

# **ACTION RESEARCH AS PANACEA FOR LEARNERS' ABSENTEEISM IN REMOTE AREA PRIMARY SCHOOLS OF BOTSWANA: THE CASE OF KACGAE PRIMARY SCHOOL**

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## **Abstract**

Drawn from a research project on an incidence of irregular school attendance or absenteeism in Kacgae Primary School (a remote area primary school), this article discusses the manner in which an action research process was employed to revert the problem of absenteeism in order to improve school attendance. The article makes a clear case that action research can be a panacea for learner absenteeism and improved academic performance in remote area primary schools of Botswana. A case study model design was used where analysis of qualitative and quantitative data was done. This study found a relationship between class attendance and academic performance. Further analysis reveal some difference in family dynamics may have an effect on the relationship between class attendance and academic performance. Central to all the findings is the fact that absenteeism in schools affects only a small percentage of the class therefore affecting the overall average academic class performance.

## **1.0 Introduction**

In Botswana, formal education was accepted as a tool for development even before independence. Consequently, before and during the first decade of independence, many primary schools were built all over the country with a view to increasing the national literacy rate. However, the success of modern education is usually dependent on learner enrolment, retention and successful completion of studies. Pansiri (2011, p.111) argues that, the status of education for the ethnic minority groups in remote areas of Botswana is that there are still a lot of issues that go unaddressed. While Botswana achieves about 93.9% of enrolment of primary school pupils in most years (Republic of Botswana, 2012), it does not achieve the same level of success in retention and completion of studies. The Botswana Ministry of Education and Skills Development has in recent times been bedevilled by high learner dropout rate and declining academic performance in schools, particularly the Primary schools sector. But the most serious problem that has been of concern to Government as outlined by the Kedikilwe Commission is that educational achievement at this level is indeed declining (Republic of Botswana, 1994, p.8). Further, for example, during the 2011-12 academic years, 3239 pupils were found to have dropped out of primary schools in the country (Republic of Botswana, 2012).

In Botswana, primary schools may be categorized into urban and rural. While urban primary schools are usually found in areas surrounded with modern amenities and abundance of practical facilities, rural primary schools are located in environments within which modern amenities are meagre. Among rural primary schools are further identified a group of schools known as remote area primary schools. Remote area primary schools are primary schools located in the remote parts of the country where modern amenities are meagre. According to Pansiri 2008 remote area dwellers "...usually live in small numbers; are

politically disempowered, economically disadvantaged, socially underprivileged, marginalised and discriminated against in terms of linguistic and cultural identity” (p. 111).

There exist about 812 primary schools (Botswana Ministry of Education Statistics, 2012). Among these schools are government and private primary schools. Government owned primary schools constitute about 92.7% of the total number of primary schools in Botswana while the rest are privately owned. About 65 of the 812 schools are Remote Area Dwellers settlements with schools (Republic of Botswana RADP report 2003b in Pansiri 2008:447). As stated earlier, these schools are located in the urban, rural and remote areas of the country. There are ten educational regions in Botswana. In each of these ten regions the three types of schools mentioned above could be found. However, regions vary in terms of population which translates into the school enrolment. Some regions have low enrolment rate while others like the Central region have high enrolment rates. The table below shows primary school enrolment within the ten regions;

**Table 1: Primary School Enrolment in regions in Botswana**

Region	Total Enrolment	%
South East	28 611	9
North East	24 570	7.8
South	41 121	13
Central	113 555	35.9
North West	30 402	9.6
Gantsi	7287	2.3
Kgalagadi	9033	2.9
Chobe	3294	1
Kgatleng	14015	4.4
Kweneng	44650	14.1

Source: Statistics Botswana-2012

Remote area schools have been established to bring modern education nearer to the communities in those areas, as during the pre and post-independence years in Botswana most modern education facilities were found in urban areas and big villages thus marginalizing communities in remote parts of the country. According to Pansiri (2011), there are also indications that some minorities resist certain dispositional practices in the education management system. He further cites an incident from the Botswana Daily Newspaper of the 5th February 2007 in which it was reported that some parents forced their children out of school as a protest for being discriminated and abused at the hostels. The approximate population of primary schools in remote area is more than 50% of government primary schools in Botswana (Statistics Botswana-2012). Such schools are found in areas such as North East, Central, Gantsi, Kgalagadi, Northwest, Kweneng and Chobe region. It is in these regions where dropout is rampant which an outcome of absenteeism is.

While irregular attendance and inability to retain all pupils to the completion year are issues in all primary schools in the country, a different set of parameters exacerbate these issues in remote area primary schools. Remote area schools are characterised by communities with low level of acceptance of the formal education. Cultural practices are incongruent with modern living. This is explained by an argument that “traditional values and lifeways of rural people are disappearing in the face of globalisation, agribusiness, and exurbanisation... [and]...many rural people committed to place, resist intrusion on their lifeways and

make social and economic sense of their worlds in a distinctly rural manner” (Howley, 2009, p. 63). The cultural practices therefore contribute to low school enrolment, irregular school attendance and poor learner achievement. These are issues of greater concern in remote area primary schools of Botswana; hence this study.

This article discusses the case of Kacgae Primary School, a remote area primary school in the Gantsi District in Botswana. This primary school takes its name from the community within which it is located. Kacgae is a community located 550kms away from Gaborone. Kacgae primary school was established in July 1976 by some white settler commonly known to the residents of Kacgae as Tony, Patrick, Ben Hart and wife who later on handed it to the government of Botswana. It is currently a seven streamed primary school. As such, it is categorized as Group 3 according to the Primary Schools Establishment Register of Botswana. For the past 5years the school has had an annual enrolment ranging from 100 to 160 pupils. Ninety five percent of the pupils of this school are children from the San ethnic group. These children come from families which are economically challenged such that of date, 95% of these pupils depend on government social security programmes for their school uniform and feeding.

## **2.0 Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study was therefore to investigate an incidence of irregular school attendance (absenteeism) in Kacgae Primary School.

The objectives of this study were:

- 1) To identify the causes of learner absenteeism in Kacgae Primary school
- 2) To apply action research strategy to reduce the rate of absenteeism

## **3.0 Literature review**

School retention and irregular school attendance are global issues which have been studied in various contexts and different stages of educational development. Following many international, regional as well as national surveys and studies, the 1990 world education conference, for example, adopted access to basic education as one of the strategic priority areas (Haggis, 1991). At the time it was reported that “more than 100 million children and countless adults fail to complete basic education programmes” (WCEFA, 1990, p.41). Studies in Colombia, Tanzania, Tunisia and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) identified that dropout rates in these countries were higher in rural public schools than in urban centres (UNESCO, 1972). However, early school withdrawal does not usually come as an abrupt case. It develops from gradual absenteeism. Further Studies have established that there is also “a strong positive relationship between student achievement ...and annual building attendance averages” (Roby, 2003).

Sleigh and Ritzerb (2001) in Schmulian and Coetzee (2011) argued that learners that absent themselves are usually not available to learn key concepts and skills that are assessed during standardized test scores. They further asserted that learners who miss classes lose the benefit of acquiring general knowledge and skills that are assessed during examinations. Furthermore, these absentee learners forfeit the benefit of the auditory and visual supplementation of the textbook, the opportunity to learn from questions asked by other learners during class and resultant explanation provided by the teacher.

Class attendance therefore, is an important factor in school success among all learners. Studies indicate that the academic achievement of learners who attend classes regularly is higher than that of learners who are frequently absent (Balfanz & Vaughan, 2013). This has been found to be true even among learners whose socio-economic status is low. It is further indicated that right from the kindergarten, children who attend school regularly score higher on test than their peers who are frequently absent (Ehrlich et al, 2013).

Despite the evidence that there may be a positive relationship between attendance and academic achievement despite socio-economic status, learners in remote area schools continue to be absent in large numbers from classes. Different researchers have identified several reasons for these absences. These reasons vary from the more 'valid' reasons, such as illness and inclement weather to 'less valid' reasons such as frequent unexcused absence (Schmulian and Coetzee, 2011). Pansiri (2011) further indicates that seasonal changes and variations in Botswana contribute to school dropout or absenteeism.

It must be noted however, that most research works that investigated reasons for non-attendance and the possible correlation between student attendance and academic performance at primary school level did not discriminate among the demographic and socio-economic statuses of communities within which schools were located. This has proven to be a challenge when recommendations had to be implemented as learners' parents and learners themselves drawn from different communities have completely different attitudes towards formal education. Given these differing attitudes towards formal education, and given the differences in demography, culture and socio-economic statuses, the generalization of the findings relating to the reasons accounting for learner's absenteeism may be an error. Consequently, the strategies and approaches to be adopted to minimize or eradicate learners' absenteeism may not be the same or attract the same success across all primary schools.

In the current work, action research was employed to identify the causes of absenteeism and reduce these incidences among learners in Kacgae primary school between January and December 2013. Based on the uniqueness of Kacgae Primary School, an action research was implored because it is an imperative thing to do if at all one needs to achieve better results that are context relevant. Action research is a process of investigation that combines study and action. It is "...a practical approach to professional inquiry in any social situation" (Waters-Adams, 2006). Pansiri, 2008:492 argues that, instructional leadership, which is not guided by research, may not address the actual problems. He further indicates that school based and or classroom-based action research leads to evidence-based decision-making that encourages practitioners to take into account local values and cultural experiences and use those to improve teachers', learners' and parents' attitudes towards classroom work.

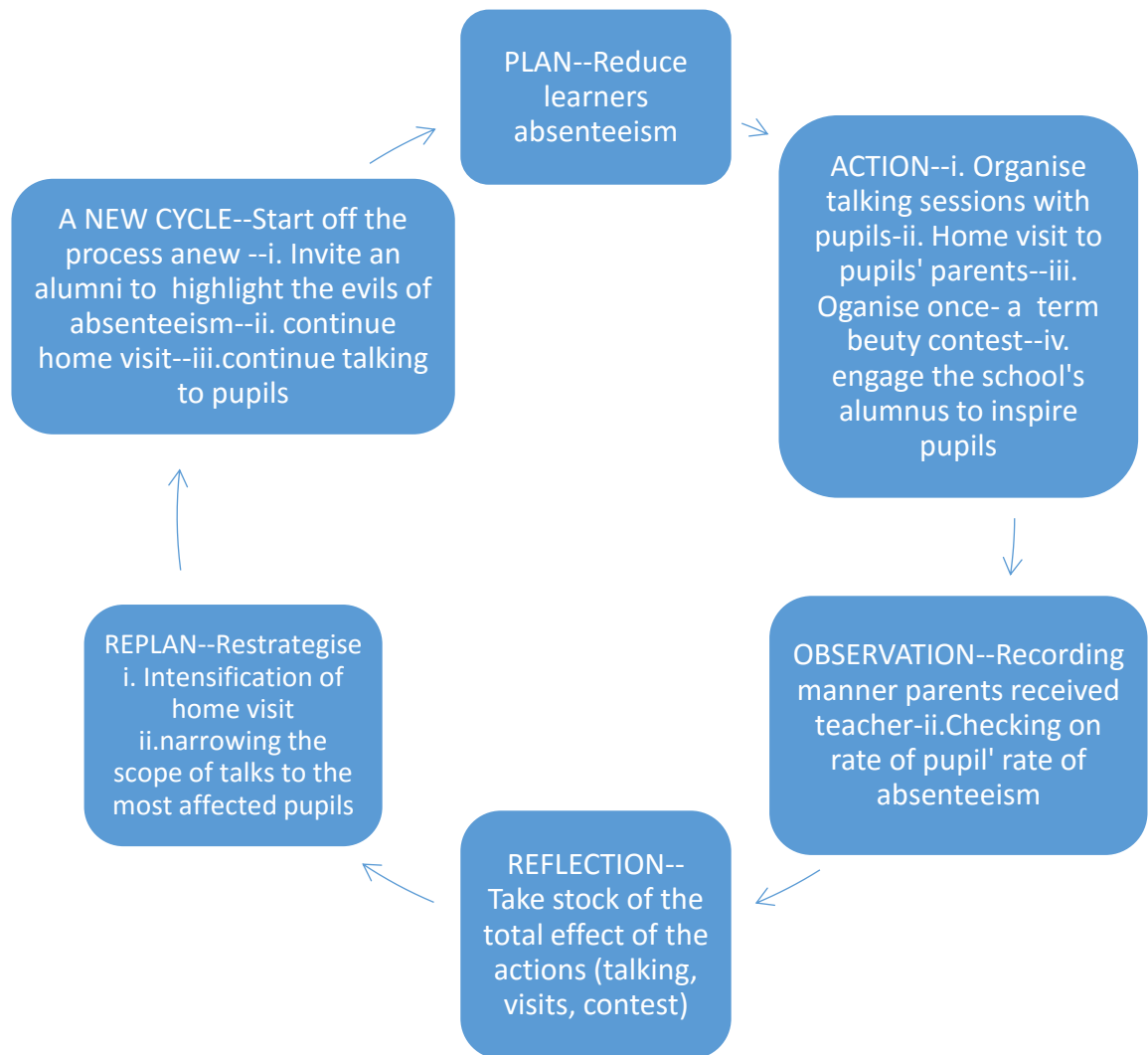
*...action research concerns actors – those people carrying out their professional actions from day to day - and its purpose is to understand and to improve those actions. It is about trying to understand professional action from the inside; as a result, it is research that is carried out by practitioners on their own practice, not (as in other forms of research), done by someone on somebody else's practice. Action research in education is grounded in the working lives of teachers, as they experience them (Waters-Adams, 2006:258).*

In a practical sense, action research recommends 5 main steps including planning, acting, observing, reflecting and re-planning (Waters-Adams, 2006). The drawing of a plan implies the

identification, clarification and clear statement about the issue to which action research is to be applied. Acting implies the taking of action with the view to implementing the plan earlier drawn. Observing means the monitoring of each step of the action with the view to recording people’s reaction, the result generated by each step of the action and the general progress of the action. Reflecting is the stock taking of the whole process as it regards the main goal that was set out to be achieved. Re-planning implies a process of adjusting to the product of reflection with the view to refining the process of action research.

#### 4.0 Methodology

In the particular case of Kacgae primary school, the conceptual framework of the action research employed was the following:



**Figure 1:** Conceptual Framework of the Kacgae primary school action research for reducing learners’ absenteeism

Figure 1 displays the steps taken during the implementation of the action research carried out with the view to reducing learners’ absenteeism in Kacgae primary school between Jan-Dec 2013.

## 5.0 Implementation of the action research

- Plan

When school reopened in January, 2013, the staff members of Kacgae Primary were invited to a meeting during which they were informed of the intention to embark on a plan to stop or reduce the rate of absenteeism in the school. A committee was then commissioned to come up with a write-up which indicated the main aim of this planned activity by the school and the objectives that were to facilitate its implementation. The committee was also to identify important stakeholders within the committee that could be associated with the action research.

Between January and February 2013, this committee submitted a number of reports that were considered and modified in line with the inputs of other staff members that listened in during readings or that reviewed the reports.

- Action

The series of action that followed the written plan began with a visit to the Kgosi (Chief) of Kacgae to inform him once more of the issue of absenteeism in the school and to intimate him of the new plan to embark on some activities aimed at eradicating or reducing absenteeism in the school.

Having received the Kgosi's support and blessing, the next major step was taken at school. A series of meetings were organized between staff, parents and pupils that discussed the meaning and evils of absenteeism. Staff members improved their knowledge of reasons that encourage absenteeism by asking pupils to speak out about their own escapades or their peers' escapades. Drama shows and other leisure activities were equally organized for pupils to drive home the bad sides of absenteeism or to discourage absenteeism.

The next series of activities targeted the homes of some of the students. A roster was drawn to permit selected teachers and parents to visit many homes within the community with the view to discussing school attendance of children coming from such homes. A number of interesting pieces of information were equally obtained through these visits. Some children who had absconded were relocated back to their parents where care and support could easily be given.

At the end of these series of activities, the session of observation began.

- Observation

This is an activity session that is virtually equivalent to the data collection process. Beginning from the visit to pupil's homes, teachers were told to begin recording the attitude of the parents through the manner in which they were received by these parents and to record all pieces of information given by the parents especially in regards to how much they may have influenced absenteeism of the children.

The home visit part of the activities took much time because in addition to the desire for collecting information from parents and guardians, it was designed to sensitize parents and guardians about the ill effects of absenteeism.

An eye was also kept on the manner the various activities were impacting on pupils' attendance especially beginning from the period home visits began.

- Reflection

The month of September, 2013 was spent reflecting on whatever was received that far through the numerous activities that have been carried out. A series of staff meetings was organized during which the pieces of information obtained were pooled together, analyzed and discussed.

At this stage, it was not clear to a number of the staff whether the school was making much progress in improving pupil's attendance. Consequently it was decided to intensify some activities with the aim to fast track result expected by the school.

- Replan

In pursuance of the decisions taken at the level of the "Reflection", home visits and play sessions were intensified beyond September, 2013. By November, 2013, the research had begun to wind down and a new cycle of activities have been planned for some time in 2014.

- A new cycle

Mid-2014, the embarked upon new action research that aims at boosting class attendance and at reducing pupils' absenteeism.

## **6.0 Findings**

### *Pre-study data on absenteeism and academic performance at Kacgae Primary School*

An examination of Kacgae primary school records indicates that for more than 10 years pupils' irregular attendance and drop-out rate have been steadily increasing in the school. These two factors have tended to impact academic performance negatively during the same period. During the 2012 academic session, it was observed through daily attendance registers that class attendance had increasingly become even more irregular. Simultaneously the school's academic performance had also not been satisfactory.

For example, during the first term of 2012 academic year, a total of 309(4.5%) absences were recorded out of a total expected 6942 attendances as shown below. Table 2 shows that about 5% of pupils stayed away from school during the first term of the 2012 school year in Kacgae Primary School. Most of the absenteeism (87%) was attributed to abscondment, and boys (81%) more than girls (19%) were found to engage in absenteeism. Standards 3, 7 and 2 have been found to have recorded the highest numbers of absenteeism respectively. These classes recorded 114, 65 and 46 cases of absenteeism respectively. Based

on data collected from class attendance registers parents have not contributed to pupils' absenteeism in any way.

**Table 2: School attendance in all classes during term one of 2012 academic year**

Standard	Expected total attendances	Total attendances	Total absences			Reason for absence		
			boys	girls	total	Parents directive	Abscndment	Ill-health
1	1652	1630	17	5	22		19	3
2	1298	1252	32	14	46		40	6
3	1121	1007	92	22	114		101	13
4	885	868	11	6	17		16	1
5	987	953	34	0	34		30	4
6	350	339	11	0	11		10	1
7	649	584	53	12	65		52	13
	6942	6633	250	59	309		268	41

Source: 2012 Kacgae Primary school attendance registers

Table 3 shows that Standards 2, 3 and 7 recorded the worst academic performances. These classes happen to be the same, which on table 1 recorded the highest rates of absenteeism. It is also evident from the table that boys absent themselves from school more than girls. Although boys' and girls' academic performances were both low, boys' performance is also low when compared to their female counterparts. Reasons for these disparities have not been investigated in this study.

**Table 3: Absenteeism and academic performance among Kacgae primary school pupils during 2012 Term 1.**

Standard	Expected total attendances	Total attendances	Total absences			Average class academic performance in term1		
			boys	girls	total	Boys	Girls	Total
1	1652	1630	17	5	22	18%	21%	39%
2	1298	1252	32	14	46	9%	11%	20%
3	1121	1007	92	22	114	3%	18%	21%
4	885	868	11	6	17	19%	23%	42%
5	987	953	34	0	34	16%	21%	37%
6	350	339	11	0	11	18%	18%	36%
7	649	584	53	12	65	8%	11%	19%
	6942	6633	250	59	309			

Sources: 2012 Kacgae primary school attendance registers and 2012 Kacgae primary school academic records for term 1



**7.0 Results of the action research**

Three main findings came out of the research. The first concerns the corroboration of a finding displayed on table 1. The second had to do with those things that pupils did when they stayed out of school and the third was related to the effect the 2013 action research impacted pupils’ class attendance.

On table 2, it was reported that parents contributed in no way to the class absenteeism of their children. This information was obtained originally from the Kacgae attendance registers since all reasons for absenteeism were usually recorded along with cases of absenteeism. One of the objectives of home visits to parents was to confirm whether any parents were involved in encouraging class absenteeism. The answers obtained did confirm that parents did not act in a way as to encourage their children not to go to school. Other motivations drove pupils to stay away from school. The following table displays the main reasons why pupils stay away from school.

**Table 4: Reasons accounting for absenteeism in Kacgae Primary School**

Reasons	percentage
Desire to roam in the wilderness	75%
Desire to hunt animals	60%
Desire to taste alcohol	53%
Desire to be with the opposite sex	31%
Others	24%

Learners’ absenteeism was caused mainly by their desire to go hunting (60%) and roam in the wilderness (75%). The other motivations for absenteeism are the desire to taste alcohol (53%) and desire to be with the opposite sex (31%). There exist also other minor desires (24%) such as desire to play football, going to see one’s grandparents and be with friends, etc.

**Table 5: School attendance in all classes during term one of 2014 academic year**

Standard	Expected total attendances in 2012	Total attendances in 2012	Total Absences in 2012			Expected total attendances in 2014	Total attendanc	Total absences in 2014	Reduction in 2012 absences (Difference between 2012 & 2014)
			Boys	Girls	total				
1	1652	1630	17	5	22	1570	1560	10	12(55%)
2	1298	1252	32	14	46	1342	1319	23	23(50%)
3	1121	1007	92	22	114	1279	1229	50	64(56%)
4	885	868	11	6	17	876	867	9	8(47%)
5	987	953	34	0	34	890	868	22	12(35%)
6	350	339	11	0	11	402	392	10	1(9%)
7	649	584	53	12	65	546	516	30	35(54%)
	6942	6633	250	59	309	6905	6751	154	155(50.16%)

Table 5 shows that by the first term of 2014, absenteeism has reduced overall by about 50% in Kacgae Primary school. The reduction in absenteeism was most highly felt in Standards 3(56%), 1(55%) and 7(54%).

## 8.0 Discussion

In 2012, a total of 309 cases of absence amounting to about 5% of total expected attendances. This relatively small percentage of attendance may suggest that the low academic performances across the classes may not be accounted for by absenteeism alone. However, table 4 clearly shows that the action research which was directed at reducing absenteeism bore its fruit as class attendance improved by 50% at the beginning of 2014. While class attendance has improved, it has been found that most absenteeism cases are accounted for by children's desire to roam the wilderness and hunting. As Molefe et al (2005) in Pansiri, (2011, p.761) observed "conditions in Botswana are such that when hunting seasons (usually lasting for 3 months) start, some children in remote areas ...drop from school to join their parents' hunting expeditions". It is imperative to note that most of the reasons for absenteeism are common among the boys.

## 9.0 Conclusion

Data in this study suggests that acute learner absenteeism can be reverted. Through action research practicing teachers can improve performance in numerous areas of their practice including class attendance. The results show that class attendance does correlate with class average academic achievement at varying dimensions. As earlier on mentioned by Roby (2003), there is a strong positive relationship between student achievement and class attendance averages. The numbers of learners who frequently absent themselves from class also have an impact on the class results. In the present case, action research was employed to shore up attendance in Kacgae Primary School and it has yielded encouraging results. However, the study reveals that there is still some work to be done to utilise improved class attendance in order to improve learner achievement. Nevertheless, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to all remote area primary schools of Botswana.

## 10.0 Recommendations

- 1). Although an impressive result was obtained at first trial in the case of Kacgae Primary School, it is recommended that action research be implemented at least twice in quick succession in order to avoid tendencies to relapse.
- 2). It is recommended that remote area primary schools should employ action research in their effort to improve performance in all areas as financial and material resources are usually not as available to these schools as they are to other government or private schools.
- 3). It is further recommended that the MoESD should train teachers on how to conduct action research because such an initiative help practitioners in making evidence-based decisions that are context relevant and practical.

## 11.0 Acknowledgements

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