serious lack of concern for identifying the inherent causes and impact of this increasing trend of teacher absenteeism which continues to plague our current school system in Trinidad and Tobago.

The school in Northern Trinidad, like most other schools in the society, is plagued by the burning problem of teacher absenteeism. Being a member of staff, I realise that my colleagues exhaust their leave entitlement with impunity. Teachers are legally entitled to access their leave which forms part of their terms of employment and no one could justifiably denied them of that right. Undeniably, whenever teachers are absent from work teaching time is lost and this could negatively impact student performance.

There are many reasons one could advance for teacher absenteeism. Some may be unavoidable whilst others avoidable. Whatever reasons teachers may advance for their absence, undoubtedly, absenteeism creates tremendous hardships for teacher colleagues and student learning, hinders improvements, and productivity in our nations' schools. In light of the immense hardships brought about by teacher absenteeism, it is critical to <https://assignbuster.com/teacher-absenteeism-and-its-impact/>

get a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding its causes and likely impact on student learning with a view to address the problem.

Many factors could contribute to teacher absenteeism. The most common reason given by teachers at the school in the education district of Northern Trinidad is illness. Abadzi (2007) concur that “ illness in general and in particular, HIV/AIDS have become major causes of absenteeism in certain countries” (p. 11). Surprisingly, the causes and effects of teacher absenteeism have been given very little attention by the relevant authorities (Ehrenberg et al. 1991). Sometimes, teachers may be absent from their regular duties to participate in educational workshops, in-service training, seminars, or any other official duties (Abadzi, 2007). Whenever teachers are absent for whatever reasons, it would tend to have the same negative impact on the students learning experience as when they are absent due to illness. Bowers (2001) used the terms ‘ sickness absence and absenteeism, interchangeably. He considers an absentee teacher as one who absents themselves from work due to illness or incapacity. Jacobson (1989) views absenteeism as “ an expression of employee choice” (p. 283) and made a clear distinction between ‘ involuntary and unavoidable absence.

In clarifying the concept of absence due to illness Ehrenberg et al. (1991) offer three categories of illness: ‘ serious illness, defined as ‘ unambiguously preventing ‘ teachers from coming to work, minor illness, where the teacher has discretion over whether to report for work and ‘ paid vacation’ (p. 74) or reporting sick when there are no manifested health problem. As humans, it is well accepted that teachers would fall ill from time to time, and unavoidably would have to stay away from work, especially in cases where serious illness

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is involved (Ehrenberg et al. 1991). As part of their terms of employment, teachers are legally entitled to take sick leave in the event they fall sick. If teachers are seriously ill then they are unable to exercise ‘ choice’ but in cases of minor illness and paid vacation they have full control as to whether or not to be absent themselves (Ehrenberg et al. 1991). At times, teachers claim to be ill as an excuse for their absence when in fact other reasons may be responsible. They escape scrutiny by substantiating such claims with an accompanying medical certificate obtained from their personal doctor hence making it extremely difficult to disprove.

I have seen teachers actually take half day sick leave on a regular basis on days when they have heavy teaching sessions in school. Health problems, primarily teachers’ own illness, according to a study done by Das, Dercon, Habyarimana and Krishnan, (2007), account for more than 60 % of teacher absences across schools in Zambia. A teacher who is ill, therefore, will likely be absent from work more often and most likely spend less time in lesson preparation (Das, Dercon, Habyarimana and Krishnan, 2007).

It is clear that illness significantly contributes to unavoidable teacher absenteeism, reduction in teacher productivity and negatively impacting student learning. However, sometimes teachers use socially acceptable excuses as illness to account for their absence, which may be avoidable, but the fact that they are compensated for such absence, they seek creative ways to defend their claims which is very difficult to disprove.

The school’s leave policy encourages regular teacher absenteeism. Pitkoff (2003) found a similar trend in leave policy adopted by the district schools in

Connecticut. Although many economists and industrial psychologists have conducted studies on the determinants of worker absenteeism few of them have dealt with how sick leave policies impact absenteeism (Ehrenberg et al. 1991). Teachers are entitled to 14 days sick leave and 14 days occasional leave per annum. These leave entitlement allow teachers to take 28 half days in sick leave and 28 half days in occasional leave and 28 half days in sick leave. A teacher could be absent approximately 56 times per annum, an opportunity which some of them readily exploit. Teachers take time off simply because leave days form part of their contract (Podgursky, 2002; Clotfelter et al. 2007 and Pitkoff 2003).

In looking into the effects of sick leave policy on teacher absenteeism in California and Wisconsin in 1974-1975 (Ehrenberg et al. 1991) found the existence of income protection plans for long-term sick leave resulted in higher rates of teacher absenteeism. However, the study discovered that when teachers are required to provide proof of their illness and report illness directly to the principals the absenteeism rate was found to be lower (Ehrenberg et al. 1991).

Teachers utilise their occasional leave predominantly to attend to personal matters, some of which are unavoidable. A case in point is when teachers have to visit the Ministry's office on several occasions to deal with matters involving their salary, increments and status of employment as identified by (Abadzi, 2007). Additionally, some teachers use avoidable reasons to exhaust their full leave entitlement as failure to do so during the year would result in loss of their entitlement without any form of compensation. Ehrenberg et al. (1991) cited a second study in New York State which <https://assignbuster.com/teacher-absenteeism-and-its-impact/>

revealed that instituting pay incentives for good attendance in 1986-1987 resulted in a significant reduction in the mean number of sick days in the district.

The ease with which leave could be accessed by teachers through the school's leave policy tends to support teacher absenteeism. Lack of a proper incentive programme to compensate teachers for unused leave could promote further teacher absenteeism and ultimately, more teaching time would be lost which negatively impact student learning.

Most notably, teachers at the school in Northern Trinidad expressed frustration when having to fill in for their absentee colleagues. The absence of an effective substitute teacher system forces the school leadership to assign teachers who are on duty to supervise these unattended classes. Regular teachers become very frustrated by feeling a sense of inequity and overworked and would subsequently resort to similar behaviour as the absentee teachers (Rogers and Vegas, 2009).

Teachers feel pressured with the demanding work environment, which eventually, become burdensome to them, and, as their stress levels increase, their morale and motivation decreases. In our discussions some teachers expressed grave dissatisfaction with the teaching environment, and, the school management. They develop negative attitudes towards their job and are uncommitted to the school's strategic goals. Some described school conditions as depressing and demotivating hence they actually look forward to regularly absenting themselves from work. Bruno (2002) contends

that high teacher absenteeism tends to lower the morale of the remaining teachers thus causing them to eventually leave their job.

Teacher absenteeism brings additional pressure on teachers who attend school regularly causing them to be frustrated and resort to absenting themselves from work. Teachers develop negative job attitude, low motivation and morale which lead to further absenteeism.

Stress and burnout on the job are contributors to teacher absenteeism at the institution. Teachers express deep frustration of their working environment which is mainly hostile and lacks basic amenities in the. “ Stress is the psychological, physical and behavioural response of individuals when they perceive a lack of equilibrium between the demands placed upon them and their ability to meet those demands, which over a period of time leads to ill-health” (Palmer, 1989 p. 17). Stress and strain lower teachers’ productivity, negatively impact their personal lives, and cause them to be absent from the classroom on a regular basis. A brief conversation with a teacher at the school revealed that she sets aside days called “ fed-up days” to be absent due to the stressful nature of the workplace. Stress may lead to teacher burnout which would encourage teachers to take sick leave or occasional leave since there is no other incentive for them not to access such leave. Miller, Murnane, and Willett, (2008) as well as Shirom and Rosenblatt (2006) concur that a reduction in teacher absenteeism has the effect of improving teacher productivity and any policy changes could reduce teacher absenteeism rates.



The increased demand by society on the educational system in Trinidad and Tobago has negatively impacted the school environment, resulting in increased stress levels for educators. Whilst the Ministry of education is continuously making demands on schools to increase both teacher and student performance at all levels this would, according to Kyriacou (2001) increase the level of stress on the teachers. Teachers at the school in Northern Trinidad are convinced that teaching in their current environment tends to be very demanding.

Van Horn, Schaufeli and Enzmann, (1999) discovered that teachers in secondary schools are more stress out than their counterparts in primary schools due to challenges of work load, job characteristics, as well as lower organisational commitment and symptoms of ill-health. They contend that high emotional demands are imposed upon teachers within secondary schools due to the quality of students they are required to train. These challenges, according to Van Horn, et al. (1999), contribute to an important determinant of teacher burnout called “ emotional overload”. Teacher stress and burnout along with the demands by society and the Ministry of education are major contributors to teacher absenteeism which cannot be left unattended by the school system.

Poor work attitude and commitment are some growing characteristics at the institution. Some teachers, who expressed major dissatisfaction with their job, access their leave with very little consideration for its impact on students or colleagues. Wegge, Schmidt, Parkes and Van Dick, (2007) found a weak correlation between absenteeism and work attitudes such as job satisfaction. One reason they advanced for this lack of correlation is the fact

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that the study ignored the interactive effects of attitudes with variables such as job involvement and organisational commitment. They confirmed that job involvement would affect absenteeism more if job satisfaction is low (Wegge et al. 2007).

Also, there is a strong perception that the current school administration is not providing adequate support for teachers. As a result, teachers become very depressed, stressed out and respond by absencing themselves from work through authorized leave channels. Haberman (2005) and Ervasti, Kivimaki, Pentti, Suominen, Vahtera, and Virtanen, (2011) supported this view by conceding that teaching is very stressful and it requires the teacher to be highly alert to execute his task well. Teacher attitude and commitment along with a supportive and embracing administration are critical to reduce absenteeism.

The network of relationships that exist amongst teachers, principal, vice principal and supervisors within the school environment can contribute to low teacher morale and changes in their stress levels. Some teachers expressed concerns about the poor relationship amongst the administration, their supervisors and themselves. They argue that sometimes they absent themselves from work due to poor relationship perceived to exist between themselves and the administrators. Teachers regularly express disenchantment with the authoritarian approach adopted by the school leadership in making decisions. Research confirmed that the more authoritarian the leadership the greater the level of absenteeism. It is therefore reasonable to assume that a healthy relationship in school is essential to reduce the stress levels of teachers as it could contribute to

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teacher burnout and negatively impact teacher attendance (Hilton, Sheridan, Clary and Whiteford, 2009).

It is clear that stress and burnout which are attributed to factors such as increased demands on the school by key stakeholders of society, work load challenges, poor network of relations, leadership style and the level of job satisfaction contribute significantly to high teacher absenteeism.

The chronic problem of teacher absenteeism has raised many concerns about the persistent decline in student learning and performance at the school in Northern Trinidad. Using teacher-level data from a study conducted in North Carolina, Clotfelter, Ladd and Vigdor (2007) found that teacher absence is associated with lower student achievement in primary school. Miller, Murnane, and Willet (2007) confirmed that higher teacher absences lead to significantly lower student achievement. Records from the school in Northern Trinidad showed that on average teacher absenteeism ranged from 10% to 11.45% on a daily basis. Additionally, the end of term test scores of students continue to deteriorate over the years with some classes struggling to get overall pass rates of 20% in the various subject areas. Also alarming is the deterioration in the pass rates in the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) exams which showed, on average, out of a population of 900 students the failure rates in Mathematics, English Language, and Physics at CXC level were estimated to be around 60 to 65% over the past three years. A study into teacher shocks and student learning in Zambia found that a 5% increase in teacher absence rate reduces learning by 4 to 8% of average gains over the year (Das, Dercon, Habyarimana and Krishnan, 2007).

Chaudhury, et al (2005) discovered that as teacher absences increased by 10 % it led to a decrease in student test scores by 0.02 standard deviation and a 1-8% decrease in student attendance. This result was supported by a study conducted in rural Rajasthan by Duflo and Hanna and Ryan (2007). They found that a reduction of teacher absence by one half resulted in a 0.17 standard deviation increase in student achievement scores. Additionally, studies conducted in other developing countries found that teacher absenteeism and student performance were negatively correlated (Das et al, 2007; Suryadarma, Suryahadi, Sumarto, and Rogers, 2006). When regular teachers are absent from the classroom less learning takes place and students become less motivated to attend school thus leading to reduced academic performance (Ehrenberg et al. 1991).

Additionally, student behaviour at the school has deteriorated over the past five years resulting in a wide array of deviant behaviour. Most interestingly, as teachers absent themselves from school some students take advantage of this opportunity to absent themselves from school. Based on my experience at the school and supporting school records it was found that between 15 to 16% of the student population were absent on a daily basis. Clotfelter et al (2007) argue that teacher absenteeism causes an increase in students misbehaviour thus causing administrators to concentrate more resources in dealing with discipline whilst, Duraisamy, James, Lane, and Tan, (1999) concur that teacher absenteeism also encourages students to absent themselves from school. Though difficult to quantify, these findings clearly suggest that there is a strong possibility that teacher absenteeism does have a negative impact on student learning and performance. “ The impact that

teacher absences have on student achievement is harder to quantify.

Different studies have arrived at distinct conclusions, but the most current research indicates that there is indeed a correlation between teacher attendance and student learning” (Hubbell, 2008 p. 2).

It is found that when students are exposed to a high quality environment they usually receive a successful educational experience. However, teacher absenteeism causes a discontinuity in sequential learning largely brought about by underprepared substitute teachers or oversized classes or none at all (Chaudhury et al. 2005). Clotfelter et al. (2007) argue that when teacher absenteeism creates discontinuity and other teachers and their students are made to bear the weight of institutional turmoil, the quality of the learning environment is damaged. Ultimately, persistent teacher absenteeism would also damage student motivation to learn (Bruno 2002).

According to the literature, the level of teacher absenteeism at the school in Northern Trinidad, most likely, would have a negative effect on the learning environment for students. This would have the effect of reducing the quality of education offered by the institution. It is therefore essential that the leadership of the School create a high quality environment that is appropriate to effective student learning.

#### Conclusion and Recommendation

Clearly, teacher absenteeism is attributed to many factors which can be classified as unavoidable and avoidable. The high absenteeism problem at the school in Northern Trinidad is commonly caused by many factors such as illness, personal business, stress and burnout on the job, existing leave

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policy, negative attitudes of teachers, poor job environment, low job commitment and low job satisfaction, poor network of relationship and authoritative leadership style. Some of these reasons are usually unavoidable whilst others could be avoided if there are adequate systems in place. Whatever claims put forward for teacher absenteeism there is an abundance of evidence to suggest that student learning and performance, student attendance and behaviour are negatively affected. The authorities can address this problem by considering teacher incentive schemes geared toward rewarding teachers for good attendance. Efforts should be made to improve school infrastructure to create a less stressful environment and leaders should provide adequate support such as training and mentoring to teachers to cope with work challenges and pressures. The school leadership should encourage teachers to fully participate in the decision making process to improve their job satisfaction and commitment. Finally, further studies are needed to fully appreciate the root causes of the problem so that more effective policies and strategies can be adopted to address teacher absenteeism.