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Managing teacher absenteeism: Lessons from independent primary schools in Gauteng, South Africa

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Teacher absenteeism is of concern in today's developing educational climate. In South Africa, where education itself is a contested terrain, and decades of disadvantage still impact resources and skills, despite democracy, it is a compelling challenge. This paper, based on a study of how independent primary schools in Gauteng, South Africa, manage teacher absenteeism, offers an analysis of the management practices employed so that some lessons can be extrapolated. The paper draws from real teaching experience in South African primary schools, noting the huge impact of teacher absenteeism and its implications for teaching and learning. Five co-educational (with both genders), independent primary schools were selected for this qualitative study, using Christopher Hood's Cultural-Theory Framework, document analysis, interviews and observation. Findings homed in on processes used to track teacher attendance policies; directives and instruments that regulate teacher absenteeism; factors that influence teacher absenteeism; leadership styles; rewards for good attendance; penalties for abusing leave, and strategies and measures to manage teacher absenteeism. We conclude with recommendations in response to this challenge and emphasise the need for further research.

Keywords: primary school; strategies for management; teacher absenteeism; teaching and learning

Introduction

Given the incessant demands of teachers over the past decade, the denigration of the profession in general, and the numerous press articles on teachers' lack of responsibility as well as the failure of the education system in South Africa, as teachers we wondered what role and impact teacher absenteeism really had. Teacher absenteeism is an important factor that detracts from building a conducive learning environment not only in South Africa, but globally. While we can understand pupil absenteeism, we perhaps do not understand teacher absenteeism. How much have we focussed on teacher absenteeism? How is this admittedly widespread phenomenon managed? As teachers at an independent school with a history at a number of successful public primary schools, we noted the difference in the teacher absenteeism rates in public and independent schools; that the absenteeism rate is rated higher generally in the former, and that they nonetheless maintain effective strategies, which we are not delving into currently. In our study, no public primary schools were selected.

The main purpose of this paper, based on a study of how independent primary schools in Midrand, Gauteng, South Africa, manage teacher absenteeism, is to offer an analysis of the management practices employed and to extrapolate lessons.

The Impact of Teacher Absenteeism on Teaching and Learning

Teacher absenteeism may have adverse effects on an entire school system, from lowering learner achievement and attendance to tarnishing the school's reputation to broader economic losses (Steiner-Khamsi, Harris-Van Keuren, Omoeva & Shiotani, 2009). International sources indicate that low teacher attendance is linked to low learner attendance (Black, Seder & Kekahio, 2014), implying that there are mutually reinforcing implications of teacher absenteeism for overall learner performance (Banerjee, King, Orazem & Paterno, 2012; Benveniste, Marshall & Santibañez, 2007).

Teacher absenteeism adds pressure to schools, nationally and internationally, by draining their resources and increasing the administrative time spent on finding suitable substitutes, while still managing attendance (Obeng-Denteh, Yeboah, Sam & Monkah, 2011). Based on teacher-level data, studies such as Clotfelter, Ladd and Vigdor (2007) and Das, Dercon, Habyarimana and Krishnan (2007) found that teacher absence is associated with lower learner achievement in primary school, and a decrease in test scores (Chaudhury, Hammer, Kremer, Muralidharan & Rogers, 2006; Duflo, Hanna & Ryan, 2012).

The management of teacher absenteeism in South Africa

Research into the management of teacher absenteeism from a South African perspective is scant, at best. A study by Reddy, Prinsloo, Netshitangani, Moletsane, Juan, Janse van Rensburg, De Kadt, Mda and Cosser (2010), is perhaps the closest this topic has come to being investigated, with a focus on the control and supervision of teacher leave in South African public schools. On the administration and management of teacher leave, Reddy et al. (2010) found that sufficient strategies were in place to address teacher absenteeism, for example, the improvement of working conditions to encourage teacher attendance and the improvement of leave administration systems.

However, this does not imply or ensure its successful management. Reddy et al. (2010:4), conclude that while “schools have been compliant in adhering to the administrative requirements regarding leave taking, they have not engaged with the strategic management of leave taking in order to reduce the extent of leave.”

The Study in Midrand, Gauteng

Given this brief overview of teacher absenteeism, its impact and management, we required further information on:

- What factors influence teacher absenteeism in independent, primary schools;
- How do these schools implement processes to track teacher attendance?
- What strategies do they use to manage teacher absenteeism?

The study used a qualitative approach in an attempt to respond to these questions.

The Research Sites

Five co-educational, independent primary schools in the Midrand area of Gauteng were selected for study. All the schools vary in physical size as well as learner and teacher population; are in close proximity to one another (within a 15 km radius) and are fully private and rely solely on school fees (ranging between R20,000 and R70,000 pa), with no government subsidies. One school is managed via the church while two others are owned by private companies. The remaining two schools are non-profit organisations and whatever income is generated is reinvested into the schools to improve facilities and infrastructure. Only one school was demographically completely diverse in terms of its staff and pupils. The other four have a majority of white staff members and children with a smaller representation of the different races among the learners. The class sizes ranged from 18 to 25 pupils per class. The medium of instruction at all five schools is English, while first additional languages like Afrikaans and isiZulu are also on offer. The schools use manual registers for teachers to sign in when they arrive at and leave school. The heads of departments (HODs), Deputy Principals or Principals sign off daily against the teachers’ register to verify that all information contained therein is accurate. Leave forms are issued immediately to the teachers upon their return to school, irrespective of whether they were away for an entire day or a few hours. The information regarding each teacher’s attendance or absence is captured electronically either by the school’s secretary or the Human Resources Manager (if there is one at that particular school). Teachers are cautioned, in writing, when they have used all their available leave for a specific period or when they are getting close to that.

Theoretical Framework

“A useful theory is one that tells an enlightening story about some phenomenon. It is a story that gives you new insights and broadens your understanding of the phenomenon” (Anfara & Mertz, 2014:17). Theory should provide a useful framework that will offer explanations for the relationships that exist among the different phenomena being studied and give insight that will lead to the discovery of new relationships (Tudge, Mokrava, Hatfield & Karnik 2009). For this study, Christopher Hood’s Cultural-Theory Framework (1998) served as a lens through which research into the management of teacher absenteeism was conducted.

Christopher Hood’s Cultural-Theory Framework

School managers play a pivotal role in combatting teacher absenteeism. Dworkin, Haney, Dworkin and Telschow (1990) explain that principals or school managers must establish an environment where effective leadership would result in reduced teacher absenteeism. Studies in South Africa have shown that teacher absenteeism is lower where teachers report directly to the principal. Finlayson (2009:33) stresses that when teachers had to personally account to the principal and not to the administrative personnel for their absences, the rate was reduced. Usman, Akhmadi and Suryadarma (2007:207) argue that in schools where the principals themselves were often absent, “the teachers followed their example.” Marsh (2000) found that absenteeism may be further aggravated by poor skills and weak policy implementation exhibited by the principal. Hood (1998) differentiates four options for dealing with public management: the hierarchist, egalitarian, individualist and fatalist. These approaches all relate to exercising control and regulation in public management but engage a different method to achieve this.

The hierarchist approach

The hierarchist approach, according to Hood (1998:73–79), is defined by strict relations of authority whereby organisations operate in accordance with pre-determined hierarchical structures and a clear division of responsibilities. Rigid structure and policies dictate.

The egalitarian approach

The egalitarian approach is defined by co-operation and participation (Hood, 1998) and is based on inclusiveness that promotes the desirability and possibility of self-organisation and self-steering. Egalitarians control their organisations through mutuality and “maximum face to face accountability” (Hood, 1998:81), and use a bottom-up participatory management style.

The individualist approach

The individualist approach, according to Hood (1998:92), is based on the assumption that humans are “rational egoists.” This approach envisages the quest for personal interests, and inspiring people who work together to compete for better positions, more money or the highest rewards, by providing the best individual service.

The fatalist approach

The fatalist approach includes no proper checks on the actions of public officials (Hood, 1998). This approach envisages disorganisation and a very low standard of productivity. No effort is made to create a stimulating incentive structure for officials, and this ultimately leads to corrupt and unaccountable practices. While this approach has been criticised for being negative, Hood (1998) claims that it is common.

In considering how these approaches apply to our understanding of teacher absenteeism management, we purposefully selected five independent schools and provided a rich description of the lessons learnt regarding effectiveness of teacher absenteeism management.

Research Methodology and Tools

This paper reports on findings in the five, independent primary schools in Midrand, Gauteng, where semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants, selected because they had been uninterruptedly employed as teachers for a period of five years or longer, and had occupied a management position at their schools for a period of three years or longer. They were also involved in the management system utilised by their particular school when teachers were absent. The interviews were conducted in English. Five schools were selected with the expectation that such a concentrated sample might provide a better source of data – studying a larger pool of participants within a smaller sample organisation pool was expected to deliver more truthful data, as opposed to a smaller number of participants in a larger sample organisation pool. Documents (leave forms/attendance registers/substitution forms, leave policy) were carefully scrutinised at the five independent schools in order to fully understand the acts and policies that were operational in the different schools; how leave policies were implemented at these schools and what measures/steps had been implemented to control teacher absenteeism in independent, primary schools.

The five schools from which the relevant information was collected were given pseudonyms (e.g. School A). All documents relating to leave were scrutinised, and whoever was responsible (the HOD, Deputy Principal or Principal) for managing teacher absenteeism in that particular school, was designated such (Manager A and so forth). Obser-

vation was used to establish the leadership style of each Head of Department (HOD), Deputy Principal (DP) and Principal (P), as this also impacted directly on the way that teacher absenteeism was managed at the five schools. As researchers, we were on the lookout for three types of leadership styles: transformational, transactional or laissez-faire. These leadership types have an effect on absenteeism and behaviour of teachers.

Transformational leadership not only entails providing support for teachers to develop from an intellectual point of view, but also requires the leader to motivate his/her teachers to work enthusiastically towards transformation (Çelik, 1998). Transformational leaders promote a positive organisational climate, fulfil their goals with great ease, ensure that their teachers are satisfied with their jobs by encouraging them to give their best, and give special attention to each teacher (Deluga & Souza 1991; Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999; Rowold & Schlotz, 2009). Transactional leaders identify what teachers need to accomplish at their schools, then set about creating the necessary structure while stressing the importance of planned and scheduled work; followers are either punished or rewarded based on whether they successfully met the planned goals or failed to do so (Hoy & Cecil, 2005).

According to Bass (1990), a laissez-faire leadership style is basically an attitude where there is a lack of leadership and there is no engagement between the leader and the teachers. The leader steers away from his/her responsibility, procrastinates on decisions that need to be made, fails to engage with the staff and shows no interests in them whatsoever (Hoy & Cecil, 2005; Northouse, 2007).

Data gathered from the interviews, as well as from document analyses and observations, was interpreted and analysed, revealing interesting results. The following measures were put in place to assure that the study preserved rigorous subjectivity (Wolcott, 1994). In order to achieve a balanced, fair and complete analysis, we triangulated data from five schools, and sought feedback from the participants through member checking.

Findings: Themes Uncovered

From the data analysis, the following themes came to the fore:

- An understanding of what teacher absenteeism was all about;
- The impact of teacher absenteeism on teaching and learning;
- Policies, directives and instruments that regulate teacher absenteeism;
- Teachers' reasons for their absence from schools;
- The causes of teacher absenteeism;
- Proposed strategies to better manage teacher absenteeism.

Unpacking these themes led to the following summarised findings.

Processes Used to Track Teacher Attendance

Teacher absenteeism rates at the five schools are well-managed and do not really present a challenge as effective controlling procedures are in place and teachers face dire consequences if they abuse their leave-taking privileges. On some days, more than two teachers are absent, but these schools have put measures in place to accommodate and manage the situation for teaching and learning not to be compromised. Teachers often prefer to work in independent schools (if given a choice) as there are smaller classes, more teaching and learning aids available, as well as room for progression and growth. Hence, the need to prove themselves in terms of their performance and commitment is strong and ongoing. Immense pressure is also being exerted by the parent body and the Board, so absent teachers are dealt with in a serious manner.

Low absentee rates can be attributed to the type of schools, the managing styles of the people in charge and the consequences of abusing one's leave privileges. In School A, the HOD said, "*We have created such a competitive environment amongst the teachers by rewarding them for working hard so the teachers work tirelessly to give of their best which includes not getting absent as they are aware that this features high on our list of priorities*" (SA, HOD).

In School B, the Deputy Principal said, "*Our parents pay a fair amount of money to send their children to our school therefore when a teacher is absent even if it is not on a frequent basis, we address the issue on a one-to-one basis with that particular teacher by ensuring that he/she fully understands the impact his/her absenteeism is having on the school's reputation ...*" (SB, DP).

Policies, Directives and Instruments that Regulate Teacher Absenteeism

Although the teachers at the independent schools in our research do not belong to or are not affiliated to any union, they are governed by the Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1997 and the South African Schools' Act 84 of 1996. Leave due to teachers is in line with what teachers who work in state schools are afforded. When teachers are newly appointed in independent schools, the guidelines and policies for taking leave are explained in great detail by the Principal or the Human Resource (HR) Manager. At School D, the policy states: "*Scheduled working hours, rest periods and arranged additional or extra-mural work periods must be adhered to by all school employees. Poor timekeeping practices, unexplained absences or premature departures from school, from the employee's place of work or from school events, are not conducive to orderly school activity or work-*

place discipline." This issue is also addressed during staff meetings where the teachers are urged not to take leave unless absolutely necessary and to plan and prioritise so that their holidays can be effectively utilised.

Factors that Influenced Teacher Absenteeism

The highly effective management of teacher absenteeism could be related to the area in which the schools were operating (urban, highly competitive) and that they were in close proximity. Thus, in order to be the best, the preferred school had to exemplify success and not suffer from teacher absence: this would be detrimental to the school's survival. Hence, enormous pressure is placed on their teachers to be at school every day (observations and interviews of all participants).

In all five schools, the most common reason for teachers being absent was ill-health. A smaller number of days were lost due to family responsibility and study leave, but they did not amount to rates that warranted drastic action from the schools' management teams. If teachers were to request leave for longer periods of time to undergo a major operation that could not be postponed to a school holiday, then that school made use of a substitute teacher. The five schools studied also kept set lists of available substitute teachers.

These substitute teachers must have worked at independent schools before and had to have had a minimum of five years' teaching experience. In this way, the teaching and learning at that particular school was not compromised. However, at the five schools, substitution happened only in one instance. The schools also had a policy which determined that if one, after having worked there for three years and longer, fell ill, one was entitled to 30 days' paid sick leave.

Teachers were granted leave to study and grow professionally and personally as this would add value to the school's image. At the five schools, many teachers were studying to enhance their teaching abilities, but they only took time off to write the examinations. They were granted a day's study leave before the examination, provided that the degree/qualification was linked to their current positions and would enhance growth and development. Teachers had to provide proof of registration at their institutions and official documentation detailing examination dates and times. Once again, depending on the leave time needed, the school's management team planned so that teaching and learning was not compromised.

Teachers were absent from school when their children and sometimes even spouses fell ill but this was also well-managed. Those who worked at the schools fully understood the importance of being at work every day so, as noted from scrutiny of the attendance registers and leave forms of all the

schools over a period of six months, very few days were lost due to teacher absence.

Analysis of Leadership Style

Even though the principals' leadership styles differed slightly, they were all similar pertaining to teacher absenteeism – they had very low tolerance for the same teachers staying away frequently. We gauged their leadership styles from observations of the way the principals spoke to their staff and the manner in which they dealt with the teachers. Two predominant leadership styles emerged: transformational and transactional leadership. The principals chose to set an example by coming to school regularly and by asking the teachers to contact them directly when they were unable to attend school.

Rewards for Attendance

Teachers at the five schools were rewarded in the following ways for 100% attendance:

- Cash bonuses at the end of the term/year
- Public recognition
- Opportunities for promotion
- Blanket day
- Above-average pay increases.

These incentives motivated teachers to maintain their excellent attendance records and encouraged other teachers to follow suit. The school's chosen type of incentive was clearly stipulated in the code of conduct which every teacher was required to read, acknowledge and sign upon commencing his/her employment at that particular school.

When teachers were publicly praised and recognised for their hard work, they were motivated to carry on working in that manner. Teachers were given recognition at year-end functions and at the schools' award ceremonies, and they were highly appreciative when their commitment and dedication were acknowledged. Excellent teacher attendance obviously improved and added to a school's image.

Teachers who showed their commitment by not only working hard but by coming to school every day were next in line when opportunities for promotion arose. Most teachers were ambitious and wanted to climb the school's employment opportunity ladder. Thus, they were prepared to work hard to ensure that when the moment arrived, they would not lose out.

At School A, a blanket day was used where a particular teacher was given a school day off from work to thank him/her for always working hard being committed and dedicated. This was done once a month and one of the criteria used for awarding such a day, was attendance.

Teachers at School D were given salary increases the following year, based on their performance in the year before. A teacher who came to school every day, worked hard, and produced the

desired results, received a higher salary increase than a mediocre teacher. All five schools used this as part of their appraisal system for their staff to help them decide on the increases for the following year. The Principal at School E noted: *"We make use of the Internal Quality and Management System (IQMS) to appraise our teachers and one of key performance indicators is regular attendance. We use this rating to determine increments for the next year"* (SE, P). Members of staff were also informed of this via the code of conduct.

Penalties for Abusing Leave

Teachers who were found to abuse the leave system faced the following penalties:

- Deduction in salary
- Pressure from Management, the Board and parents to either meet with the school's expectations or leave the school
- An unhealthy, disgruntled relationship between the absent teacher and the rest of the staff who attended school regularly
- Lack of trust and a stigma of suspicion surrounding the absent teacher even when there was genuine reason to be absent
- No opportunities for promotion
- Poor reputation, compromising chances of employment in other independent schools.

If teachers took more time off than was legally due to them, this could result (and did at School A), in a deduction in their salaries. This hurt the offending teacher the most as teachers are not the best paid in South Africa: any additional cut in salary affected monthly budgeting. Teachers took attendance seriously when the schools had direct and immediate control over their salaries.

Management exerted pressure on the teachers by either emphasising the importance of attending school at every single meeting or by calling the teacher for an upfront and honest conversation with him/her, indicating that the days taken off were a serious cause for concern and affected teaching and learning processes. Teachers were constantly reminded of the high school fees, how much parents were paying, the sacrifices they were making to send their children to independent schools, and what they and the school expected in return. If a teacher was still uncooperative the Board would get involved by providing advice to the school principal. When that happened, the offending teacher could lose his/her job. Parents also pressurised the school management team who then exerted more pressure on the absent teachers. The Deputy Principal at School C said, *"When I informed the offending, absent teacher, that the Board is aware of his situation and the parents are also demanding an explanation as to why the teacher is absent so often, the teacher becomes more aware of his absenteeism and immediately there is a change in his behaviour"* (SC, DP).

Strategies used to Manage Teacher Absenteeism

Findings showed that Schools A, D and E had a system in place where, when teachers were absent for a day or two, fellow teachers who were not teaching during that time (admin periods) substituted for the absent teacher. Most of the teachers' workloads were quite full and when they had to sacrifice their admin periods to fill in for a teacher who they believed was absent for trivial reasons yet again, they would display great animosity towards that teacher upon his/her return. The Principal at School E said, "*My hardworking, committed and diligent teachers have no qualms about showing the absent teacher how they feel about having to fill in for her/him. When the absent teacher returns to school, that teacher is basically isolated and made to feel like he/she did something wrong*" (SE, P).

Even when the teacher who stayed away from school more than he/she should, actually had a genuine reason for staying away, both the management team and teachers became highly suspicious and doubted the sincerity of the teacher's intentions. The Deputy Principal at School B said, "*I had one particular teacher who had the tendency to stay away for trivial reasons ... when she informed me that her grandmother had passed away ... I asked for a copy of the death certificate*" (SB, DP).

Teachers who were absent more often were not considered for promotion posts even if they were excellent teachers. Their reputations were tarnished to such an extent that when they applied for jobs at other schools, they were unsuccessful due to their poor attendance records. The Deputy Principal at School C said, "*I would rather settle for a mediocre teacher who was 100% committed, especially about attending school regularly rather than an excellent teacher who was 50% committed*" (SC, DP).

Measures to control teacher absenteeism

Absenteeism was controlled by keeping of records (both manual and electronic) of the leave forms the teachers were required to fill in when they were absent from school. At the independent schools, the teachers would complete the leave forms which would then be handed to the principal to sign off/approve and decide whether it was paid or unpaid leave, after which the leave would be captured on the school's information system. This means that both electronic and manual records were kept. The independent schools had proper systems in place for when teachers were absent. The school secretary would hand the absent teacher a leave form to complete upon his/her return to school. If that teacher did not complete the form or provide the necessary documentation (e.g. a doctor's note) for whatever reason, that leave would be regarded as unpaid and the teacher would face immense pressure from the principal of his/her school.

Teachers fill in any one of the following four forms when they are absent:

- Family responsibility leave
- Special leave
- Sick leave
- Study leave

Teachers were also required to notify the principal directly when they were absent from work. This requirement was clearly listed in the teacher's code of conduct.

Management approaches to control teacher absenteeism

According to Hood (1998:73–79), the hierarchist approach is defined by strict relations of authority in terms of which organisations operate in accordance with pre-determined hierarchical structures and a clear division of responsibilities. The thinking behind this approach is that organisations that operate within such a rigid structure would guarantee that everyone will perform to his/her best, without there being any recklessness towards their duties.

Schools D and E applied the hierarchist approach. Pre-determined hierarchical structures were in place and there was a clear division of responsibilities of all staff – from the principal to the cleaning staff. Hence if one did not perform, one was held accountable. If one was absent, the allocated responsibilities could not be carried out, which then had an impact on the effective functioning of the school. At Schools D and E absenteeism rates were quite low and not at all problematic. One principal commented as follows: "*If I myself have not been absent for the past three years even though I have been sick, then why can't my staff do the same?*" (SE, P).

The egalitarian approach is characterised by co-operation and participation (Hood, 1998) and is based on inclusiveness that promotes the desirability and possibility of self-organisation and self-steering. Egalitarians control their organisations through mutuality and maximum face-to-face accountability (Hood, 1998), and they apply a bottom-up participatory management.

School B used the egalitarian approach and involved everyone in the smooth running of the school. Every staff member had an important role to play and their contributions were highly valued. Because teachers at this school felt a part of the institution they worked for, they rarely stayed away because of the collaborative and equally valued efforts of all. The teacher absenteeism rates at School B were quite low and not at all problematic. The manager who was responsible for supervising and managing teacher absenteeism noted: "*I make every teacher feel important and let them know that every single one of them contributes equally to the success of our school*" (SB, DP).

The individualist approach assumes that hu-

mans are “*rational egoists*.” (Hood, 1998:92). This approach envisages a quest for personal interests, but the manner in which this quest is achieved may be directed by the institutional context, such as providing or revoking privileges for a defined type of behaviour. The first act would be to make people who work together compete for better positions, more money or the highest rewards, by providing the best individual service. The manager at School A noted: “*I promote the teachers who work the hardest first and part of that includes attending school regularly*” (SA, HOD).

School A used the individualist approach where the teachers who worked hard were rewarded with incentives like cash bonuses, promotions, and public recognition. Those teachers who did not perform their allocated duties were denied certain privileges, for instance having time off when another was rewarded, having money deducted from their salaries, being denied promotional opportunities, given the lowest increase or even no increase in salary for the following year. Since none of the teachers wanted to miss out, teacher absenteeism rates were low and not at all problematic.

In the fatalist approach no proper checks on the actions of public officials exist (Hood, 1998:145–167). This approach envisages disorganisation and a very low standard of productivity. No effort is made to create a stimulating incentive structure for officials, which ultimately leads to corrupt and unaccountable practices. While this approach has been criticised for being negative, Hood (1998) stresses that it is common.

At School C a particular teacher thought that his behaviour would go unnoticed (as had been the case at his previous school). The teachers arrived at school in an inebriated state and was also absent frequently. School C’s management wasted no time in removing this teacher from their school. This sent out a strong warning to the other staff members to fall in line because the school adopted a firm stance against poor performance and negligence. Apart from this isolated incident, teacher absenteeism rates at School C were low and not at all problematic.

Furthermore, at the selected schools only two of the three leadership styles were displayed, namely transformational and transactional, and not *laissez-faire*. In summary, it is evident from the findings that teacher absenteeism is managed well in the five independent, primary schools studied. This can be attributed to a number of reasons such as better working opportunities, better chances for promotion, better salaries and an overall improved image for the teacher who teaches in an established, independent school.

Independent schools generally do not reveal their teacher absenteeism statistics publically, as the latter does not pose a real challenge. Even when the odd situation arises where teachers abuse their

leave privileges, the matter is dealt with immediately. This occurs despite the fact that teachers here are not affiliated to any unions that protect their rights, leaving them vulnerable and exposed.

In terms of Hood’s Cultural-Theory Framework, it was quite evident that the management styles in the five schools affected the manner in which the teachers carried out their responsibilities. However, those responsible for managing teacher absenteeism adopted a kind of bullying attitude towards the teachers. This was evident in that the teachers would come to school even when they were really ill for fear of being victimised or isolated when they returned to school. While maximum teacher attendance is of paramount importance at any school, there should be a balance between putting pressure on the teachers to attend school every day and knowing when a teacher has a genuine reason for being absent.

The five schools referred to here all experienced minimal interruption to their teaching and learning due to the strict measures that were in place and the management approach adopted by the school principal. If teachers were planning to stay away for longer periods, then a suitable contingency plan came into operation to maintain the quality of teaching. The climate that existed within these schools encouraged every stakeholder to give nothing less than the best, which included attending school regularly and on time. The five schools created a positive culture and climate in which there was no room for teachers to behave differently. If a teacher deviated from the norms, he/she was immediately reminded of his/her duties, the school’s expectations, et cetera.

Recommendations Regarding the Management of Teacher Absenteeism

The strategies that were implemented by the various managers in the schools studied were crucial as they set the tone for how the rest of their staff would conduct themselves. Much can be learned from them. A key component was the ability to manage teacher absenteeism.

The study afforded a glimpse into independent schools and their approaches to this challenge, especially as they tend to keep their operational procedures a closely guarded secret, and that the existence of these schools depended on their learner intake. It is a highly competitive industry in an area with many independent primary schools in close proximity. The schools that generally survive and succeed are the ones that earn and maintain a good reputation in terms of the quality of the teachers they employ, the quality of the education they offer, the extra-mural programme and overall success. If it were to be known that a certain school’s teachers were absent on a frequent basis, then that school’s existence would be a short one.

One of the appealing factors of teaching at an independent school is the guaranteed lower teacher-learner ratio. This does not mean that teachers at independent schools are not pressured to perform, but smaller classes allow teachers to accomplish more. Therefore, teachers are eager to teach at independent schools and want to retain their positions, so they will generally work extremely hard.

Independent schools have more control over their teachers as they can impose immediate sanctions when a teacher does not fulfil his/her duties. The appeal of independent schools means that they offer a wide range of options. The fact that teachers here are not affiliated to unions makes them vulnerable and desperate. They will do all they can not to miss a school day for fear of repercussions.

The incentive initiative for 100% attendance by teachers should be a project driven by the Department of Education. If teachers were offered a 10% increase in salary for the months during which they were not absent, they would feel encouraged to come to school.

It is envisaged that the outcome of this study will be included as content of a management module of a programme in which school principals are prepared for improving teacher management in all South African public schools.

This study prompts further research into the management of teacher absenteeism:

- How do principals sustain effective management strategies to control teacher absenteeism?
- How can the South African education crisis be mitigated through the efficient management of teacher absenteeism?
- How can leadership development programmes lead to the positive management of teacher absenteeism?

Conclusion

The sharing of lessons among different schools is essential. Teachers may need to be monitored and held accountable, if the hierarchical management style was the underlying motivation for teachers at independent schools to be present in their classrooms. Teachers should take the lead and set the example for learners. Teachers need to attend school regularly, motivate the learners and emulate the ideal. Acknowledging Grundy's (1987:105) quote, when "teachers" confront the real problems of their existence, they will soon be faced with their own "realisation" that their presence in schools is critical for the learners' learning experience. Lessons learned from these independent schools should be applied in all schools.

Authors' Contributions

KB wrote the manuscript, LN conducted the interviews, and RV reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

- i. This article is based on the MEd dissertation of Linda Naidoo.

- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
- iii. DATES: Received: 4 December 2018; Revised: 18 April 2019; Accepted: 20 September 2019; Published: 31 December 2019.

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