



Prevalence and Correlates of Sickness Presenteeism Among Secondary School Teachers in the Bukedi Region of Eastern Uganda

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ABSTRACT. The efficacy of focusing on education as one of the cornerstones to achieve sustainable development, is reliant on the productivity of teachers to prepare learners adequately with the requisite knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes for their future roles as productive and responsible citizens. However, sickness presenteeism in schools has proven to be a huge challenge for secondary school productivity. As such, this study aimed to establish the prevalence and correlates of sickness presenteeism among secondary school teachers in the Bukedi region in Eastern Uganda. The study, which adopted a qualitative approach and a phenomenological design, involved conducting interviews with secondary school teachers and key informants such as head and deputy head teachers and heads of department from 4 schools to ascertain their views on the prevalence and correlates of sickness presenteeism in their respective schools. A purposive sampling method was used to locate and access the participants, and a thematic analysis was used to analyze the rich qualitative data elicited from semi-structured interviews with the purposively selected participants. The study revealed that most of the teachers engaged in sickness presenteeism, and that moon lighting, egocentrism and heavy workloads were the significant intrapersonal correlates of sickness presenteeism, while under staffing was a

prominent institutional correlate. The teachers also identified poor coping mechanisms as a correlate that endangered their productivity. The study recommends that moonlighting and egocentrism among teachers be minimized, and that an increase in staff and sensitizing school management to the ill-effects of sickness presenteeism be implemented to reduce its prevalence in secondary schools.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the globe, education is recognized as pivotal to addressing inequality in society and to alleviating poverty. However, its success is dependent on the quality of education provided, and the degree of wellness of teachers to execute their tasks diligently, effectively, and efficiently. As a renowned human right (United Nations [UN], 2023; World Bank, 2023) education has garnered substantial recognition as one of the key protagonists of global development. The centrality of education for global development cannot be overstated, since it is recognized as the strongest instrument for poverty reduction, health and wellbeing improvement, gender equity promotion, peace building, and climate change prevention (Spada, Fiore, & Galati, 2023; World Bank, 2023; Xie, Sarntisart, & Uddin, 2023). Additionally, there is evidence that education is the key antecedent for human capital accumulation and growth (Hoai, 2023), especially through skilling (Molina et al., 2023; World Bank, 2023).

However, while access to education serves to promote the development agenda, secondary school education has been identified as the most important phase, since it bridges the transition between primary and higher levels of education. Werner et al., (2022) revealed that for each year of secondary school added, the mortality risk was reduced by 16%, asset ownership increased by 26%, and economic returns increased by 3% for women and 10% for men. That, in part, reinforces the importance of secondary school education, among other levels of education (Sophie, & Molua, 2019), and justifies why it is one of the indicators of Sustainable Development Goal 4, which focuses on the proportion of children and young people who have achieved the minimum proficiency level of numeracy and literacy by the end of secondary school.

At the helm of ensuring the successful delivery of secondary education are secondary school teachers. UNICEF (2020) observed that teachers are the ones tasked with the important role of ensuring that students experience productive learning if effective teaching and learning is to be realized. However, the efficaciousness of secondary school teachers in fostering learning among students depends on their productivity and performance (Utami & Vioeza, 2021). One of the major adversaries to teacher productivity is sickness presenteeism, which is associated with low productivity and performance (Bryan, Bryce & Roberts, 2022; Yoshimoto et al., 2020).

In the early 20th century, scientific management emerged (Taylor, 1911), which led to a managerial focus on augmentation of staff productivity to enhance performance (Murphy & Balzer, 1989). Gradually, performance management became a norm, costing organizations millions of dollars (Elstad & Christophersen, 2017). Among the organizations in which performance measurement became a mainstay in its development are the institutions of learning (Ghaffarian, & Osam, 2021), and this is because the quality of education has been historically considered fundamental in evaluating educational systems and there is long-standing consensus that teacher performance in the classroom has a lot to do with such a quality (Bini & Masserini, 2016; Gómez & Valdés, 2019).

The development of the term sickness presenteeism is credited to Cooper, a professor of psychiatry at Manchester University. He developed the term after observing that staff turned up to work for fear of insecurity, despite being sick (Diane, 2011). Since then, two categories of definitions of sickness presenteeism have been developed (Ishimaru, Mine & Fujino, 2020, p.21), one referring to presenteeism as a situation in which “people, despite complaints and ill health that should prompt rest and absence from work, still turn up at their jobs” (Aronsson, Gustafsson, & Dallner, 2000 p.12). The second definition of sickness presenteeism involves productivity loss due to coming to work while ill, which is predominantly used in American literature (Burton, Conti, Chen, Schultz, & Edington, 1999; Turpin et al., 2004). However, between the two definitions, the former is most widely used, while the latter is used to denote consequences of the practice.

In the context of educational institutions, sickness presenteeism has over a long period been recognized as a human resource challenge, although largely qualitatively, following evidence that the practice (sickness presenteeism) is most common among staff whose line of work involves a lot of interaction with other people. Typical among such staff are teachers, and indeed, teachers have been historically reported to exhibit high levels of presenteeism (Aronsson et al., 2000; Aronsson & Svensson, 1997; Coledam & da Silva, 2020).

Presenteeism is a global work-related problem across all professions, however, according to research conducted by Dudenhöffer et al., (2016) and Ishimaru et al., (2023) the incidence of presenteeism is more pronounced in occupations that focus on caring for or interacting with people in the fields of healthcare and education. While Chambers et al., (2017) indicated that the prevalence of sickness presenteeism was at 88% among healthcare professionals in New Zealand, Jesus et al., (2023) revealed that sickness presenteeism prevalence ranged between 26% and 70.6% across Europe, Asia and United States. Further, Tartari et al. (2020) disclosed an average presenteeism prevalence rate at 58% across Europe, Asia-Pacific, the Americas and Africa. In Egypt, sickness presenteeism among nurses in intensive care units was 100% (Elsherbiny et al., 2022) and in China it was reported at 94.25% among nurses (Shan et al., 2021). Evidence from Ethiopia had

sickness presenteeism at 56.7% (Mekonnen, Tefera, and Melsew, 2018). Despite the high sickness presenteeism rates mentioned above, in North Korea it was at 23.2% (Kim et al., 2020) and at 21.8% (Min, Kang, and Hong, 2021) respectively among nurses in Korean hospitals. For Latvia (Europe) Lakisa et al., (2022) reported the lowest sickness presenteeism at 11% rate. Demographic factors play a vital role in determining sickness presenteeism, for instance scholarly evidence of Yu and Wang (2015); Navarro et al. (2018) and Allemann et al. (2019) all of whom indicated that younger workers had a higher prevalence of sickness presenteeism compared to older ones. In terms of gender, Mossad et al. (2017); Cho et al. (2016); De Perio et al. (2014) and Goncalves et al. (2022) all indicated that female workers were more likely to show presenteeism compared to their male counterparts. The evidence of Johansen et al. (2014) and Braveman and Gottlieb (2014) disclosed that highly educated employees believe that they are irreplaceable at work, a mentality that exposes them to sickness presentism. Concerning marital status, divorced individuals exhibited the highest levels of presenteeism compared to married and singles (Johansen et al., 2014), also presenteeism was higher among married employees with young children compared to single employees (Aazami et al., 2015). In addition, personal traits like fear of job-loss (Allemann et al., 2019), strong job attachment (Karanika-Murray & Cooper, 2018), newly acquired job (Park et al., 2020), Egocentrism (Polezhaeva, & Gabova, 2020), strong work ethic and financial stress (Chiu et al., 2017) were strong predictors of sickness presenteeism.

Institutional characteristics are perhaps the most important correlates of sickness presenteeism across all professions. A comprehensive review by Miraglia & Johns (2016) disclosed a positive correlation of presenteeism with several institutional variables notable; workload, time demands, and work hours. Nordenmark et al., (2019) confirmed the effect of time-demand and long work hour policies on presenteeism among staff in Northwestern Europe. Such policies are usually implemented in institutions with staff shortages, which therefore require that a given staff member works long hours, without any day of default. Tianan et al. (2019) revealed that a negative and positive supervisor behavior was associated with employees' job-stress-related presenteeism. The evidence of Dudenhofer (2016) indicated that presenteeism among teachers was influenced by less support from supervisors, inappropriate administration efforts, and inappropriate recognition of performance by the school administration. Furthermore, Kinman and Wray (2018) found that factors like limited entitlement to sick pay, strict absence of management policies, job insecurity, availability of replacement, competitive workplace culture, and high levels of work-related stress and time demands, expressively contributed to sickness presenteeism. Further scholarly evidence confirmed that employees' choice to work while ill was informed by the fact that they had no paid sick leave policy at their workplace (Rebmann et al., 2016).

According to the transactional model of stress and coping, people employ various coping strategies to cope with stressful situations like sickness. In this regard Lazarus & Folkman (1984) aver that any person who is forced to face a stressful situation can adapt either by confronting the root cause of stress or by avoiding the stressors. According to Ahmed et al., (2021), some people cope with stressful situations by not confronting the problem directly, but by sidelining it and merely going about their normal business (Sonja et al., 2022). Becoming more religious has been frequently reported to be a coping strategy adopted by people with illness (Folayan et al., 2016 and Mohammed et al., 2021), in part, due to concerns about death. Additionally, Alharbi et al., (2019) reported that employees coped with presenteeism through a religious belief and in some cases through substance abuse. Evidence from a range of scholarly articles has revealed that sharing stressful and challenging moments with friends (Lades et al., 2020), other people (Bhandari et al. 2021), colleagues in the workplace or with peers (Sun et al., 2020) are some of the predominant coping mechanisms that employees use to deal with sickness presenteeism. Additionally, Adom et al. (2021) also reported that some people cope up with stress by isolating themselves.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

For over a decade, the district education offices across the region of Bukedi (comprising seven districts) in Eastern Uganda have been grappling with the issue of absenteeism among secondary school teachers, which has now been reduced to less than 27% (UNICEF 2020). However, the administrative and human resource dilemma that has emerged as a major impediment to academic performance in the entire region is currently sickness presenteeism among the same secondary school teachers. Although the exact prevalence of sickness presenteeism among secondary school teachers in the region is not documented, it has been reported to be a widespread practice currently, given that there has been a reduction in absenteeism among the said staff (Odoi, 2020). In government aided secondary schools within the region, it is anecdotally reported that up to 40% of the teachers may be practicing presenteeism (both sickness and non-work related) for one reason or another. Secondly, secondary school teachers in the region have been known to report to work when sick, only to miss out on the lessons they ought to be conducting.

What is known is that teacher sickness presenteeism is a reality in the Bukedi region, although it has never been quantified definitively. Still, the prevalence and correlates of the human resource challenge have never been studied in the context of the Bukedi region, which is a significant research gap in the field of human resource management. Since presenteeism is as problematic as absenteeism on organizational productivity, the effects of sickness presenteeism in the Bukedi region could, in part, be responsible for the poor academic performance in the region in its entirety. For instance, the region has been registering a declining

trend of first grades achieved among ordinary level candidates over the years, despite a significant reduction in teacher absenteeism, and is the worst performing region in the country (MOES, 2020). With these issues in mind, this study aimed to assess the prevalence and correlates of sickness presenteeism among teachers in secondary schools in the Bukedi region of Eastern Uganda and how this challenge could be addressed.

METHODS

A qualitative approach incorporating a phenomenological design was adopted for the purposes of this study. The aim of qualitative research is to comprehend how individuals perceive their surroundings by providing rich meaning and insights generated by the accumulated data (Chinyere & Eze Val, 2023). Furthermore, the mode of qualitative inquiry represented by the phenomenological research design process focused on understanding the essence of a phenomenon, which in this case was sickness presenteeism, from the perspectives of various participants, namely teachers and school administrators (Christensen, Johnstone & Turner, 2020). Hence, a key feature of the study was on the direct experiences of the participants as meaning-making agents of sickness presenteeism in their daily lives (Fossey, et.al., 2007). The data collection process involved conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers and key informants such as head and deputy head teachers, and heads of department. The interviews aimed at exploring the respondents' views on their experiences with sickness presenteeism as it manifested within their respective schools. Since the interview schedule created opportunities for further probing, the responses received from the participants were rich and insightful. The key informants were able to provide additional information relating to how sickness presenteeism occurred within their own contexts and the reasons for such manifestations.

Population

In this study, the population included secondary school teachers in the Bukedi region of Eastern Uganda and key informants such as head and deputy head teachers at schools, and heads of departments, since these key informants would also be able to provide insights into presenteeism given that they have experiences working with teachers who attend school while ill. The selection of teachers was based on the proviso that only teachers who had been in those positions within the regional education system for at least 12 months preceding the study were considered. This inclusion criterion was premised on the fact that the assessment of sickness presenteeism could only be validly executed in a retrospective manner over the previous 12 months. From the population mentioned above, a sample comprising 15 teachers, 10 head teachers, 7 deputy head teachers, and 4 heads of departments were included. The inclusion of the key informants was significant as they provided additional insights into the

prevalence of sickness presenteeism with a special focus on the intrapersonal and institutional correlates, which was the focus of this study.

Data Analysis

The accumulated data were analyzed according to themes by the application of Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for analyzing qualitative data which included the following procedures: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) reading throughout the transcripts to immerse oneself in the data, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report. The application of this process led to the identification of a range of common themes that contributed to enhanced meaning and understanding of sickness presenteeism, with a specific focus on the prevalence and correlates of sickness presenteeism within secondary school contexts in the Bukedi region of Eastern Uganda.

RESULTS

The results are discussed in terms of the prevalence of sickness presenteeism within secondary school contexts in Uganda, and the various correlates associated with the practice based on the accumulated data from in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Prevalence of sickness presenteeism

Most of the secondary school teachers interviewed, indicated that they reported to work while sick or feeling ill within the past 12 months prior to participating in this study. The above finding is strongly reinforced with several revelations from the key informants' study respondents who indicated that sickness presenteeism is a phenomenon that teachers cannot just walk away from. In this regard one of the respondents noted that:

"I have personally engaged in sickness presenteeism before, due to unavoidable circumstances, and so have other colleagues of mine in this school, so I can say that sickness presenteeism is a common occurrence among teachers in this school." (Deputy Head Teacher, Male, private school)

Furthermore, the key informants indicated that sickness presenteeism is a common occurrence among the teachers. The school administrations in no way tolerate sickness presenteeism among its staff members, but the situations that teachers are placed in leads to its occurrence. One of the head teachers noted that:

"Sickness presenteeism is a common feature among teachers in this school, not that because we as the administration condone, but because teachers themselves engage in it, upon their own discretion". (Head Teacher, Male, government school)

In affirmation of the occurrences and prevalence of sickness presenteeism as stated above, another key informant reiterated as follows:

“It is common, that is what I can say, very common actually, may be because this is a private secondary school where enumerates are given based on attendance at work, unlike government schools where one’s emoluments are guaranteed regardless of whether they absent themselves or not”. (Deputy Head Teacher, Female, private school)

Other than the school administrators, the teachers themselves confirmed the common practice of sickness presenteeism. One of the secondary school teachers while reaffirming the common indication of other participants said that:

“I and other teachers here engaged in sickness presenteeism before, that is what I believe; okay, personally I have engaged in sickness presenteeism, quite frequently. Sometimes as a teacher, sickness presenteeism can become a norm, especially if you have a chronic illness or if the illness you have is very minor, like flue”. (Government secondary school, male)

Based on the findings highlighted above there is an overwhelming position that sickness presenteeism is prevalent among teachers in schools in the Bukedi region of Eastern Uganda.

Intrapersonal correlates

Sickness presenteeism is a universal concern that affects not only the teaching profession, but all other disciplines, especially those involving direct human service. It must be emphasized that there are many factors that contribute towards sickness presenteeism among employees, teachers inclusive, and one of the most notable factors is intrapersonal correlates. Two of the key intrapersonal correlates that emerged from the findings focused on moonlighting and teacher egocentrism.

Egocentrism

Egocentrism or self-centeredness, that is, the feeling that one is the only person who can teach what they teach at a given school, was reported to be an important driver of sickness presenteeism among secondary school teachers in the Bukedi sub region. This was mentioned by most staff members and key informants as well.

“There are times when some teachers feel like they are the ones who are supposed to taken on some tasks, and no one else but them. Sometimes it is because of ego, or because there is shortage of teachers in a given school, to take on a given task. In both cases, which apply to most of use secondary school teachers, sickness presenteeism becomes more likely”. (Participant 9, private secondary school, Female)

The same was reiterated by another teacher, who happened to be in support of egocentrism, and illustrated that in their school, they had four biology teachers, teaching at different levels of secondary school, and that when one falls, they do

not delegate their load to another biology teacher, meaning that they inevitably have to report to school and teach, regardless of the sickness.

“I think one of the most important antecedents of sickness presenteeism is this feeling that one is the only persons who can do what they do like they want to do it. That perception, despite being considered negative, is sometimes a positive one actually. For instance, we have four biology teachers here, some for O-level, and others for A-level (two of them), each of which apparently picked some topics to teach. So, when one of them gets sick, they never feel like delegating their chosen areas of teaching to another teacher, and so, they push themselves to still come to school to teach”. (Participant 13, private secondary school, male)

In support of egocentrism being one of the intrapersonal drivers of sickness presenteeism, most of the key informants were also of the view that some teachers had the feeling that they were the only ones that could take on a particular task at their workplaces, and rightly so. They were of the view that due to understaffing, some teachers certainly felt like they were the only ones that could do what they were supposed to do at school, and hence turned up for duty even when sick.

“One of the most important drivers of sickness presenteeism is understaffing, which at times leaves available teachers (filled positions) as the ones who have to execute their roles, as prescribed to them by the administration. Thus, that creates this feeling that they are the only ones available who can carry out their duties, which is usually true. For such people, sickness presenteeism of course remains the only option”. (Participant 19, Government secondary school, female)

Hence egocentrism aligned to understaffing has a significant influence on sickness presenteeism, especially since teachers believe that if they are not present, no-one else will be able to teach their subject.

Moonlighting

Besides egocentrism, the other much talked about antecedent of sickness presenteeism was having more than one place of work, also known as moonlighting. Both in-depth and key informant interviewees noted that teachers who taught in two schools or those that had other personal businesses they attended to, other than teaching, were the ones that had higher tendencies of coming to work while sick.

“We are in a government school, but to make ends meet, some of us teach in two or even three different schools, and although we do that, it is very stressing and fatiguing to the extent of making one sick. But then, if you get overworking-related sickness you can’t risk absenting yourself from the official school you are attached to”. (Participant 20, Government secondary school, female)

One of the in-depth interviewee participants categorically stated that teachers who moonlight were more likely to report to school when sick, but that in case the teacher taught in two schools, they most likely absented themselves from the second school they taught in and attended the main school they are attached to.

“I think one of the most common drivers of sickness presenteeism, in my opinion, is moonlighting; you see, people who moonlight are more likely to get sick, and after getting sick, they are less likely to absent themselves from their official school, but more likely to absent themselves from the other schools they moonlight in or secondary occupations they have, besides teaching”. (Participant 18, private secondary school, male)

Key informants expressed the same sentiments, with all of them mentioning that moonlighting was a common feature among teachers who engaged in sickness presenteeism. One of them mentioned that he was aware of teachers who engaged in moonlighting, adding that they are the ones who engaged in sickness presenteeism.

“Moonlighting it is, I have teachers here who I know that engage in moonlighting; they are the ones that engage in sickness presenteeism more than their non-moonlighting counterparts, and the thing with them is that they rather dodge duty in their secondary occupations, that they main ones like in this school. I think that is why they engage in sickness presenteeism more”. (Participant 3, Head of Department, Male)

The same view was shared by another key informant, who noted that the moonlighting secondary school teachers he knew of, were the ones that actually engaged in sickness presenteeism, putting the onus of finding out the reasons why that was the case, on the principal investigator.

“I also have secondary school teachers who have other businesses they conduct, besides teaching in this school, and I have noticed that they are the one that engage in sickness presenteeism, more. You are here to conduct the study, so, please find out why they exhibit such a characteristic, than teachers who do not moonlight.” (Participant 7, Head Teacher, Female)

From the findings highlighted above, it emerged that while secondary school teachers and administrators of the sampled schools provided a number of drivers of sickness presenteeism at such schools, two of these were considered to be the main antecedents, by the majority of the teachers and key informants, namely egocentrism and moonlighting.

Institutional correlates

The role of institutional factors in perpetuating sickness presenteeism among the teachers cannot be ignored. According to some participants teachers end up at their places of work while sick due to pressure and threats from the school

administration. Due to the high workload demands from schools, one of the teachers referred to sickness presenteeism as a necessary evil, by stating that:

“. . . sickness presenteeism can be a necessary evil . . . especially for teachers with a higher workload like those who teach candidate classes, implying that missing a day of work at the school, can translate into even a higher workload.” (Participant 3, Government secondary school, male)

Another respondent observed that such pressure to complete syllabi made teachers reconsider sickness absenteeism and forced them to work:

“Workload definitely matters a lot, and I think is among the top five reasons why teachers come to work even when they are sick. We have these targets of finishing syllabi on time, and doing so requires you do not absent yourself at any one time.” (Participant 20, Government secondary school, female)

In addition to the above, in-depth participants voiced the institutional challenge associated with low to moderate staffing levels. This implies that even when a teacher is sick, he/she must report for duty because there is no back up or support personnel. This was further substantiated by one of the teachers as follows:

“A times there is no teachers to cover up missed lesson due to sickness, in such cases, sickness presenteeism becomes inevitable, especially for those teaching candidate classes.” (Participant 11, private secondary school, male)

The above situation is exacerbated since most schools impose penalties which decrees that if any teacher absents him/herself from work he/she will be punished with reduced wages and could also be discharged from work.

Coping mechanisms

Coping mechanisms adopted by secondary school teachers in the Bukedi region, in the event of sickness and non-work related presenteeism included: napping during free periods, dodging some periods and delegating one of the students to dictate notes to their peers in class.

Napping during free periods

Almost all teachers that participated in the in in-depth interviews reported that they coped with sickness presenteeism by sleeping through their free periods. Some went to the extent of reporting that they slept whenever they got the chance to do so, for as long as they were not meant to conduct any lesson.

“I sleep whenever I get the chance to do so, like when I have not class to conduct, I take a break and nap, until I have one scheduled, then I try to conduct that, but generally I sleep through most periods.” (Participant 20, Government secondary school, Female)

There were other teachers, with similar sentiments, who reported that they slept through some lessons, only if the disease they reported to school with was debilitating and not bearable:

“I cope a lot by sleeping through some of the lessons, whether mine or when I am free, going by the time- table set. I do that a lot when I have an illness that is really debilitating but bearable, like malaria or heavy flue or a migraine.” (Participant 17, Private secondary school, male)

For some, their decision to sleep through a free lesson depended on the severity of the disease; when severe, then they slept entirely but when the illness wasn't that severe, they tried to go to class, but still get some time to sleep, when they had a free lesson.

“Well, for me it depends on the kind of illness I have at the time, if it is really intense, then I try my level best to go to class, conduct the lesson, and then get some time during the free lesson to simply have some rest and sleep. I do that for all free lessons at least”. (Female, Government, participant 1)

Some opined that they coped by sleeping through their free periods, so they could rejuvenate and be in position to conduct their scheduled forthcoming lessons. One of them mentioned that:

“Sleeping, but during free periods or when I do not have any lesson to conduct in any of the classes, it helps me rejuvenate a bit so that I can be in better shape to conduct any forthcoming lessons I may be having for the day, that is how I cope with sickness presenteeism.” (Participant 6, Private Secondary school, male)

The practice of sleeping through free lessons was also confirmed by all key informants, although for them, coping was largely done by sleeping throughout the entire day.

“I see them, and indeed we have a number of them who insist on coming to school, only to end up sleeping in the staff room almost for the entire day, I think that is how most of them cope.” (Participant 7, Head of Department)

As confirmation, one of the key informants occupying the position of a deputy head teacher provided an analogy indicating that if one wanted to know if a teacher came to school when sick they just had to go to the staff room, since they would be sleeping.

“..... Ha, they sleep a lot, actually, if you want to know that a teacher came to school when sick, you just have to go to the staff room, you will find them sleeping during a time when they have no lesson to conduct. But, when they have lessons, they try to conduct them.” (Participant 9, Deputy Head Teacher)

From the exploration of the coping mechanism that emerged first, that is, napping during periods, sleeping was a common coping strategy adopted by most of the teachers, making it a precedent coping strategy, worth being considered as significant.

Dodging some periods

While some of the teachers reported they persevered and taught their lessons, or at least taught for a fraction of the time, others reported that they coped with the illness at work by simply dodging lessons:

“I actually forfeit on some of the periods I have to attend, when I feel sick, it becomes unavoidable because you cannot really stand in front of a class and teach them for 60 or 120 minutes when your health is not in shape.”
(Participant 1, government secondary school, Female)

One of the teachers, who confessed that he/she dodged lessons sometimes, also added that he/she at least provided the students with notes to ensure that they do not miss out even when the teacher was sick:

“I cope by dodging sometimes, but at least I make sure that I provide the students with , and they copy them, just to ensure that they do not miss out on the lesson”. (Participant 7, Private secondary school, Female)

Similar to what the teachers had reported, key informants were also of the view that some of their teachers coped with the illness at work by simply dodging lessons:

“It is true, some cope by dodging the lessons, out rightly, even when they are available on the school premises, they just happen to lounge around the staff room, sleeping” (Participant 18, Head Teacher, Female)

In agreement with the opinion of teachers in some secondary schools, two of the key informants also noted that teacher absenteeism in private schools was not tolerated, and that consequently, some of the teachers report while sick and still dodge lessons.

“This being a private school, absenteeism is really considered to be criminal, and so, even in sickness, some teachers still come to school, and dodge lessons in real-time... they become absent while present.”
(Participant 10, Deputy head Teacher, Female)

While coping by dodging lessons emerged from the exploration of coping mechanisms in the event of sickness presenteeism, it was not an important coping mechanism, as it was mentioned by only a few teachers.

Delegating one of the students to dictate notes to peers

Perhaps one of the most popular coping strategies, in the face of sickness presenteeism, was the delegation of students or a student to dictate notes to their peers in class, while the presentee teacher took a break in the staff room. This was mentioned by almost all the teachers interviewed during the exploration of sickness presenteeism. One of them mentioned that he gave a student delegate notes, while he stayed in the staff room, and only went to class later on after feeling better, to render some explanations to his students, on a later date.

“In many cases when I have to go school when sick, I have had to stay in the staff room, give the students notes to dictate to themselves, and I come in later when I have recovered, to explain the notes to them”. (Participant 8, Private secondary school, Female)

Another teacher took the delegation of a student, a notch higher, by first endeavoring to go to class first, tell the students that she is sick, and therefore not feeling well, introduce the topic of the day, and then request them to write notes to be dictated by a fellow student, to be explained on a later date.

“I give the students my notebook; I come to the class, introduce the topic of the day, and tell them that I am not feeling well, and then I request them to carry on with copying the notes that I then explain later on when I get well”. (Participant 19, government secondary school, Female)

The same was done by another teacher in a private secondary school, who apparently delegated the dictating responsibility when sick, but not the teaching responsibility, which he took up later when healed.

“For me it is simply to delegate the responsibility of dictating notes, but not the teaching responsibility, to one of the students I trust can dictate and is charismatic enough. By doing that, I get assurance that at least the entire lesson is not lost, because I always find time to explain the notes, when I recover” (Participant 8, Private secondary school, Female).

One of the teachers was also innovative in coping with sickness presenteeism by way of delegating students to dictate notes. He said that he chose to sit in the classroom, while they delegated one of the students to dictate the notes they gave to the class. He, however, went ahead to disclaim that in case the sickness he had turned severe, he moved out of the class.

“I sometimes choose to sit in the same classroom where I am scheduled to have a lesson, and then delegate one of the students to read out the notes on my behalf, as I guide accordingly. That is how I cope with sickness presenteeism, but in case the disease intensifies in severity, I move out of the class.” (Participant 6, Private secondary school, Male).

The delegation of dictation of notes to one of the students was further confirmed by most key informants, who reiterated that teachers who did so, found time at a later date to explain the notes, once they recovered from their illness.

“It is also a common practice for teachers who come to work when sick, to just give notes to one of the students in the class so that they can dictate to their colleagues, and the teacher gets time on a later date when feeling better to explain the notes.” (Participant 11, Head Teacher, Female).

A head teacher also had this to say, still re-echoing on the coping strategy of giving notes to students to dictate, once they perceive that they will not be as productive in class, due to the prevailing illness they have.

“For some teachers who feel really sick and yet report for duty, giving notes to their students becomes one of the ways through which they cope with the illness. Of course, that would not be considered normal because we expect the teacher to always attend their lessons and not delegate a student to fill their shoes, but at times the teacher may not be able to be as productive in the class, when sick, and they choose to provide notes”. (Participant 8, Head Teacher, Female)

While delegating students to dictate notes was a very popular coping mechanism adopted by the secondary school teachers that at least endeavors to mitigate productivity loss that could occur due to sickness absence, it is a form of emotion-focused coping, as it does not address the actual stressor, directly.

DISCUSSION

This section discusses key findings that emerged from this study. Sickness presenteeism is a universal concern that affects not only the teaching profession, but all other disciplines especially those involving direct human service. It must be emphasized, however, that many factors contribute to sickness presenteeism among employees which include intrapersonal and institutional correlates.

The study revealed a rampant practice of moonlighting among secondary school teachers in the Bukedi region of Eastern Uganda. This finding is consistent with that of Peng, Wang & Wang (2021) and Prasad, Vaidya & Rani (2023) in which moonlighting was identified as one of the main causes for an increase in work engagement, a factor that necessitates presenteeism. Further, Laetitia, Rispel & Duane (2015) reiterated that with moonlighting, one becomes more inclined to engaging in sickness presenteeism due to taking on additional jobs. Several studies have also linked moonlighting to employee burn out and fatigue (Babamiri et al., 2022; Stufano, Koku, & Vimercati, 2022; Vimercati et al., 2021). Adversely burnout is a known cause of mental health morbidity which in turn worsens presenteeism among workers.

The study's findings revealed that egocentrism is one of the contributory factors to sickness presenteeism among teachers in secondary schools. The study's respondents tended to be protective over the nature of their work at school by proclaiming at times that they did not believe that someone else would be able to do the work. This finding is consistent with several other studies such as those of Al Nuhait et al., (2017), Brborovic & Brborovic (2017), Chiu et al., (2017) and Polezhaeva & Gabova (2020) all of which highlighted the belief of workers that none of their colleagues would be able to fill in for them, when they were absent from work. Egocentrism sets a very dangerous precedent to the extent that professional and experienced teachers decline to mentor their colleagues in the event of them not being available to perform their work.

The role of institutional factors in perpetuating sickness presenteeism among the teachers cannot be overlooked. The findings from the in-depth interviews disclosed that it was a common practice for teachers to report at their places of work while sick due to work related pressure. The pressure to complete syllabi made teachers engage in sickness absenteeism. The above finding is consistent with that of Lewis (2020) and Kabanga & Mulauzi, (2020) where they observed that when teachers who were under pressure to teach pupils while they were unwell, impaired teaching and learning processes thereby leading to poor academic performance among learners. Furthermore, the study revealed that teachers engaged predominantly in sickness presenteeism due to poor staffing at the schools. The above finding is consistent with the findings from several other studies (Al Nuhait et al., 2017; Brborovic & Brborovic, 2017; Chiu et al., 2017; Kaldjian et al., 2019; Marklund et al., 2021; Navarro et al., 2018) in which sickness presenteeism was observed to be higher among institutions with moderate to poor staffing levels. Presenteeism is occasioned because the absence of a single teaching staff member in the school, creates a huge vacuum resulting in high workloads that have to be spread across the remaining staff members. In essence, high staffing levels can reduce the incidence of sickness presenteeism, since the sick teachers will be assured that their colleagues are present to perform their duties.

Despite the challenges experienced by presentee teachers, they indicated that they managed to deal with their undesirable plight in various ways. Nearly all teachers that participated in the in-depth interviews reported that they coped with sickness presenteeism by sleeping through their free periods. This finding is consistent with the studies of Takano et al., (2021) and Haider et al., (2024) in which teachers disclosed that their judgment to sleep through a free lesson depended on the severity of the disease they had. Whereas such decisions may demonstrate willingness to work, such efforts do not yield much fruit as they are associated with adverse effects on the teachers and students alike. Additionally, and in a rather unfortunate scenario, some teachers persevered with the ill health situations and taught their lessons, while others reported that they simply dodged lesson times. Such findings are consistent with that of Baker et al., (2021) in

which the coping mechanisms adopted by the teachers were identified as being inappropriate, since none of them resulted in supporting the sick teachers to recover properly.

If sickness presenteeism is to be averted in secondary schools in the Bukedi region of Eastern Uganda, it is incumbent on the Department of Education, departmental officials, heads of schools and school management teams, amongst others, to come to grips with its correlates and to work collaboratively to curb its impact on teaching and learning and on the wellbeing of presentee teachers. The creation of support teams within schools with a particular focus on sickness presenteeism will go a long way to supporting staff to come to terms with this malady, and to realize that there are others at work who are concerned about their wellbeing, and who are prepared to support them in their time of need, especially when they are unable to execute their tasks efficiently due to illness.

CONCLUSION

The evidence from the qualitative data in this study confirms the prevalence of sickness presenteeism among secondary school teachers in the Bukedi region of Eastern Uganda. The findings indicated that intrapersonal correlates such as the practice of moonlighting, which increases work engagements and egocentrism which sets a dangerous professional precedent are correlates that have an influence on presenteeism. Additionally, institutional correlates like institutional pressure related to completing syllabi and under staffing also contribute significantly to sickness presenteeism.

The negative influence of presenteeism among teachers cannot be overlooked since the effects are felt both in the short and long term. In the short term, for instance, the teaching services rendered by the already under-staffed teachers will have a negative impact on the quality of teaching and learning. Secondly, the teachers presented an improper way of coping with, or dealing with sickness presenteeism despite having infectious diseases that could easily spread to fellow teachers or even the students. Thirdly, working while sick negatively affects the recovery process of the teachers, thus exacerbating their illness.

In view of the magnitude of the impact of sickness presenteeism on teaching and learning and the successful functioning of a school, the various stakeholders who are involved in the school will need to familiarize themselves with the correlates of sickness presenteeism so that they are better prepared to address such challenges when they manifest within secondary school contexts.

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