

Pupil Absenteeism in Malawi Primary Schools: Are There Any Solutions?

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Introduction

In 1994, Malawi became a democratic country and the newly elected government introduced free primary education. This resulted in an increase in primary school enrolments from 1.9 million children to 3.2 million children representing a 68% rise. This also increased the number of children in difficult circumstances such as orphans, street children and the physically challenged who attended school. The proportion of girls whose education was not considered as important by many families also increased substantially. In 2006 the net enrolment ratio (NER) stood at around 100% and the Gross Enrolment Rates (GER) was 122%. Gender parity in primary school enrolment is almost 50%. (Ministry of Education, 2006) The government has crafted several policy documents to support free primary education and these include the Policy Investment Framework (PIF), a revised Education Act which is the legal education sector framework, the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategic Paper (MPRSP), the National Strategy for Teacher Education and Development (NSTED), the Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform (PCAR) Programme, the HIV/AIDS Strategy and the National Action Plan for Education For All. These are intended to guide how the country is going to provide education to its children. Developing partners in the country have supported government's efforts to provide education to the majority of the children. However the education indicators show that after more than a decade the quality of education has been compromised by the increases in enrolments. For example teacher pupil ratios ranged from 1: 37 in urban areas to 1: 120 in rural areas; classroom pupil ratios ranged from 1 to 47 in rural areas to 1 to 150

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in urban areas, survival rates to the final primary class was 29.6% and this means that only 29.6% of the cohort was able to complete schooling. Even when they reach the final year only 67% were able to pass the Primary School Leaving Examinations (Ministry of Education, 2006). These figures paint a grim picture about schooling in Malawi. It is thus critical that efforts be made to keep children in school and ensure that they are learning. Checking absenteeism is one way of giving the children a chance to learn in an efficient way. Even more important is to ensure that this smooth learning is not disrupted by humanitarian crises such as floods and food shortages. The best solution to improve the efficiency of the system is to ensure that meaningful learning takes place throughout the year. This study thus focused on absenteeism during a complete year to see when pupils are most vulnerable and when their attendance is most affected.

There are many reasons that have been suggested as being the cause of such an inefficient education system. Poverty always stands out as the basic reason why many children do not complete schooling. Children are required to supplement family income in many ways and have to stay away from school to attend to activities that help the family to survive. Schools also demand certain norms such as clean clothes, writing materials and a healthy mind and healthy body which are difficult for poor families to provide. This together with cultural practices that do not encourage children to go to school present difficult circumstances for children. The illiteracy rate in the country is 58% meaning that many parents fail to appreciate the goodness of schooling. Other reasons have to do with the schools themselves. For example long distances to school and poor site of a school discourage children from attending school. Poor management of schools also contribute to the frustration children have with schooling. In some cases unpalatable school regulations drive children away from school. Poor teaching methods, crowded classroom and unhealthy school premises do not attract children to come to schools.

In the recent past Malawi has been experiencing frequent humanitarian crises in form of floods, droughts, shortages of food and out breaks of diseases. These bring untold suffering to many families and in order to cope with the

situation children are forced to stay away from school. Different families are affected in different degrees and those that are adversely affected tend to stay away from school for long periods. Over the last twenty years Malawi has been visited by the scourge HIV/AIDS and it has had devastating effects on the socio economic front. Many families have been affected with the result of increased numbers of orphans who must still attend school. Many of such children are functioning as parents looking after their siblings and themselves. It is in this context that this study wished to map out the attendance or the extent of absenteeism in schools given that through out the school year, children seem to face many challenges that prevent them from attending school on a regular basis. (Government of Malawi, 2004)

There have been several reforms in the education sector that are meant to help children to attend school regularly in order for them to fully participate in schooling. World Bank, World Food Programme and other development partners introduced school feeding programmes in some schools to ease the pressures on children during periods of shortage of food. In some cases girls and orphans who are particularly vulnerable in such times are given packages of food to take home at the end of the month if they do not miss classes during the month. A new policy allowing pregnant girls to come back to school after they have given birth is meant to keep girls in school until they complete their schooling. In 2007 World Bank announced it was launching a National School Health and Nutrition programme which would provide supplementary micronutrient foods and drugs, promote iodised salts and change in behaviour and introduce Information Education and Communication. The World Bank was also piloting a school grant programme where schools would receive small grants for purchasing teaching and learning materials. All these are efforts to make children not only attend school but that they improve their performance and stay on to complete schooling.

Context

Malawi is located in the Southern African region. It covers 119,140 square kilometers and 20% of this is covered by Lake Malawi. The country is landlocked

and it is bordered by Mozambique to the east and south western part. Zambia is to the west and Tanzania is to the north and north eastern part. Malawi has a population of about 12 million people 46% of whom are children under 15 years of age. (National Statistics Office, 1998)

In 2004 the Gross National Product (GNP) per capita was estimated at 160 US Dollars suggesting that the average Malawian lives barely at the subsistence level. Rural poverty was estimated at 60%. Malawi's economy is mostly agrarian with tobacco, tea and sugar earning 76% of foreign exchange. Over the past two decades the country has suffered immensely from HIV/AIDS and this has resulted in many children becoming orphans. The country experiences regular droughts and food shortages requiring humanitarian aid. (Government of Malawi, 2004)

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the research was to document the pattern of pupil absenteeism over a period of one year. In addition the research aimed at highlighting particular periods when absenteeism seems to worsen and when it seems to lessen and the reasons why this was like that.

Statement of the Problem

Pupils in primary schools in Malawi continue to register low achievement rates mainly due to poor quality of education provided. This is evidenced by lack of teaching and learning materials, high teacher pupil ratios, high classroom-pupil ratios, high dropout rates and low completion rates. According to MoE (2006) the completion rates is 29.6% meaning that about 70% of the children drop out along the way before they reach the last standard. When compared to other countries in the SADC region Malawi has always been one of the least performing countries (SACMEQ, 2001). It possible that this could be attributed to many factors but absenteeism could be one of the contributing factors. Malawi has been experiencing different humanitarian crises in the past two years and during such times school going children stop going to school to help manage the crises or are themselves affected adversely to the extent of stopping attending classes. This state of affairs limits the chances of the pupils to learn and reach

acceptable levels of achievement at the end. With frustration and the psychological effects of hardship and poverty their performance in school is necessarily affected. Girls, orphans and other vulnerable children usually get the brunt end of such times and therefore their schooling is also affected. However such information about schooling patterns is not known because Education Management and Information System has not found ways of capturing such data. This study set out to find out the extent of absenteeism in primary schools during times of plenty and tranquil and also during humanitarian crises which affect different parts of Malawi in different degrees. It sought to document the patterns of attendance during a schools year to identify when children are most likely to stop going to school. Teachers are also likely to be affected in many ways and may fail to teach effectively.

Research Questions

1. What is the extent of absenteeism in Malawi primary schools?
2. Which periods in the course of the year seem to register the highest rates of absenteeism?
3. Are there differences in absenteeism between regions?
4. Are there specific areas where absenteeism is greatest?

Theoretical Framework

The thesis of this study is that if schools are managed properly gross absenteeism in schools in Malawi can be reduced drastically or even eliminated completely. The scourge of absenteeism affects the pupils, the teachers and the school as a whole. Pupils who are regularly absent from school usually find it difficult to connect issues from lessons they missed and new work. They slow down the normal flow of teaching because they ask what was already taught in previous lessons. This is to the detriment of the regular pupils. The teacher not only must change the pace of teaching but must of necessity attend to the pupils who were absent to help them catch up with their colleagues. Even more important is that the school's image as a social entity with regulations is affected negatively. The school as a whole is affected because measures to control absenteeism such as

punishments are usually applied and this has been a source of alienation for many pupils.

School Management and Organizations

In countries where legislation, policies and regulations that support schooling are enforced absenteeism is at minimum levels. School buildings, health and safety, teaching learning materials, relevant curriculum, trained teachers, school management and organizations are well thought. When disasters strike measures that ensure that schooling is disrupted as little as possible need to be put in place and management structures to support this are necessary.

Teacher management: Strategies to attract and retain teachers in order for them to discharge their duties diligently for the benefit of the learners need to be put in place. Image of the profession which gives the status of teachers in comparison to other professions, job content depicting what is interesting and challenging about teaching, a recognizable career progression that gives hope to the teacher about prospects of rising on the job, attractive compensation and benefit packages that befits someone who works with children, favourable job security and stability, the presence of resources, facilities and guidance to help the teacher to work optimally with children and parents, a conducive work climate to make the teacher enjoy and like the work, the presence of valid and reliable performance appraisal and feedback systems with attractive rewards and fair sanctions and the quality of peers who can foster a collegiate system at the school and overall policies and procedures which are in place make schools attractive work places. (Gaynor, 1997; UNESCO, 2006, UNESCO, 2006)

Communities around the school also need to be sensitized to the needs of the school. There is need for collaboration between teachers and parents so that they can support and encourage truant pupils. Strong school committees are crucial in fostering this collaboration.

Disaster management: In times of disasters school children are affected in significant ways because they are asked to manage the disasters at the peril of their

schooling.(UNICEF, 2001) Women and girls and other vulnerable children are worse affected because they become both victims and participants of disaster management due to traditional, social economic and cultural roles which marginalize and discriminate against them(Gupta, 2002). Therefore there should be structures that recognize institutional and organizational frameworks to manage schooling during disasters. First there should be an inventory and an analysis of risks or disasters that are likely to occur in different locations. Secondly, there is need to appreciate the nature of vulnerability of the children during such emergencies. For example children may be affected physically, or they may need to move from one geographical region to another or they may suffer socio-economic loss or their health could be affected. Thirdly an inventory of means to alleviate the effects of the disaster is needed. These may be in form of food stuff, emergency shelters, medicines, insecticides and means of transportation. Fourthly, there is need to map out the risk areas and their vulnerability so that emergency response offices can be set at strategic locations. Fifthly, an information and sensitization system needs to be put in place so that all citizens including children in school are aware of the risks and the possible responses. Sixthly, a surveillance system to alert all stakeholders of impending disasters is needed. Last but not least, organisation of response systems and coordination of action and their management are needed. (<http://www.bothends.org/service/jp-ndm.htm>)

Absenteeism plagues many school systems including in Malawi. In Ghana, Etsey (2005) was able to connect absenteeism with poor performance. During emergencies school teachers in Mozambique have shown that monitoring absenteeism was a way of monitoring flooding and other emergencies and clearly indicated that teachers can take an important part in the management of disasters in mitigating the effects on schooling.(International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2002) The National Demographic and Health Survey in 2002 in Malawi was the closest attempt to measure absenteeism in schools but the method was rather crude in that it used parents to recall how many times their school going children had been absent in the previous week and concluded that on average a child missed 17 school days per year. (National Statistics Office, 2002) This study went a step further to document the actual absenteeism as

recorded by selected dedicated teachers in their school attendance registers on a daily basis for one complete year.

Significance of the Study

The Education Management and Information System of the Ministry of Education in Malawi does not capture data on attendance or absenteeism because school registers are not updated and in many cases class teachers have no registers. An attempt to provide a true picture of absenteeism in the country is a great stride in improving the education management information system of the country. The study also complements the findings of other research works which have tried to find reasons why children stay away from schools. This study is particularly significant because of its full coverage of the country and that it was conducted throughout one academic year. It was conducted with the aim of registering school attendance even during calamities therefore gives insights into how children respond to crises with respect to schooling.

Where the majority of the population is classified as living below poverty lines it is the responsibility of schools to attract children to school and keep them in school until they finish. This depends on how schools are managed and how the teachers perceive their roles in attracting children to their classes and sustain their interest until the end against all competing odds in their homes. This study offers suggestions on how absenteeism in schools can best be reduced if not eliminated completely. It offers suggestions on how to manage absenteeism even during natural calamities which seem to be a constant occurrence in Malawi.

Method

The data for this study was collected in primary schools in the 2006 academic year. The year is divided into three terms and the data was collected during all the three terms. Term one starts from January and ends in March. Term two starts from May and ends in July while the third and last term starts in September and ends in November. Each class has a class register in which teachers mark class attendance of each pupil. Pupils who are present are marked present and those who are absent are marked absent. Pupils who are ill and are not in

school are also marked as ill.

Sample:

Districts: In Malawi there are 27 education districts four of which are urban while 23 are rural. This study used schools in the 23 rural districts because the Government of Malawi together with its partners considered these districts as emergency prone districts which required constant surveillance to monitor effects of disasters on the population and this study wanted to study the effects on schooling patterns using absenteeism of pupils and teachers.

Schools: In each of the 23 emergency prone districts the District Education Managers were asked to identify three schools in various parts of the district which were most likely to fall under a humanitarian situation. Therefore the sample for the study was 69 schools located throughout the country except in urban districts.

Pupils: The school is organized into three sections namely the infant section, the junior section and the senior section. The infant section is from standard one to standard three and the junior section is from standard four to standard five while the senior section is from standard six to standard eight. This study used standard three and standard seven classes to find the rates of absenteeism because standard three represents the infants who are most likely to stay at home in the event of any humanitarian crisis and therefore would give us the extent to which young children are affected. Pupils in standard seven are old enough to make decisions as to whether they have been adversely affected by a humanitarian situation to warrant staying away from school and this would give a clear picture of absenteeism in schools.

Instrument: A one page questionnaire was used to capture enrolment of boys and girls and orphans in standards three and seven and the number of times pupils were absent in a given month. The questionnaire also captured the number of teachers by gender and the number of times teachers were absent each month.

Another section of the questionnaire captured the reasons why the pupils and the teachers were absent during the month. These figures were used to calculate the monthly rates of absenteeism in each term.

Procedure

First all District Education Managers (DEMs) in the 23 sample districts were invited to a briefing where they were sensitized about the study and were asked to inform school head teachers, standard 3 and standard 7 class teachers in the three schools in their districts about the impending data collection by the research team. The class teachers were asked to keep their class registers updated and be made available to the researchers when they visited their schools. They were also asked to indicate in their registers pupils who were orphans.

At the end of each month the research team visited the schools to collect data on absenteeism. At the school the researchers collected standard 3 and standard 7 class registers and counted the number of times pupils were absent during the month. Using class enrolments, the researchers calculated the rate of absenteeism for each class at each school. The researchers also used time books to count the number of times teachers were absent and used this with total number of teachers to calculate the rate of absenteeism for teachers during the month. The absenteeism for each class at a school was disaggregated into total absenteeism, absenteeism for girls and absenteeism for orphans. Absenteeism for teachers was also disaggregated by gender.

Then the class teachers were invited give reasons why children in their classes were absent during the month and whether they had noticed any changes in behaviour that could point to some crisis within the communities around the school. Similarly, the head teacher was asked to give reasons why teachers at the school were absent during the month.

Results/Findings

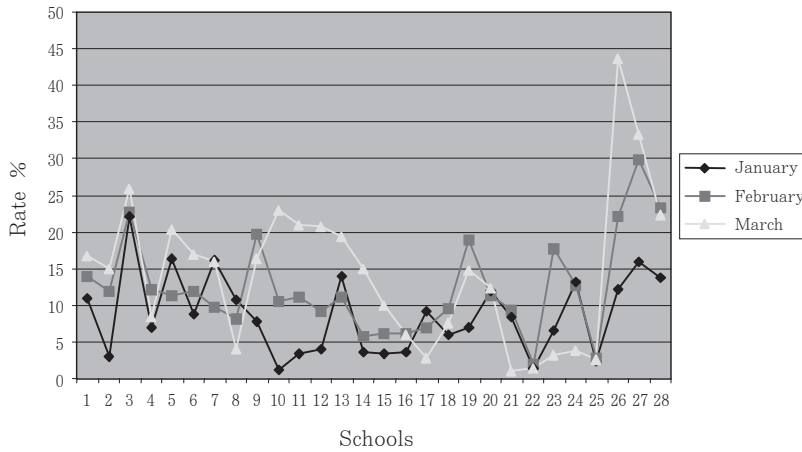
The findings were based on schools that had complete data for a whole term. This meant that each term and each standard had different numbers of schools which were considered. This section presents two sets of findings starting with

rates of absenteeism for standards three and seven for each term and followed by an analysis of absenteeism in schools by geographical region in the country.

Pattern of Absenteeism in the First Term

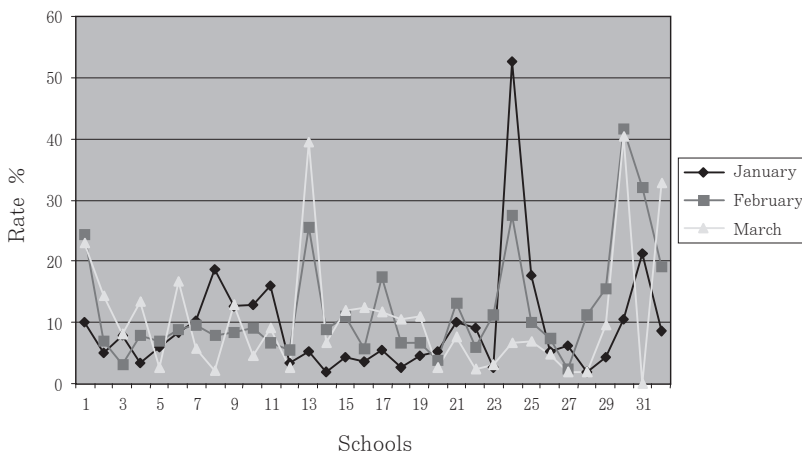
The first term of the academic year in primary school starts early January after the Christmas and New Year holidays. Many children in the infant section enroll and according to Chart 1 below absenteeism is the lowest during the month of January compared to the other two months of the term. The absenteeism ranged from as low as 1% to as high as 25% averaging around 8%. For many schools absenteeism in the months of February worsened showing that children were less inclined to attend school during this month. In March the majority of the schools registered the highest rates of absenteeism in the term ranging from around 1% to high as 43% and averaging around 12%. Several schools registered rates above 20% and these are the cases where authorities need to pay special attention to get children in school. The explanation could be that this is the rainy season and children are less likely to brave the rains and so decide to stay at home and not go to school. This is also an agricultural season where families tend their little farms and children are called upon to assist in one form or another. It is also the case that some families run out of food during this time and many children cannot go to school while hungry. These are issues which need to be considered when organizing our schools. The learners are at the mercy of the elements during this term and schools should recognize the need to put in place mechanisms which attract children even in such circumstances.

Chart 1: Absenteeism in std 3 in first term (%)



In the case of standard seven where pupils are much older a similar trend of absenteeism was observed. As shown in Chart 2 below, in January the rates were below 10% for most schools with a few schools registering rates of absenteeism above the 10% mark. In February the rates increased slightly showing growing stress in children and finally in March the rates rose for most schools indicating that the month presents problems for even the older children in standard seven.

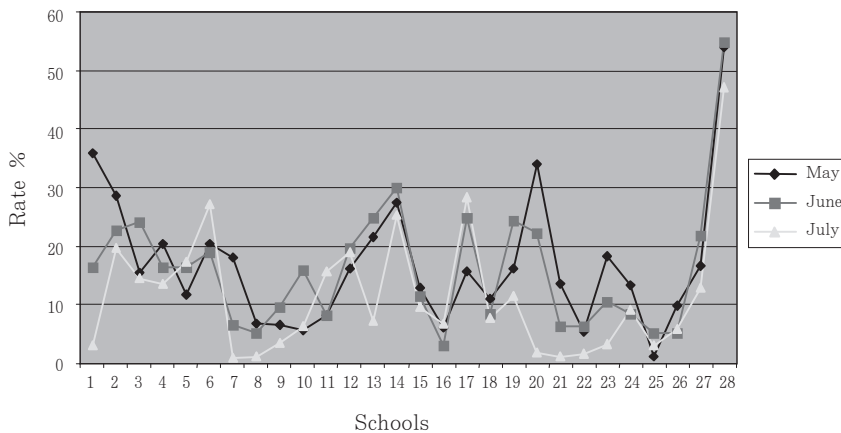
Chart 2: Absenteeism in std 7 in the first term (%)



Rates of Absenteeism in the Second Term

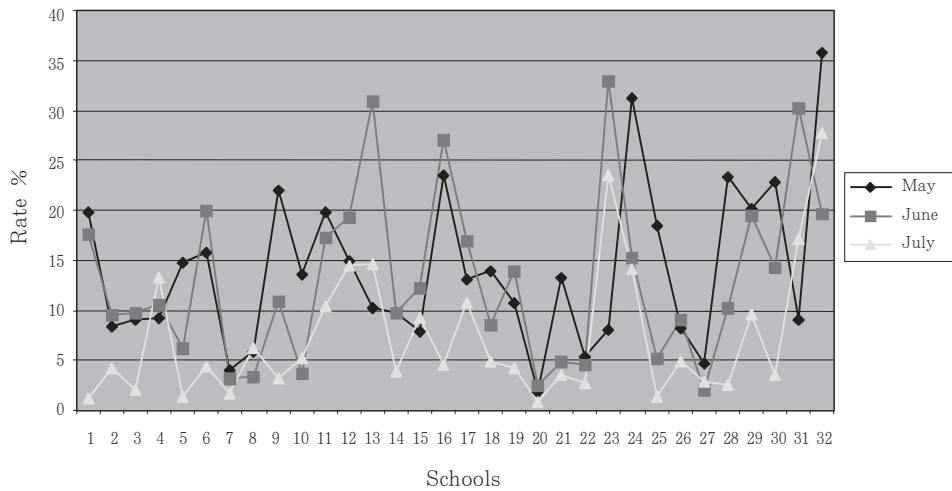
The second term is characterized by cold weather and it is a period when families harvest their crops in the field. As shown in Chart 3 below for the infants in standard three May and June registered much higher rates of absenteeism than in the first term averaging around 16%. The rates increased in June compared to those in May. However they dropped dramatically in July. The explanation for this is that agricultural activities and the cold present a serious challenge to children and therefore schooling suffers. In July the children have food and even when it is cold they go to school. Another attraction to school is that they need to consolidate their place in school by writing the end of term tests. This makes them attend school on a more regular basis for them to pass the tests.

Chart 3: Absenteeism in std 3 in second term (%)



In the case of the older children in standard seven the rates of absenteeism were more or less similar to those in the infant section but in July the rates fell dramatically to much lower figures in almost all schools. As shown in Chart 4 below the differences between June and July were remarkable. What this means is that children are willing to go to school but circumstances beyond their reach compel them to play truant. The issue of pupils going back to school to consolidate their place and to be present for revision in order to pass examinations or tests gives hope that they recognize the need to be present in school in order to do well in tests and class work.

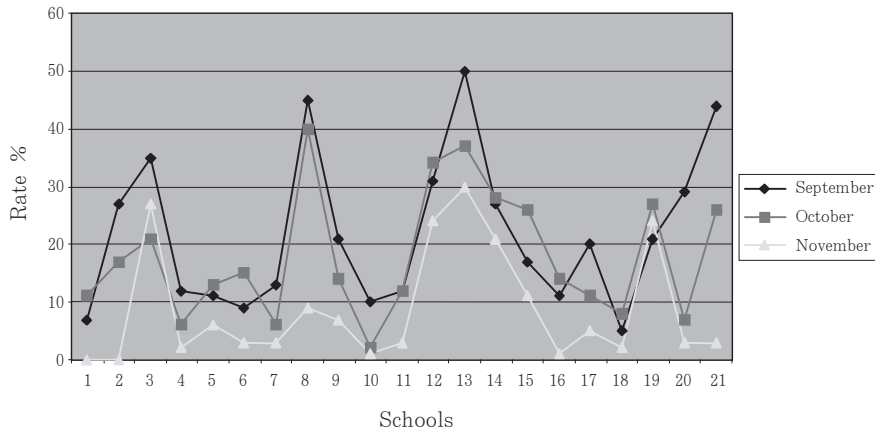
Chart 4: Absenteeism in std 7 in the second term (%)



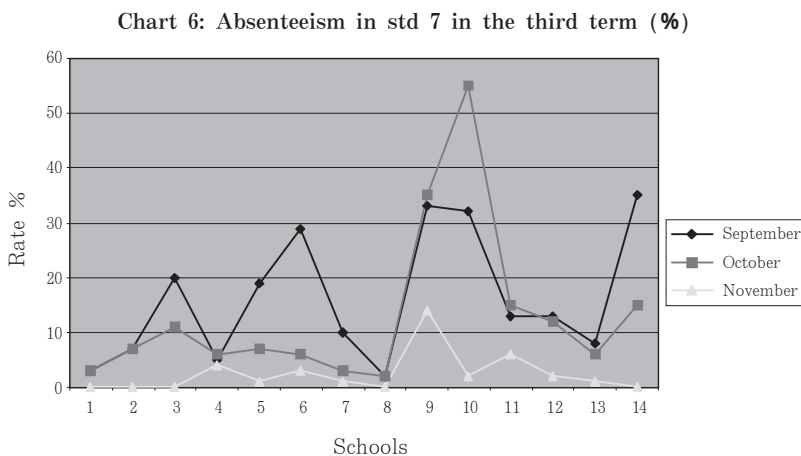
Patterns of Absenteeism in the Third Term

The third term and the final term starts in September when there are many social and cultural activities in villages. The weather is warm and the people are not yet engaged in serious agricultural activities. Many children are attracted to casual labour which gives them some money for buying their needs. As can be seen in the Chart 5 below this month registered the highest rates of absenteeism in the third term. Children take a relaxed mood and are attracted to social activities. Rates of absenteeism averaged above 17% except in a few schools in some districts. In October common sense seemed to get the better of the children and the rates of absenteeism start to fall. Finally in November the children went back to school and stayed on to register the lowest rates of absenteeism in the year.

Chart 5: Absenteeism in std 3 in the third term (%)



Similarly in the case of standard seven pupils September registered the highest rates of absenteeism in the term registering figures slightly lower than those in May. For many pupils in the upper standards this term poses the most difficult challenge as to whether to continue with schooling or to continue with the relaxed mood of the season. Some get married and others become subsistence farmers or fishermen or casual labourers. As the rates of absenteeism are depicted in Chart 6 many older children absent themselves from school regularly to attend to cultural affairs and other income generating activities. In October the rates of absenteeism dropped down slightly and finally in November the rates dropped to the minimum in the year. Again the children went back to school and stayed on to benefit from the revision to be able to sit for the final end of year tests which decide whether one fails and repeats a class or passes and moves on to the next higher class.



In summary the pattern of absenteeism seemed to differ from one term to another while the rates of absenteeism were generally higher in the infant section compared to the senior section. In the first term absenteeism was increasing from one month to another while in the second term May and June saw similar high rates of absenteeism. In the third term schools registered the highest rates of absenteeism in September while November registered the lowest in the year.

Absenteeism by Geographical Region

Generally the three regions in Malawi have different peoples of different cultures and traditions. By virtue of the geographical differences they also have different weather patterns. These are likely to affect how pupils attend schools. Table 1 below shows rates of absenteeism in standards three and seven in the three regions in three terms of the 2006 school year.

Table 1: A summary of means of absenteeism by geographical region

Mean Rates of Absenteeism in the year 2006 (%)										
Std	Region	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.
3	South	9.3	8.1	15	19.8	15.7	11.5	17.4	12.8	6.9
	Centre	10.3	13.7	13.5	17.1	19.1	13.2	19.6	16.7	10.2
	North	5.7	6.6	6.8	11.4	10.9	5.5	11.2	8.9	3.9
7	South	8.4	10.2	11.4	14.7	12	8.7	13.9	8.8	3.2
	Centre	12.2	13.8	12	16.3	16.3	10.1	14.4	13.3	3.8
	North	5.2	7.3	4.1	11.1	11	3.5	9.3	9.7	2.4

As shown in Table 1 above, in the first term the month of March proved to be the most difficult for pupils to attend school for all the regions. This was because the country experiences heavy rains, a lot of flooding and waterborne diseases which pose serious challenges to pupils. The start of the second term in May proved difficult for pupils as well because this is harvesting period and children are required to help out in the task.

Secondly there is enough food in the homes and children tend to stay home to enjoy the harvest. This is one of the most difficult months for the children looking at the high rates of absenteeism throughout the country. The third term is the most interesting in that schools registered the highest rates of absenteeism in September and then they registered the lowest rates in November. The months of May and June registered the highest mean rates of absenteeism throughout the country. This could be because of the harvest period and abundance of food which takes families to gather and store their food for the year as well as to sell some of their crop to get money for other necessities in life. The cold in June is also a challenge to reckon with as many classrooms have no window panes and children sit on the cold floor for half a day. It is also the case that most classes are held outdoors and many children cannot withstand the cold. This result gives us insight into how school management can change all this by providing warm and well ventilated classrooms and constructing more classrooms so that all pupils learn indoors.

In terms of regions, the North almost always registered the lowest rates of absenteeism throughout the year both in the infant section and the senior section. Except in the months of May and June, the North registered absenteeism lower than 10% in both standards throughout the year. One explanation offered was that schools and parents in the North are better organized and work together to ensure that their children receive a good education while this is not yet the case in the other regions. On the whole the mean rates of absenteeism ranged from 2% to 16% per day in the senior section while they ranged from around 4% to 20% in the infant section. These figures of course mask extreme cases which are of interest in that they offer insights in what goes on to reduce absenteeism or what is failing as to result in high absenteeism.

Conclusions. This study is about the extent of absenteeism in primary schools. Many factors come into play to stop children from attending school on a regular basis. But when disasters such as hunger, inundation and disease visit locations on a yearly basis then clearly there is need to set some machinery which can assist pupils to continue schooling. Regular attendance of school by children is an indication of well-planned and supported school systems and high rates of absenteeism are indicative of failing education systems. It is also imperative to keep in mind that every child has a right to receive quality education and therefore the provision of quality education by government need to take center stage especially when the international community has pledged to support such efforts in any developing country. It is therefore criminal for governments and educators to let their education systems remain at the mercy of regular and predictable disasters without any intervention meant to assist children continue with normal schooling. The presence of large proportions of orphans in schools also compels us to give serious thought as to how these children are going to get a good education to give them a chance to gain a decent living in future. Without this we are consigning a considerable proportion of our children to a bleak future without the means to escape from the debilitating reins of poverty. The conclusions drawn from this study give us insights into possible avenues which can be taken to reduce absenteeism in schools.

What appears to be the case in the pattern of absenteeism is that in the first month of the term pupils seem not to be decided as to whether they want to continue with schooling or not. It took time for them to settle and concentrate on lessons on a regular basis. The interesting thing about the pattern is that at least in the second term and the last term pupils who were regular absentees realized at the end that they need to attend classes regularly for them to move on to the next class. This provides a good starting point for enticing children to come to school regularly. In some schools the rates of absenteeism were attributed to a few pupils who were absent for one week or more. Some were considered to have dropped out only to be seen in the last month of the term. These are children who can be assisted by the school management. Well motivated teachers and schools that are well organized and have adequate teaching and

learning materials can reach out to such children and attract them to attend school on a regular basis. Of equal importance is the actual teaching and interaction that goes on between teachers and the pupil. If the school does not have attractive facilities which children can enjoy at least the teaching itself should be enjoyable and meaningful to the child. These are issues which are usually forgotten when looking at problem children in schools.

From the results it was clear that some schools continually registered high rates of absenteeism throughout the term. These are schools which can benefit from humanitarian crisis management with a view to keeping children in school. The perpetual high rates of absenteeism in such schools need attention of the authorities. There should be something strange in the communities around such schools which need some kind of intervention. What should be borne in mind is that there are many communities who still do not appreciate the worth of education and if the system does not do anything about it then those communities and their children will not get out of the poverty trap.

It was clear that feeding schools had less absentees especially during periods of shortage of food. However there were cases of feeding schools registering rates of absenteeism as high as schools with no school feeding. This means that the problem is not just the humanitarian crisis but requires more insights in order to be addressed adequately.

The lack of interest in school at the beginning of the term is something that should not elude educators and communities. Communities that are sensitized adequately help schools to achieve high rates of attendance. There are cases when communities bring sanctions to parents who do not encourage their children to go to school even when the country's legislation does not enforce compulsory education. Therefore it behooves the Ministry of Education and all stakeholders to give thought to reducing inefficiency in the system by reducing absenteeism in schools at all costs.

Recommendations

Using the register was seen as a problem especially when the classes are very large and it takes half an hour to call out names of all the children. It is also

an energy sapping exercise. This is compounded by the fact that children in many schools sit on the floor and there are no sitting plans. This resulted in faked figures in attendance and sicknesses and thus of little use to the teachers themselves and the school management. Usually, the head teacher or the deputy head teacher is responsible for monitoring documentation of school information and events. However teacher shortages take them away from such duties in order to teach and this results in poor management of school information. Two possibilities come to mind to improve this situation. The first is for schools to dedicate the first ten to fifteen minutes of the day to registration in the same way schools take a few minutes in the morning to school assemblies. The assembly could be divided into two parts. The first part could be set aside for whole school assembly and the second part set aside for marking class registers in respective classes. Another way is for schools to dedicate the last part of the school day to marking the register. This could be a better way of capturing the true attendance as those who absconded or played truant during the school will be marked absent or other wise. It is also possible to visualize partnership with parents in this exercise. A few parents may be asked to come to school at scheduled intervals to assist teachers with large classes to mark the registers while the teachers go about their teaching job. This might work out and the teachers and the school management can now use the registers to follow up on absentees.

Any school which registers rates of absenteeism above a given threshold should be considered as requiring some intervention. This can be in the form of revamping the school setting and administration which can be the cause or a sort of humanitarian crisis management to prevent further worsening of the situation.

While school feeding was one way to respond to hunger crisis it was found that there were still appreciable absenteeism in the schools. To completely eliminate absenteeism both the management of the school and the communities should work hand in hand to find ways of making schools more attractive than the other activities that take children away from school. School Management Committees and Parent-Teachers Associations have been shown to bring discipline to schools without alienating the children.

It is also imperative that a country like Malawi should make use of legislative instruments to get children to go to school. If the government does not even honour such legislation then to get children to attend school on a regular basis will be a difficult problem to address.

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