

Does It Matter! Relationship Analysis Between Chronic Absenteeism and Academic Performance of Pre-School Learners in Kambiti Primary School, Makuyu Education Zone, Murang'a County, Kenya

Kamau Bonface

Department of Early Childhood Studies
Mount Kenya University, P.O. Box 342 - 01000, Thika (Kenya)

ABSTRACT

Despite the recent development of ECDE in Kenya and the awareness that the department is giving to the public, the overall performance in ECDE is quite dismal. Concerns have been raised over this dismal academic performance of children in spite of all the efforts being made. These concerns are not based on any systematic studies or confirmed by empirical data. Factors leading to the poor academic achievement have not been sufficiently investigated and understood; thus hindering effective development of ECDE in the country. To this end, this study aimed to establish the connection of chronic absenteeism with academic achievement of pre-school children (age 4 - 5 years) in Kambiti ECDE centre in Makuyu Education Zone, Murang'a County, Kenya. The objectives that addressed this study were: to find out effects of chronic absenteeism on pre-school children's academic performance and; to establish the relationship in academic performance between pre-school children who are affected by chronic absenteeism and their counterparts who attend school regularly. Descriptive survey research design was adopted by this study. The research study population comprised of 1 head teacher, 1 teacher, 46 children, and 46 parents/guardians. Purposive sampling applied in sampling 1 head teacher and 1 teacher, purposeful sampling was applied to get a sample size of 8 children, while snowball sampling applied to sample parents/guardians. Data from the manager and the teacher was obtained by use of questionnaire, while interview-guide and observation schedules collected information from children. Focused group discussions collected information from parents/guardians. The researcher did pilot-testing of the research instruments with a representative group of the research population. To ascertain instruments' validity and reliability, the researcher sought expert assistance from his supervisor, who helped improve the instrument's content validity. The obtained data was analyzed by use of frequency tallies as well as percentages. The findings were presented in tabular forms, bar-graphs, and pie-charts. Data analyzed formed the basis for research findings, conclusive remarks as well as recommendations. The study found out that a good number of children were chronically out of school due to various reasons including and not limited to: poverty, family health and nutritional problems, financial constraints, drugs and alcohol abuse, poor school climate, transport problems, differing community attitudes towards education. It became evident that chronic absenteeism negatively impacted on the academic achievement of children; children who missed more than 10% scored less than their colleagues who attended school regularly in achievement tests. This is because their absence limited their attention, concentration, content mastery and retention. The following recommendations were drawn from the study: all the ECDE stakeholders should join hands to ensure that pre-school attendance is improved amongst children as it would positively impact on the content mastery and retention; and thus the academic performance of these young minds considering that they are in their formative years. This could be done by jointly improving the basic needs to these children as directed in Maslow's Hierarchy of needs.

Keywords: Preschool; Pre-school education; Academic performance; chronic absenteeism;

1.0. Introduction

Pre-school going age is a point in time of significant brain expansion. This span of duration is known to set the base for successive education. Initially, preschool education aimed at the child's learning via play. However, many child-care centres nowadays are applying more academic strategies. They are developing curricular and applying it into the young learners' daily routine to cultivate greater academic achievement. Pre-school education as an idea can be traced back to 400BC in Plato's book, *"The Republic"*. Plato advocated that early years' education should be made interesting and attractive through music, play, number work and geometrical exercises. Pre-school education is structured in a framework created by professional educators. That framework entails; firstly, structural parameters that involve institutional administration, class size (learners' population), teacher-children ratio, service deliverables among others. Secondly, process parameter that entails classroom environments' quality, teacher-child relations and such. Thirdly, alignment parameters that include standards, curriculum, and assessments components associated with every individual child' uniqueness that has social and intellectual outcomes (UNESCO, 2004). At every age, a level-appropriate curriculum ought to be followed. The existing structure of pre-school education provision is community based; it's managed by the communities

through their constituted committees. It's true to indicate that about three quarters of Kenya's ECDE centres are community oriented; and as Kenyan society is diversified, same way are the pre-schools as learning centres. These are established and managed by diverse organizations for instance faith-based organizations, proprietors, agencies or parastatals, women groups, charitable organizations, private communities and individual foundations, as well as county governments.

As stated in the ECDE guideline, the main goal of pre-school education is to train and equip the youth to be happy and useful individuals of Kenyan society. The pre-school should enable a child to develop physical skills, numbers concept, intellectual skills, awareness of their environment, self expression, and gaining understanding of temporal as well as spatial relations (UNDP, 2001). There is an ever-increasing understanding and emphasis on the value of the early years of life on the physical, mental, social and emotional development of children. It has determined that developmental deficiencies taking place during this critical period are more often intricate to overturn.

ECDE experiences have been revealed to elicit a positive weight on school enrolment, academic achievement and retention. Pre-school education programs can also apply to improve learners' nutrition and health monitoring. These are imperative factors in learning and ensuring holistic development in learners. The breakdown of the extended family social organization, growing figures of female-headed families, augmented urbanization and poverty have battered the capability of most households to provide for their children's requirements. Preschool education programs offer a lot of desired support to households in ensuring the strong development of their kids. It is therefore important that children should attend pre-school regularly in order to undergo the laid down program of pre-school in readiness for formal schooling.

2.0. Problem Statement

Schooling being the key to national development can only be obtained when quality teaching and learning is accessible to all people. This is known as Education for All. The issue of access of education to children at pre-school level has been a major concern all over the world. Policy frameworks in many Governments do not adequately address issues concerning pre-school education programs (UNESCO, 2004). The state and other development allies have meant to make provision for facilities leading to the realization of Education for All. Issues have on the other hand been raised owing to attendance and its impact on academic achievement of pre-school education. This problem requires investigation because ECDE is a critical base for later learning. Education is a fundamental human right essential for individual and state development and every effort have got to be made to guarantee school-going age children not only attendance to school but moreover do so regularly and gain profit from excellent learning on the basis of accurate strategy and skills laid down.

3.0. The purpose of study

This study aimed at establishing the correlation between chronic absenteeism and academic achievement of pre-school children (age 4 - 5 years) in Kambiti ECDE Centre in Makuyu Education Zone, Murang'a County, Kenya

4.0. Study Objectives

- To determine effects of chronic absenteeism on pre-school children's academic performance in Kambiti ECDE Centre in Makuyu Education Zone, Murang'a County, Kenya
- To compare the impact of absenteeism and non- absenteeism on academic performance among pre-school children in Kambiti ECDE Centre in Makuyu Education Zone, Murang'a County, Kenya

5.0. Rationale of the study

This research study would make available helpful understanding to the state, managers and ECDE teachers, pertinent development associates and communities on the impact of chronic absenteeism of ECDE children on their academic performance. Stakeholders would acquire significant data on how pre-school attendance can be improved. Appropriate strategies to address the factors that encourage chronic absenteeism are very imperative in this case.

6.0. Literature Review

Early childhood period has been recognized as the most influential in a child's development. From 0 – 8 years, a child steadily masters more and more difficult levels of progress like motion, thinking, feeling and interaction. Plentiful proof as of varied fields – physiological, nutritional, health, mental and education manifest how these early years are vital for the advancement of intellect, character, and interactive behaviour. First years' experiences has remarkable implication on subsequent growth of these learners. A child is entitled to free elementary education which shall be geared to facilitation of progress of child's character, talent, psychological and physical abilities to reach their fullest potential (Ndaayezwi, 2003).

6.1 Effects of Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism in the pre-school learner is typically a consequence of childhood ill-health or parental educational neglect. As learners advance from primary classes, too much non-attendance to school drains the public resources. These impacts on human services like truant officers, social workers, probation officers, school counselors, courts and retail merchants who are susceptible to loitering and shoplifting. It's therefore critical to identify strategies that will efficiently arbitrate for the youth who are persistently delinquent and interrupted in their progress to truancy and other negative behaviours. This can be done by addressing the causal factors leading to their absence from school. Observational learning, as proposed by The Social Learning Theory, suggests that learning takes place in the course of modeling the behaviours of significant others. This could explain some students' non-attendance to school. Additionally, parental lack of concern or memory of his or her depressing precedent school experience could hold back promoting the value of learning and pre-school attending (Applegate, K., 2003).

The schools and society cannot manage to tolerate a single learner to go away from school earlier than expected or practice unnecessary non-attendance. Every attempt has been made to eradicate school non-attendance by establishing programs that keep learners in school. Non-attendance is a forewarning signal for potential harms that negatively affect learner's academic accomplishment. Research has indicated that absenteeism is the first pointer that a child is giving up and losing inspiration to attend pre-school. When children start skipping pre-school they are telling everyone that they are in danger and call for help if they are to keep moving ahead in their learning. Recurrent absence affects learner's academic achievement. They lag behind their peers, which consequently raises the likelihood that at-risk learners will quit pre-school. Learners with advanced absenteeism rates incur the most dismal academic attainment levels. These are more probable to fall out of pre-school, something that points that there is a correlation between learner's preschool attendance and his/her academic achievement. Learners with minimal turnout more often end up falling out of pre-school. They place themselves at a lasting shortcoming in becoming fruitful nationals (Lovell, K. (1973). Quite a number of studies have found out that reduced pupil turnout is a key forecaster of his/her school non-success. The studies moreover indicated that turnout levels varied noticeably among learners considered at-risk and non-at-risk ones. Some learners would freely be present at preschool but others not, most often due to negative influences in their lives. These learners need intervention for the purposes of expected attendance. This may be the distinction between a lifetime of burdens and a lifetime of success (Applegate, 2003). Studies have shown that high learner absenteeism rates affect the attainment of learners' that attend regularly. This is by upsetting the existing scholarly groups. Contextual variables like size of the school and location have an outsized weight on the degree of nonattendance to pre-school (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002).

6.2 Factors that Influence Academic Performance

6.2.1 Lack of proper health and nutrition

Children who are not properly fed with a good balanced meal and whose health issues aren't taken care of, perform poorly in their academics. It's therefore the duty of every parent to provide their children with a balanced meal and proper medical care in case of an illness. This in-turn boosts the attention of the children and so have a stable mind for learning and hence proper performance. Diseases such as HIV/AIDS have also influenced performance negatively because children are left on their own as bread winner when parents die. Also older children are left to cater for the other young brothers and sisters as they become the head of the family; thus lacking enough time for learning and this leads to poor performance academically (Twoli, 2009).

6.2.2 Lack of teaching and learning materials

For learning to be effective and meaningful it is important for the learner to be provided relevant learning materials. They expose children to reality and enhance retention of what they learn. Lack of teaching and learning materials therefore adversely affects learning in pre-schools. Teaching/learning materials help children to develop manipulative skills, language development, explorations through feelings, auditory perception motor skills and visual perception. Teaching/learning materials in ECDE centers create interest, arouse curiosity, sustain learning and develop appreciation; factors that are important in future learning. The teacher should therefore be advised on their importance. According to Piaget children should learn practically through use of concrete materials and this makes children develop direct experience rather than verbal description (Lovell, 1973).

6.2.3 Lack of play and play materials

Play in children is vital as it provides relaxation of the mind and develops a healthy brain for learning. Therefore, children who are always learning and barely allowed to play suffer psychological torture which is reflected through poor performance. Play along with Physical Education occupies a vital position in an individual development by their given nature. They entail participation, inclusion and offer a great sense of belonging. This ensures that they unite individuals and also communities. They offer an opportunity to gain knowledge of skills for instance discipline, self-confidence and leadership. These convey core values that are vital in democratic

environment for example forbearance, collaboration and respect. Fundamental value of effort and how to handle crucial steps in one's life for example success or defeat are obtained when learners are exposed to Play as well as Physical Education (Bogonko, S.N., 1992).

Children can count so many benefits when they engage in participation in play. When they participate in organized play they raise their physical stamina and improvement, just not to mention interactive skills. Nevertheless, for them to get the most out of the positive benefits that they can derive from organized play, equilibrium must be established that is meant to match the child's maturity, interests and skills with their sports' involvement (Epstein, J. L. and Sheldon, S. B., 2002).

6.2.4 Lack of enough sleep

Sleep is very necessary since growth and development take place during sleep and once awake the body, in particular the brain, is able to work and think. Therefore lack of sleep and relaxation of the brain may lead to poor performance (Lovell, 1973).

6.2.5 Slow brain development

Development in the brain differs with individuals. Children with slow brain development have a low learning tendency which in turn affects their academic performance (Lovell, 1973).

6.2.6 Impairment

Various forms of impairment like partial sight, hearing loss contribute greatly to performance. Children need to clearly hear and see what the teacher intends to teach. The impairment is a great hindrance to pre-school attendance and hence proper learning (Lovell, 1973).

6.2.7 Poor management of ECDE centers

Poor management of ECDE centers is believed not to have a good atmosphere for learning, thus influencing academic performance. Health of the children hinders good performance either positively or negatively; good health promotes good performance while poor health hinders good performance (Lovell, 1973).

7.0. Research Methodology

7.1 Research Study Design

The research adopted mixed method research design (Orodho, 2002). The research design was most suitably used since it allowed the researcher to gather information, analyze, present and interpret it for purposes of clarification. It was also appropriate for assessing and reporting things as they are. Producing statistical information about the particular aspect of education that interest policy makers and educators was made possible by the research design. Purposive sampling applied to get 1 ECDE manager and 1 ECDE teacher, deliberate sampling to get the sample size of 10 children, while snowball sampling applied to sample 10 parents/guardians. Pilot-testing of research tools was done using a small representative group from the population. Instruments' validity and reliability was ascertained by the researcher's consulting with his supervisor who is an expert in the research area.

8.0. Findings of the Research

After analysis of the data the findings of the research were presented by use of frequency tallies and percentages. They were then presented in tables, pie-charts, bar-graphs and histograms. The information was interpreted qualitatively based on themes; in line with research objectives.

8.1. Effects of chronic absenteeism on academic performance.

To determine the effects of chronic absenteeism on academic performance, the manager and the teacher were asked to highlight the effects they suffer from as a result of children' chronic absenteeism in their ECDE centre, to which they responded as shown in figure 1 below.

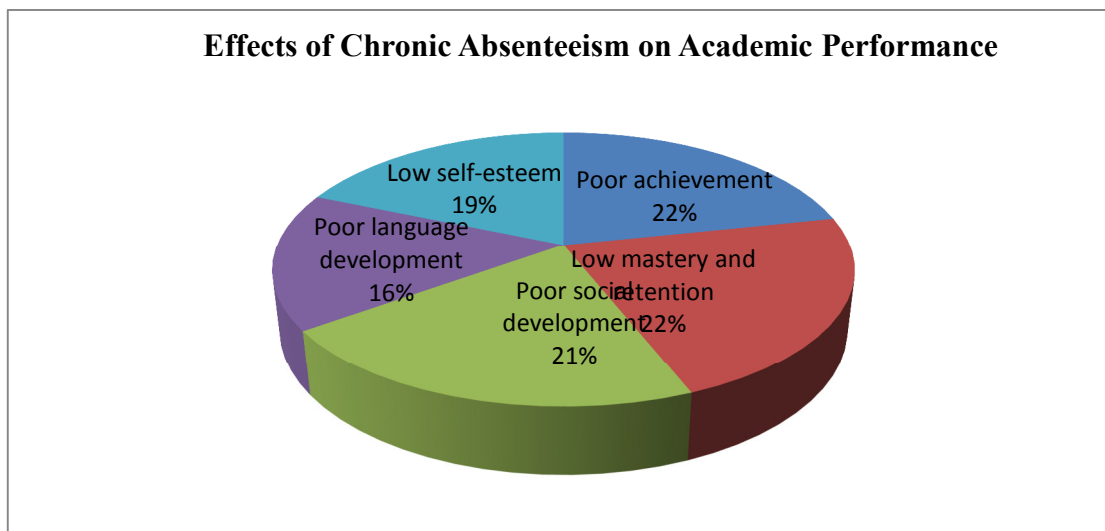


Figure 1: Effects of Chronic Absenteeism on Academic Performance

The data in the above figure showed that the major effects of children’s chronic absenteeism were poor academic achievement that could have resulted from low content mastery/retention, poor social development, low self-esteem and poor language development which rated at 22%, 22%, 21%, 19% and 16% respectively. If this situation is not arrested immediately, the children would continue deteriorating in retention of content and concepts, mastery and manipulation and therefore their output will be very low and will not achieve at the higher levels. The above finding concurred with a study carried out by Epstein and Sheldon (2002) that showed that better and regular school attendance is related to higher academic performance to children of all backgrounds.

8.2. Relationship in academic performance

The findings on Relationship in academic performance between pre-school children who were affected by chronic absenteeism and their counterparts who attend school regularly had the following scenario. This focused on different areas of learning competence as shown in the figure below.

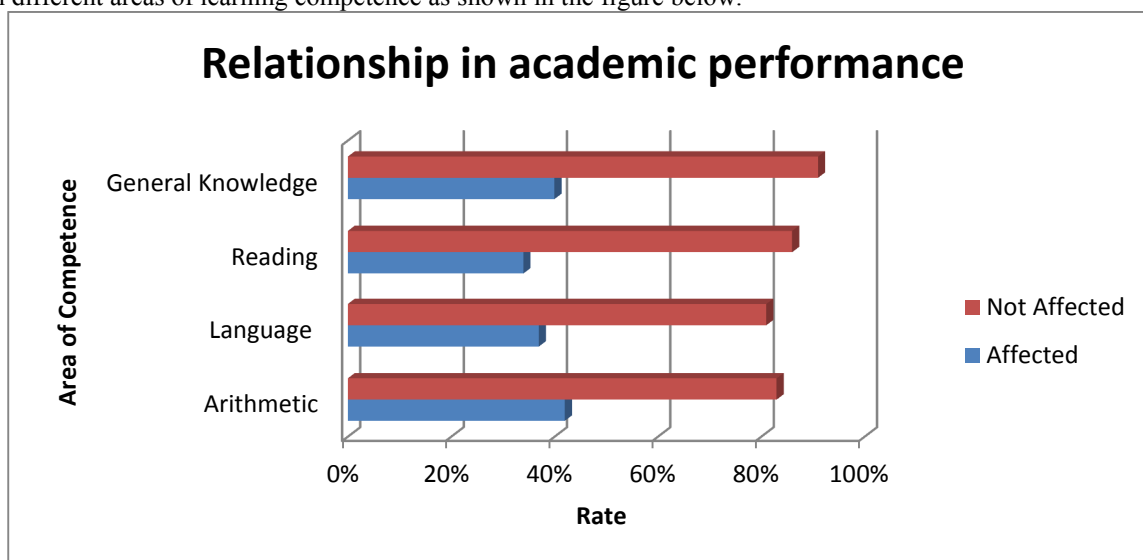


Figure 2 Relationship in academic performance

The data collected and analyzed above showed that children who were hard hit by the problem of chronic absenteeism had poorer learning competence than their counterparts who attended pre-school regularly. This was in all the competences they were required to acquire before transiting to the next level (primary school). Those who were chronically absent scored generally poorer in the tested areas of competences; arithmetic, language, reading and general knowledge (42%, 37%, 34% and 40% respectively) while their counterparts who were not affected scored better (83%, 81%, 86% and 91% respectively).

If this scenario is not arrested, children won’t acquire the expected concepts in their learning at the expected preschool level and this will greatly affect their overall output in their future higher levels of learning.

9.0. Recommendations and Conclusion

Chronic absenteeism is a major drawback in good performance. It affects learner's participation in preschool learning. Priority should be emphasized on every tactic and strategy applicable in positively motivating pre-school learners to participate regularly in pre-school learning. Provision of basic requirements comes first; whereby parents should be encouraged to join organizations like community based organizations to get some money. These organizations will help the parents and the members of the public to be economically sound and so will be able to provide their children with the appropriate basic needs. Mobility and socio-economic condition are factors that impact on learners' preschool attendance and academic achievement (Applegate (2003).

Play opportunities, appropriate play materials/facilities should be adequately provided to children in preschools with an aim of boosting their self-esteem and self-confidence, including those children with special education needs. In order to capture learners' interest teachers in the ECDE centres should always employ modern teaching strategies, appropriate teaching/learning resources, enticing games and plays during their teaching among others. This way they will win the children's interest; the children will realize learning is playing and because to them playing is fun - hence learning will become fun in pre-schools.

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