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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### CAUSES OF TEACHERS AND LEARNERS ABSENTEEISM: A CASE STUDY OF HIGH SCHOOLS IN BRAZZAVILLE

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#### ABSTRACT

It is commonly recognized that, the development of humanity inevitably passes through education which sets the means for any society to ensure its sustainability. But the reality within the Congolese education system in general, and that of high schools network in particular, shows that the paramount role of a school is no longer valued. In other terms, the Congolese educational system is plagued by the issue of absenteeism, involving both teachers and learners. Therefore, the goal of this study was to examine the main factors impinging the teaching and learning process. The research intended to go deeply in finding out the causes of this scourge, and showing its consequences, while making concrete recommendations to the attention of policy making people. Through a qualitative approach, using a semi structured interview form consisting of twelve questions, purposively selected as the data collection tool, to the attention of a study group constituted of sixteen principals and heads of pedagogical bureau across Brazzaville eight high schools, research findings were generated. Certain suggestions were developed in line with the findings obtained as the result of the study.

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## INTRODUCTION

The economic, social and cultural development of any society is the combination of several factors such as the raise of awareness, the acquisition of knowledge, and education in general. Therefore, the development of humanity inevitably passes through education which is the means for any society to ensure its sustainability. As old as human societies, education is an area that requires patience, attention, regularity and continuity. Economic growth, the reduction of poverty, the improvement of living and working conditions of men as well as the good health of the population are objectives linked to education. The issue of education is therefore vital both on an individual and community level. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of December 10, 1948 states that "Everyone has the right to education (p.14)". We must therefore give everyone the opportunity to access education which is a cardinal value. In other words, the child has the right to education which must be free and compulsory, at least at the elementary level. He must benefit from an education which contributes to his general culture and allows him, under conditions of equal opportunity, to develop his faculties, his

personal judgment, and his sense of moral and social responsibilities. And without any doubt, school claims to be as an enterprise through which any educational system of a country can achieve its goal. As a matter of fact, school is the basis of a society and a powerful tool for a country. That is why everyone agrees that "a country having best schools is sure to have best the people too". So, families send their children to school in order to let them improve the education already received at home; then, to deserve such parents' trust, schools have to be fit with well-trained educators who must regularly be controlled by relevant educational authorities and be provided with good working conditions. To this regard, Abdou Diouf, the former general secretary of the francophone zone institution (the French speaking countries international organization): *It is through education that Africa, both its sons and daughters will be able to match with the requirements and challenges of this 21<sup>st</sup> century.* (Diouf, 1998). In the same vein, Henri Lopes, the former Deputy Director of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), affirmed that: *If you do not have educated people in the country, you cannot get developed* (Lopes, 1998). Since the earlier hours of its accession to sovereignty (15<sup>th</sup> August 1960), the Congo's Republic focused on education via the nationalization of the educational system with the law n° 32/65 of August 12<sup>th</sup> 1965, cancelling the former law n° 44/61 of

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September 28<sup>th</sup> 1961; by so doing, the leaders of the country implemented the main guidelines organizing our educational system. Despite all these developments, there are several handicaps to the success of educational missions. Secondary education, which is the central link in the education system, still faces certain difficulties such as the multiplication of overcrowded classes, insufficient equipment, insufficient educational offer, absenteeism, lack of social relevance of certain subjects, etc. The Congolese educational system still faces up the scourge of massive absenteeism from teachers and learners. The challenge of school absenteeism is nowadays recognized as one of the real problem impeding the good running of the teaching learning process. In fact, the primary assignment of a teacher is to turn learners into responsible people, susceptible to act responsibly in the society. For this duty to be achieved, a certain number of basics are to be taken into account among which good working and teaching conditions, school climate and majorly a good educational system as a whole. This transformation based education requires a shared responsibility of both teachers and learners in the teaching and learning process, and deep motivation from the two sides. Unfortunately, it is observed that teachers are becoming more and more demotivated towards their noble assignment on the one hand and learners from their learning duty on the other hand. According to a survey conducted in 2017, it was observed from October 2017 to May 2018, 7, 8% of secondary school students were absent without notice. The proportion of absentees among learners varies sensitively after the type of establishment and from a month to another, with a tendency to augment towards the end of the school year. In senior secondary schools, the annual average rate of learners' absenteeism is from 5, 5 to 10, 3%, and that absenteeism rate correlates with the social position of a school; in the high standard schools, it roams about 2, 5%, and some other low ranking schools, especially suburban schools, the absenteeism rate is much higher, around 12, 7% (UNICEF 2015 report). Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine the main factors impinging the teaching and learning process within the Congolese high schools. The research intended to go deeply in finding out the causes of this scourge, and showing the consequences, while making concrete recommendations and suggestions to the attention of policy making people.

## Literature Review

Teacher and learners' absenteeism constitute a serious issue for school systems in general all over the world. Absenteeism represents a costly problem for all organizations, due to the huge financial burden it places, and its detrimental effect on their productivity and performances (Barmase R. & Shukla H.A., 2013), but none more so than for elementary and secondary school systems. Employee absenteeism is a worldwide phenomenon which due to the financial impact on a nation's economy is an important subject in the international agenda. Public schools are impacted as much by absenteeism primarily because of the effect on the delivery of quality education to learners. The problem of teacher absenteeism is a growing concern worldwide. It has broad-ranging consequences for governments, school boards, principals, teachers, students, and thus it tends to inhibit the realization of Education For All (EFA) and achievement of United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (1). A study of three school systems in the US (Detroit, Philadelphia, and New York) revealed that their combined absenteeism costs were approximately \$500 million per year (Lewis, 1982).

These costs included wages for the absent teacher, wages for the substitute teacher, and time taken from the administrator who must contact, instruct, and evaluate substitute teachers. In addition, Skidmore (1984) found that interruptions in the continuity of the students' regular instruction contributed to lower achievement scores and increased the remedial costs of education. Concomitant problems of absenteeism result in teacher resistance to change or input, negativity, and low motivation (Ferkich & Grassi, 1987) cited by (Scott & Wimbush, 1991). In fact, A significant number of teachers are absent from their workstations on any particular working day worldwide. Teacher absenteeism is a chronic problem that cuts across national boundaries and it is a much bigger challenge in developing countries as compared to developed countries. The rate of teacher absenteeism in the U.S.A., England, Canada, Israel, and the Ireland ranges from 3% to 6% (Prinsloo R.V. et al., 2010). Teacher absenteeism is a costly problem not in terms of monetary funds alone, but also contributes to lowering students' achievement; subsequently enhancing their absenteeism rate, and affecting their overall schooling; as result, this study chooses to include both teacher and student in tackling the issue of absenteeism, contrarily to some most of the literature around, which focused solely in the aspect of teachers. It has been remarked that education has changed little in the past century. It still usually requires a teacher in front of a classroom full of students, meaning that the physical presence of both is required. In a developing country settings such as Republic of the Congo where substitute teachers are uncommon, absence of a teacher may have various consequences such as doubling up of classes, idle time for students and even student dropout if absence becomes frequent enough; meaning the effects of absenteeism have to be examined in correlation between teachers and learners. Addressing the impact of teacher absenteeism requires information about the underlying causes and conditions that keep teachers from the classroom. It is an agenda that requires the attention of all stakeholders in the society (1).

Absenteeism is one of the key discussion topics in the scholarly world as an important criterion that shows the quality of education, and this is regarded as an important predictor of the existing and future problems of the education system (Graeff-Martins et al., 2006) cited by (Sahin, 2016). Absenteeism is one of the most basic indicators of to what extent the educational needs of students are met by schools. If the students are turning their back on the education they are provided, it means that we need to ask ourselves the questions of "What is wrong in this education?" and "Is something happening in our schools and classrooms that distract students from education?" (Cabus S.J. & Witte K., 2015). Regular attendance at school is essential for the students' academic achievements, language development and social development. Students who attend school regularly can be successful in their future professional lives through achieving work-related skills such as persistence, problem-solving, and the ability to work with others to accomplish a goal. It is seen that students who attend school regularly have higher academic success, standardized test scores, graduation averages, university entrance rates and job opportunities goal (Keamey, C.A. & Graczyk, P., 2014). Compared to their peers, students who don't attend school regularly have lower academic performance, limited future employment opportunities and will experience social and emotional problems in adulthood (Busha, F. & Conte, A., 2014). Absenteeism not only affects the academic progress of the student, but also influences the

in-class planning of teachers and at the same time the motivations of the other students in the class. Chronic absenteeism has a significant relationship with certain dangerous behaviors such as substance abuse, violence, physical injury, suicide, showing sexually explicit behavior at an early age, pregnancy and eventual dropout (Ferrell et al., 2013; Gage et al., 2013; Thornton, Darmody & McCoy, 2013) cited by (Sahin, 2016). Many researchers have attempted to identify factors related to absenteeism in developed countries such as the USA, Europe and some other parts of the world, so that appropriate solutions for this problem can be developed, and of course, some conflicting results on causes and predictors of teacher and learner absenteeism are observed here and there; but unfortunately, very little has been concretely produced in the existing scholarly literature about teacher and learner absenteeism in secondary education of Republic of the Congo in general, and particularly in high schools as it is being tackled in this study. In the Republic of Congo, it is not uncommon to meet certain secondary school students wandering around the city, in markets or in ceremonial places under the pretext that they do not have classes, while their classmates are in class working under the guidance of their teachers. The consequence is that, at the end of the school year, we notice from their transcript of records, an enormous rate of low achievements due to absenteeism. Also, every morning, in the surveillance services of establishments there are always lagging pupils who will not be able to return to class until the following hour. In addition to this, in most high schools, supervisors record daily multiple unjustified absences for various reasons. A supervisor of the Lycée Thomas Sankara evokes that all unjustified absences of learners are penalized according to local internal regulations of the school. When the absence relates to an assignment, a score of zero is automatically assigned if a valid justification is not made within seventy-two (72) hours. Parents are mostly unhappy when they notice some of their children from certain courses, and this is more irritating when such sanctions result into the expulsion or the dismissal of students.

However, on a psychological level, absenteeism can be linked to pathology: HUERRE and LEROY (2006) state:

"From the teenager who dries up a course occasionally to invest sometimes in other activities, to the one who completely drops out because he can no longer find the necessary motivation, or is plagued by a school phobia for example, passing through the "attendee-absentee" who attends classes but never acquires fundamental knowledge; the term absenteeism covers very diverse realities. So it can appear, depending on the case, as a normal transgression accompanying the adolescent process or as a symptom of pathology. "

### Study Objectives

#### The objectives of this research claim at the following:

- Bringing both teachers and learners to their shared responsibilities in the teaching-learning process;
- Arousing teachers' motivation towards teaching;
- Enhancing the expectation of learners towards their studies on social, professional and international level;
- Raising the government awareness towards improving the citizens living and working condition, especially in the education field.

## METHODOLOGY

Referring to the research aim of this study, which was to examine the main factors impinging the teaching and learning process within the Congolese high schools, the researcher found it necessary to investigate the opinions and perceptions of some key informants regarding the phenomenon of absenteeism in a case study design which is one of the qualitative research approaches, used as the research model. One of the most important characteristics of a case study, which is widely used in qualitative research is that, it enables the thorough examination of one or several cases (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006) cited by (Sahin, 2016). A semi-structured interview form consisting of twelve questions, purposively selected, was engaged as the data collection tool, to the attention of a study group consisted of sixteen both school principals and officials of pedagogical bureaus across Brazzaville eight high schools. The design was meant to understand the social phenomena from the participants' perspectives in their natural settings(4). It also enabled the researcher, to be the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Conrad & Serlin, 2006) cited by (Dzanvoula, 2019). Specifically, a descriptive multi case study approach was used, involving an intensive inquiry into instances of a phenomenon and seeking to understand it from the perspectives of insiders, including the researcher and the respondents (Gall, et al, 2009). Such understanding is not sought as an end in itself, but as means for addressing critical problems and improving practices(6). The choice of the case study approach allowed the researcher to explore in depth individuals perceptions towards primary education of the teaching profession within the scope of time (7). However, following the perspective of qualitative methodological design, which data analysis is inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning thereof (Creswell, 2009); an inductive approach was therefore observed in the manual analysis of data. And themes and categories were generated from the analysis of the transcripts and given names from the actual terms used by participants (Bajpai, 2017). The credibility of the study was assured and specifically, the researcher employed in-depth semi-structured interviews to collect data over a reasonable period of time and by so doing, the latter gained more insight into the contextual life of the participants within their settings. Thus, an array of measures was also observed still in regard to the accuracy and credibility of findings; among others:

- the case study protocol and interview schedule were based and guided on themes derived from extant literature on teacher retention (Merriam, 1998);
- Personal perspectives were not brought into the process of data collection and analysis;
- Prior to finalizing findings, the tentative interpretation of data was referred to focus group respondents, to clarify uncertainties and verify accuracy and plausibility of findings (Saunders, et al., 2009);
- Data from the various focus groups were interpreted in comparison with the information contained in the existing empirical literature, as above disseminated (Creswell, 2009).
- Sequel to the essentials of research ethics, the researcher assured participants that their responses were not to be used to any other end than the goal of the study (Dzanvoula, 2019).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sequel to data analysis, the causes of absenteeism were discussed and interpreted under the following theme areas:

**Causes of Teachers and Learners Absenteeism As a Result of Low Monthly Income and Family Matters:** The causes of absenteeism from both teachers and learners originating from low monthly income and family matters were gathered under five main themes. Thirteen respondents pointed the truancy of teachers to financial challenges versus four who were skeptical to that view; in the same vein, twelve respondents evoked the failure of government to effect permanently the scheme of teachers' incentives and allowances. As for learners' absenteeism, twelve respondents admitted the root causes of untimely preparation, whereas fifteen considered the frequent repetitious delays, and nine of them assert the point of careless parental involvement.

Absenteeism	Affecting Teachers	Affecting Learners
The consistency of monthly income	13	
The overview appreciation of incentives and allowances scheme	12	
Untimely preparation for schools		12
Frequent repetitious delays		15
Careless parental involvement		09

Absenteeism	Affecting Teachers	Affecting Learners
Poor working and teaching conditions	16	
The lack of physical facilities	16	
The lack of socio-cultural activities		16
Negative incidents in school		16
School bullying problem		16

However, in line with the above analysis, it is clearly observed from the feedback of respondents that, the phenomenon absenteeism among the teaching staff results among others, to the financial condition of teachers. The mechanism of incentives, allowances and the consistency of teacher's monthly revenue are a vital predictor of teacher's motivation and satisfaction; and the latter averts the scourge of absenteeism. According to the Cornell Job Description Index (JDI), the employee's earnings are part of the six separate scales which measure satisfaction at work. In fact, underpaid teachers are typically underprepared and not supportive as they confront lower levels of resources, poorer working conditions. (Krasnoff, 2014). And in the case of the Republic of the Congo, as it shows several factors affect the job satisfaction of teachers, including intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The former emanate from the teacher and are related to his individual characteristics as well as the feelings of accomplishment and performance he may experience. The latter are characterized by a set of elements related to the organization and, more broadly, to the system, such as salary or possible promotions (Lawler & Porter, 1997). In the light of the above analysis, concerning learners, family inputs play a huge role in the responsibility of their absenteeism. The family, being the first platform for children's education, it is observed that the tendency of low parental involvement leaves children at their own lot, leading to a state of an overall carelessness towards their studies, with untimely preparation and frequent repetitious delays to school, subsequently affecting their schooling with significant absenteeism rates and poor achievements, even dropouts.

In fact, it is observed that working conditions of parents could decrease the time they spend for and their control over their children, and increase absenteeism and school dropout rates, and children of families who cannot have a good communication with their children, who are highly oppressive or who have no authority on their children and have accepted the failure of their children show considerably high cases of absenteeism and school dropout. Family problems such as divorce, domestic violence and death of a parent have a highly negative effect on the student's attendance at school. In such cases, students lack concern, love and parental control and become more inclined to show aimless attitudes such as absenteeism and school dropout (Sahin, 2016).

**Causes of Teachers and Learners Absenteeism Originating from Distance Factor:** Majority of the respondents stated that the distance factor could pave the way for absenteeism both at the teachers and learners side. In fact twelve of them portrayed the distance factor from the dwelling place to school location as a key factor in explaining the absenteeism of teachers and learners, and some of the responses were identically expressed as follows:

*Every society, every community and every place has its commonalities and realities. Most of our teachers and learners living afar from the school location complain of transportation problems in a bid to justify their delays, class missing and overall absenteeism. As we all know in our Nation, living far distanced from the working place is really a challenge, because of our poor transportation network across the cities. Most of times, our transportation means do not provide direct access line between two distanced areas, they often times shorten their destination to generate much funds from customers, making it a real big puzzle whenever people teachers and students have to leave their place to reach the school once the destination is quite far distanced.*

In fact, from the above analysis, we come to understand that in the setting of the Congolese society, an enormous distance between the living and working place automatically interpellates to financial challenges. Thus, the distance factor is really considered as a real problem causing the demotivation of teachers towards the workplace. So, through these outcomes, it is logical to mention that the government does not care about the conditions under which its civil servants in general and those of teachers particularly work.

**Causes of Teachers and Learners Absenteeism due to Torrential Rains:** Virtually all respondents admitted that the rain factor happens to be nowadays as a real hindrance to an effective schooling to both teachers and learners. A common sentiment that was expressed is reflected in the following statement:

*In the setting of the Congolese society, it has been commonly observed that the weather condition, fostering the incessant torrential rains in course of the year, tend to affect seriously the attendance of workers in their workplaces in general, and that of teachers in particular, learners as well notwithstanding. Whenever it rains most Congolese simply stay home, and as a result, we register a poor attendance of teachers and learners. Therefore, the torrential rains happen to be a huge factor of demotivation of the school population and of course, a fruitful ground of high rates of absenteeism of both teachers and learners.*

From the above view, most respondents agree to consider rains, as one of the impediment to an effective teaching learning process, and the schooling as a whole. In fact, in Republic of the Congo, the phenomenon of torrential rains is common, and due to poor road facilities, whenever it rains abundantly, the state of roads get deteriorated, becomes very bad, obstructing the free circulation of persons and goods; and much more, entire areas get affected with natural calamities such as erosions, houses' inundation and so on; as result, most people in general, and workers in particular get a free excuse to just stay home, and not go to work. The school population as well, does not exempt from that reality.

**Causes of Teachers and Learners Absenteeism Originating from the School Setting:** The causes of absenteeism and school dropout originating from the school setting were grouped under four main themes as depicted in the below table. All the respondents in one accord pointed the scourge of teachers' absenteeism to poorer working and teaching conditions, and of course to the insufficiency of physical infrastructures that definitely lead to overcrowded classes, making a teaching learning process an uncomfortable experience. In fact school becomes extremely burdensome for teachers when the structure is raised for them to flow in their duty. The Republic of Congo is part of the Countries in the world, with a lot of the most unfavorable conditions along with defective education and learning facilities. The report on the sixth edition of World Bank data on education concerning the Republic of Congo, states that existing schools conditions impacted negatively on the quality of teaching, and it further notes that most school buildings, are poorly equipped as they do not have access to basic facilities and services like clean water, electricity and telephone connectivity; as result, the Country faces high rates of absenteeism and shortage of teachers.

It has also to be noted from the above analysis that, when schools fail to become interesting places for students due to reasons such as lack of sociocultural activities, conflicting relationships between learners leading to multiple incidents in schools, and peer bullying problem; for these reasons, students' willingness to go to school decreases. Providing teachers and students with learning environments in which they feel themselves peaceful, happy and secure in schools, where they spend an important part of their daily time is a crucial factor that can increase their commitment to school and education in general.

### Arising study Conclusion

The issue of truancy is nowadays a global concern. It massively appeared in the late 1970s. It is therefore not new. In the light of this study, four categories were found as causes of teachers and learners' student absenteeism. These four categories were broken down in several main themes as above mentioned in the results of the study. It is evident from the findings that absenteeism remains a real scourge that potentially jeopardizes the quality of education in the Nation. This research has brought some insights, justifying teachers and learners demotivation from the teaching learning process. In fact, the teaching industry is underestimated in Republic of the Congo, that's why the responsibility of the Congolese education' system must be shared between all stakeholders, that is, the government, educational leaders, teachers, learners and the parents; but government has the primary duty to

improve the overall school condition in terms of working materials, working environment, and infrastructures, that will make teaching more attractive as a profession in the society, and schools a safe and flourishing learning place for students.

### Recommendations

In order to find out to tackle this detrimental issue from its roots, and find effective solutions to it, the following suggestions were developed, based on the results of the study :

- The government must enhance its implication towards the education sector by improving the teaching and learning conditions of schools. A provision should be made for the construction of dining halls, bookshops, libraries, computer and internet rooms, and organize periodically cultural activities which will attract not only learners, but teachers as well ;
- The government should enlarge the capacity of high schools, by constructing new infrastructures that will accommodate all students in regard to norm of pedagogical classes, limited in numbers ;
- A Platform of school counseling services should be raised in all high schools, in order to monitor the absenteeism rates of learners, and provide the necessary counseling on daily, weekly and monthly basis ;
- The government should implement measure to increase the incentives and allowances scheme, pay regularly the seniority of teachers, and organize the shuttle buses platform that will facilitate their movements in and out of the school premises, and enhance their motivation in carrying out their assignment;
- The counseling school services of schools must raise the awareness of both parents and learners to get rid of deviating behaviors that may tamper with their studies, such as avoiding conflicting actions, bullying and incidents among their peers ;
- Students should be provided opportunities to realize themselves, and their anxieties of failure should be tried to be prevented ;
- Cooperation between the school and the family should be maintained and the awareness of families regarding the attendance at school should be raised ;
- Finally, absenteeism, being a complex phenomenon that needs much exploration, a suggestion is made to the scholarly world towards a need for further larger-scale quantitative studies to be conducted on absenteeism and school dropouts.

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