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INTRODUCTION

Absenteeism can be defined as ‘the lack of physical presence at a behavior setting when and where one is expected to be’ (Harrison and Price, 2003: 204). Absenteeism is linked to various undesirable consequences. First, absenteeism is reported to be negatively associated with productivity and supervisory ratings of performance (see meta-analysis by Viswesvaran, 2002). Second, absent employees may adversely affect their colleagues because these latter employees may have to substitute for their absent coworkers (Martocchio, 1994). Subsequently, the employees who show up for work may experience overload and stress (Shirom and Rosenblatt, 2006). Finally, absent employees may determine absence norms within the organization, and thus influence their colleagues’ shirking behavior (Bradley et al., 2007).

While excessive employee absences are troublesome for any organization, absences in a labor-intensive field such as education are of particular concern. In Trinidad’s education sector, secondary school teacher absenteeism is increasingly becoming problematic. Connelly (2015) reports that approximately 600 teachers in Trinidad are under investigation, primarily for absenteeism issues. Teacher absenteeism is particularly problematic for numerous reasons. First, hiring substitute teachers can be difficult and costly (Shirom and Rosenblatt, 2006; Woods and Montagno, 1997), and these substitutes are likely to be less qualified than the regular teachers (Rosenblatt et al., 2010). Second, absent teachers’ classes may be cancelled, and this can lead to disruptions in their colleagues’ teaching. Third, teacher absenteeism may have adverse effects on students’ achievement, especially when these absences are unanticipated (Miller et al., 2008; Woods and Montagno, 1997). Finally, students may regard their teachers as role models, and thus imitate their absence behavior. Ehrenberg et al. (1991) empirically supports

this notion, showing an association between teacher absenteeism and student absenteeism.

Trinidad's government has been seeking ways to remedy the problems associated with teacher absenteeism. A decade ago, the country's Education Minister threatened to cut salaries for absent teachers (Mohammed, 2005). However, these threats have yet to materialize. Today, teacher absenteeism is continuing to create problems for secondary schools and their students. Yet again, disciplinary solutions are to be determined (Connelly, 2015). Evidently, governing bodies seek to address absenteeism via a broad-brush approach that involves penalties. In this study, I offer a more focused alternative. My approach is to minimize teacher absenteeism via the implementation of policies based on the socio-demographic factors that are associated with teacher absenteeism. To do so, I partially replicate, within the Trinidadian context, Rosenblatt and Shirom's (2005) study. Rosenblatt and Shirom's (2005) study focused on teacher absenteeism in the Israeli public education system, and found that prior absenteeism, age, education, and supervisory position were significant predictors of absence frequency. Correspondingly, I examine prior absence behavior and socio-demographic characteristics as predictors of secondary school teacher absenteeism in Trinidad.

Like Rosenblatt and Shirom (2005), I control prior absence behavior when investigating the potential effects of socio-demographic factors. A longitudinal research design by Breugh (1981) showed that prior absenteeism was a better predictor of current absenteeism than work attitudes such as job involvement, work satisfaction, and supervisory satisfaction. Accordingly, Ivancevich (1985) provided further support for Breugh's (1981) work, showing that prior absenteeism is a strong predictor of future absenteeism. Therefore, I control prior absenteeism in this study, and subsequently the upcoming hypotheses reflect the residual change

in absences from one year to the next (Rosenblatt and Shirom, 2005). Hereafter, absence behavior implies this residual change between two consecutive years.

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Absenteeism researchers are increasingly emphasizing the value of using socio-demographic characteristics in explanatory models of absence behavior (Price, 1995; Rosenblatt and Shirom, 2005; Shirom and Rosenblatt, 2006). For instance, Chaudhury and Ng (1992: 615) report on their findings by explaining that ‘personal attributes are the most important determinants of long-term absences’. Contrary to popular belief that socio-demographic characteristics should be used as control variables, Price (1995) argues that the direct effect of these socio-demographic characteristics are important. These characteristics are more objective (i.e. reliable and valid) than psychological variables, and are thus more easily understood by decision makers (Harrison and Martocchio, 1998). More importantly, Price (1995: 29) asserts that ‘relating these [socio-demographic] variables to a phenomenon being studied suggests a way to explain this phenomenon’. That is, relationships between socio-demographic characteristics and absence behavior imply underlying mechanisms that should be further explored (Shirom and Rosenblatt, 2006). In this study, I examine both personal and occupational characteristics.

Personal characteristics

Gender. Male teachers appear to have significantly fewer absences than their female counterparts (e.g., Farrell and Stamm, 1988; Scott and McClellan, 1990; Shapira- Lishchinsky, 2012; Steel and Rentsch, 1995). One possible reason for such a variation is that women, unlike men, are more likely to stay at home to

attend to their offspring, e.g., breastfeeding (Ichino and Moretti, 2009) or when their child is ill or hurt (Scott and McClellan, 1990). In addition, some researchers suggest that biological or physiological reasons may also account for women displaying higher levels of absenteeism than men. For instance, women being more susceptible to staying home because of their menstrual cycle (Ichino and Moretti, 2009), health-related factors (Mastekaasa and Olsen, 1998), body weight issues, smoking (Leigh, 1983), or illnesses (Youngblood, 1984). Moreover, in developing countries such as Trinidad, women may be more absent than men because of societal norms in which women are expected to direct efforts more towards housework than their career (Rosenblatt and Shirom, 2005). In these developing countries, women may face a work environment in which they have a lower status than men. These status differences can result in women becoming apathetic towards their job, and thus staying home more frequently than men (VandenHeuvel and Wooden, 1995). For these reasons, I propose that,

H1: Female teachers are more absent than male teachers.

Age. Generally, age and absenteeism tend to be negatively related. Even though older employees are potentially more vulnerable to health-related problems which can keep them away from work, they tend to (a) have higher job commitment and better person-organization fit (Rosenblatt and Shirom, 2005; Vistnes, 1997), (b) enjoy more pleasant working conditions (Chaudhury and Ng, 1992), and (c) experience fewer injuries on the job (Vistnes 1997) than younger employees. Moreover, younger employees are more likely to be absent. Levinson's model of adult development proposes that during early adulthood persons seek youthful desires, and question whether they are on the right path in terms of their life goals (Levinson, 1986). The instability accompanying this phase of adulthood is mirrored in career development models. These models show that younger employees tend to continuously explore job opportunities, often moving in and out

of various organizations, i.e., the boundaryless career (e.g., Greenhaus et al., 2009; Mirvis and Hall, 1994). As such, younger employees tend to be unsure of their place in the job environment, and such volatility may lead to frequent absence behavior. Therefore, I expect that,

H2: There is a negative relationship between teachers' ages and their absence behavior.

Education. Rosenblatt and Shirom (2005) explain that a higher education level will be accompanied by elevated professionalism, and consequently higher levels of responsibility and commitment to work. Furthermore, highly educated employees tend to have more autonomy and be more involved at work (Chaudhury and Ng, 1992), and job involvement is associated with lower absenteeism rates (Baba, 1990). Empirically, absenteeism researchers confirm a negative relationship between education and absenteeism (Steel and Rentsch, 1995). Hence,

H3: There is a negative relationship between teachers' level of educational attainment and their absence behavior.

Young children. A family with more young children has increased family commitments such as child-rearing and care-taking, and these extra commitments can result in higher absenteeism for employed parents (Judge et al., 1997). Empirical findings for the relationship between number of children and absenteeism have been inconsistent. Vistnes (1997) found a positive relationship between number of young children and women's absenteeism. Similarly, Bridges and Mumford (2000) found that the presence of children under two years of age was associated with women being more absent than men. These authors also reported that the presence of children between two to five years of age was associated with men being more absent than women. Other researchers found no relationship between the overall number of children and absenteeism (e.g., Judge et

al., 1997; Rosenblatt and Shirom, 2005; VandenHeuvel and Wooden, 1995). These differences between findings seem to indicate that the presence of very *young* children, rather than the overall number of children, accounts for teacher absenteeism. Furthermore, given that child-care is increasingly becoming more of a shared responsibility, the presence of young children should be positively associated with absenteeism for both genders. Therefore,

H4: There is a positive relationship between the number of young children in teachers' families and teachers' absence behavior.

Occupational characteristics

Seniority. Empirical research supports a negative relationship between seniority and absenteeism. For instance, Porwoll (1980) reported that teachers with 2 to 4 years and 23 to 25 years of teaching experience have the fewest absences. Similarly, Ehrenberg et al. (1991) found that the greater the proportion of teachers older than age 55, the fewer sick leave days taken. Ehrenberg et al. (1991: 83) give reasons for such findings, explaining that the fewer absences of persons older than 55 years is likely due to the expected 'payoff for unused sick days ... in the near future'. Moreover, tenure is likely to be accompanied by increased job satisfaction and more pleasant working conditions, which can both lead to a reduction in absenteeism for elderly teachers (Vistnes, 1997). Hence,

H5: There is a negative relationship between teachers' seniority and their absence behavior.

Position level. Teachers with higher position levels are likely to experience greater levels of responsibility (Rosenblatt and Shirom, 2005). Therefore, these teachers may view their job as important and meaningful. Accordingly, these teachers may view their absenteeism as having harmful consequences. Empirical

findings support these theoretical arguments, showing that higher positions are associated with lower absenteeism levels (e.g., Johns, 1997; Shirom and Rosenblatt, 2006). Thus,

H6: There is a negative relationship between teachers' position level and their absence behavior.

METHODS

Participants

The sample for this study consisted of 146 secondary school teachers from Trinidad's public school system. The sample of teachers was selected based on two criteria. First, for proper representation of teachers from government schools, both government and government assisted schools were selected. The ratio of government to government assisted schools was calculated as 1:1.21 (*Trinidad and Tobago Telephone Directory*, 2005: G66). Because the ratio was close to 1:1, an equal number of government and government assisted schools were deemed appropriate, i.e., four of each type of school were selected for a total of eight schools. The sample consisted of 79 teachers from government schools and 67 teachers from government assisted schools. Second, teachers from schools located in each major area of Trinidad were included, i.e. teachers from schools located in Northeast ($n = 33$), Northwest ($n = 46$), Central ($n = 33$), and Southern ($n = 34$) regions of the country. For each location, I investigated teachers according to the first criteria, i.e., one government and one government assisted school was selected.

Materials

Absence duration. Generally, absenteeism was typically measured by either frequency or duration. Absence frequency is ‘the number of spells or times an individual has been absent’ whereas absence duration is ‘the total length of time an individual has been absent’ (Bakker et al., 2003: 342). In absenteeism research, absence frequency is often considered an indicator of involuntary absenteeism, e.g., mourning or certified sickness. Conversely, absence duration is often regarded as an indicator of voluntary absenteeism because individuals are likely to deliberately stay at home for short durations of time. However, Sagie (1998: 158) explained that ‘the unfortunate use of frequency as a measure of voluntary absence and duration as a measure of involuntary absence has resulted in both conceptual confusion and measurement contamination’. For instance, several short periods of absence can be due to certified sickness, i.e., involuntary (Sagie, 1998). For this reason, and in line with the definition of absenteeism given at the outset of this paper, I departed from Rosenblatt and Shirom’s (2005) work by using duration (i.e., total days lost) to measure absenteeism.

The 2004 measure of absence duration was used as an independent control variable in the statistical analysis. By doing so, the dependent variable measured the change in absenteeism between the two years (Rosenblatt and Shirom, 2005). Moreover, prior absenteeism was expected to be the strongest predictor of future absenteeism (Harrison and Price, 2003).

All absences were treated equally, with no consideration given to the different causes. Such uniform treatment of absences was in line with the definition of absenteeism in this study. Still, absences due to maternity leave and extended absenteeism for medical reasons were excluded because these absences represented highly involuntary causes of absenteeism. From the absenteeism records used, I

could not determine absences due to strikes declared by Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers' Association (TTUTA). As such, these absences were included in the present study, whereas they are excluded by Rosenblatt and Shirom's (2005).

Socio-demographic characteristics. The study comprised of six socio-demographic characteristics which were all measured with a survey. Gender comprised of two categories including male (0), and female (1). For number of young children, previous studies defined young as being less than 2 years old (Bridges and Mumford, 2000) or less than 6 years of age (Vistnes, 1997). In the present study, I chose a midpoint between the stated ages, i.e., children who are less than or equal to 4 years of age. This cut-off point was appropriate in this study because, at the age of four to five years, children in Trinidad begin kindergarten schooling. As such, I expect that from age 5 and onwards, children would become less dependent on their parents and require less attention. Education was measured by years of formal education. This measure of education was more comprehensive than Rosenblatt and Shirom's (2005) measure of education, i.e., they measured education as whether a teacher had an academic degree or not. Age and seniority were both measured in years. For school position, the three positions considered in the study were vice-principal, dean, and form teacher.

Control variables. In addition to prior absenteeism, three control variables were included in this study. First, job scope was measured as a percentage of a full-time job (40 hour week). Second, teaching load was measured by the annual number of teaching hours a teacher was expected to teach (Rosenblatt and Shirom, 2005). Third, marital status was measured as married (1) or not married (0).

Procedures

Prior to collecting data, I received approval from Trinidad's Director of Schools Supervision to collect data from schools across the country. In 2006, I administered surveys on-site during regular working hours. For the survey, I requested participants' names or teaching numbers in order to match their survey responses to their absenteeism records from 2004 and 2005. The use of absenteeism records helped to reduce any potential adverse effects of common method bias and social desirability bias. Subjects were assured confidentiality of their responses, and informed that participation was voluntary.

RESULTS

Sample size and statistical assumptions

After accounting for missing data and outliers, the sample size was reduced to 146. This sample size met the minimum requirements needed to conduct the upcoming regression analysis (Hair et al., 2009). However, using precise statistical power calculations proposed by Tabachnick and Fidell (2005), values that were significant at a 10% or 15% level should still be examined for a sample size of 149 with twelve independent variables.

For all variables, I examined the assumptions of normality, homoscedasticity, and linearity. While linearity was not problematic, some of the variables did not meet the assumption of normality and/or homoscedasticity. I addressed non-normality and heteroscedasticity using data transformations proposed by Hair et al. (2009). The recommended transformations markedly improved variable distributions and/or equality of variances. Specifically, I used square root for seniority, squared term for teaching load, inverse for age, and

logarithm for both education and job scope. Hereafter, these variables were used in their transformed form.

Correlation analysis

Table 1 shows the matrix of intercorrelations along with the means and standard deviations for all of the variables. The correlations were calculated using Pearson's correlation coefficient. Absenteeism in 2004, marital status, gender, age, and number of children less than four years of age were significantly correlated with absenteeism in 2005. There were also notable significant correlations between dean and teaching load, dean and seniority, dean and age, dean and form teacher, and marital status and number of young children.

Table 1: Summary of Intercorrelations, Means, and Standard Deviations for the Scores of Absenteeism and Socio-demographic Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Mean	SD
1 Absenteeism 2005	1.00													15.06	7.64
2 Absenteeism 2004	.70**	1.00												16.37	8.05
3 Teaching load	.07	.08	1.00											401184	136191
4 Job scope	-.03	-.04	.18*	1.00										-0.09	0.05
5 Seniority	-.11	-.00	-.09	-.07	1.00									3.37	1.39
6 Education	-.00	.03	.07	.05	.17*	1.00								1.06	0.12
7 Marital status	.17*	.16	-.05	.06	.24**	.01	1.00							0.61	0.49
8 Gender	.28**	.26**	.10	-.00	-.21**	-.17*	.01	1.00						0.64	0.48
9 Age	.17*	.04	.11	.05	-.92**	-.13	-.26**	.23**	1.00					0.03	0.01
10 No. of young children	.29**	.21*	.07	.05	-.19*	-.01	.36**	.12	.19*	1.00				0.39	0.71
11 Vice principal	.07	.04	.03	-.03	.16*	.00	-.03	.09	-.15	-.07	1.00			0.01	0.12
12 Dean	-.12	-.11	-.32**	.03	.37**	.10	.10	-.26**	-.34**	-.12	-.05	1.00		0.17	0.38
13 Form Teacher	-.09	.07	.20*	-.09	-.22**	.12	-.03	.16*	.26**	.05	-.21*	-.42**	1.00	0.75	0.43

Note.

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).



Hierarchical regression analysis

To test the hypotheses, hierarchical regression analysis was used (see Table 2). In step 1, absenteeism in the year 2004 was entered. The results showed that prior absenteeism was a highly significant predictor of absenteeism ($\beta = .64, p < .01$) and explained the majority of the variance in absence duration ($R^2 = 0.49$). In step 2, the control variables of job scope and teaching load were entered followed by the socio-demographic variables including seniority, education, marital status, gender, age, and number of children less than four years of age. The first two control variables had no significant relationship to absenteeism. Marital status was also not a significant predictor. The relationship between gender and absenteeism was marginally significant in the expected direction ($\beta = .09, p < .15$), providing partial support for H1. Age and absenteeism were significantly related in the expected direction ($\beta = .32, p < .05$), thus supporting H2¹. H3 and H5 were not supported because respectively seniority and education were not related to absenteeism. Finally, the number of young children in a teacher's family was a marginally significant predictor of absenteeism ($\beta = .1, p < .15$), thus providing partial support for H4. Up to this stage, the variables in the model explained 54% of the absence variance, representing a R^2 change of 0.05 in the predictive power of the variables entered in step 2. For steps 3 to 5, the three position levels were entered hierarchically. Form teacher was the only position that was significantly related to absenteeism in the hypothesized direction ($\beta = -.22, p < .01$), and explained 4% of the variance, thus providing partial support for H6.

Table 2: Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Absence Duration In 2005

Step	Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β	R^2	δR^2
1	Absenteeism in 2004	0.60***	0.06	.64	.49***	.49
2	Job scope	-7.84	9.74	-.05	.54*	.05
	Teaching load	0.00	0.00	.02		
	Seniority	0.92	0.84	.17		
	Education	2.73	3.82	.04		
	Marital status	1.10	1.03	.07		
	Gender	1.47*	0.99	.09		
	Age	344.82**	164.87	.32		
	No. of young children	1.11*	0.70	.10		
3	Vice principal	1.11	3.94	.02	.54	.00
4	Dean	-1.11	1.43	-.06	.54	.00
5	Form teacher	-3.94***	1.19	-.22	.58***	.04

Note.

* $p < .15$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$

Independent samples t-tests

Given that gender and number of young children were significant at a 15% level of significance, I conducted additional independent-samples t-tests to determine whether these variables should be of concern. For gender, a t-test confirmed that there was a significant difference in absences between men and women in both 2004 ($t = 3.18, p < .01$) and 2005 ($t = 3.51, p < .01$). In other words, the average absences for women ($\bar{X} = 17.93, SD = 7.76$ in 2004; $\bar{X} = 16.68, SD = 7$ in 2005) was significantly higher than that of men ($\bar{X} = 13.65, SD = 7.9$ in 2004; $\bar{X} = 12.23, SD = 7.97$ in 2005). Another t-test for presence of dependent children also showed that there was a significant difference in absences between teachers with young children and teachers without young children in both 2004 ($t = 3.15, p < .01$) and 2005 ($t = 3.47, p < .01$). That is, the average absences for teachers with young children ($\bar{X} = 19.44, SD = 6.61$ in 2004; $\bar{X} = 18.56, SD = 6.76$

in 2005) was significantly higher than that of teachers with no young children ($\bar{X} = 15.26$, $SD = 8.26$ in 2004; $\bar{X} = 13.79$, $SD = 7.57$ in 2005). Both t-tests confirm that gender and number of young children were still worth examining even though they were only marginally significant in the hierarchical regression model.

Overall, the findings showed that secondary school teachers who were frequently absent, exhibited high prior absenteeism, were younger in age, and less likely to hold the position of form teacher. Furthermore, these teachers might be female teachers, and have children who are less than or equal to four years of age. However, these latter relationships need to be confirmed in a larger sample. After conducting the hierarchical regression analyses, I evaluated the variate for the regression model, and the assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, and normality were met. Also, there were no issues with multicollinearity as indicated by the variance inflation factor and tolerance statistics.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to predict teacher absenteeism in secondary schools in Trinidad by personal and job characteristics. My findings provide empirical support for the literature on the use of these background variables in explaining teacher absenteeism even when controlling for prior absenteeism. Undoubtedly, prior absenteeism is the strongest predictor of absenteeism in this study, and this finding confirms previous research (e.g., Ivancevich, 1985; Rosenblatt and Shirom, 2005). Farrell and Stamm (1988) report that the mean correlation coefficient between prior absenteeism and present absenteeism over ten studies is 0.71. The correlation in this study is 0.70, thus indicating that the importance of prior absenteeism as a predictor has not changed from past years. Rosenblatt and Shirom (2005) suggest two possible reasons for such a high

explanatory power of prior teacher absenteeism. First, they suggest that teachers may develop norms in the workplace for what are acceptable levels of absenteeism (Rosenblatt and Shirom, 2005). In other words, teachers may attune their absence behavior to conform to the absence norms of their group. Second, Rosenblatt and Shirom (2005) suggest that common reasons taken for absences in one year may be the same reasons taken for absences in the following year, e.g., illnesses².

Unlike previous studies, job scope and teaching load do not contribute to the explanation of teacher absenteeism in this study. For job scope, this is not too surprising because the descriptive statistics reveal that working hours are very similar for each teacher, i.e., there is little variation ($\bar{X} = .82, SD = .1$). In contrast, there is more variation in teaching hours ($\bar{X} = 620.42, SD = 127.94$). This latter non-significant finding means that more teaching periods for teachers are not accompanied by additional absences. Perhaps teachers are only assigned more teaching periods if their work ethic is strong, and thus these teachers welcome the challenge of an additional teaching load. This non-significant finding also means that a reduction in teaching load is not associated with a decline in absenteeism.

The personal variable that is most strongly related to absenteeism in this study is age. Specifically, younger teachers are more frequently absent than their elder counterparts. This finding supports the majority of the literature providing evidence that older employees are more committed to their job, and may even benefit from better working conditions. This finding also supports the notion that younger teachers seek the youthful desires of a boundaryless career (Greenhaus et al., 2009; Levinson, 1986; Mirvis and Hall, 1994).

Education is unrelated to absenteeism. This finding contradicts the significant negative relationship found by other researchers (e.g., Chaudhury and Ng, 1992; Rosenblatt and Shirom, 2005). These researchers measure education by whether or not a participant had a degree. Rather than using possession of a degree,

some studies measure education by the extent of education level and found either a positive relationship (e.g., Norton, 1998) or no relationship at all (Spencer and Steers, 1980). My finding confirms that when education is measured more comprehensively, it is unrelated to absenteeism. Therefore, in the context of Trinidad, more years of formal education for secondary school teachers do not lead to better attendance.

The number of children under four years of age in a teacher's family is marginally related to absenteeism in the hypothesized direction. In a separate analysis, I replace number of young children with number of children regardless of age, and the latter variable is unrelated to absenteeism. This difference indicates that ages of children are of importance. The extra child-care commitments for younger children may lead to increased absenteeism for both men and women, which is indicative of the changing times where male parents are taking a more active role in the raising of their children.

Gender is also a marginal predictor of absenteeism. For this relationship, female teachers exhibit higher absences than male teachers, even when factors such as education, number of young children and seniority were held constant. This finding partially confirms that of earlier studies, and implies that female teachers may direct more efforts towards household duties. Alternatively, this finding may be an indication of a lower status of women teachers relative to male teachers in Trinidad. A lower status may lead female teachers to become disgruntled in their job, and thus they may withdraw from the workplace (Shapira- Lishchinsky, 2012). Further exploration of these underlying mechanisms is necessary.

Like Rosenblatt and Shirom's (2005) study, seniority was not associated with absenteeism. This finding contradicts the notion that the possibly better working conditions of senior teachers (Vistnes, 1997) should translate into reduced

absenteeism. Leigh (1986) argues that senior workers have been in the business for quite some time, and thus may feel more secure in their job, and less concerned about the repercussions of absenteeism. These conflicting arguments may explain why no relationship exists in this study.

The findings for school positions are unusual in the case of deans. Approximately 17 percent of the teachers who participated in this study are deans. Surprisingly, no relationship is found for this group of teachers. Closer examination of the absence data for deans reveals that some deans have a very low number of absences while others exhibit an extremely high number of absences, i.e., the standard deviation for the mean number of dean absences is high ($\bar{X} = 13.12$, $SD = 9.07$ for 2005; $\bar{X} = 14.36$, $SD = 8.62$ for 2004). In a separate analysis, I analyzed the number of dean absences according to location in order to determine whether specific areas of Trinidad are accountable for the high variation in dean absences. I found that the number of dean absences is noticeably higher in the Northeastern and Southern areas of Trinidad than in the Northwestern region. Possible explanations for the higher absences in the aforementioned areas may be transportation problems, flooding, or other structural problems in those areas.

The position of form teacher is not only highly related to absenteeism in the expected direction, but also explains a relatively large portion of the variance for a single variable. The extra duties and responsibilities of form teachers may not be as demanding as deans. At the same time, in comparison to a regular teacher, the position of form teacher may motivate teachers as proposed by job characteristics theory (Hackman and Oldham, 1980). Specifically, the form teacher position likely provides higher skill variety, task identity, task significance, and autonomy than regular teachers. Hence, this post seems to strike a balance between the workloads of deans and regular teachers in such a way that it is associated with reduced absenteeism. Besides dean and form teacher, the position of vice principal was not

adequately represented because only two vice principals participated in the study. Therefore, results are inconclusive for this position.

In summary, I examined the relationship between government secondary school teachers' personal background characteristics and their change in absenteeism from 2004 to 2005. After controlling for absenteeism in 2004, job scope, and teaching load, the variables that are associated with absence behavior are age and form teacher. Both the number of dependent children in a teacher's family and gender of the teacher may be related to absenteeism, but these findings need further support. Finally, education and seniority are unrelated to teacher absenteeism. The findings are mostly consistent with Rosenblatt and Shirom's (2005) study, with some differences noted. While the inconsistent findings may be due to measurement differences, Spencer and Steers (1980) explain that inconsistent results in absenteeism studies may also be due to the type of sample used. Given that this is one of the few absenteeism studies in Trinidad, the inconsistent findings may very well be attributed to the uniqueness of the context.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One limitation of this study is a three-month data collection time limit. In future research, data can be gathered from additional schools in order to obtain a larger sample size. A larger sample size can provide more conclusive results regarding gender and number of young children. An increased sample size may also facilitate the addition of other potentially influential variables. For instance, given that number of young children in a teacher's family was marginally related to absenteeism, this then raises the question as to whether the number of elderly dependants may also be related to absenteeism. Furthermore, based on the findings for deans, location or distance to work (Scott and McClellan, 1990) can be another

useful addition to future absenteeism research in Trinidad. Rosenblatt and Shirom (2005) also recommend the addition of school-level variables such as school size, attendance policy, hierarchy level, and leadership style. Future research may also incorporate physiological and psychological factors that are likely to be relevant to teacher absenteeism in Trinidad, e.g., stress (Addae, 1998), alcoholism (Jacobson, 1990; Montane-Jaime et al., 2008), and health issues (Ragoonath, 2014; Vistnes, 1997).

My personal communications with teachers in some schools confirms another limitation that Rosenblatt and Shirom (2005) identified – there is no way to check the reliability of the record keeping. In some instances, teachers may sign the attendance for the entire day, but then leave the school compound during the lunch break, and not return for afternoon classes. Also, teachers may sometimes forget to sign the attendance register, which can lead to an overstated number of absent days. Stricter record-keeping procedures may improve the accuracy of the data for further research.

The study is further limited with respect to the two consecutive years being used to gauge teachers' absenteeism. Rosenblatt and Shirom (2005) suggest that these types of studies be replicated via a longitudinal design, in which data is collected over a period of years. Such a design would lead to more conclusive results, and even accounts for changes in a teacher's background traits such as marital status or number of dependent children. Notwithstanding the limitations of this study, the findings offer support for the use of background variables in predicting teacher absenteeism. The study's findings should be considered as a means for the development of teacher absenteeism interventions in Trinidad.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings in this study can be used to assist local governing bodies and school authorities in developing policies to reduce absenteeism. The importance of policy making based on the results of this type of study is stressed by Rosenblatt and Shirom (2005: 221) who explain that '[m]anagement should plan and implement extended prevention techniques, based on those factors found most conducive to absence behavior, and directed at those employees or subgroups of the human force found vulnerable to absenteeism'. In this section, I identify these subgroups along with policies to potentially reduce absenteeism. These subgroups include young teachers, positions other than form teachers, teachers with young children, and women.

It is likely that young teachers are not given any special considerations that elder teachers enjoy, such as better working conditions. Better conditions can reduce health-related problems which may lower the number of sick leave days taken. Policies can also be directed towards making the profession more attractive towards the younger group, e.g., more opportunities for promotion. Rather than trying to counteract the nature of younger teachers as identified in career development and adult development models, recruiters should instead provide clear and accurate information regarding working and career opportunities in the school.

In order to provide a precise picture of working in a school, recruiters should conduct realistic job previews (RJPs) when hiring young teachers. A RJP is used during selection to provide an accurate or balanced view of a job by communicating both positive and negative job attributes (Breugh and Billings, 1988). The main goal of RJPs is to prevent violations of employees' psychological contracts. A psychological contract is 'an individual's belief regarding the terms

and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party' (Rousseau, 1989: 123). In this case, the parties involved in the psychological contract are young teacher applicants and the school. A RJP would help to shape young teacher applicants' expectations of what the job would provide them (e.g., pay or sense of fulfilment) in return for what they give (e.g., take-home work or repetitive tasks). Using RJP to shape newly hired young teachers' psychological contracts may reduce absenteeism because RJP have been associated with lower initial job expectations and turnover, and greater self-selection, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (Premack and Wanous, 1985).

School positions can be manipulated in attempting to reduce absenteeism. The post of form teacher may require little or no formal training, yet the position seems to include enough extra duties to motivate teachers to come to work. It seems as though many schools are already capitalizing on the benefits of assigning teachers to the post of form teacher because these teachers comprised 75% of all cases in this study. Instead of assigning the form teacher post to every teacher, which may defeat the purpose of having *extra* responsibility, other positions comprising similar levels of responsibility or prestige may be created within schools in order to reduce absenteeism.

The number of young children in a teacher's family is marginally significant in this study, and this finding partially confirms the survey findings by Bonacum and Allen (2006). These authors found that the primary reason employees are not coming to work is that of family issues (Bonacum and Allen, 2006). One policy may be to encourage the development and use of day-care centers, or even child-care programs within schools (Werner and DeSimone, 2011). Research may be needed to determine whether such centers and programs would be as successful in Trinidad as in other countries. Another strategy may be to enable teachers with

very young children to achieve more flexible teaching schedules through the use of work-life programs. Employee assistance plans are one of the more commonly used work-life programs in the United States (Bonacum and Allen, 2006), and these programs may help teachers deal with the stress involved in taking care of very young children.

If further research shows that women are clearly more prone to absence behaviour than men, then the potential causes of such behavior should be targeted. For instance, if the disparity between male and female teacher absences is being caused by women's resentment towards their lower status in the workplace, then this may be an indication of a deeper problem in society. In this case, gender policies should be geared towards promoting women's participation and leadership in decision making in order to give them a more effective voice. Additionally, legal reform programs may be needed to assist in the advancement of women. Further research is needed to both verify the indefinite findings in this study and the potential causes for gender differences in absenteeism.

In conclusion, the findings show that teachers who are more prone to absenteeism are younger in age and not form teachers. Furthermore, female teachers and those with young children may also be prone to absenteeism, but further research is needed here. The findings also indicate that marital status, seniority, education, and the position of dean are not related to absenteeism. Overall, the findings can be used as a basis for further research in understanding the underlying 'psychological and social processes behind the "hard" background variables' (Rosenblatt and Shirom, 2005: 221). Relevant governing bodies in Trinidad can use the present study's findings to implement the recommended policies that target the potential processes underlying the background variables related to secondary school teacher absenteeism.

FOOTNOTES

1. Note that the inverse transformation for age reversed the sign for the beta coefficient.
2. In a separate analysis, the results of a paired-samples t-test revealed that there was no significant difference in the mean number of sick leave days taken between 2004 and 2005 ($t = 2.32, p < .05$). That is, the average sick leave days taken in 2004 ($\bar{X} = 8.85, SD = 5.06$) was not significantly different to the average sick leave days taken in 2005 ($\bar{X} = 7.83, SD = 4.91$). Note that sick leave data was unavailable in one of the schools ($n = 124$).

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