Purpose of The Study

This study is designed to ascertain the root causes of absenteeism in selected primary schools by investigating the influence of personal, educational, and community factors on student absenteeism. The findings identified the categories and descriptors associated with students who are consistently absent from school in 71 primary schools in Jamaica.

Methodology

The research utilized focus group interviews to ascertain the opinion of community members regarding the root causes of student absenteeism within communities that experienced acute absenteeism at the primary level. In this report, absenteeism is not treated as the problem but rather as the result of several causes/problems that may find their genesis in the school environment, the community, and the family structure.

Focus group interviews were carried out in 71 schools in the six educational regions of Jamaica. The aim of the interviews was to ascertain the root causes of absenteeism from the perspectives of principals, teachers, representatives of parent-teacher associations (PTAs), parents, and in some cases the chairman of the school board; this group is subsequently referred to as the adult group.

Ten schools were selected for participation in students’ focus group interviews from the 71 schools that participated in the adult focus groups. These 10 schools were located in the parishes of St. Catherine and Clarendon. The aim of these interviews was to ascertain students’ views on the factors influencing student absenteeism. Overall, this represented 14% of the total number of schools identified with acute cases of low attendance, and 42% of the schools within St. Catherine and Clarendon parishes. Five primary schools were chosen from each parish. The selection of schools was also based on geographical location and accessibility. Again, these schools were selected from the list of primary schools that had attendance rates below 85%, which was provided by the Ministry of Education.
Main Findings

The causal factors that emerged from the data are as outlined below:

- **Parental factors**: financial constraints, older siblings given preference over younger siblings at the primary level to attend school, and parents’ lack of control of their children.

- **Student factors**: Truancy, student indiscipline, and illness.

- **Community factors**: Lack of water, lack of electricity, and poor transportation.

- **School factors**: Non-critical activities on Fridays at the schools, removal of students from PATH program (Program of Advancement Through Health and Education).

Data were analyzed using Root Cause Analysis (RCA) techniques.

Implications for Policy

- The solution to absenteeism is multidimensional—the four key causal factors need to work in an integrated way in resolving the problem of absenteeism. As García-Gracia (2008) pointed out, schools must reach out to the reality of their communities and their families: (a) schools should have a greater level of coordination with the different government agencies within their areas to enable a better understanding of the extent of the problem in the area; (b) there should also be coordination among schools within the community and in other communities within close proximity; and (c) common projects should be designed for schools in the community. Community members along with the leaders of the schools need to be more united in challenging the government—their members of parliament—in improving the utilities within the community. Parenting programmes among low-income families are crucial in dealing with student absenteeism at the primary level.

- Where possible, the school administrators within the community could consider joint programmes with skills training institutions for enhancing parents’ working skills and exposing them to alternate competency–based training.

- The schools need to organize adult literacy classes in the evenings for parents, with the objectives of enhancing parents’ appreciation for education in their everyday lives and equipping them to assist their children in school work at home.

- The Ministry of Education should take leadership in coordinating government sectors that provide services related both directly and indirectly to the delivery of education. A range of agencies and entities may need to collaborate if the problem of student absenteeism is to be reduced/eliminated, including parish councils, which are responsible for the maintenance of road systems; and utility companies, which are responsible for the supply of water and electricity.

Conclusion

This study was concerned with student absenteeism at the primary level. The findings showed that students’ absenteeism is a reflection of the inadequacy of parents, the community and our nation to provide the opportunity for them to fully realize the Ministry of Education mandate that “each child can learn and every child must”. If appropriate steps are not taken to address the hindrances to quality education for these children and others in similar predicaments, then the mandate becomes an elusive ideal.

Reference