Caregiving and Children's Preschool Attendance: A Case of Tharaka Nithi Preschool Randomized Controlled Trial Intervention Project

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Abstract

Caregiving is a service provided for children with the primary objective of taking care of them and ensuring that they are safe and have opportunities to learn and develop positive relationships with their caregivers and peers while their parents are away. Caregiving takes the forms of home-based care, centre-based care, school-based care, family child care and family, friend, and neighbour (FFN) care. The paper utilises preliminary findings on school attendance from a randomised controlled trial on the effects of a preschool intervention on child learning and women's economic empowerment in Tharaka Nithi County in school-based care. The research sought to test whether a preschool-based intervention in a rural setting in Kenya influences child development and women's labour market participation in a cost-effective manner. The project examines the impact of allowing three-year-old children to attend preschool versus the regular pre-primary education programming, which allows children aged 4 years and above to attend preschool. Implementation of the intervention started in January 2024 in 60 intervention schools where five three-year-old children were admitted to a playgroup (PG) in the pre-primary one (PP1) class. Twelve mentors and sixty caregivers were recruited and trained alongside sixty PP1 teachers from the sampled preschools to implement an adapted PP1 curriculum. The twelve mentors coached teachers weekly on the implementation of the curriculum in the five schools assigned to them. This paper presents preliminary findings on preschool attendance for the PG and PP1 children based on weekly attendance data from term one and term two of the 2024 school calendar year on the day the mentors visited the school. Findings reveal that school attendance was low during school openings, midterm breaks, and the last weeks before the schools closed. Public holidays, as well as extracurricular activities coupled with children being sent home for school levies, also contributed to children not attending school regularly. The findings further show that the attendance rate in term one was slightly higher than in term two.

Keywords: Caregiving, Playgroup, Pre-primary, Preschool attendance, Preschool intervention

Introduction

The World Bank (2020) define childcare as a service with the primary objective of caring for children while parents are away. The service seeks to ensure that children are safe and have opportunities to learn and develop positive relationships with their caregivers and peers. Lucas, Richter, and Daelmans (2018) opine that childcare is a continuous process of monitoring a child's development and providing interventions and that sensitive and responsive caregiving promotes young children's psychosocial development. Childcare, therefore, requires solid knowledge, skills and trusting and nurturing relationships by the families and caregivers. It creates an enriching and stimulating environment for the children during their early years of development.

The World Bank (2020) estimates that about 350 million children below primary school age, representing more than 40 per cent of that population, do not have access to proper childcare. Additionally, it is estimated that about 40 per cent of Preschool children are not enrolled in school. The childcare burden is widely felt among children under 5 years old because the costs of keeping them are generally higher, and few countries have policy strategies to improve childcare choices or cater to their needs. The gaps in access to childcare are acute in low-income economies where resources and policies are not available to support the children. This is also affirmed in a Carsey School of Public Policy white paper by Howard, Wilson and Aliouche (2020). About 35 million children in Africa live without parental care, according to a report by the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Union, 2013). Poor quality of childcare impacts a child's development outcomes and future potential in life.

A child's earliest years of development are the most critical to invest in to build foundational skills. This is the time when there is rapid brain development especially the first a thousand days (Dercelli & Beaton-Day, 2020). Heckman and Masterov (2007) and Engle *et al*. (2011) maintain that children need a range of inputs during this critical period more than at any other time of life. Children need a nurturing environment that includes stimulation, protection from stress, adequate nutrition, healthcare services and stimulating opportunities for early learning (Black *et al*, 2017). Evidence has shown that globally, over 250 million children are at risk of failing to reach their developmental potential due to poverty, inadequate nutrition, exposure to stress and lack of early stimulation and learning (Black, *et al*, 2017; Lu, Black and Richter, 2016).

Providing children access to quality childcare will, in turn, improve women's employment and productivity. It can also improve child outcomes, family welfare, business, productivity and the economy as a whole (Dercelli & Beaton-Day, 2020). Studies have further shown a link between childcare and women's economic empowerment, especially those from low and middle-income countries (Angels et al., 2014; Clark et al., 2019 & Dang et al., 2019). It is apparent from these studies that providing childcare services for young children will allow mothers an opportunity to engage in economic activities, leading to increased income as well as transitioning from the informal to the formal sector (Grantham & Somji, 2022).

Lack of affordable childcare is the biggest barrier to women's opportunity to work, limiting the type and amount of work women do outside the home. In Kenya, the 2010 constitution localised childcare by devolving childcare facilities, healthcare services and pre-primary education to the

county governments. The majority of the children's rights, as outlined in Article 53 of the constitution, are the function of the County Governments (Republic of Kenya, 2010).

Granthan and Somji (2022) opine that supporting the development of quality childcare solutions for women can have enormous social and economic payoffs. They further assert that, if properly done, it will lead to a triple win in facilitating women's labour force participation, economic agency, and broader gender equality outcomes. This will, in turn, enhance the child's well-being and development and create decent job and business opportunities in the paid care sector for women (Granthan & Somji, 2022).

Childcare in Kenya

Childcare is a critical service that parents require to enable them to participate in social and economic activities that enable them to generate income to support their families. The Kenya National Care Policy 2023 recognises this importance and outlines several key challenges that require urgent attention to support working mothers with caregiving services (Republic of Kenya, 2023). The challenges include: Inadequate coordination of childcare coverage across ages to cover caregivers full workday for all children; inadequate awareness and understanding of the need for childcare centres within communities; lack of national legal frameworks to guide establishments and operations of childcare centres; inadequate government support in childcare centres to offer services for proper growth of the children; untrained workforce for childcare centres and inadequate research on what works to implement childcare interventions in a cost-effective and sustainable manner (Republic of Kenya, 2023).

The care policy further underscores the fact that daycare centres for three-year-old children are mostly private (Republic of Kenya, 2023). Doughman, Muthuri, Kabiru, Wanjohi and Clark (2017) observe that women with young children depend on the availability of affordable childcare for them to participate in employment and involvement in income-generating activities. They assert that in Kenya, mothers from resource-limited urban areas lack kin support for childcare hence relying on low-paying jobs in the informal sector where they can multi-task in caring for their babies as they do menial jobs.

The United Nations Women's Report on National Care Needs Assessment in Kenya 2022 identified five key concepts related to care dubbed the 5Rs conceptual and policy framework for the care economy (Charmes & Asiligwa, 2022). The 5 Rs include: **Recognition** as a first step for raising awareness among the political spheres and the economic actors of the disproportionate burden of care that women face within the household preventing them from engaging and remaining in income-generating activities; **Reduction** of unpaid care work through supporting adapted and quality care services that commensurate with the needs of the population; **Redistribution** of unpaid care work between women and men within the household; **Rewarding** care work jobs such as those undertaken by domestic workers, teachers, nurses etc; **Representation** of care workers in active social dialogue with their representative.

Limited access to affordable and quality childcare is a primary challenge faced by working mothers in Kenya. The high cost of childcare services makes them unaffordable for many families. This has forced many mothers to resort to informal arrangements such as leaving their children in the

care of often underage siblings or their ageing grandparents. The quality of services offered in daycare facilities, if any, often does not meet safety, hygiene, and developmental requirements. Without caregivers, most parents are compelled to prioritise their children's care, resulting in business inconsistency and subsequent negative effects on household income. During an assessment for the Tharaka Nithi County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP) 2018, it became apparent that many women faced the common challenge of caring for their children while attending to their businesses in the market. In view of this, the County Government of Tharaka Nithi came up with a crèche programme to support traders in Chuka Market.

This is a childcare arrangement where the County Government of Tharaka Nithi built a childcare facility within the Chuka Market to provide space for businesswomen with children below three years to leave their babies while selling goods in the market. The County hired and trained caregivers to look after and play with these children. The purpose was to offer mothers ample opportunity to participate in economic activities (selling their wares) while at the same time being able to breastfeed their children on demand and find time to feed those who are not breastfeeding. While the crèche addressed childcare challenges for urban women in the market, women in rural areas with caregiving challenges did not have such a remedy. In view of this, Kenyatta University, Women Economic Empowerment Hub, Tharaka Nithi County and Yale University designed an intervention to provide caregiving solutions for rural women by introducing a playgroup within public pre-primary schools for three-year-old children.

Childcare Initiative in Tharaka Nithi County

A livelihoods survey and rapid needs assessment survey for a crèche programme were conducted within the Initiative of What Works for Women's Economic Empowerment (IWW-WEE) in Kenya, which was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The surveys by The County Government of Tharaka Nithi were carried out collaboratively with the Kenyatta University Women Economic Empowerment (KUWEE) Hub. The results indicated that women spend an average of 5-6 hours on unpaid care work per day, varying from 1-15 hours. The hours women spend caring for their children per day is 8 hours, varying from 1 hour – to 19 hours, which consumes a considerable amount of time for mothers, to the point that they regard it as part of their livelihoods. In view of these findings, Kenyatta University, in partnership with Yale University and Tharaka Nithi County, designed a randomised controlled trial to test whether providing caregiving services to women with children aged three will relieve them from caregiving services and enable them to engage in economic activities and whether this will enhance children's transition from preschool to primary school.

Through a policy proposal, the County Government of Tharaka Nithi allowed pre-primary schools to accommodate three-year-old children in the preprimary one (PP1) classrooms and allowed the childcare intervention to be implemented in public pre-primary schools. Preprimary schools form an important mechanism for childcare in the preprimary school environment. It is with this understanding that the randomised controlled trial (RCT) project admitted five three-year-old children in the intervention preprimary one (PP1) schools and hired a caregiver to support the PP1 teacher in handling the three-year-olds. The project hired and trained an intervention officer to oversee the implementation of the RCT. Further, the project hired and trained mentors to coach the caregivers and PP1 teachers.

The Randomized Controlled Trial and Curriculum Implementation

The Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) sought to examine the impact of enrolling three-year-olds on PP1 under a modified curriculum and learning environment. The intervention hypothesised that three-year-old children will achieve developmental milestones and school readiness, and their mothers engage in economic/labour activities for income.

The RCT involved 3–4-year-olds utilising the infrastructure of Preprimary 1 (PP1), the classroom setting, and the modified and adapted PP1 curriculum that accommodates 3-year-olds. A cohort of 3-year-old children attended PP1 starting January 2024 and will remain in PP1 for two years. The 3-year-olds will formally register for regular schooling in the second year using Kenya's National Education Management Information System (NEMIS). The enhanced curriculum includes activities focusing on learners' executive function and addresses cognitive concepts. Attention was paid to improving teacher-child interaction by encouraging two-way conversations. Learning and play Activity areas were set up/modified on a daily basis. There was at least one guided group learning session daily, and it included pre-literacy and pre-numeracy activities. The children were taken through daily singing, dance movement and story time that introduced dialogic reading methods emphasising basic language skills. All these were meant to promote meaningful conversations during break time and lunchtime among children and adults, considering the principles of activity-based learning.

A mapping of all the 436 public primary schools with Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE) facilities in Tharaka Nithi County was carried out to establish the status of the schools in terms of learning resources and the children's enrollment in PP1. Of the mapped schools, 145 met the inclusion criteria of not having 3-year-old children enrolled in their preprimary school. Further, a mapping of the 145 schools was done to identify the enumeration areas they cover to undertake the census of mothers with children below five years. The mapping showed that 15 transboundary schools could not be used for the experiment. The listing, therefore, targeted mothers with children under 5 years, which was done in 550 Enumeration Areas hosting 130 public primary schools in Tharaka Nithi County with a population of 5,576 children below 5 years. 118 schools were randomly selected to be involved, 60 treatment schools and 58 control schools.

Randomisation of children was based on how close they were to the treatment or control schools. The scatter plot (Figure 1) shows the dispersal of experimental schools and the listed 5,576 children across the 550 enumeration areas. The location of the experimental schools is shown in Figure 2

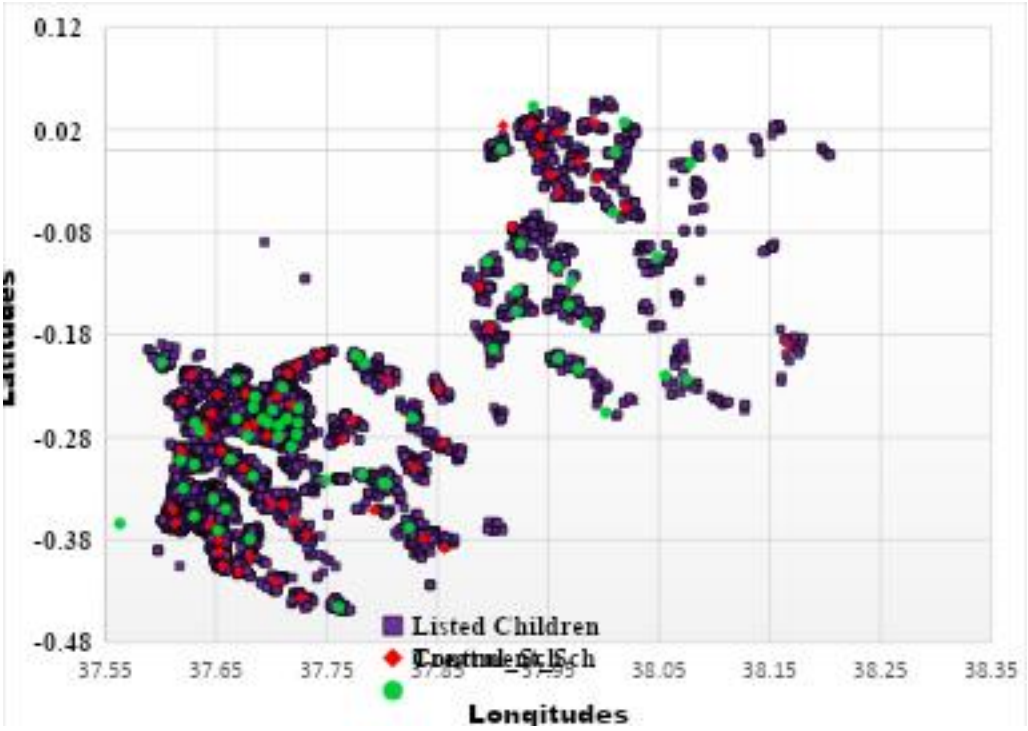

Figure 1: Scatter plot showing the dispersal of experimental schools and the listed 5,576 children

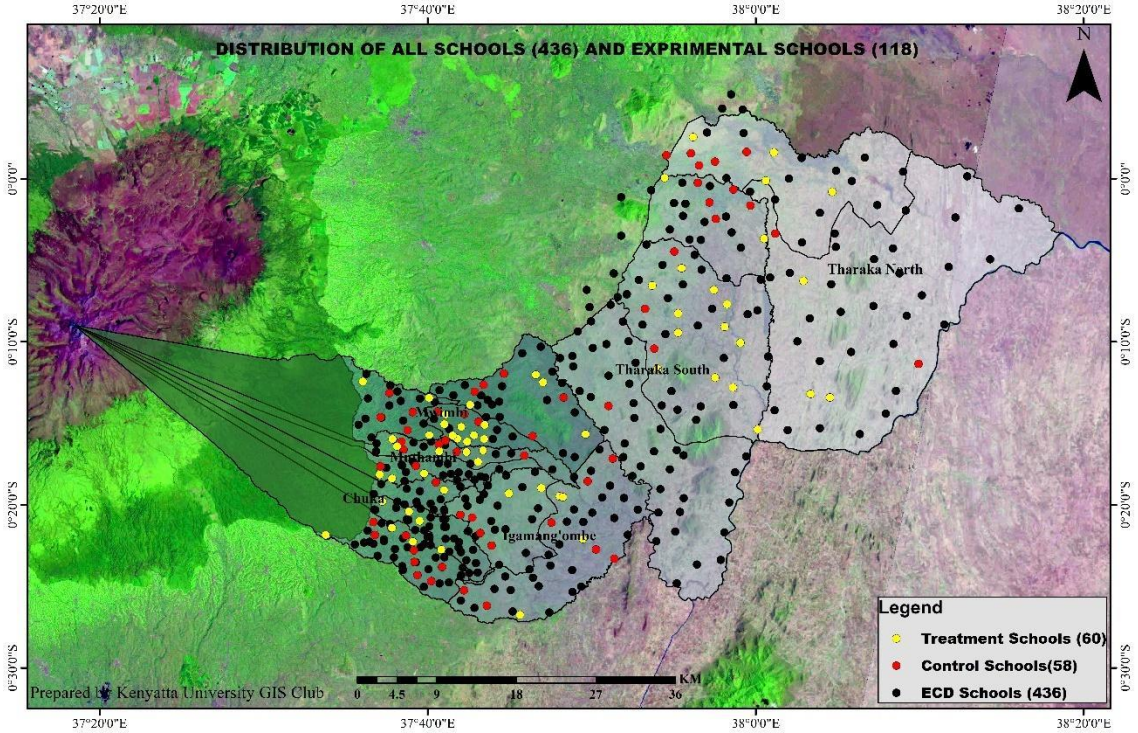

Figure 2: Location of treatment and control schools against all the schools in the County of Tharaka Nithi

Schools that did not have three-year-old children and did not have a playgroup class were included in the randomisation. Schools with three-year-old children or playgroup classes were excluded from the randomisation to avoid contamination of the experiment.

Implementing the curriculum started with adapting the PP1 Curriculum to suit the content for the 3-year-olds. Curriculum materials were developed for the 60 intervention schools. The hired curriculum implementation personnel were trained in curriculum implementation.

Therefore, this paper aims to share the preliminary findings on children's preschool attendance, focusing on findings from the 60 intervention schools for playgroup and preprimary 1 children.

Delivery of the Intervention

The intervention was delivered by the current teacher in PP1 (the county teacher) and a caregiver (new teacher) hired by Kenyatta University to implement the project. The caregiver supported the learning needs of the three-year-olds during the whole group and small group activities in the school-based care environment. This was particularly important given the varying ages and abilities of the children in the PP1 intervention class. The program considered the needs of each individual child. The children were taught at the right level, without being pushed too fast, while at the same time being appropriately challenged. For smooth implementation of the adapted curriculum, the mentors spent a day every week in the preschool, guiding and coaching the teachers and the caregivers and solving any practical problems encountered during implementation.

Data Collection and Analysis Methodology

Mentors collected data on school attendance from the 60 intervention schools for terms one and two. Each of the twelve enlisted mentors had five preschools to mentor by visiting a school weekly from Monday to Friday. The mentors recorded playgroup (PG) and preprimary 1 (PP1) children's school attendance on the day they visited the school for the twelve weeks of the term. All the reported attendance was summed up to assess the total class attendance of PP1 and PG each week.

To analyse the trend in the attendance pattern, total **(Σn)** attendance of both PG and PP1 and mean attendance **$[(\Sigma n)/N]$** of PP1 and PG were calculated for both terms one and two. Where (n) represented the total number of learners reported by the mentors and N as the number that each mentor was required to visit a school per term, which was twelve times in total.

A linear equation was applied between the class attendance and the number of visitations to further understand the class attendance pattern as presented in Figures 3 and 4 using the:

A Slope-Intercept

Formula: $(y = mx + c)$

Where:

1. (m) is the slope of the line, which can be calculated as (\dfrac{y_2 - y_1}{x_2 - x_1}) using two points on the line.
2. (c) is the y-intercept, which is the point where the line crosses the y-axis.
3. (y) is the attendance of PP1 and PG every week
4. (x) is the number of weeks the mentors visited a school

Results

The findings for term one and two weekly attendance are presented in Figures 3 to 5.

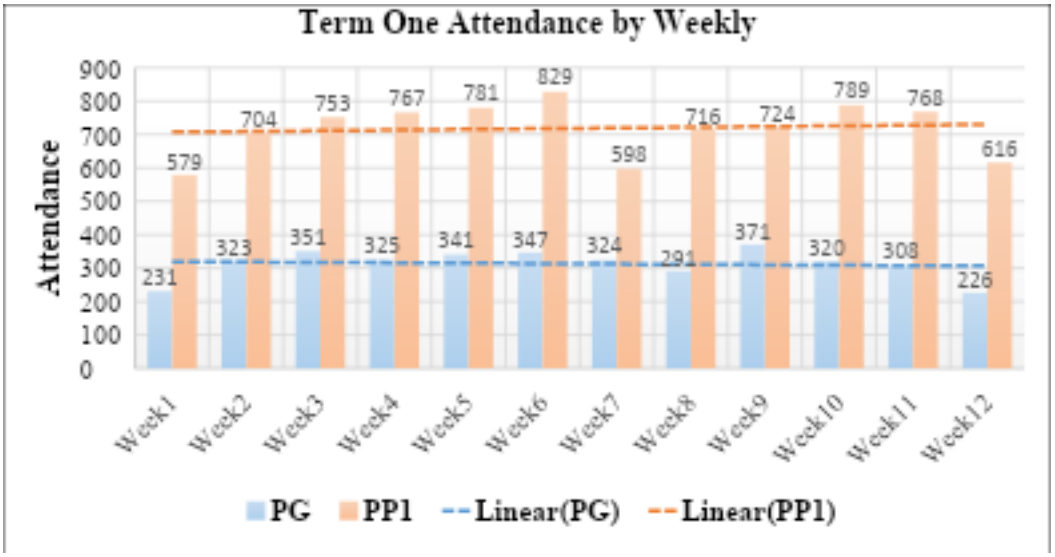

Figure 3: Weekly Attendance for PP1 and PG in Term 1

The analysis of weekly attendance patterns for the two learner groups, represented by PPI learners and PG learners, reveals distinct trends over the 12 weeks of term 1. While PPI learners generally indicated an increasing trend in attendance from week one to week seven, PG learners showed an unsteady trend in the first half of the term.

For the PG learners, the peak class attendance was noted in week nine, reaching an average of 371 total attendance, while the lowest attendance was recorded in week twelve, averaging 226 attendees. This fluctuation in attendance levels suggests that PG learners' engagement might be influenced by external factors such as public holidays or breaks due to sporting activities in schools as well as being sent home for levies or when their older siblings are away from schools for one reason or the other as the children miss out on whom to accompany them to and from school.

On the other hand, PPI learners demonstrated a contrasting pattern, with the highest attendance recorded in week six, peaking at 821 attendance, while the lowest attendance for PPI learners was observed in week one, when the children were being enrolled to preprimary for their first term in the school calendar year. The lower attendance at the start of the term could be attributed to various factors, such as children adjusting to the new schedule and new environment away from home. Overall, Figure 4 highlights a positive trend in attendance during the first half of the term

contrasting with the overall downward trend observed in the second half of the term of Week 7-12 (Figure 5)

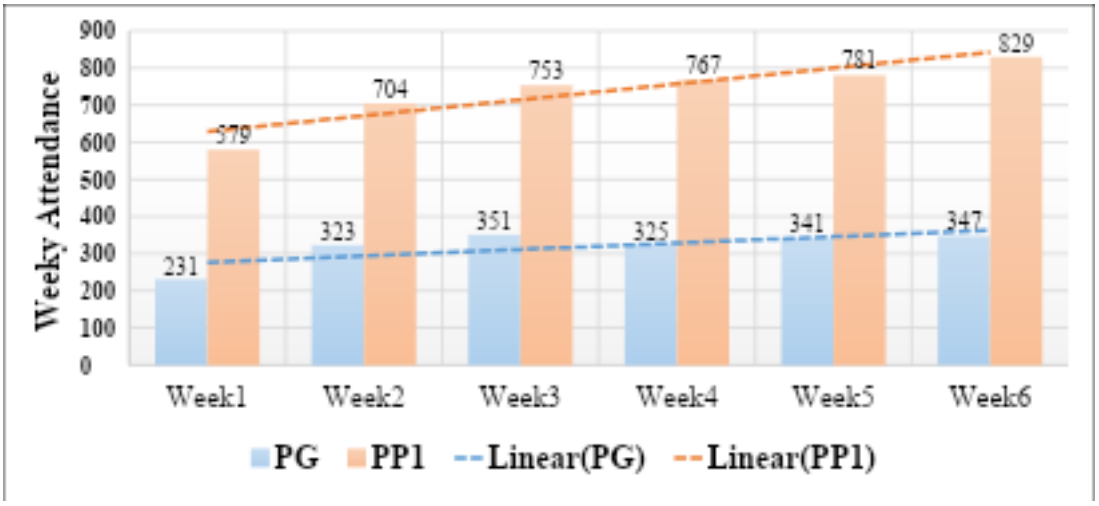

Figure 4: PP1 and PG attendance in the first half of the Term 1(Week 1-6)

Figure 4 shows a general increase in attendance for both PPI and PG learner groups during the first half of the term compared to the second half of the term in Figure 5.

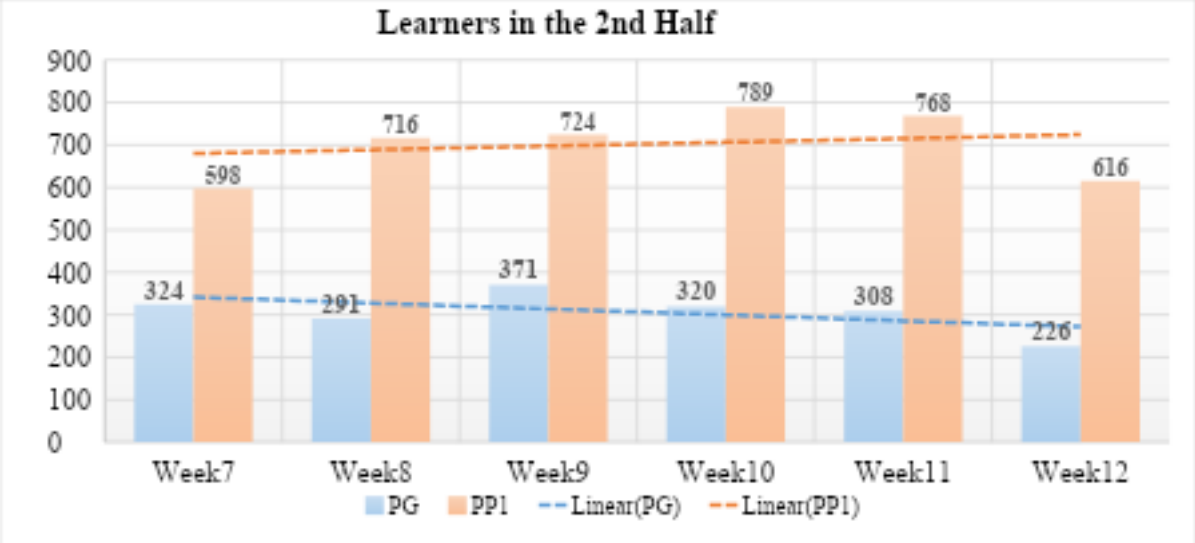

Figure 5 PP1 and PG learners in the second half of the first term

The positive slope indicates that attendance increased as the week progressed. Specifically, for every additional week, there was an additional of approximately 2.08 PP1 learners reporting to school. This could be attributed to parents sending their children to school when they attained the

approved age of four years to join PP1. Both groups showed lower attendance levels in week seven, likely attributed to the half-term break, and in week twelve, which typically marks the end of the term when some schools had closed while others were waiting to close.

A notable aspect of this period is the higher average attendance in the playgroup, with 319 learners on average, compared to the overall average of 313 learners throughout the term. This suggests that the playgroup children may have had a more consistent engagement level during the early weeks of the term.

During the second half of the term, PPI and PG learners experienced lower attendance levels than in the first half. This decline in attendance can partially be attributed to the half-term break in week 7, which resulted in fewer schools being visited. Additionally, fluctuations in attendance were observed in week 8 to week 11, likely due to various scheduled extracurricular activities that took place during these weeks, including sports days and other school events. In week 12, some schools had already closed by the time of the scheduled visitation, and in some cases, PP1 classes were utilised for examinations. This led to a noticeable drop in attendance, especially among PG learners, as there were no examinations for them. Consequently, some learners were compelled by their parents not to attend school during this week.

Despite these challenges, it's important to note that the mean attendance in both groups remained below the average for the entire term. PG learners had an average attendance of 306, while PP1 learners had an average of 701. This discrepancy highlights the varying attendance patterns between the two groups, with PP1 learners showing a higher average attendance throughout the term.

Term 1 Monthly Attendance and Variations in School

As presented in Figure 6, the monthly attendance patterns point to variations in how learners came to school in the first term. The second month of the term, spanning from February to March, recorded the highest attendance, particularly among the PG learners. This surge in attendance was concentrated in weeks 5 to 8, indicating a period of heightened engagement and participation. Conversely, the PG group experienced the lowest attendance rates towards the end of the term, specifically in the last month of April. This decline in attendance was observed from week 9 to week 12, suggesting a waning interest or availability among children toward the end of the term.

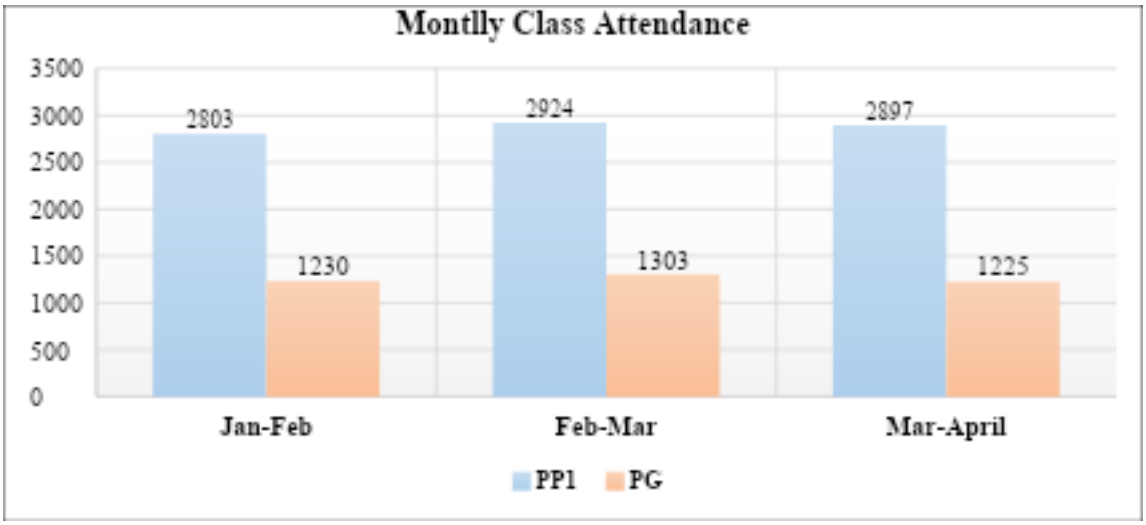

Figure 6. Monthly attendance of PP1 and PG learners

For the PP1 group, the lowest attendance was recorded during the first month of the term, from January to February. This period, encompassing weeks 1 to 4, marked a time of transition from home to school and adjustment for many children, potentially affecting their initial commitment to regular attendance. All the schools that were not visited due to holiday breaks and school activities were denoted a zero. The breaks reflect a temporary pause in the curriculum implementation, particularly noticeable in the high variation in attendance in the second half of the first term. Absenteeism implies that the class teacher would be forced to reteach the learned concepts/content to benefit those learners who did not attend school.

Term 2 Weekly attendance

The weekly findings for term two on attendance are presented on Figures 7 - 9.

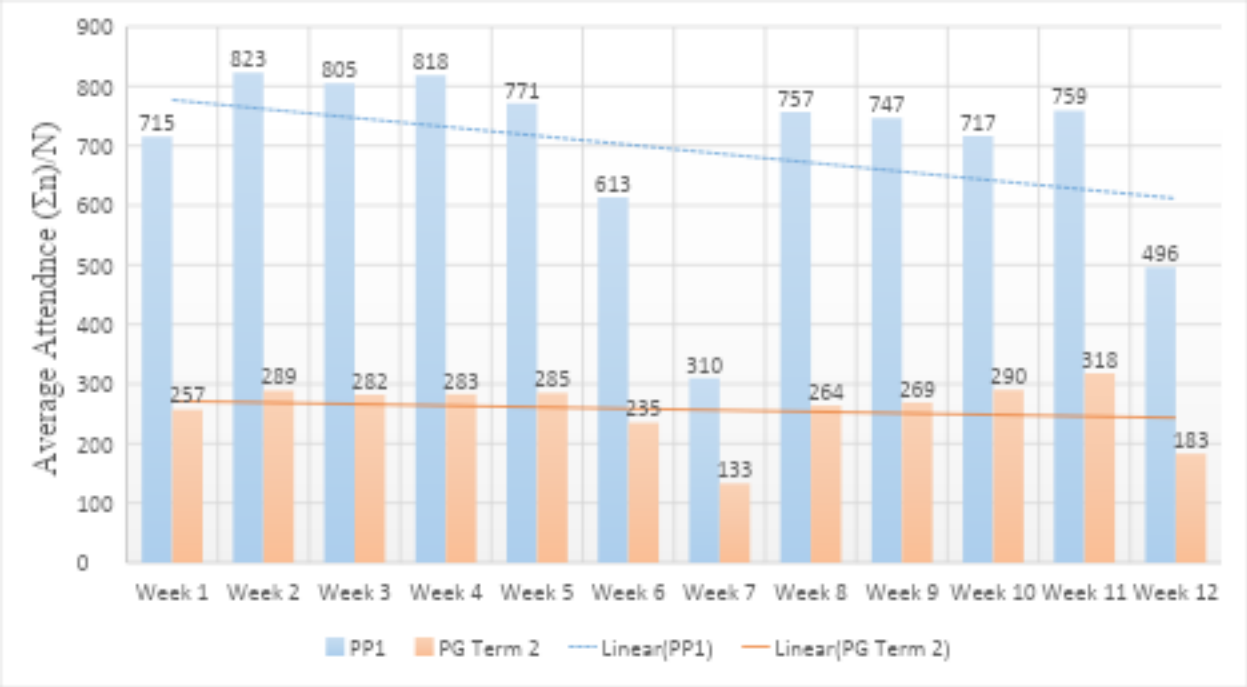

Figure 7: Term 2 Weekly Attendance for PP1 and PG

The results indicate a decline in both PPI and PG learners, as shown by the linear trend line. However, the decline was different for the two groups. For PG learners, the highest class attendance was recorded in week 11, reaching an average of 318 attendees, while the lowest attendance was recorded in week seven at an average of 133 learners. As alluded to above, this attendance fluctuation suggests that PG learners' engagement may be influenced by external factors such as holidays, mid-term breaks, and examination week or school activities.

In contrast, PPI learners displayed a different pattern, with the peak attendance occurring in week two at 823 learners (Figure 8). The lowest attendance for PPI learners was noted in week seven, which coincided with the beginning of the second half of the term (Figure 9). The negative slope of the attendance equation indicates a decrease in attendance as the term progresses, with an average decline of approximately 2.08 PPI learners for each additional week.

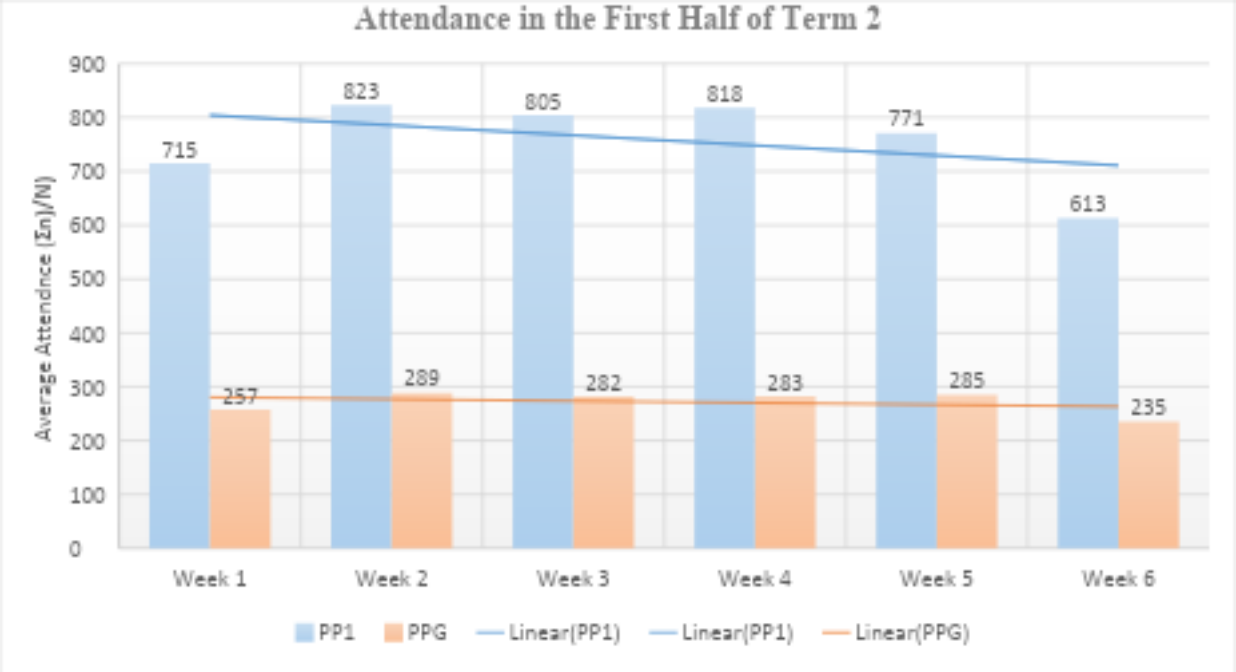

Figure 8: PP1 and PG learners in the second half of the 2nd term (Week 1-6)

Figure 9 illustrates a general decline in attendance for both groups in the second half of term 2.

Despite the overall decreasing trend, a notable aspect of this period is the higher average attendance recorded for both groups. On average, PP1 learners had 756 attendees, significantly above the overall average of 694 for the term. Similarly, the PG group had an average attendance of 271 learners during the first term, slightly exceeding the term average of 257.

The data further reveals that the highest attendance for both groups occurred in the second week, marking a peak in school attendance. In contrast, the lowest attendance figures were observed in week 1 and week 6, which correspond to the beginning and end of the first half of the term, respectively. This pattern suggests that attendance may be influenced by factors such as the transition into the term and the approach of the midterm break.

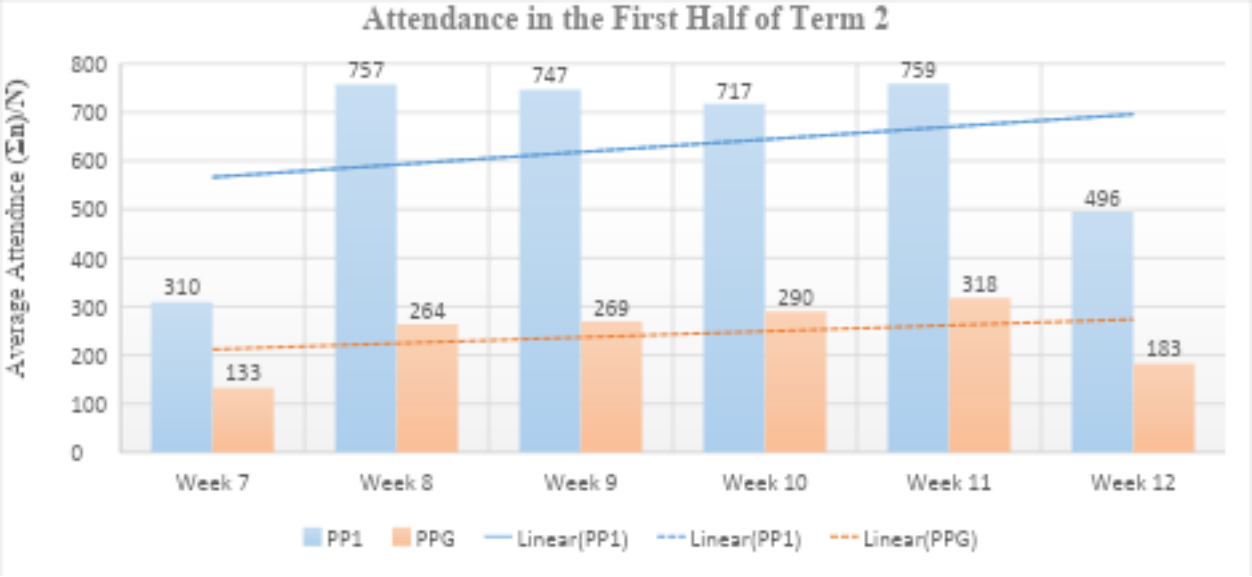

Figure 9: PP1 and PG learners in the second half of the 2nd term (Week 7-12)

During the second half of the term, PPI and PG learner groups experienced lower attendance levels than in the first half, as presented (Figure 9). This decline in attendance can be partially attributed to the half-term break in week 7, which resulted in fewer schools being visited. Additionally, fluctuations in attendance were observed in week 10 to week 12, likely due to various school calendar activities that took place during these weeks, including sports days and other school events.

In week 12, some schools had already closed by the time of the scheduled visitation, and in some cases, PP1 classes were utilised for examinations. Consequently, some learners did not attend school during this week. Despite these challenges, it's important to note that the mean attendance in both groups remained below the average mean attendance for the entire term. PG learners had an average attendance of 242, while PP1 learners had an average of 631.

Term 2 Monthly School Attendance

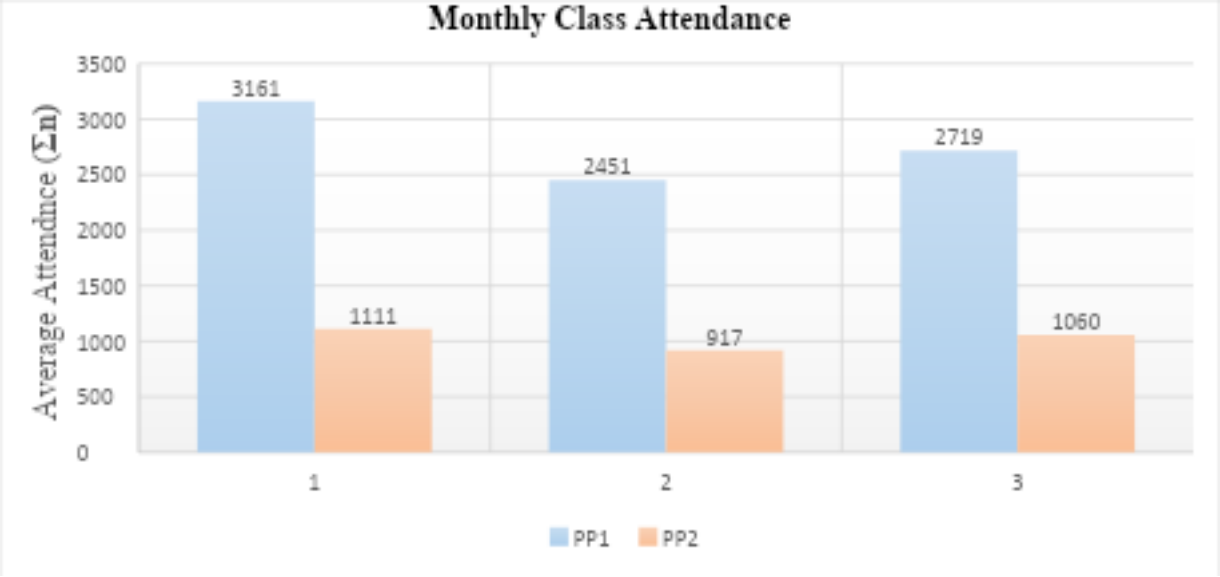

Figure 10. Monthly attendance of PP1 and PG learners

The monthly attendance patterns for term 2 are presented in Figure 10. The second month of the term, spanning from June to July, recorded the lowest attendance in both groups. This low attendance was recorded in weeks 6 and 7. To note, all the schools that were not visited due to breaks, holidays, and activities were denoted a zero. The breaks reflect a temporary pause in the curriculum implementation, particularly noticeable in low attendance at the beginning of the second half of the term. Absenteeism also implies that the class teacher would be forced to reteach the class to benefit those who did not attend school.

Attendance Trends across Terms and Variability in Attendance

As indicated in Table 1, an examination of attendance trends across terms 1 and 2 reveals that PP1 learners had an average total attendance of 719 in Term 1, slightly decreasing to 694 in Term 2. Notably, the mean attendance per school remained constant at 12, indicating stable attendance levels despite the minor decline in total numbers.

Table 1 **Attendance Trends across Term 1 and Term 2**

Statistics	**Term 1**		**Term 2**	
	PP1	**PG**	**PP1**	**PG**
Average Term Attendance Total	**719**	313	**694**	257
Mean Attended Per School	12	5	12	5
Std. Deviation	2.16	1.32	7.82	2.51
Maximum	789	351	818	318
Minimum	579	226	310	133

Table 1 provides a comparative attendance analysis for both PP1 and PG learners in Term 1 and Term 2. The results show that PG learners had an average total attendance of 313 in Term 1, which

decreased to 257 in Term 2. Like PP1, the mean attendance per school for PG remained unchanged at 5, reflecting a consistent level of participation despite the overall drop in attendance.

Regarding variability, PP1 experienced an increase in standard deviation from 2.16 in Term 1 to 7.82 in Term 2, indicating greater fluctuations in attendance during the second term. In contrast, PG learners exhibited a minimal change in variability between the two terms, suggesting a more stable attendance pattern, as presented in Figures 11 and 12.

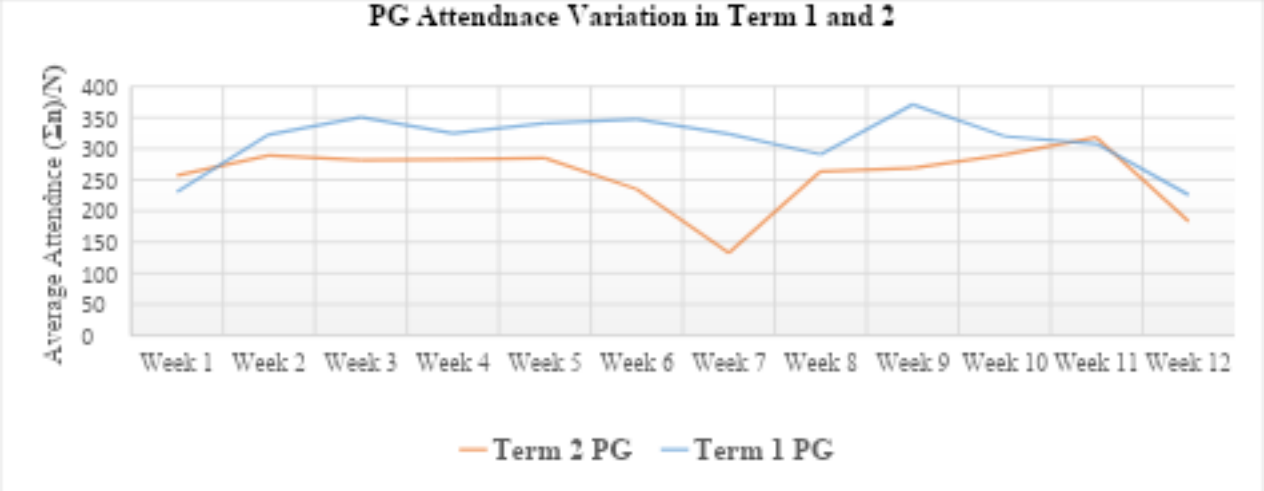

Figure 11. Termly attendance for PG learners

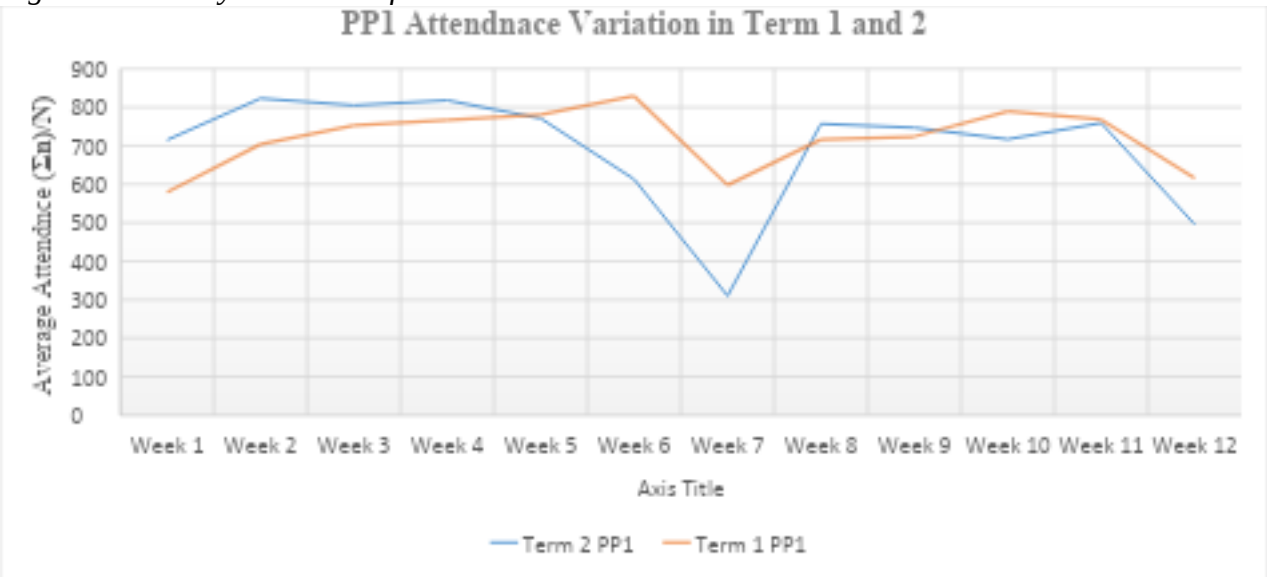

Figure 12. Termly Attendance for PP1

When analysing maximum and minimum attendance figures, PP1 recorded a maximum attendance of 789 and a minimum of 579 in Term 1. In Term 2, these figures increased to a maximum of 818 and a minimum of 310, demonstrating a wider range of attendance for PP1, particularly with a

significant rise in maximum attendance during the second term. For PG learners, the maximum attendance in Term 1 was 351, with a minimum of 226. In Term 2, the maximum decreased to 318 and the minimum to 133, indicating that PG had a narrower range of attendance overall, with only minimal changes between the two terms.

The results also indicate that in both terms, attendance was notably lower during specific weeks, particularly when learners were either starting school, during the half-term break or closing for holidays. These patterns suggest that external factors, such as school openings, midterm breaks, and holidays, significantly influence attendance levels for both PP1 and PG learners. Understanding these trends can help develop strategies to improve attendance during these critical periods.

Discussion of the findings

The results indicate that in both terms, attendance was notably lower during specific weeks, particularly when students were either starting school, during the half-term break or closing for holidays. These patterns suggest that external factors, such as school opening, midterm breaks, core curricular activities and holidays, significantly influence attendance levels for both PP1 and PG learners. Understanding these trends can help develop strategies to improve attendance during these critical periods. However, from the reports by the mentors, this dip in attendance towards the mid-term and end-term was due to the tendency of the head teachers to send the learners home for school fees.

While the primary purpose of allowing three-year-olds join play groups was to allow their primary caregivers to engage in meaningful economic activities, the frequent absenteeism from school would mean that if there is nobody to stay with the child at home, then the caregiver is left with the responsibility of looking after the child. There is a need, therefore, to sensitise parents/caregivers on the need to ensure that the children are supported to be in school. Where absenteeism is associated with school levies, head teachers should be sensitised to find ways of making parents pay school levies without sending children home from school. However, where absenteeism was associated with midterm breaks and exam weeks, parents should find alternative caregivers to enable them engage in economic activities. These may include older siblings or relatives from the extended families.

Conclusions

Findings on attendance reveal lower attendance levels in the first week of opening when learners either join the school in the first term or when the school opens in the second term. Additionally, lower attendance was observed in week seven, likely attributed to the half-term break, and again in week twelve, which typically marks the end of the term when some schools had closed while others were waiting to close. This variation can also be attributed to the fact that younger children, from time to time, are likely to stay at home, especially after midterm break, wanting to be closer to their primary caregivers. Additionally, during the exam period, they are likely to stay at home since active teaching/learning is not happening, contributing to why there was an absence on week

twelve for terms 1 and 2. Being sent home for school feeding programme fees also contributed to absenteeism from school.

The PPI group may have had a more consistent engagement level during the early weeks of the term. A positive trend in attendance during the initial phase of the term, contrasting with the overall downward trend observed later in the term, indicates children's eagerness to play with the variety of teaching/learning play materials supplied to all intervention schools, making learning interesting for them.

The breaks reflect a temporary pause in the curriculum implementation, particularly noticeable in the high variation in attendance in the second half of the first term. Absenteeism implies that the class teacher would be forced to reteach the concepts and skills learned to benefit those learners who did not attend school. To remedy absenteeism, schools need to provide a uniform feeding program where all learners are provided with hot meals at school. This will allow all children to stay in school and attract them to attend school regularly. Schools can borrow a leaf from what others have been doing, for example, requesting parents/guardians to provide food staff such as cereals and grains to be prepared and cooked at in school.

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