

**FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS' ABSENTEEISM  
IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN JAMAICA**  
**Perspectives of Community Members**

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This study sought to determine the root causes of absenteeism in selected primary schools in Jamaica by investigating the influence of personal, educational, and community factors on student absenteeism from school. Data collection techniques involved the use of focus group interviews with parents, teachers, and community members from 71 schools, and with students (aged 7–12 years) from 10 of these schools, who were identified as having very low attendance rates. The findings suggest that the causal factors for absenteeism do not find their genesis in the family only, but also in the schools, the communities, and the students themselves. These factors combine to accentuate absenteeism in primary school in the rural areas of Jamaica.

**Introduction**

Absenteeism can be defined as persistent, habitual, and unexplained absence from school (Brooks, 1997, as cited in Bond, 2004). Bond noted that chronic absenteeism occurs when a student is absent without reason 20% or more of school time; “this nominal figure is consistently identified regardless of the specific circumstances of the absenteeism” (p. 8). Bond identified three dimensions of absenteeism: truancy, condoned absenteeism, and school refusal, whereas the Auditor General Victoria (Australia, 2004) identified four major dimensions of absenteeism: truancy, school refusal, school withdrawal, and early leaving. It is important to identify the different dimensions of absenteeism in tackling the problem because they may require different interventions.

**Truancy:** The Auditor General Victoria (Australia, 2004) describes truancy as:

the persistent, habitual and unexplained absence from school of a child of compulsory school age, although it can occur with parental knowledge and sometimes consent. However for the most part truant students tend to spend their time away from

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school and home; time away from home is used to conceal absences from their parents .... Truancy can take the form of fractional truancy, where students arrive late, leave early or skip individual classes (p. 16).

According to Cunningham (2005), truancy is the absence of a student from school without the knowledge or permission of parents. The truant leaves home under the pretense of going to school but turns away and become involved in out-of-school activities. Truancy is unauthorized non-attendance. Bond (2004) included fractional truancy, which occurs when students arrive late or leave early, or spend entire days away from school.

**School refusal:** School refusal differs from truancy in that children refuse to attend school even in the face of persuasion and punitive measures from parents and school. These students stay at home with the knowledge of their parents and school administrators (McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2001). This form of absenteeism is widely associated with social and medical disorder involving persistent non-attendance at school, excessive anxiety, and physical complaints (Australia, 2004; Bond, 2004). This type of absenteeism can be separated from the other types, given its psychological and/or medical composition.

Several studies show that school refusal is an important dimension in understanding students' absenteeism (Dube & Orpinas, 2009; Kearney, 2007; McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2001). For example, Dube and Orpinas noted three reasons for students' refusal to attend school: 17.2% of their participants refused to go to school to avoid fear- or anxiety-producing situations, to escape from adverse social or evaluative situations, or to gain positive tangible rewards; 60.6% missed school to gain parental attention or receive tangible rewards (positive reinforcement); and 22.2% had no specific reason for not attending school.

**School withdrawal:** Children are absent from school because their parents keep them away from school on a frequent basis because of the parents' needs and priorities. For the most part, these children's parents do not enrol them at school (Australia, 2004). This, Cunningham (2005) referred to as "parental agreed absence" (p. 29). Bond (2004) noted that this does necessarily equate to approved absence. According to Bond, "absence can only be approved by the school given a reasonable excuse" (p. 8).

**Early leaving:** This refers to children under 15 who drop out of school before completing their schooling.

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Studies suggest that the factors influencing students' absenteeism at the primary level can be classified into medical and non-medical (Bendel, Halfon, & Ever-Hadani, 1976); or four broad categories: home and family, school, community, and personal characteristics of the students (Etsey, 2005; Withers, 2004); or two broad categories: school factors, and family and personal factors (Bond, 2004).

Bendel et al. (1976) indicated that possible medical factors influencing students' absenteeism at the primary level included respiratory infections, toothaches, abdominal pains, headache, and pains on legs or arms; while non-medical reasons for absenteeism were truancy, family events, excursions, and helping family at home.

In addition to the above, Waldfogel and Washbrook (2010) noted that children from low-income homes who had taken/done vocabulary tests were a year behind those from middle-income homes by the age of 5. They recommended that government programmes should target children in the early years before age 5. Such programmes should provide training in effective parenting skills, and early childhood educators should be encouraged to work in partnership with health professionals to support vulnerable families. Waldfogel and Washbrook also noted that 15% of the poorest mothers have problems with basic literacy and numeracy, such as the ability to fill out forms.

The Auditor General Victoria (Australia, 2004) categorized the factors influencing absenteeism under two main headings: family and personal factors, and school factors; and expanded family and personal factors to include low parental valuing of, or interest in, education; low socio-economic status; geographic isolation; and unemployment. School factors include boredom with schoolwork; being bullied, threatened, or involved in fights; inadequate school support and welfare; unsatisfactory relations between students and their teachers; and an irrelevant or restrictive curriculum. These factors do not necessarily influence absenteeism in discrete ways but are likely to be interconnected in their impact on absenteeism.

In Jamaica, Sections 23 and 24 of the Education Act (Jamaica, 1980) declared that children of the compulsory primary age (6–12 years) must get quality full-time education. The Act sets the legal framework governing school enrolment and attendance, and the responsibilities of parents and teachers. Despite the legal requirement for school attendance at the primary level, it was reported in 2001 that the average student attendance at the primary level was 78% (Jamaica. Ministry of Education and Culture [MOEC], 2001). By 2004, the Task Force on Educational Reform in Jamaica noted that:

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although an enrolment rate of 97 percent of 6–11 age group was achieved, attendance rates at primary and all age schools were 72 and 65 percent respectively. These national figures obscure the fact that, in some deep rural areas, the attendance rate is as low as 50 percent. Attempts to enforce compulsory attendance in eight parishes have not resulted in an improvement in attendance rates. (p.19)

The statements by the Ministry of Education and Culture (2001) and the Task Force on Educational Reform (2004) indicate a decrease in student attendance at the primary level between 2001 and 2004. The Task Force report also highlighted the fact that at the primary level the education system failed to achieve the global standards for literacy and numeracy. Students at this level lacked the necessary skills and competences required for access to secondary education.

One report noted that absenteeism in Jamaica is highest in some geographical locations of the island due to the harvest time in the agricultural sector (Inter-American Development Bank [IDB], 2006). Thompson (2008) noted that student absenteeism is at its highest in the parishes of Clarendon, St. Catherine, and St. Mary. The magnitude of irregular attendance at school and classes does not only affect the absent student(s), but also impacts on teachers' ability to articulate the curriculum requirements, and to plan and present instructional activities in an organized and meaningful way. Poor school attendance lowers the literacy and numeracy rates of any country (Thompson, 2008). Absenteeism places students at risk; they are unable to achieve their educational, social, and psychological potential and are disadvantaged in the quality of choices they are able to make in later life situations. One possible reason for children being held back at home during this period—especially girls—was to care for their younger siblings (IDB, 2006).

In an attempt to increase school attendance at the primary level, the Ministry of Education implemented the School Feeding Programme since 1939 in a limited number of schools. By 1955 the programme was expanded with the aid of food commodities provided by sources within the United States. Between 1975 and 1988 an agreement was in place between the Governments of Jamaica and the United States for the receipt of supplementary food commodities from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Food was also received from other donors such as the European Economic Community (EEC) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). For the 2007/2008 financial year, the Government reported that the School

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Feeding Programme accounted for more than a billion dollars of the budget (<http://www.moec.gov.jm/divisions/ed/welfare/index.shtml>).

The School Feeding Programme is geared towards alleviating short-term hunger in school and increasing the time students spend in school, with the intent of improving education outcomes in the school. One of the objectives of the Medium Term Socio-Economic Policy Framework was to achieve 90% school attendance by students at the primary level on a daily basis by the end of the fiscal year 2007 (Planning Institute of Jamaica, as cited in IDB, 2006); this figure has not been achieved in current times. According to the Ministry of Education, there are approximately 100 primary schools, mostly in the rural areas, which have high levels of absenteeism (ranging from 54% to 80% attendance rate). In 2005, Cunningham noted that “in the Jamaican schooling experience, it is observed rather poignantly that low attendance rates and dropouts are a problem, particularly when they act as constraints on teachers to introduce new materials” (p. 4).

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. These findings will identify 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. The schools that participated in this study have been assigned pseudonyms.

The principal research question that guided this study was:

*What are the major root causes of student absenteeism?*

The following are three operational research questions:

1. What factors are identified by adults in the selected communities (that is, teachers and parents) as the root causes of absenteeism?
2. What factors are identified by students as the root causes of absenteeism?

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3. How do the root causes of absenteeism identified by students differ from those identified by teachers and parents?

### Selecting Participants

Focus group interviews were carried out in 71 schools in the six educational regions of Jamaica (see Figure 1). 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.

In addition, separate focus group interviews were carried out among groups of students from selected schools within Region 6; this region was selected because of its proximity to Kingston and also because it experienced the highest levels of student absenteeism (see Table 1).



Figure 1. Educational regions of Jamaica. (Source: Ministry of Education, Youth and Culture <http://www.moec.gov.jm/regions/index.shtml>)

### Data Collection From Adult Group

Focus group interviews were carried out in which a moderator led a group of persons from each community in a discussion on the causes of absenteeism. This technique allowed for data to be collected from a mixed group of persons (teachers, principals, community members, etc.) with different views of the causes of absenteeism. This approach allowed

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the researcher not only to learn about the range of views but also allowed participants to explain the reasoning behind their views.

Focus group interviews were organized in schools identified by the Ministry of Education as having attendance rates below 85% (see Table 1). Focus group participants within each school did not exceed 12 adults. In order to simplify the recruitment process, the focus group discussions took place on the grounds of the schools, which were easily accessible by the relevant community members. Most, if not all, of these schools were located in rural communities that were ranked low on the socio-economic scale; therefore, location of participants near their homes or workplace was very critical in the research design.

**Table 1. Sample of Schools**

<b>Regions</b>	<b>Number of Schools With High Levels of Student Absenteeism</b>
1	1
2	16
3	5
4	12
5	13
6	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>

Purposive sampling was used in the selection of participants associated with the schools' administration and work environment (principals, chairman, and teachers), while convenience sampling was used for selecting the parents who were members of the school community. The aim of this combination in the adult focus groups was to create synergy; to provide perspectives from a wide range of experiences, insight, and information on the symptoms and, ultimately, root causes of student absenteeism at the primary level.

**Data Collection From Students**

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

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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 Region 6. 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.

Purposive sampling was used to select the students who would participate in the interviews; the students were identified by the schools' administration as having very low attendance rates. The students who participated in the focus groups ranged between the ages of 7 and 12. Most of these students were in Grades 3, 4, or 6. Each focus group had 8 to 10 students participating in the interviews, and two research assistants who were interviewers assigned to each of the two parishes.

### **Developing Interview Schedules**

The research assistants carried out interviews using semi-structured interview schedules that were developed to ascertain participants' views on the major causes of student absenteeism at the primary level. Though an interview schedule was used as a guide in the focus group interviews, research assistants were encouraged to ask additional probing questions to elicit additional information in the case of incomplete or vague answers. There were two sets of interview schedules: one for adults and one for students.

The development of interview schedules was guided by the following questions:

- Who are these participants (children, adults, educated, uneducated)?
- Where and why are students continually absent from school?
- What are the major factors which contribute to student absenteeism and why?
- What are the school factors which may have impacted on student absenteeism?
- What are the community factors which may have impacted on student absenteeism?
- What are the family factors which may have impacted on student absenteeism?
- What are the students' factors which may have impacted on student absenteeism?

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The guides for the interview schedule were informed by the literature and preliminary discussions in the communities. The interviews are presented in the language the participants used during the focus group sessions, that is, Jamaican Creole.

#### **Data Analysis Techniques**

A mixed methods approach was used to analyse the focus group data. The analysis represents data from 71 schools. Data were analysed using Root Cause Analysis (RCA) techniques.

The concurrent strategy of quantifying qualitative data was utilised in analysing the data. Therefore, selected statistical techniques were used to analyse and identify the root causes of student absenteeism at the primary educational level. The quantification of qualitative data enabled the comparison of quantitative and qualitative results.

Root cause is the “deepest underlying cause or causes, of positive or negative symptoms within any process that, if dissolved, would result in the elimination, or substantial reduction, of the symptom” (Preuss, 2003, p. 3). RCA is a problem-solving process that seeks to locate the ultimate cause or 80/20 rule, known as the Pareto Principle, behind students' absenteeism at the primary level. The 80/20 rule means that in nearly all cases, a few (20%) are vital and many (80%) are trivial (The Pareto Principle, 2008). The Pareto Diagram (see Figure 2) is used to determine which characteristics are the major contributors in a process. The diagram was constructed by ranking the data according to frequency of occurrence and plotting the bars in descending order.

The data analysis procedure was carried out as follows:

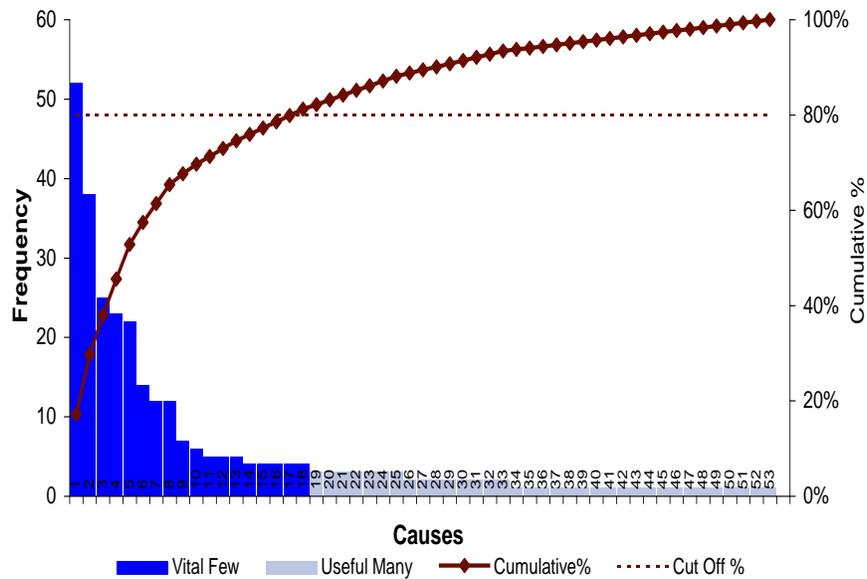
1. All the factors identified in the focus groups were listed.
2. A frequency of occurrence table for each factor was developed.
3. The Pareto Principle was applied to identify the vital causes of absenteeism.
4. Content analysis of the responses from focus group interviews resulted in the identification of four key factors. This information was used to produce Figures 2, 3, and 4.

#### **Analysis of Adults' Interviews**

The Pareto Principle states that most effects, often 80%, stem from 20% of causes. A healthy approach to Root Cause Analysis, therefore, is to attack these 20% issues, often labelled as “the vital few.” The main purpose of the Pareto chart is to display this skewed distribution graphically. The chart (see Figure 2) shows the causes of a problem

sorted by their degree of seriousness, expressed as a frequency of occurrence. The X axis represents the causes and the Y axis to the left represents frequency of occurrence of these causes, while the Y axis to the right gives the Pareto principle, which is the cumulative percentage.

The Pareto chart separates the vital few from the useful many (see Figure 2); 18 causes of student absenteeism cover 81% of the total frequency of occurrence of the 53 causes of student absenteeism. The 10 top causes of absenteeism out of the 18 vital few were selected for presentation in Table 2.



**The first 18 Causes cover 81.19% of the Total Frequency**

Figure 2. Root causes of student absenteeism.

Based on the focus group interviews, adults at approximately 65 schools (92%) complained that financial constraints affected their ability to provide lunch money and bus fare. Sometimes children went to school without breakfast and lunch money. The financial problems were further exacerbated by poor transportation facilities in the areas. For example, at Bo All Age, participants complained that transportation from the community in which they live to the school is extremely difficult. The taxi fare is J\$40 each way and parents complained that they could not afford it. According to the parents, the children have to walk 9 miles to

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and from school. This they think is very difficult for the children. Many parents do not think that children should be walking such long distances.

**Table 2. Ten Top Causes of Absenteeism & Decoding X-Axis in Figures 2 & 3**

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Causes of Absenteeism</b>
1	Financial constraints (high unemployment rate): influence ability to find bus fare and lunch money
2	Little or no value placed on education
3	"Friday mentality" that students don't have to go to school on Fridays
4	Child labour: Thursday & Friday
5	Weather conditions
6	Lack of parental control
7	Chronic sickness (asthma attack)
8	Students have to stay home and take care of siblings
9	Indiscipline
10	Severe water problems

Approximately 45 schools (63%) indicated that parents and the communities did not place much value on education. This is clearly supported in the data as there was recurring evidence of parents keeping their children home on Thursdays and Fridays to work on their subsistence farms and to sell farm products in the market. Also, older children at the primary level are kept from school to care for their siblings while parents go to work. The lack of value for education is further compounded by the young age of some parents in the community.

Student absenteeism needs to be recognized as a symptom of something that is affecting a student's life. When a school is developing strategies for eliminating absenteeism and improving attendance it is very important to have a detailed understanding of the different causal factors affecting absenteeism in the school. The following key causal factors have been identified: parental factors, school factors, student factors, and community factors.

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All 369 responses from the adults' interviews were categorized using one of these factors. There are at least five subsidiary factors for each key causal factor (see Figure 3). The subsidiary factors presented in Figure 3 were selected based on frequency of occurrence.

### **Analysis of Students' Interviews**

The main factors that evolved from the students' interviews are presented in Figure 4. The following key causal factors have been identified: parental factors, school factors, student factors, and community factors. Responses from the focus group interviews with the students were categorized using one of these factors. Each key causal factor was broken down into subsidiary factors (see Figure 4). The causal factors and relevant subsidiary factors in Figure 4 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

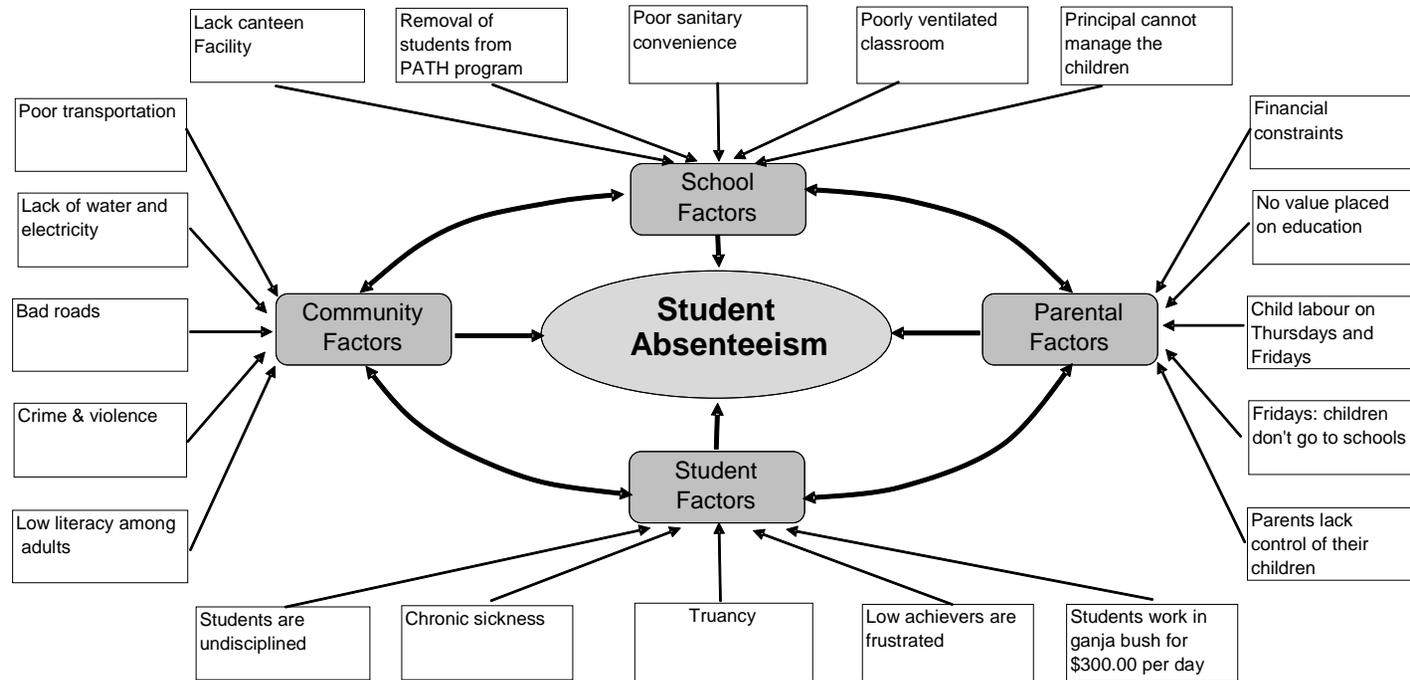
***Student factors:*** Truancy, student indiscipline, and illness

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

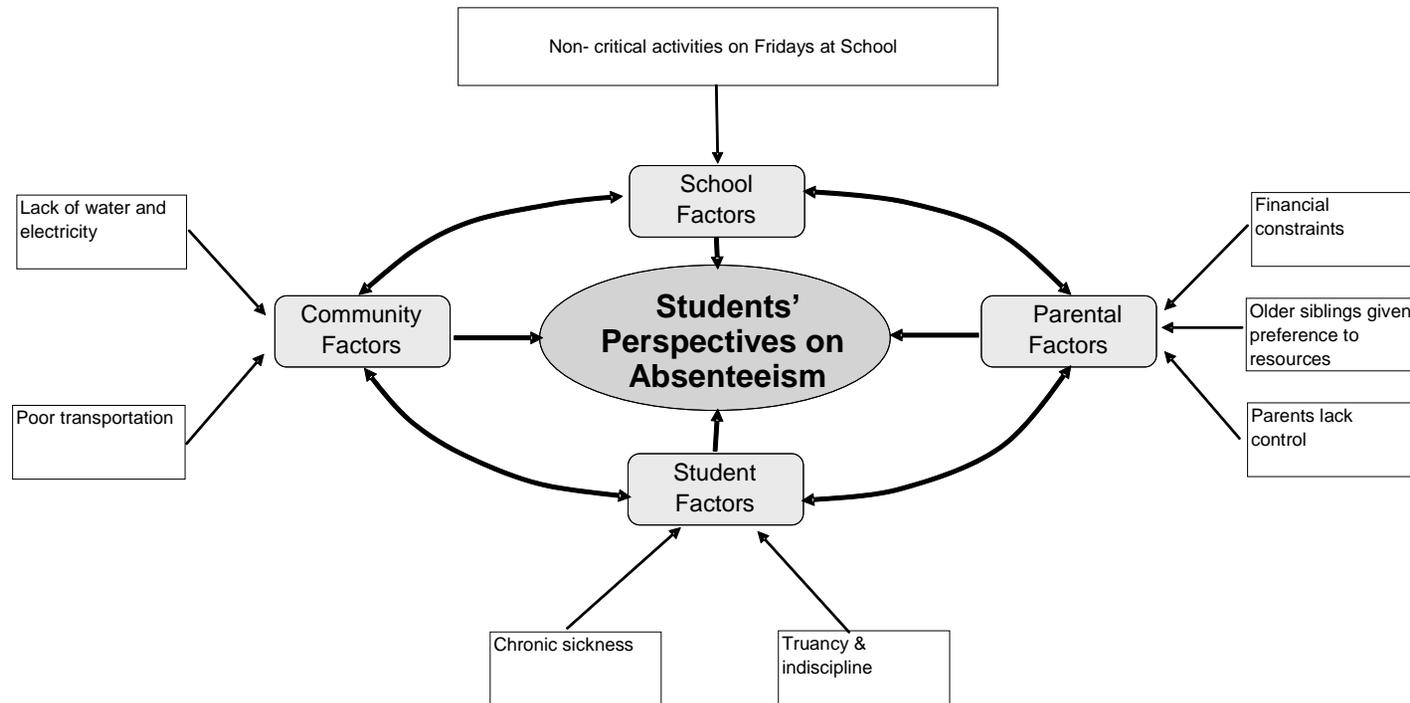
***School factors:*** Non-critical activities on Fridays at the schools

#### ***Parental factors***

Parental factors are those issues that impact on student absenteeism which are within the control of the parents. Also, society holds the parents responsible for providing sufficient finances, discipline, and education for their children. According to the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959), "the best interests of the child shall be the guiding principle of those responsible for his education and guidance; that responsibility lies in the first place with his parents" (Principle 7). Parents who lack financial resources cannot provide for their children's basic educational needs. The recurring theme in the interviews with children was the lack of financial resources on the part of parents/guardians. The interviews are presented in the language the participants used during the focus group sessions, that is, Jamaican Creole.



*Figure 3.* Analyses of key causal factors.



*Figure 4.* Reasons for students' absenteeism: Root causes.

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Some recurrent indicators of financial constraints are: siblings in high school who were given preference to attend school over the younger children in primary school; inadequate sets of uniform; and the fact that parents on some days simply did not have the necessary funds for their child/children to go to school. The following extracts from the interviews conducted at two schools illustrate the preference given to the child who attends secondary school over the child who attends primary school. Several children indicated that whenever there was scarcity of resources, the child who attended secondary school was sent to school while they (the children at the primary level) had to remain home. Several students from Juan All Age supported this view:

*Interviewer: So when you are absent from school, they are also absent from school?*

*Student: No miss.*

*Interviewer: They go to school?*

*Student: Yes miss.*

*Interviewer: Why do they go to school and you are absent?*

*Student: My aunty sends them and they are bigger than us and when we don't go him a fi go (he will have to go).*

Older siblings were given preference over siblings at the primary level to attend school because parents and students perceived high schools as having more stringent consequences for student absenteeism than the primary schools. A student from Cassius River Primary explained that his parents kept him home and sent his brother at the secondary school instead since his brother was more likely to get suspended from school.

*Student: Miss my breda kyaahn absent (Miss, My brother can't be absent).*

*Interviewer: Your brother kyaahn absent from school, why?*

*Student: Miss him will get suspension.*

*Interviewer: Oh he'll get suspension.*

*Student: Yes miss.*

*Interviewer: So, but you can be absent and you don't get any suspension. So you stay home and your brother go?*

*Student: Yes miss.*

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Students were absent because parents did not have the funds for them to go to school; there was no money for lunch or bus fare. This lack of funds even affected items such as uniforms, which are fairly fixed in cost for the school year. Students from Wood Valley All Age explained that “*some times the parent don’t have any money miss and some time uniform dirty.*”

There were instances when parents lacked control over their children’s behaviour, to the extent that a student from McCook’s All Age confessed that watching TV on Thursdays resulted in him being absent from school on a Friday because he was too tired to get up. Another student from Juan All Age indicated a similar problem of oversleeping in the morning as the reason for being absent from school the following day:

*Student: And sometime mi wake up late miss, no get fi kom (don’t get to come).*

*Interviewer: When you wake up late you don’t come?*

*Student: Miss like all 8:00 or 9.*

### ***Student factors***

Student factors are incidents within the students’ control. For example, truancy is the decision of the child to stay from school without parental knowledge or consent. Illness is also a student factor since it is mainly the student who complains of being sick.

Several students admitted to truancy. These students refer to truancy as “Skulling School”; they are sent to school by their parents or guardians but they do not attend, they detour on their way to school. The students gave the following reasons for “skulling” school:

- Accompanying cousin to see boyfriend (frequency: once)
- Don’t like school (frequency: once)
- Go to bush to cook and smoke (frequency: once)
- Go to the river (frequency: once)
- Play money football (frequency: once)
- Go to game shops (frequency: seven times)

Note that the game shops have the highest frequency. One could extrapolate that these students do not like school and may find it boring. The following excerpt demonstrates student attitude towards school and the contribution of game shops to students’ absenteeism. A student from Herwick All Age gives an example of the activities students are engaged in when in a state of truancy:

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*Student :* Miss, my brother and myself skull school and go to the game shop.

*Interviewer:* You and your brother skull school?

*Student:* Miss he placed a bet that I should go to the game shop.

*Interviewer:* Ok, so when you go to the game shop what you do?

*Student:* Miss, I sit and wait on him.

*Interviewer:* Ok, so how long you stayed at the game shop for, the whole day?

*Student:* No.

*Interviewer:* Until what time?

*Student:* Until his game is finish.

Students who were absent on week days other than Fridays indicated that there were times when they were too ill to attend school. Many complained of being sick with flu or diarrhea, while others simply found school boring. For example, a student from Herwick All Age said, “miss sometimes I don't want to go to school because school is boring; a lot of playing.”

#### ***Community factors***

Community factors are resources that are the responsibility of the local government to make accessible to every member living within a community; such factors are outside of the control of the parent, child, and school. These resources include water and transportation. Water shortage did not seem to be a real issue for students who attended the following schools: Cook All Age, Parks All Age, and Herwick All Age.

Three of the communities had acute water shortage, which impacted on student absenteeism from school; uniforms were dirty, there was no water to bathe or, in some instances, to drink. To compound the water problem in these communities, residents had to purchase water from the water trucks from their already limited financial resources at the cost of J\$150.00. Also there were times when the water trucks did not come to the communities.

There were those students who did not have to purchase water but could obtain water from the standpipe or river. However, even this impacted on students being able to reach school early; sometimes the children were needed at home to “carry water,” while at other times the pipes were not functional.

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### *Transportation*

Several of the students who participated in the focus groups lived within walking distance of the schools. In some schools mixed transportation modes were dominant for students; those who took taxi paid fares ranging from \$20 to \$30 each way. Students from several of the schools complained that the taxis and buses did not like to stop for them in the mornings because they paid the lowest fare; as a result they were late for school most mornings. Depending on what time they arrived at school in the morning they were deemed absent after the register was marked. Students from Cook All Age explained:

*Interviewer: So do you have a problem getting bus to school?*

*Student: Yes miss...*

*Interviewer: Alright let's take it one at a time. What's the problem that you have?*

*Student: Miss like Monday morning.*

*Interviewer: What happens on Monday morning?*

*Student: Miss they're full.*

*Interviewer: They're full, alright.*

*Student: Miss they don't want to stop for us, miss.*

*Interviewer: They don't want to stop for you, alright. You can sit but how much do you pay on the taxi?*

*Student: Miss. Sometime they take \$20.00 from us. And \$60. I pay \$20.*

*Interviewer: So do they often pick you up when you want to come? Or they are just like the bus; they don't want to carry you?*

*Student: Miss, some of the taxis don't take little children they take the high school children instead.*

The wearing of school uniforms was linked to the price that students were charged for transportation by bus and taxi drivers. Students from Juan All Age enlightened the interviewer about the link between wearing uniforms and transportation cost. The students explained that they were charged higher fares when they wore *pretty clothes*. This affected them especially on a Friday when the school would be less stringent about the wearing of uniforms and they would be allowed to supplement their uniforms with pretty clothes.

Many of these students have a limited supply of uniforms for the week; whenever the one or two uniforms are dirty and there is no water and electricity to provide clean uniforms for school, the students have no

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choice but to stay home due to the increased transportation cost that pretty clothes attracts. Transportation cost does exacerbate the financial constraints of the struggling family.

#### ***School factors***

Students reported that they found Friday school either boring or teachers gave too much schoolwork. Students from Mount Rosser All Age complained that they were given too much work on a Friday. Students from several schools complained that Friday was a day of play. In two of the focus groups, 6 out of 10 students indicated that they were absent regularly on a Friday (12 out of a total of 20 students). One student from Herwick All Age explained that his aunt refused to send him to Friday school because she did not perceive the activities as valuable:

*Interviewer: Friday is the last day. So what you don't do much at school on a Friday?*

*Student: No miss, is like .... play.*

*Student: Miss. Sometime my aunt does not send me because it's just play on a Friday, so she says that she don't have any money to waste.*

## **Discussion**

### **Participants' Perspectives on Student Absenteeism**

One has to be cautious when comparing the outcomes of the students' interviews with those of the adults because there are certain issues that were emphasized in the adults' interviews which were not emphasized in the interviews with the students. For example, students were not asked to evaluate the school facilities or the teacher's relationship with parents, whereas adults were asked specific questions concerning these factors. Therefore, the fact that these issues were not outcomes of the students' interview is not an indication that they are non-critical issues.

Despite this, it is important to compare similar issues that were discussed in the interviews with students and adults. When Figure 2 is compared with Figure 3, one can observe that from the students' perspective the parents do not lack an appreciation of the value of education. Based on the analysis of the students' interviews it was clear that the students felt that parents cultivate positive attitudes toward education. The indicators of parents' attitudes toward education were assistance with homework and openness to discussing career choices with their children.

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Most of the students reported that they receive help from parents with their homework. Whenever parents were not able to help or were absent from the home, other members of the family assisted with homework. The outcomes of the analysis of the students' interviews suggested that parents assisted their children by doing examples, by reading through the homework with them, or doing the homework. The following excerpts confirm these findings.

***Herwick All Age***

*Interviewer: Alright, your parents help you with you homework? Your mom or your dad help you when you get homework?*

*Student: Yes miss, all the time.*

***Juan All Age***

*Interviewer: Your parents help you to do your homework?*

*Student: My parents help me miss.*

*Interviewer: Sometimes they help?*

*Student: Yes miss.*

*Interviewer: How do they help, how do they help, how do your parents help you?*

*Student: They show me what to do miss.*

*Interviewer: They show you what to do.*

*Student: Miss and when I don't know the answer they tell me.*

Students from Juan All Age and Rosser Primary explained how their parents helped with homework:

***Juan All Age***

*Interviewer: Sometime you do it at school. How do your parents help you with your homework?*

*Student: Sometime she read it with me.*

***Rosser Primary***

*Interviewer: So who help you with your homework, your mummy? How does she help?*

*Student: She show me.*

Students told the research assistant that other members of the family also gave assistance.

***Herwick All Age***

*Interviewer: You live with who?*

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- Student: My grandmother.*  
*Interviewer: You live with your grandmother?*  
*Student: ...she's old miss.*  
*Interviewer: So you have to work on your own?*  
*Student: Miss my brother help me.*  
*Interviewer: What about you, your parents help you with your home work?*  
*Student: Sometime.*

Parents were open to discussions about their children's career choice and encouraged their children to aim for careers such as nursing, law, medicine, teaching, singing, and hairdressing. Several other career choices came to the fore:

***Cook All Age***

- Interviewer: Now do you talk to your parents about what you want to do when you get older? ...Did they agree with your being a nurse?*  
*Student: Yes miss.*  
*Interviewer: And what they say about it?*  
*Student: Miss they say that, that is good.*  
*Student: Miss they say that they want me to become a doctor.*  
*Interviewer: They want you to become a doctor you, you talk to your parents about what you want to do?*  
*Student: Yes miss.*  
*Interviewer: And what they say about it?*  
*Student: Miss my mother says I must do my best, so that I can achieve...*

Transportation was another point of difference between the outcomes of the interviews with students and adults. In the adult interviews the road conditions and the inadequate number of public transportation vehicles were emphasized. For the students the emphasis was more on public transportation drivers and conductors not wanting to "pick them up" for school because of the low fare primary school children pay. The students also linked their absence from school with the problems that occur when they don't have enough uniforms, or when transportation to school is inadequate.

From the analysis of the students' interviews there was little indication of child labour. Instead, students were for the most part absent

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from school because of financial constraints, engagement with household chores, providing assistance with younger siblings, and watching television. There was little suggestion from the data that students were kept at home to earn money.

The domino effect of the financial constraints is: insufficient number of uniforms, lack of lunch money, and lack of funds for transportation to school. Students felt that it was not important to attend school on Fridays based on the activities that took place. Acute water shortage and poor transportation were prominent in both the interviews of the adults and children (compare Figures 2 and 3).

The causal factors for absenteeism do not find their genesis in the family only, but also in the schools, the communities, and the students; the combination of these factors accentuates absenteeism at the primary school in the rural areas of Jamaica.

### **Conclusion**

The Root Cause Analysis identified four causal factors of student absenteeism:

- **Parental factors:** several of the communities experience high levels of unemployment—this has resulted in parents' inability to find bus fare and lunch money for their children.
- **Student factors:** truancy, students' indiscipline, and illness.
- **Community factors:** lack of water, lack of electricity and poor transportation.
- **School factors:** non-critical activities on Fridays at the schools.

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.

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Parenting programmes among low-income families are crucial in dealing with student absenteeism at the primary level: (a) they are needed to address the values parents place on education in the development of their children (see Figure 3); and (b) they are needed in the school communities to aid parents, especially young parents (in their teens and early twenties), in the development of effective parenting skills, since community members in the adult focus groups indicated that parents were struggling with managing their children's behaviour.

In several of the communities the severe financial constraints were caused by high levels of unemployment among parents (see Figure 2). 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. For example, school administrators from one of the schools that participated in this study joined with Heart (Human Employment and Resource Training) Trust in conducting evening classes for parents who had become unemployed due to the closure of a garment factory in the area. The aim is to assist parents in re-entering the job market and thus increasing their income-earning power and allowing them the financial capacity to provide for their children. In addition, with the help of relevant government agencies, the schools need to propagate 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.

Reid (2003) pointed out that "truancy thrives when students know there is little risk of being caught" (p. 5). This implies that school administrators need to revisit the sanctions meted out for truancy by the schools, and more stringent structures need to be implemented in the schools to identify truants and design early interventions that can address the students' psychological and physiological needs. Several participants in the study indicated that the games shop in the community was a contributing factor to truancy. It is important for the school to work along with community members in eradicating truancy.

One very evident implication from the Root Cause Analysis is that the solution for student absenteeism does not depend only on the education system. The Ministry of Education must 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.

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The students who participated in the study are still in primary school and, as such, are still considered minors/dependent. Their reasons for not going to school are a reflection of the inadequacies of their parents, the community in which they live, and the nation's failure to provide the opportunity for them to fully realize the Ministry of Education's mandate that "each of our children can learn and all of our children must." If appropriate steps are not taken to address the hindrances to quality education for these children and others in similar predicaments, then this mandate becomes a farce.

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