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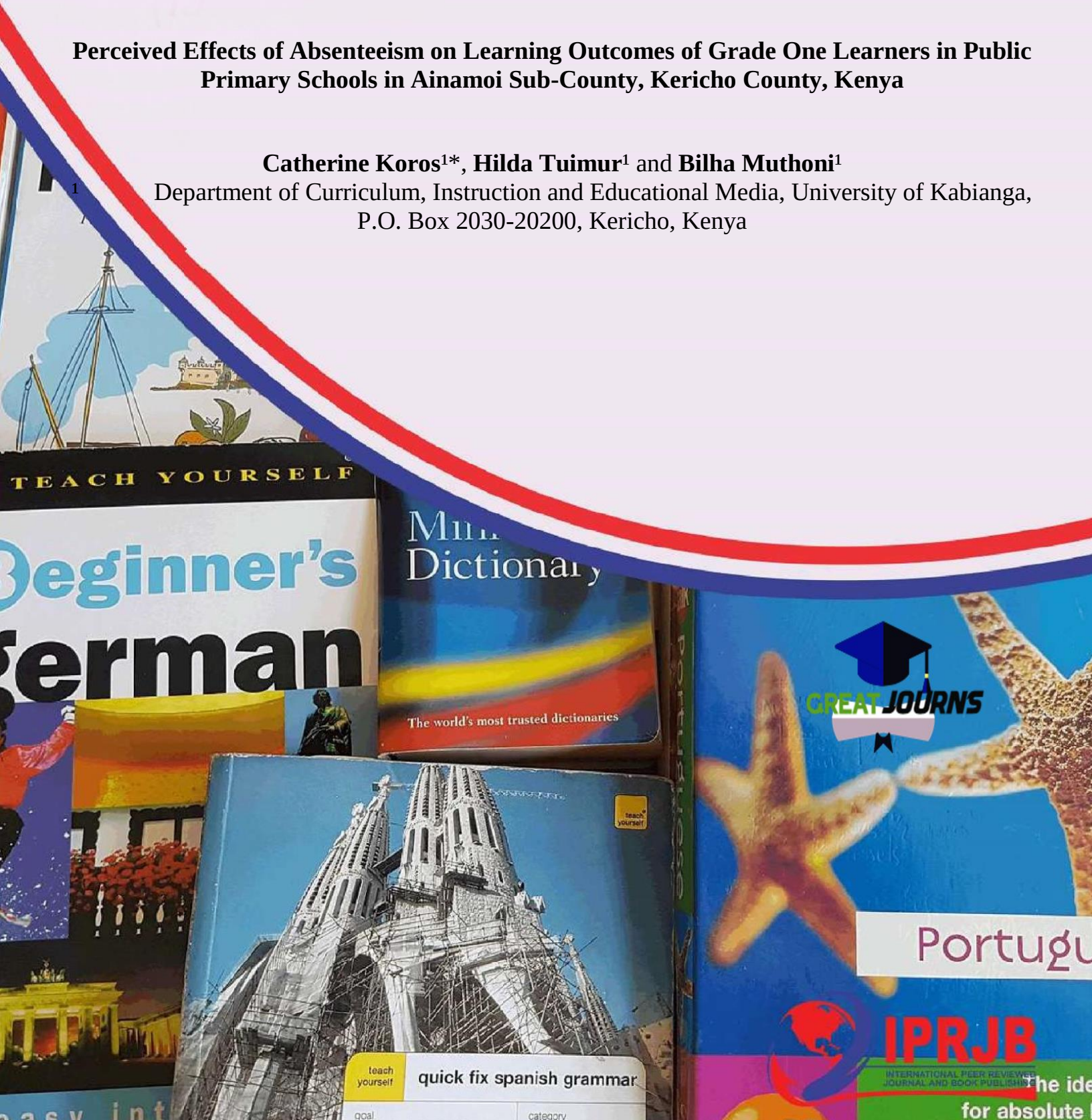
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Perceived Effects of Absenteeism on Learning Outcomes of Grade One Learners in Public Primary Schools in Ainamoi Sub-County, Kericho County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Regular attendance in Grade One is the foundation on which literacy, numeracy and social skills are built, yet little is known about how absenteeism affects the learning of Grade One learners in rural Kenya. This study determined the perceived effects of absenteeism on the learning outcomes (literacy, numeracy, participation and progression) of Grade One learners in public primary schools in Ainamoi Sub-County, Kericho County, Kenya. The study was anchored on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and used a descriptive survey design with a mixed-methods approach. The sample comprised 108 respondents: all 84 Grade One teachers (census) and 24 heads of institutions selected by simple random sampling. Data were collected through a teacher questionnaire, a semi-structured interview schedule and document analysis of attendance and progress records. The instruments had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.804. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively in SPSS version 27 and interview data thematically. Teachers strongly agreed that absentee learners end up with fewer friends (M = 4.57, SD = 0.52), that absentees who leave school early are rejected by the community (M = 4.29), that absenteeism prevents learners from obtaining knowledge (M = 4.26) and that it interrupts lessons and forces teachers to repeat content (M = 4.13); the overall mean was 4.31. Heads of institutions agreed that persistent absenteeism is associated with low self-esteem (M = 3.75), poor learning outcomes (M = 3.71) and dropping out (M = 3.71), and described broken continuity in learning and unmet learning targets. Absenteeism is therefore perceived to affect the academic, social-emotional and progression outcomes of Grade One learners as well as the learning of their classmates. The study recommends early tracking of absence, structured catch-up support for absentee learners, and school–parent partnerships that protect instructional time in the first grade.

Keywords: ***Absenteeism; Grade One; learning outcomes; early grade literacy and numeracy; school participation; Kenya***

1. Introduction

School absenteeism is a learner's non-attendance on scheduled school days, whether the absence is excused or unexcused. Chronic absenteeism, commonly defined as missing 10 per cent or more of school days, is the pattern most strongly associated with weak learning (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gottfried, 2014). It differs from truancy, which is unexcused and often deliberate (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015), and from dropout, which is permanent withdrawal. These distinctions matter most in Grade One. At this stage the child moves from home or pre-primary into formal schooling, acquires the foundational literacy, numeracy and social skills on which later learning depends, and forms attendance habits that can persist into later grades (Ehrlich et al., 2013; Gottfried, 2014).

Since the 1990 Jomtien World Conference on Education for All, the international community has affirmed the right to universal and equitable access to quality education (King, 2019). Access alone does not secure learning, however. Learners who are enrolled but frequently absent do not benefit fully from instruction, and global monitoring has documented high rates of repetition and dropout in the first years of primary school in several low-income countries (UNESCO, 2015). The early grades are therefore a critical point at which attendance must be secured.

In Kenya, the Basic Education Act, 2013 gives every child the right to free and compulsory basic education. It requires parents to ensure that their children attend school regularly and County Education Boards to put measures in place to keep children in school (Republic of Kenya, 2013,

ss. 18, 28 and 30). Despite these provisions and the introduction of free primary education, absenteeism persists in Kenyan primary schools (King et al., 2015; Matage & Begi, 2017; Muiru, 2012). The consequences for young learners are serious: absent learners miss instruction and struggle to recover missed content, teachers must repeat lessons, and the foundations for literacy and numeracy may be weakened (Gottfried, 2014; Sekiwu et al., 2020).

Kericho County is a largely rural, agricultural county, and Ainamoi Sub-County is one of its sub-counties. Attendance and learning data for Grade One learners in the sub-county are not routinely published, and teachers and heads of institutions in this study identified absenteeism among Grade One learners as a concern. Existing Kenyan studies of the effects of absenteeism have examined upper primary learners, whole schools or urban settings, and have mostly reported effects on examination performance (Gitonga, 2012; Mutisya & Ngware, 2020). No study was located that documents the effects of absenteeism on the learning outcomes of Grade One learners in Kericho County or Ainamoi Sub-County.

This article reports the second objective of a wider study of absenteeism among Grade One learners in Ainamoi Sub-County. The objective was to determine the effects of absenteeism on the learning outcomes (literacy, numeracy, participation and progression) of Grade One learners in public primary schools in Ainamoi Sub-County. The study sought to answer the question: *What are the effects of absenteeism on the learning outcomes of Grade One learners in Ainamoi Sub-County, and how do teachers and heads of institutions describe these effects?* Because the study used a descriptive survey, the effects are reported as perceived associations and not as proven causal effects.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Absenteeism and learning outcomes

Learning outcomes are the knowledge, skills, competencies and attitudes that learners demonstrate and that are measured through assessment. In this study they were examined in four dimensions observable in Grade One: knowledge (literacy and numeracy), participation and peer relationships, lesson continuity, and progression.

The strongest international evidence on early absence comes from the United States. In Chicago, children who were chronically absent in the early years showed weaker early literacy and mathematics readiness than children who attended regularly (Ehrlich et al., 2013). Gottfried (2014) found chronic absenteeism to be associated with lower achievement and with weaker socio-emotional outcomes. Gottfried (2019) further showed that the level of chronic absenteeism in a classroom was associated with lower achievement for all learners in it, not only for the absentees. Absence therefore has spill-over effects on classmates. Balfanz and Byrnes (2018) evaluated a city-wide campaign to reduce chronic absenteeism in New York, which shows that the problem is treated as a policy priority.

African evidence points in the same direction but is thinner. In Uganda, Sekiwu et al. (2020) found a positive but modest relationship between attendance and academic performance in Universal Primary Education schools; attendance explained about 12 per cent of the variation in performance, which shows that attendance is one of several influences on learning. Biryomumaisho (2008) also linked absenteeism to weaker academic performance in a Ugandan primary school, and Yendaw and Dayour (2015) examined attendance and performance in relation to school feeding in Ghana.

In Kenya, Gitonga (2012) examined absenteeism and academic achievement among marginalised urban children in Nairobi, Mutisya and Ngware (2020) examined school attendance and learning achievement among primary pupils, and Ngware (2019) linked early grade absenteeism to later schooling outcomes. The effects discussed in these studies include weaker literacy and numeracy, interrupted lessons and slower syllabus coverage, reduced participation and peer interaction, and a higher risk of dropout. Matage and Begi (2017) and Muiru (2012) documented the persistence of absenteeism in lower primary schools in Nyamira and Kiambu counties, while studies in Kericho County have examined early years feeding and competencies but not attendance (Chepkoech et al., 2013; Langat et al., 2021).

Two weaknesses limit this literature. First, most studies use whole-school or upper-primary samples and report effects on examination performance, so little is known about the effects of absenteeism on the foundational skills, participation and progression of Grade One learners. Second, no study was located that documents these effects in Ainamoi Sub-County. The present study addresses both gaps by examining effects observable in Grade One, as perceived by the teachers and heads of institutions who see them daily.

2.2 Theoretical framework

The study was anchored on Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, which proposes that human motivation is organised in five levels: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation. Applied to the classroom, a learner who misses school loses access to the belonging that comes from peer relationships and to the esteem that comes from keeping up with classmates. The theory therefore predicts that absenteeism affects social and emotional outcomes as well as academic ones. Empirical work has found little support for a strict ordering of needs (Tay & Diener, 2011; Wahba & Bridwell, 1976), so the hierarchy is used here as a heuristic for grouping needs, not as a fixed sequence.

The study was complemented by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which explains child development as the product of interactions among nested systems: the microsystem (family, classroom), the mesosystem (home–school links), the exosystem (settings that affect the child indirectly), the macrosystem (culture and national policy) and the chronosystem (change over time, such as the transition into Grade One). The theory explains why the effects of absence reach beyond the individual learner: an absent child weakens classroom continuity in the microsystem, strains home–school relationships in the mesosystem, and may be marginalised in the wider community. Together, the two theories explain what an absent learner loses (Maslow) and where in the learner's environment those losses are felt (Bronfenbrenner).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design and study area

The study used a descriptive survey design with a mixed-methods approach. A descriptive survey suits research that describes the views and practices of a population as they exist, without manipulating variables (Cohen et al., 2018). A quantitative strand (teacher questionnaires) measured the extent of agreement with statements on the effects of absenteeism, and a qualitative strand (interviews with heads of institutions) explained and corroborated these results.

The study was conducted in Ainamoi Sub-County, Kericho County, Kenya. The county lies at about 2,002 metres above sea level and is predominantly rural. Farming is the main occupation: households grow maize, beans, potatoes, tomatoes and bananas and keep livestock, and tea and

sugarcane are the main cash crops. The sub-county was selected purposively because it is a rural, agricultural setting in which household circumstances may affect attendance and because no study of absenteeism among its Grade One learners was located.

3.2 Population and sampling

The target population was 168 respondents in the 84 public primary schools in Ainamoi Sub-County: 84 Grade One teachers (one per school) and 84 heads of institutions. Where a school had more than one Grade One stream, one stream was selected by simple random sampling. All 84 teachers were studied through a census. Twenty-four heads of institutions (28.6 per cent) were selected by simple random sampling, using a lottery without replacement; this fraction falls within the 10 to 30 per cent range recommended for descriptive studies (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). The final sample was 108 respondents (Table 1).

Table 1. Target population and sample

Category	Target population	Sample	Sampling technique	Sample (% of population)
Grade One teachers	84	84	Census	100.0
Heads of institutions	84	24	Simple random sampling	28.6
Total	168	108		64.3

3.3 Research instruments

Three instruments were used. The teacher questionnaire contained four statements on the effects of absenteeism on learning outcomes, rated on a five-point Likert scale (5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree). The semi-structured interview schedule for heads of institutions asked about the effects of persistent absenteeism; it included three rating items on the same scale, so that the two groups could be compared, and open-ended questions. A document analysis guide was used to review attendance registers and learner progress records to corroborate the respondents' reports.

3.4 Validity and reliability

The instruments were pre-tested in neighbouring Belgut Sub-County with 11 respondents, about 10 per cent of the sample, and ambiguous items were revised. Content validity was established by university supervisors and lecturers in early childhood and primary education, who judged whether the items covered the study objectives. Internal consistency reliability on the pilot data gave a Cronbach's alpha of 0.804, above the accepted threshold of 0.70 (Cronbach, 1951). The trustworthiness of the interview data was addressed through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985): responses were probed, compared with the questionnaire data and records, and the procedures were documented.

3.5 Data collection and analysis

After obtaining a research licence from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) and authorisation from the county education and administrative offices, the researcher delivered questionnaires to the teachers in person and collected them on completion. Heads of institutions were interviewed in private, and attendance registers were reviewed with their permission.

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Questionnaire data were coded, entered and cleaned in SPSS version 27. Frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations were computed for each item. Mean scores were interpreted as follows: 4.21–5.00 strongly agree; 3.41–4.20 agree; 2.61–3.40 neutral; 1.81–2.60 disagree; 1.00–1.80 strongly disagree. A composite score was computed for each teacher as the mean of that teacher's ratings across the four items. Interview data were coded in NVivo and analysed thematically following the six phases of Braun and Clarke (2006). Verbatim responses are attributed to heads by letter (Head A, Head B and so on) so that no respondent or school can be identified.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Participants gave informed consent after the purpose of the study was explained; participation was voluntary, with freedom to withdraw. Respondents' names were not recorded and schools were coded in reporting. Grade One learners were not respondents, and the attendance and progress records reviewed did not include learners' names. Records were stored securely in line with the Data Protection Act, 2019 (Republic of Kenya, 2019).

4. Results

4.1 Response rate and respondents' characteristics

All 84 Grade One teachers returned completed questionnaires and all 24 sampled heads of institutions were interviewed, a response rate of 100 per cent. Of the teachers, 74 (88.1%) were female and 10 (11.9%) male. Most held a diploma in education (60, 71.4%), 20 (23.8%) held a degree and 4 (4.8%) a P1 certificate. Fifty-five teachers (65.5%) had served three to nine years in their current station, 25 (29.8%) two years or fewer and 4 (4.8%) ten years or more. Most teachers had therefore stayed long enough in their schools to observe their learners' attendance and learning patterns.

4.2 Teachers' perceptions of the effects of absenteeism

Teachers agreed with all four statements on the effects of absenteeism (Table 2). The strongest consensus concerned peer relationships: 83 of 84 teachers (98.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that absentee learners end up with fewer friends (M = 4.57, SD = 0.52), and none disagreed.

Table 2. *Teachers' responses on the effects of absenteeism on the learning outcomes of Grade One learners (n = 84)*

Statement	SA n (%)	A n (%)	N n (%)	D n (%)	SD n (%)	Mean	SD
Absentee learners end up with fewer friends	49 (58.3)	34 (40.5)	1 (1.2)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	4.57	0.52
Absentee learners who leave school early are rejected by the community	44 (52.4)	27 (32.1)	8 (9.5)	3 (3.6)	2 (2.4)	4.29	0.95
Absenteeism prevents learners from obtaining knowledge	40 (47.6)	30 (35.7)	10 (11.9)	4 (4.8)	0 (0.0)	4.26	0.85
Regular teaching is interrupted and teachers repeat lessons	35 (41.7)	25 (29.8)	24 (28.6)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	4.13	0.83

Note. SA = strongly agree; A = agree; N = neutral; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree. Items are ordered by mean. Percentages are of the 84 respondents.

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On progression, 71 teachers (84.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that absentee learners who leave school early are rejected by the community, 9.5% were neutral and 6.0% disagreed (M = 4.29, SD = 0.95). This item had the widest spread of views, but teachers clearly linked persistent absence with early school leaving and the social marginalisation that can follow.

On knowledge, 70 teachers (83.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that absenteeism prevents learners from obtaining knowledge, 11.9% were neutral and 4.8% disagreed (M = 4.26, SD = 0.85). Teachers therefore perceive a direct loss of instruction in literacy and numeracy when learners miss school.

On lesson continuity, 60 teachers (71.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that regular teaching is interrupted and teachers repeat lessons when many learners are absent (M = 4.13, SD = 0.83). None disagreed, but 28.6% were neutral, the largest neutral share of any item. Absenteeism is thus perceived to affect learners who attend as well as those who are absent.

Taking the four items together, 71 teachers (84.5%) had composite scores in the agree or strongly agree range (Table 3). The overall mean was 4.31, which falls in the strongly agree band.

Table 3. *Composite distribution of teachers' responses on the effects of absenteeism (n = 84)*

Level of agreement	n	%
Strongly agree	35	41.7
Agree	36	42.9
Neutral	12	14.3
Disagree	1	1.2
Strongly disagree	0	0.0
Total	84	100.0

Note. Each teacher's composite score is the mean of that teacher's four ratings, rounded to the nearest scale point. Overall mean = 4.31 (strongly agree).

4.3 Heads of institutions' perceptions of the effects of persistent absenteeism

Heads of institutions agreed, though less strongly than teachers, that persistent absenteeism is associated with poor learning, dropout and low self-esteem (Table 4). About two-thirds or more agreed with each effect, and all three means fell in the agree band (3.71–3.75).

Table 4. *Heads of institutions' responses on the effects of persistent absenteeism (n = 24)*

Effect	SA n (%)	A n (%)	N n (%)	D n (%)	SD n (%)	Mean	SD
Low self-esteem	6 (25.0)	10 (41.7)	5 (20.8)	2 (8.3)	1 (4.2)	3.75	1.07
Poor learning outcomes	5 (20.8)	11 (45.8)	4 (16.7)	4 (16.7)	0 (0.0)	3.71	1.00
Learner dropping out of school	5 (20.8)	12 (50.0)	3 (12.5)	3 (12.5)	1 (4.2)	3.71	1.08

Note. Abbreviations as in Table 2. Percentages are of the 24 respondents.

Sixteen heads (66.7%) agreed that persistent absenteeism is associated with low self-esteem, and 16 (66.7%) agreed that it is associated with poor learning outcomes. Seventeen (70.8%) agreed

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that it is associated with dropping out, the highest agreement among heads. Standard deviations of about 1.0 show that heads' views were more divided than those of teachers.

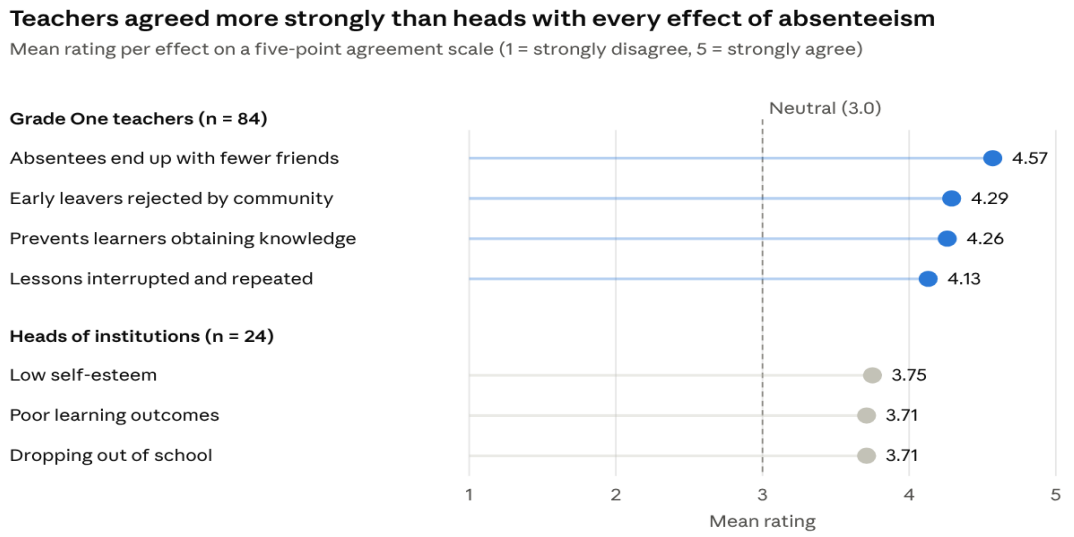
4.4 Themes from the interviews

The heads' open-ended responses fell into three themes that matched and extended the rated effects.

1. **Broken continuity and unmet targets.** Heads described absence as breaking the sequence of learning, so that missed content is not recovered and class targets are missed. Head A named 'lack of continuity in learning', and Head B observed that 'most targets are not met'. Heads B, C and E linked absence to poor performance.
2. **Falling behind peers and withdrawing.** Heads described absentee learners who isolate themselves from others (Head A) and who do not measure up with their peers in educational matters (Head D). Head E named low self-esteem directly.
3. **Early school leaving.** Heads D and E linked persistent absence to dropping out; Head E wrote that it 'leads to dropping out of school'. Head C added that absenteeism lowers enrolment at the school level.

Taken together, the interviews give the rated effects a specific form: broken learning, falling behind peers, and withdrawal from school. Figure 1 compares the mean ratings of the two groups.

Figure 1. *Mean ratings of the effects of absenteeism by Grade One teachers and heads of institutions*



Source: survey data, Tables 2 and 4 (teachers n = 84; heads n = 24)

All seven means lie above the neutral point. Teachers' ratings (4.13–4.57) were consistently higher than heads' (3.71–3.75), which may reflect teachers' closer daily contact with absentee learners.

5. Discussion

The study found that teachers and heads of institutions perceive absenteeism to affect four dimensions of the learning outcomes of Grade One learners: knowledge, participation and peer relationships, lesson continuity and progression. The findings support the international and

African evidence that absence is associated with weaker learning, while extending it to social and progression outcomes in the first grade of a rural Kenyan setting.

Knowledge (literacy and numeracy). More than four in five teachers and two-thirds of heads agreed that absence prevents learners from acquiring knowledge and is associated with poor learning outcomes. This agrees with Ehrlich et al. (2013), who found weaker early literacy and mathematics readiness among chronically absent young children in Chicago, and with Gottfried (2014), who associated chronic absence with lower achievement. It is also consistent with Sekiwu et al. (2020) in Uganda. That study found attendance explained only about 12 per cent of the variation in performance, so absence should be seen as one important influence on learning among several. The heads' references to broken continuity and unmet targets suggest the route by which this happens in Grade One: foundational skills are taught in sequence, so a learner who misses the early steps cannot easily follow the later ones.

Participation and peer relationships. The strongest finding of the study was the near-unanimous agreement among teachers (98.8%) that absentee learners end up with fewer friends, supported by heads' ratings of low self-esteem and their descriptions of learners who isolate themselves. This is consistent with Gottfried's (2014) finding that chronic absenteeism is associated with weaker socio-emotional outcomes. It can be interpreted through Maslow's (1943) hierarchy. School is a main source of belonging and esteem for a six- to eight-year-old, and repeated absence weakens both. Learners who feel excluded or behind may then be less willing to attend, which suggests a cycle in which absence and social withdrawal reinforce each other. In Grade One, when friendships and a sense of belonging to school are first formed, this social effect may matter as much as the academic one.

Lesson continuity. Seven in ten teachers agreed that absence interrupts regular teaching and forces lessons to be repeated. This finding shows that the effects of absenteeism spill over to learners who attend regularly, since repeated lessons slow syllabus coverage for the whole class. It agrees with Gottfried (2019), who found that the level of chronic absenteeism in a classroom was associated with lower achievement for all its learners. In Bronfenbrenner's (1979) terms, one learner's absence alters the classroom microsystem shared by all. The relatively large neutral share on this item (28.6%) may reflect differences in class size or in how many learners are absent at once across schools.

Progression. Teachers (84.5%) and heads (70.8%) linked persistent absence to early school leaving, and teachers further associated early leavers with rejection by the community. This is consistent with Ngware's (2019) finding that early grade absenteeism in Kenya is associated with later schooling outcomes, and with Gitonga's (2012) account of absence among marginalised children. Because these are perceptions, they indicate concern about progression and not a measured dropout rate. The concern is nonetheless important. It suggests that teachers see Grade One absence as an early warning of later dropout, which is what makes the first grade a strategic point for intervention.

Differences between teachers and heads. Teachers rated comparable effects higher than heads (for example, 4.26 against 3.71 for lost learning), and heads' views were more varied. Teachers' daily contact with absentee learners may make the effects more visible to them, while heads observe absence through registers and school-level results. The two perspectives are complementary: teachers report the effects in the classroom, and heads report their consequences for the school, such as unmet targets and low enrolment.

Overall, the findings suggest that Grade One absenteeism is not only an academic problem. It is perceived to weaken foundational learning, isolate learners socially and emotionally, disrupt teaching for whole classes and signal later dropout. Responses therefore need to address the learner's social reintegration as well as missed content.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

Teachers and heads of institutions in Ainamoi Sub-County perceive absenteeism among Grade One learners to be associated with lost learning, interrupted lessons, weaker peer relationships, low self-esteem and a risk of early school leaving. The social effect, fewer friends, drew the strongest consensus, which shows that absence in the first grade affects belonging as well as achievement. Because the study relied on perceptions supported by school records, these are perceived effects and not measured causal effects. They nonetheless show that the people closest to Grade One learners regard regular attendance as essential to foundational learning.

6.2 Recommendations

1. **Heads of institutions** should review Grade One attendance registers weekly and follow up any learner absent for several consecutive days, so that absence is identified before learning gaps widen.
2. **Grade One teachers** should provide structured catch-up support for returning absentees, such as short remedial sessions in literacy and numeracy and peer buddies, so that missed content is recovered without slowing the whole class.
3. **Teachers** should deliberately reintegrate returning learners into group and play activities to protect peer relationships and self-esteem.
4. **Heads, teachers and Boards of Management** should hold regular meetings with parents of Grade One learners to explain how absence affects learning and friendships, and to agree on follow-up for learners whose attendance is irregular.
5. **The Sub-County and County Education Offices** should treat repeated Grade One absence as an early warning of dropout and support schools to monitor and report it.

6.3 Limitations and suggestions for further research

The descriptive survey design establishes perceived associations but cannot prove that absenteeism causes poorer learning outcomes. Learning outcomes were examined through teachers' and heads' perceptions supported by school records, not through standardised tests, and responses may have been affected by social desirability and recall bias. The study covered one purposively selected sub-county, so its findings should be generalised to other settings with caution. Future research should (i) track Grade One cohorts longitudinally to examine the long-term effects of early absence; (ii) measure literacy and numeracy with standardised assessments and relate them to recorded attendance; and (iii) include the views of parents and learners.

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