

# **Challenges and factors contributing to learner absenteeism in selected primary schools in Acornhoek**

by

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## **CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY**

I Lawrence Mboweni (3081-866-4) hereby certify that **Challenges and factors contributing to learner absenteeism in selected primary schools in Acornhoek** is my own work and I declare that this dissertation and the work reported herein is original research by me. All sources used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I also certify that this dissertation of limited scope has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for any other degree in any institution.

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LAWRENCE MBOWENI

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DATE

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This work would not have been completed had it not been for the help and guidance of the Giver of wisdom and life, Jehovah, who was with me all steps of the way.

The unwavering support of my family, particularly my dearest wife and my beautiful children has kept me going until the finishing line. Thank you very much. I dedicate this dissertation of limited scope to you.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Learner absenteeism is one of the major precursors to poor academic performance. If learners miss school, they do not learn and ultimately they fail or drop-out. Notwithstanding, this problem does not receive the attention it deserves. A literature study, which reviewed research findings concerning absenteeism in South Africa and selected countries, provided a framework for the ensuing empirical inquiry. A qualitative study using in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, document review and observation as data gathering techniques focused on two selected primary schools with a high rate of learner absenteeism in the Acornhoek area of Mpumalanga, South Africa. Participants were purposefully selected as information rich candidates: absentee learners, parents of absentee learners, teachers and school principals. Learner absenteeism negatively impacts effective professional practice, that is, teaching and learning. The study concludes with recommendations to prevent learner absenteeism in order to improve teaching and learning in South African primary schools.

Key terms: Learner absenteeism, truancy, drop-out, school phobia, concealed absence, authorized and unauthorized absence, bullying, corporal punishment, child abuse and child labour.

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

CASE	Community Agency for Social Enquiry
EMIS	Education Management Information System
SGB	School Governing Body
SMT	School Management Team
SACMEQ	South African Consortium for Monitoring of Education Quality
SASA	South African Schools Act
HIV	Human Immune Virus
AIDS	Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome
OAP	Outcome Accountable Project
UIS	Unesco Institute of Statistics
HSRC	Human Sciences research Council
SAHRC	South African Human Rights Commission

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## **CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

The study was based on the sample of two selected primary schools with high rate of learner absenteeism which as a result experienced a high failure rates. The problems highlighted are not only isolated to these schools but they are a common phenomenon in the Acornhoek area. The research outcomes provide principals and other education officials with evidence-based data regarding the causes of absenteeism in primary schools and how these causes could be eliminated or minimized. It is therefore contended that this can improve teaching and learning. This chapter gives a brief outline of how this study was conducted.

### **1.2. SOCIO-HISTORIC BACKGROUND OF SCHOOL A AND SCHOOL B**

The selected schools in this study were identified as school A and school B. These schools are situated in the deep rural village of Acornhoek. Both schools fall within the Bohlabela District administered by the Mpumalanga Department of Education. These schools are found in a poverty stricken community where most families live in appalling conditions. Most people in this area are unemployed. The few people who are working are employed on the nearby farms where they earn meagre wages. As a result, they can afford to travel daily; this makes them migrant labourers. This resulted in their inability to monitor the schooling and the education of their children.

The two schools are relatively large with high enrolment of learners. School A was established in 1983. The infra-structure in school A is old and made from mud. The mud structure does not accommodate all learners because some are still receiving their lessons under the trees. Unfavourable weather conditions coupled with poor school infrastructure was one of the contributory factors to the high level of learner absenteeism especially during winter and rainy seasons. School A has 797 learners. In school A there are 97 vulnerable learners. The vulnerability of these learners is caused by orphanhood, abject poverty and disease. Most of these learners depend on government social grants for a living. Learners who received social grants in school A numbered 439. School A comprises grade R to grade 7. As a primary school,

the ages of learners ranged from 7 to 14 years but the school has a few learners over the age of 14. This school has 26 teachers which include 23 females (including the principal) and three males. Teachers' qualifications in school A range from a Primary Teachers Diploma up to Honours level. Only one teacher in school A has the M Ed. The ages of teachers in this school range from mid-35 up to late 50's.

School B was established in 1976. Just like in school A, the infra- structure of school B is very dilapidated and old. The buildings in school B are also made from mud. Learners in school B also receive their lessons under the trees. School B has 613 learners and most of these learners can be categorised as vulnerable learners. In school B 298 learners depend on social grants for survival. School B also comprises grade R to grade 7 and the learner age range in school B is similar to that of school A. School B also has learners above the primary school going age. School B has 18 teachers; only one teacher is male. The principal is also female. The teacher qualifications of teachers in school B range from a Primary Teachers Diploma to an Honours degree as the highest qualification. The ages of teachers in school B range from mid-30's to late 50's. Due to the high level of poverty the two schools have been classified as no fee schools; this implies that learners are exempted from paying school fees.

### **1.3 MOTIVATION TO CONDUCT THIS STUDY**

Several reasons motivated the researcher to conduct this study as follows:

- ❖ The researcher contends that the high failure rate of learners was greatly attributed to learner absenteeism, which is a frequent cause of drop out.
- ❖ This study aimed at contributing to a reduction in learner drop-out which the researcher assumes emanates from learner absenteeism.
- ❖ According to Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson and Kirk (2003:68), learner absenteeism has received little attention compared to other educational studies. The research sought to conceptually and methodologically address problems pertaining to learner absenteeism to address this knowledge gap.

- ❖ The aim of the empirical investigation was to share the research findings with the learners, teachers, parents, principal, national and provincial policy-makers to find ways to control, monitor and prevent learner absenteeism.

#### **1.4 RESEARCH PROBLEM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Learner absenteeism is linked to high failure rate and a direct result could be a decline in the culture of teaching and learning experienced in our schools. However, learner absenteeism has over the years received very little consideration.

In the light of the above, the main research question for this study was formulated as follows: What were the factors and challenges contributing to learner absenteeism in the selected schools of Acornhoek?

From the main research question, the following sub questions were formulated:

- ❖ What is the role of learners in promoting and preventing absenteeism?
- ❖ How can parents ensure that their children attend school regularly?
- ❖ What is the role of teachers in reducing or promoting learner absenteeism?
- ❖ What contribution do principals of school A and school B make to resolve learner absenteeism?

#### **1.5 RESEARCH AIMS**

The aim of the study was to investigate challenges and factors that contributed to learner absenteeism in the selected schools and in the country in general. This study aimed to develop mechanisms to detect, control, monitor and decrease learner absenteeism significantly. By decreasing and eliminating learner absenteeism, effective teaching and learning would be enhanced.

#### **1.6 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

- ❖ To provide information on the incidence of learner absenteeism in the country.
- ❖ To investigate the reason why learners absent themselves from schools.

- ❖ To determine the responsibility which parents have towards their children's problem of absenteeism.
- ❖ To establish the roles and responsibilities of teachers in relation to learner absenteeism in school A and school B.
- ❖ To determine the role of principals in the selected schools concerning learner absenteeism.
- ❖ To provide an analysis of the systems that can be used to monitor and reduce learner absenteeism.

## **1.7. PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW**

This was the section of the empirical investigation which allowed the researcher to reflect on the research problem. Knowledge about theoretical aspects of the study was obtained by an overview of the literature. The researcher consulted previous research to become familiar with current and early theories and definitions about the problem. A more detailed literature review is contained in Chapter 2.

The literature review commences with a definition of learner absenteeism as a key concept in this study. According to Atkinson, Halsey, Wilkin and Kinder (2000:36), learner absenteeism can be defined as a habitual pattern of absence from work or obligation. It is an indicator of poor individual performance as well as breach of the implicit contract between employer and employee; it is seen as management problem and informed in economic or quasi economic terms. Some scholars view learner absenteeism as the physical absence from school for an entire day. Partial and full absenteeism can also be distinguished. The former refers to being absent for a certain part of the day and the latter refers to being absent for the whole day. Furthermore, absenteeism can either be authorised by parents and schools or unauthorised. The latter refers to a situation where a learner decides not to go school out of his/her own will and without a valid reason (Moseki, 2004:25). Other concepts which were defined to give a clear understanding of learner absenteeism included: school phobia, truancy, condoned absence and school drop-out.

The terms, absenteeism and truancy, are used interchangeably throughout this study. Other sets of words which were used interchangeably included teacher and educator because they are similar in meaning and connotation. As part of a review of the literature, the researcher provides a detailed account on learner absenteeism in the South African schooling system. In this regard, learner absenteeism and its related concepts are described according to the legislative context particularly in terms of South African School Act 84 of 1996. The researcher further outlined the relationship between learner absenteeism, truancy and late-coming. According to Whitney (1994:07), truancy, late-coming and learner absenteeism are interrelated. Further, the causes of learner absenteeism were identified and discussed in detail in the subsequent chapter. These include learner based factors and socio-economic factors.

Finally, a comparative analysis established the extent of the problem in South Africa in comparison to selected countries which maintain high standards of education: United States of America (USA), United Kingdom (UK) and Australia.

## **1.8 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

In this study, the researcher applied a qualitative research approach in order to explore and analyse the fundamental factors and challenges that contribute to learner absenteeism. This approach also attempted to unravel the socio-economic circumstances under which absenteeism occurred. This was achieved by applying a holistic approach to the problem (Bryman, 1995: 61-66). A case study design was used because it emphasised detailed contextual analysis of limited number of events, conditions and their relationships as illustrated by Yin (1994:1-12). This design is used in investigations where the researcher have little control over events and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real life context as is the case with learner absenteeism (Bryman, 1995:69).

### **1.7.1 Sampling**

The sampling method was purposive sampling and the reasons for selecting the sample of participants have been explained in section 3.2. The participants included learners who were

chronic absentees, their parents, class teachers from grade 4 to grade 7 in the selected schools and the two school principals.

### **1.8.2 Data collection and analysis**

Data collection strategies used in this study included in depth interviews and focus group interviews. Structured questions determined biographical data of participants and unstructured questions to probe factors and challenges that contributed towards learner absenteeism in school A and school B. Participant observation was also used in the light of documents studied to generate data on learner absenteeism

Data analysis was inductive and the reasons for the data analysis strategy were outlined in section 3.4.

## **1.9 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY**

The validity and reliability of this study was addressed by posing this broad question as illustrated by Denzin (1997:320): would the researcher as an inquirer actually hear the meaning that he thought he heard? The researcher compared multiple data sources in search of common themes and more details in section 3.5.

### **1.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The ethical considerations of this study include obtaining informed consent to conduct this study and maintaining anonymity, confidentiality, privacy, avoidance of betrayal and deception in order to meet the requirements of the ethical code of conduct.

### **1.11 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The limitations of this empirical investigation have been outlined and suggestions made as to how these limitations were mitigated. For more details refer to section 5.5 of chapter 5.

## **1.12 CLARIFICATION OF ESSENTIAL TERMS**

Learner absenteeism can be defined as being not at school for the entire day. Learner absenteeism can be partial when a learner appears at school for a brief period (Moseki, 2004:25). Another scholar explained learner absenteeism as a habitual pattern of absence from school (Atkin et al, 2000:36).

School phobia is defined as a phenomenon where a learner is fearful and unwilling to attend school due to circumstances surrounding that learner (Moseki, 2004:16).

Truancy is defined as unauthorized absence from school by a learner. The learner appears for a brief moment and disappears before the end of a school day (Moseki, 2004:22).

Condoned absence is when a learner absents himself or herself from school with the knowledge or approval of teachers or guardians (Whitney, 1994:10).

Dropping out school is defined as an extension of absenteeism where the learner does not attend school permanently as a result of social or school based factors (Finn, 1991:54).

Unauthorised absence is when a learner does not attend school without a valid reason and without the knowledge of teachers or guardians (Wheatley & Spillane, 2001:122).

## **1.13 DIVISION OF CHAPTERS**

The chapters in this study were arranged in the following sequence:

### **Chapter1: Background of the study**

The chapter explored the context which this study was conducted. The chapter focused on the social-historical background of school A and school B. The aims and objectives of the study were outlined in this chapter. The motivation to conduct this study formed part of this chapter. Research questions and problem statement were formulated as proposed by Vital and Jansen (2006:17).



## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter described the theoretical perspectives and previous research findings regarding learner absenteeism. This illustrated how others have handled methodological and design issues in learner absenteeism (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:64).

## **Chapter 3: Research design and methodology**

This indicated the approaches used in conducting this study. This chapter further outlined the research designs and techniques employed in this study. A description of the research design included sampling methods and data collection strategies as suggested by Yin (2002: 1 – 12).

## **Chapter 4: Data collection and analysis**

This presented the findings of the interviews conducted with all the participants. This part of the research provided answers to the research questions. The aim of this chapter was to ascertain if the aims and objectives of the study were achieved (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007:349 – 382).

## **Chapter 5: Recommendations**

In this chapter, the researcher provided possible solutions to the identified factors and challenges that contribute to learner absenteeism. The researcher also recommended ways of how to reduce or prevent learner absenteeism. The researcher summarised his findings in relation to what is entailed in the literature review and identified topics which required further investigation.

## **1.14 RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

This indicated the background to the problem, problem formulation and aims. The research design was also described. The following chapter presents the findings of the literature review.



## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

In this study, a literature review was carried out to investigate the challenges posed by learner absenteeism and to develop remedial action to address the problem. In terms of Community Agency for Social Enquiry and Joint Education Trust (2007:52), little is known about learner absenteeism in South African schools but this does not mean that it does not exist. It may imply that the extent of the problem could not be ascertained due to lack of proper monitoring mechanism. This literature review helped the researcher justify the significance and contribution of this study by focusing on methodological limitations of previous studies. Methods used for this purpose included sampling, measurement, procedures and other related interventions.

### **2.2 DEFINITIONAL ISSUES**

According to Gabb (1994:58), a number of terms are related and used interchangeably with learner absenteeism. These concepts are familiar in meaning and similar to absenteeism. The concepts include truancy and school phobia. Absenteeism can be authorized by parents and schools and it can also be unauthorized; absenteeism can be legitimate e.g. due to illness or illegitimate e.g. due to parents and learners under estimating the value of education (Atkinson et al., 2000:36).

In South Africa this problem is covered by the South African School Act, however the Act does not necessarily define the term learner absenteeism. The Act merely provides an explanation of absenteeism in the South African school context. Learner absenteeism is a serious hindrance to effective professional practice (teaching and learning) and thus a clear definition of learner absenteeism in South African school context is called for. The aim of this study and this literature review in particular was to fully understand the extent and the challenges of learner absenteeism with the view to provide solutions by emulating best practices outlined by other scholars. Learner absenteeism as a habitual pattern of absence from obligation or school can be viewed as an indicator of poor academic performance, which is rooted in the socio-economic circumstances of a learner (Malcolm et al., 2003:44).

Another factor closely related to learner absenteeism is the distinction between authorized and unauthorized absence of learners from school. Unauthorized absence or illegitimate authorised absenteeism is referred to as post registration truancy (Atkinson et al., 2000: 68). Unauthorized absence is the type of absence which is not authorized by the schools and parents have no valid reason for granting such absence (Whitney, 1994:7).

The terms absenteeism and truancy were used interchangeably for the purpose of this study because they are similar in meaning although they differ slightly in their contextual application. Truancy is the direct result of absenteeism and absenteeism may be the direct result of truancy (Wittenberg, 2005:77). Truancy can be defined as unauthorized absence from school: the learner reports for school for a brief moment and later on disappears (Railsback, 2004:74). Truancy is closely linked to partial absence as the learner leaves school before closing time (Moseki M, 2004:22). Truancy can also be explained as the act or condition of being absent without permission (Edward & Malcon 2002:87)

Another concept closely related to learner absenteeism is school phobia. School phobia refers to unwillingness to attend school and staying at home with the knowledge of the learner's parents. School phobia includes fear of failure and concern about the health and welfare of learners by parents (Moseki, 2004:16). An example of school phobia is a child's sudden fear of attending because the learner is subjected to criticism by other learners and teachers (Finlay, 2005, 44).

Apart from the terms above, there is what is called condoned absence: when parents fail to uphold their responsibilities as parents and shift that responsibility to their children (Railsback, 2004:92). Learners are made to run family business or look after sick siblings on behalf of the parents; however, condoned absence happens when parents are just not interested in the education of their children (Whitney, 1994:10). Condoned absence or justified absence can be caused by factors such as illness, accident, family bereavement, attending educational appointments, cultural activities or religious observance (Zafar, Kgobe, Napo & Parker, 2005:68). This discussion illustrates how absenteeism and its related terms have been given different meanings by different scholars (CASE & JET, 2007:20). The clarification of the above concepts has been done to justify the study by showing the lack of consensus among scholars with regard to this issue. This literature review established important links between existing

knowledge and the research problem being investigated and the possible solutions to the problem (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:64).

### **2.3 LEARNER ABSENTEEISM IN SOUTH AFRICA AND OTHER COUNTRIES**

In terms of South African Human Rights Commission (2007:54), absenteeism rates in South African have been found to vary between 5% and 15%. The focus of studies on learner absenteeism varies considerably because it is difficult to draw firm conclusions based on these studies. To support the above fact, Budlender (2007:49) contends that school attendance of children between the age of 10 and 17 conducted in 30 000 households was fairly poor. Budlender found that the attendance rate of children of the cited age groups was 92% (absence rate 8%). This 8% occurred for more than five days over the past 12 months during the period under review. Another study that dealt with learner absenteeism was conducted by the Community Agency for Social Research and Joint Education Trust (2007:54). The study was based on recall diaries from 1 400 learners. The findings suggested the attendance rate in South Africa was 85% (15% absenteeism rate). This clearly shows that no coherence in the studies conducted and it was the aim of this study to provide findings which were consistent and which could be applied in similar situations.

In the year 2000, the South African Ministry of Education commissioned the South African Consortium for Monitoring of Educational Quality to undertake a study in 169 sample schools on absenteeism in grade 6 learners. Some items in the questionnaire asked learners the number of days they were absent in the previous month and the reasons for such absences. The number of absent days was found to be 1.6 day nationally (Moloi & Strauss, 2005: 78). The analysis by Moloi and Strauss on absenteeism found that reports on absenteeism were more concerned with number of days learners were absent rather than the causes of absenteeism.

The National Treasury's 2006 Provincial Budgets and Expenditure Review report also measured learner absenteeism through number of days learners lost. The report indicated 7 344 529 days for the primary phase of education excluding Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Western Cape and Northern Cape. According to the above reports, absenteeism was more prevalent in the Western Cape which lost 150 490 days due to absenteeism. The Treasury's 2006 Provincial

Budget and Expenditure Review report data are not entirely reliable as in the same report, the Western Cape Province was not part of the survey although it recorded the highest rate of learner absenteeism (outside of the said report). This study identified new directions worth investigating, actual causes of learner absenteeism and the need to avoid unnecessary duplication by correctly interpreting results, making meaningful conclusions and recommendations as suggested by Babbie (2007:26).

Statistics released by the Department for Education and Skills in London in 2003 revealed that absentee rate for all schools in England was at 6.83 % (Department of Education and Skills, 2003:59). In all London schools unauthorized learner absenteeism percentage was only 0.70%. Absenteeism rates in Africa are much higher: in Namibia 50% of grade 6 learners were in schools where learner absenteeism was described as a huge problem (Moloi & Strauss, 2005:81). In Tasmania the rate of unauthorized absenteeism was at 2% to 3% but Gabb (1994:58) argues that most researchers settle on an unauthorized absenteeism rate of 15% which raises a serious question on the accuracy of the findings from other studies.

In terms of unauthorized absence discrepancies appeared in the way in which findings and results were presented because 70% of sampled students in London schools admitted truanting during a three year period (Stoll, 1990:22). A further 40%-60% of learners of compulsory school age learners in Victoria Australia reported engaging in unauthorised absenteeism (Moseki M, 2004:16).

In South Africa, a study focusing on grade 10 learners in three schools in the Frances Baard region of Northern Cape revealed that four or more learners per class missed certain lessons during the week. It was also found that the lessons which were more likely to be missed were mathematics and biology lessons and bunking of lessons led to absenteeism (Moseki 2004:19).

The differences in findings and descriptions in the way in which learner absenteeism was presented was attributed to the fact that terms such as absenteeism truancy and other related concepts were given different meanings by different writers. Conclusions reached in one study could not be automatically regarded as being supported or refuted by conclusions reached in another study (Buchel, 2006:76).

According to Phurutse (2005:14), learner absenteeism was caused by three factors which were as follows: individual and personal characteristics, socio-economic reasons and school based reasons. Phurutse (2005:18) maintains that illness is a primary reason for legitimately authorized absenteeism in South Africa and elsewhere. Age was mentioned as another reason for absenteeism because, according to Railsback (2004:39), learners at the ages of 16 to 17 years were prone to absenteeism but in practice learners as young as 13 were adversely affected by absenteeism and truancy.

Morris and Rutt (2004:94) argue that gender was one of the individual and personal reasons for absenteeism but he did not substantiate how gender contributed to learner absenteeism. Morris and Rutt (2004:96) maintain that males were more likely to be absent without authorization. He emphasise that the difference is not statistically significant but indicate that, to a lesser extent, violence and sexual assault could increase the rate of absenteeism among female learners. According to the 2002 Tasmanian Government Publications (2002:188), learners who are not necessarily struggling in their work were absent; learners from wealthy families had psychological problems, poor social skills and low self-esteem which resulted in their being absent.

Socio-economic reasons was the second group of factors contributing to learner absenteeism. These factors were common in most poverty stricken communities. According to Railsback (2004:49), lack of parental involvement in the learner's education plays a negative role in the achievement and attendance of learners. According to Malcolm et al (2003:65), there is a link between parental and caregiver involvement in learner education and attendance. Railsback (2004:51) emphasises that when more adults are available in the household, the more likely that the learner from that household would be in school as required.

Disintegrated family structures have been classified as a socio-economic reason for learner absenteeism. In terms of the study by SAHRC (2006:12) conducted in the Eastern Cape, teachers reported that 74% of the learners were affected by problems relating to an unstable home environment. Similarly in selected schools (school A and B) where this study was conducted, learners who were prone to absenteeism were found to come from poor family units.

Similarly, the Comprehensive Evaluation Programme on Drop-out and Repetition Rate Longitudinal study aimed at grades 8-12 suggests that unstable and insecure home environments contribute greatly to learner absenteeism (McCluskey. Bynun & Patchin 2004:19). According to the HSRC (2005:36), it was estimated that 14% of South African school children go to school on an empty stomach. In Limpopo Province the percentage of learners going to school without food is up to 22% and this has devastating effects on the wellbeing of a learning child and is a hindrance to the child's performance and school attendance (HSRC, 2005:39).

Child labour was stated as the cause of learner absenteeism. According to the HSRC (2005:41), 38% of South African learners were engaged in some form of household or domestic labour. At some schools learners were expected to work, for instance cleaning their classrooms; school attendance was slightly higher for learners who were not engaged in any work at school. Attendance rate of learners who attended schools in which they were made to work was 94% compared to 97% in a school where learners did not work at all (Wittenberg, 2005:27).

Lack of transport and its unreliability was a problem which gave rise to truancy and absenteeism and in some cases, led to drop-outs. According to the SAHRC (2006:49) transport, costs were often a greater financial burden on parents and caregivers. The SAHRC found that most learners had to walk up to seven kilometres to and from school irrespective of National Department's policy to assist learners who walk further than five kilometres to and from school a day. The long distance to schools increased the chances of road accidents and threats from criminals and ultimately this led to learner absenteeism (Zafar et al, 2005:68).

Reviewing the causes of learners' absenteeism in South African context without touching on the crucial and sensitive issue of HIV/AIDS would be incomplete. The impact of HIV/AIDS towards learner performance and effective teaching cannot be overlooked. According to Buchel (2006:62), maternal orphan rate was 3.3% for children aged 2 to 18 and around 10% of children would have lost a caregiver by their 9<sup>th</sup> year of age, rising to 15% by the time such children reached the age of 14.



Brookes, Shisana and Richter (2004:129) maintain that 3% of children aged 12 to 18 are heads of the households and the findings further reveal that 45% of these children live in homes where there is not enough money for food and clothes. Most of these child-headed families depend on government child support and foster grants. Schoolgoing children as young as nine are expected to fend for themselves and assume the responsibility of fending for their siblings or sick parents and this adversely affects their school work. These children are more likely to truant to check on their sick family members and ultimately become absent (Buchel, 2006:8).

Research on education on South African rural communities found that teenage pregnancy, absenteeism, poverty and unemployment were casually inter-related (Zafar et al, 2005:72). Pregnancy contributes to absenteeism in short term and in the long term tends to result in drop out of school (Buchel, 2006:11).

The last causes of learner absenteeism in South African context revolve around school based reasons: boring instruction of subject matter. Survey findings in most cities of the UK revealed that mathematics and science lessons were most frequently missed by learners (Moseki, 2004:108). According to Zafar et al (2005:36), substantial evidence suggests that the requirement to pay school fees and other costs like uniform are among the barriers that prevent learners from attending school regularly.

Moseki (2004:38) suggests that absenteeism rates were lower where there was a positive relationship between the educator and the learners. Absenteeism and truancy occurred where learners avoided certain teachers and negative attitudes displayed by some teachers drove learners out of school. Insults and humiliating remarks by the teachers led to school non-attendance.

According to HSRC (2005:29), punishment for late coming was so severe to the extent that instead of going to school, learners opted to stay away from school. Even though the practice of corporal punishment has been abolished in the South African school system, the Human Science Research Council Emerging Voices (2005:33) revealed that many schools still practiced corporal punishment. Learners engaged in unauthorized absenteeism in order to avoid punishment.

HSRC (2005:32) found that poor school facilities contributed towards learner absenteeism as in the case of schools which did not have flush toilets and electricity. HSRC (2005:45) revealed that girl learners tend to stay at home when they were menstruating. The sanitation facilities at schools were inadequate or unavailable and these subjected girls to severe humiliation which led to absenteeism.

In the US the percentage of eight 8 non-Hispanic black and Hispanic students who reported missing three or more days of school decreased significantly from 1994 to 2005. From 27% for each group in 1994 to 24% and 23% respectively in 2005, attendance among fourth grade students in these groups remained stable from 1994 to 2005. In 2005, both fourth and eighth grade American Indian students were more likely than Hispanic black and white Students to have missed three or more days of school in the last month. It means that 25%, 21%, 18% respectively in the fourth grade, and 29%, 23%, 24% and 19% respectively in the eighth grade were reported absent. Moreover in both grade levels, Asian Pacific Islander students were the least likely to have missed three or more days in the past month, 13% in the fourth grade and 12% in the eighth grade (Ready, 2010:271).

## **2.4 EFFECTS OF LEARNER ABSENTEEISM**

Attending school forms an integral part in the performance and achievement of learners. Attendance is also an important factor in school success among youth. Epstein and Sheldon (2002:31) indicate that better attendance was related to higher academic achievement for learners of all backgrounds particularly for learners with lower socio-economic status. In American context, starting from the kindergarten, learners who attend school regularly score higher on tests than their peers who are frequently absent (Ready, 2010:286).

Chronic truancy, which was referred to as frequent unexcused absence, was a predictor of undesirable outcomes in adolescence, including academic failure, school drop-out, substance abuse, gang involvement and criminal activities (McCluskey, Bynum & Patchin, 2004:214). In the US, factors, which contributed to learner absenteeism, include family health, financial

concerns, poor school climate, drug and alcohol abuse, transportation problems and differing community attitudes towards education (Teasly,2004:117).

There is evidence to suggest that in the US differences by disability status had a stake in learner absenteeism. Learners classified as having a disability were more likely than students without a disability to have missed three or more school days within the past month. In 2005, 29% of eighth-graders with a disability reported missing three or more school days within the past month compared to 20% of students without a disability (Baker, Sigma & Nugent, 2007:168). In the US, difference by school-wide percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch yielded variations in the rate of learner absenteeism. Learners attending schools where more than 75% of the learners were eligible for free or reduced price lunches (a proxy for poverty, same as feeding scheme in South Africa) were reported frequently absent. These learners were more likely to report missing three or more days of school than were learners attending schools with a 10% or lower eligibility rate (Ready, 2010:276).

Ready (2010:279) contends that 25% of eighth-graders and 22% of fourth-graders at school with a greater than 75% eligibility rate, compared with 17% and 16% respectively, of their counterparts in school where 10% or fewer learners were eligible were reported to be chronic absentees. To reduce learner absenteeism in American schools, the government set national goals which had to be met in order to curb and prevent learner absenteeism (Reid, 2006:39). The No Child Left behind Act enacted in January 2002 provides increased accountability for states, school districts, schools and more flexibility for states and local agencies in how they use federal education dollars. The Adequate Yearly progress measures hold elementary school and middle schools accountable for learner absenteeism (Teasly, 2004:123).

There is evidence to suggest that in Australia over the recent years, there has been more time devoted to researching a better understanding of learner absenteeism, truancy and dropping out of school (Bond, 2004:13). Teasly (2004:123) maintains that in the US no research answered the question of whether some strategies to combat learner absenteeism worked better than others and if there were resources which offered step-by-step guidelines for developing and improving learner attendance. Reid (2006:41) argues that the available literature on learner absenteeism

presents a myriad of ideas and theories relating to tackling absenteeism but not a great deal of evidence to reinforce their effectiveness. According to Reid, what remains apparent was that raising attendance within schools was not a simple prospect.

When reviewing previous research, the literature did not provide consensus regarding an exact explanation of non-attendance. Learner absenteeism at school can manifest itself in different forms. It is a common practice for learners to be absent from school due to illness or a situation beyond the learner or parent's control (e.g. accidents). Under the circumstances cited in the above sentences, learners return to school promptly and can explain the reason for their absence (Bonzos, 2005:15). Absenteeism due to illness or accidents can be justified and has minimum impact. Bond (2004:112) warns that where a learner's absence is unexplained, persistent and habitual, it is worrying to the teachers and even parents. Learner absenteeism which is also known as school refusal applies to absence from school without a valid reason. Bond (2004:118) emphasises that this is common for primary school-going learners. This kind of practice is contrary to concealed truancy where learners tried to hide their absenteeism behaviour and parents are mostly unaware of their children's absence from school.

Concealed absence is more prevalent to learners in high schools and when absenteeism involves parent participation, comprehending the motives and reasons for such absences and negotiating relevant responses by the school became different to those situations of hidden truancy (Bonzos, 2005:17). According to the Auditor General Victoria (2004:64), prolonged habitual and persistent learner absenteeism could have deleterious effects in the child's later life. Absenteeism does not only negatively impact effective professional practice (teaching and learning). Learners who are absent from school are at the greatest risk of dropping out of school early and becoming long-term unemployed as it is difficult, if not impossible, to secure a decent job without proper educational background (Bond, 2004:123).

Learners who drop out of school early also run the risk of being trapped in poverty. Such a learner in his/her adult life would much likely depend on welfare and social agencies for survival. Such learners also run the potential risk of being involved in crime, which would impact negatively on the justice system as it is very costly to maintain an inmate (Bonzos,

2005:21). Regular school attendance is of utmost importance for learner's education and their social skills development. It is evident that non-attending learners are placed at a disadvantage socially and academically. Such learners miss critical stages of interaction and development with their peers and likelihood of academic progress and their success is compromised. The absent learner's lack of academic success breeds low-self-esteem, social isolation and dissatisfaction that can trigger learner absenteeism (Bond, 2004:178).

Learner absenteeism affects the absent learner, but also negatively impacts on the teacher's ability to plan and present classroom instruction in a logical and organized way. Failure to present classroom instruction in a sequential manner affects the absent learner and negatively impacts on the teacher's ability to plan and present classroom instruction in a logical and organized way. Failure to present classroom instruction in a sequential manner affects the progress of all learners as it complicates general classroom management (DEET, 1999:240).

Learner absenteeism does not only affect the absent learner, other learners, teacher and general classroom management, it also impacts negatively on learner's families and their communities. For the family, continued learner absentees imply continuation of poverty cycle, unemployment, family discord and additional stress which will ultimately give rise to encounters with the juvenile justice system and physical and mental illness. For a community it may imply contact with the police, drug abuse, violence, jail time, use of a range of already stretched services and unemployment, welfare dependence, lost tax revenue, illness and homelessness (Bonzos, 2005:27). Hunt (2007:13) maintains that the statistics related to school absenteeism in Virginia were staggering. Each school day 2 500 000 learners were reported absent from school. The drop-out rate was estimated at 27% nationally and over 45% from school in some cities. The 27% drop-out rate equated to 65 bus loads of student who left schools each week and did not return. According to Hunt (2007:15), in a year's time 700 000 learners would drop out. In two years the number would exceed one million. Hunt (2007:18) argues that absenteeism is a constant interruption of the learning process. The more absences a learner accumulates, the less he or she can be expected to adequately participate in and understand classroom activities. Hunt continues by stating that the skill level of many high school learners declined where absenteeism took its toll. According to Hunt, on Mondays many urban high schools had an

absence rate of more than 30%. Hunt added that it was common for many secondary school learners to miss 20 to 90 days in an academic year.

Hunt (2007:28) maintained that student absenteeism and lack of motivation were intertwined. Teachers investigated the theories of motivation to apply them with the aim of reducing the problem of learner absenteeism. Predictors of student absenteeism can be categorized as those which identify the cause of the absenteeism with the student or his/her family characteristics, those which identify the student's social or economic environment as the causal factor and those which examine the effect of various school characteristics as influences in the absentee rate of learners. Hunt (2007:33) emphasises that unfavourable parental attitudes towards school as a significant influence on the absence rate of children plays a pivotal role in promoting absenteeism. Learners whose parents have experienced poor health and economic condition develop a negative attitude toward school either because the family needs the student to work and contribute to the family income or because education is not perceived to be an avenue to increased economic status (Hunt, 2007:28).

Hunt (2007:34) maintains that a learner can access quality education provided that learner spends an expected amount of time in the classroom. When learners absent themselves from school, arrive late or bunk classes, they reduce their opportunity to learn. When a learner disturbs learning by being absent, they interfere with other learners' opportunities to learn. Learner absenteeism and drop out are interrelated because absenteeism leads to drop-out. The Unesco Institute of Statistics (UIS) conducted a survey in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia and Nigeria on the traits of learners who dropped out of school. Children dropping out from primary school were often over-age learners, around one third overall, and in four countries over-age learners accounted for 60% drop outs. Difference in school completion could be attributed to a variation between urban and rural school-going children. In Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali and Mozambique, more than 80% of rural children who had left primary school dropped out (Bruneforth, 2006:82).

Difference in the percentage of learners dropping out of school varied vastly between the poorest and richest wealth quintiles. In Burkina Faso, Mali, and Mozambique more than 90% of children

from the poorest 40% of household (the poorest quintile) who left primary school did not complete it. Differences were also strong in relation to the mother's education especially in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Mali. More than 70% of children with uneducated or unschooled mothers who left primary school did not complete primary school education (Bruneforth, 2006:94).The research did not give the reasons why mother's education was considered and compared to learner drop out.

The literature review described causes and effects of learner absenteeism in the South African schooling system in comparison with trends of learner absenteeism in other countries like Australia, the US and the UK. The literature also described a clear picture of consequences of learner absenteeism such as the dropping out from school by learners in Sub Saharan African countries which included Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique and Namibia (Bruneforth, 2006:97). In the subsequent chapter the researcher explained the research design and methodology employed in this study. The researcher also outlined reasons for choosing the designs methodologies and strategies.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

The research project adopted a qualitative research design as a paradigm in researching learner absenteeism in selected schools. The study aimed to address one of the strategic pillars of professional practice, namely effective learning and teaching. The study sought insight to the research problem (learner absenteeism) through narrative and verbal data gathered by the researcher rather than by a scaled, calibrated measurement as it would be the case with quantitative research design (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:134). According to Creswell (1998:38), a qualitative approach was used to explore the extent of participant behaviour through in-depth open-ended interviews. The qualitative approach helped the researcher solicit views and perceptions of participants about the challenges, causes and effects of learner absenteeism. In this study, the researcher began with the assumptions, world views and the use of theoretical lens which inquired into the meaning of lived experiences of the relevant learners.

In this chapter, the researcher has outlined the research design and given reasons for choosing this design. A case study was used. Data collection strategies such as in-depth interviews, focus group interview and participant observation were used. The researcher outlined how data was presented, analysed and motivated why data was analysed using inductive narrative approach. After presenting and analysing data, the researcher explained how presented data could be validated and be relied upon (trustworthiness) and motivated the reasons for his argument. The researcher explained how ethical considerations were adhered to and how participants' safety and their wellbeing were ensured.

The researcher sought permission from the parents and educational authorities which included the schools, circuit and district to conduct this research. After obtaining permission the



researcher started with his investigations. When seeking permission to conduct the study, the researcher indicated reasons for the study.

## **3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **3.2.1 Population and Sampling Procedures**

The researcher selected school A and school B after attention had been given to dropping levels of learners' performance. The selected schools are at a radius of 5 kilometers away from each other and their actual names have been withheld for ethical reasons. The researcher named the two selected schools, School A and School B.

School A had 797 learners, 26 teachers including the principal and the deputy principal and 790 parents. School B had 613 learners, 18 teachers including the principal and the deputy principal and 610 parents. The population of School A and School B comprised all the parents of the learners, all learners, all teachers and the principals of these schools. The two selected schools had been purposively selected as sample for the investigation. As a teacher in a school in this area (Acornhoek), the researcher has previously observed learners roaming the streets daily, which prompted him to investigate this problem.

The researcher used purposive sampling in order to identify knowledgeable participants (absent learners) who had in-depth knowledge about frequent absenteeism. Purposive sampling was suitable because this investigation aims to acquire in-depth information from those who were in the position to give it; these included learners, teachers, principals and parents (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:78). The participants were 32 learners who were chronic absentees from school A and school B (18 boys and 14 girls). Two (2) learners from each class in grade 4 to 6 and three learners in grade 7 in both schools were identified; this included 4 drop-outs. Thirty (30) parents whose children were prone to absenteeism (25 females and 5 males) formed part of the study. Thirty-two (32) teachers who were class teachers in charge of the class attendance register from grade 4 to grade 7 (24 females and 8 males) and the two female principals of school A and school B formed part of the study. All the classes (grades) which participated in the study in the two selected schools were divided into class A and class B. The total number of participants in this study was 94.

### **3.2.2 Data collection strategies**

The researcher collected data in the natural setting such as in the learner's home and school directly from the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2007:213). The researcher assumed the stance of participant observer to gain full understanding about absenteeism (Strike, 2006:57-73). As part of data collection strategy the researcher opted to use in depth interviews which entailed structured, open-ended and probing questions. The researcher also used focus group interview and categorized the responses given by participants. He also motivated why participants observation was relevant for this study.

#### **3.2.2.1 In-depth interviews**

The researcher collected data using in-depth interviews together with focus group interviews and the researcher took group dynamics (family background, peer pressure and lack of interest in education) into account. The researcher involved two or more participants in a single interview. These individuals did not act as true equals; some dominated the conversation. The researcher kept his list of questions for a focus group quite short. When the researcher was recording focus group session, participants identified themselves using code names (for ethical considerations). This helped the researcher identify different speakers when the researcher transcribed the session later on.

The researcher employed in-depth interviews because it allowed the use of open response questions to obtain data on participant meaning. In-depth interviewing assisted the researcher to identify how absent learners understood their world and how they explained and made sense of the important events in their lives (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:147). The researcher applied the following techniques when engaging participants in an in-depth interview:

- ❖ Identification of the interview questions well in advance. This assisted the researcher to know if the conversation was drifting in an unwanted direction and he gently guided it back on course. The list of questions was limited in the interest of covering all aspects of

the interview. The researcher ensured that interviewees were appropriate representatives of the group and were carefully selected to capture the root cause of the problem which they had intimate experience thereof (Leedy & Ormrod 2005:149).

- ❖ The researcher got written permission; it was also crucial to explain the nature of study and the manner in which the results would be utilised. No interview was conducted unless the participant had given written consent. Feedback was provided to the participants at the end of the research (Baker, 1994:99).
- ❖ The researcher established and maintained rapport; he began the conversation with small talk to break the ice and was courteous and respectful at all times. He showed genuine interest in what the participants had to say. To maintain rapport and trust, he also used body language: smiling, maintaining eye contact or leaning forward and giving neutral encouragement, such as “Go on its interesting” or “What do you mean? as proposed by Bryman (1995:46).
- ❖ Kvale (1996:149) maintains that the researcher should not put words in the participants’ mouth; the researcher should allow participants to choose their own way of expressing their thoughts. The researcher listened carefully to participant and recognized that participants might reveal inconsistencies in their recollections, attitudes and logic and perceptions would not necessarily fit together neatly. To attend to the latter he collected data extensively from all participants to obtain deep understanding about learner absenteeism.
- ❖ The researcher recorded responses verbatim. He captured everything a participant said; if he suspected that an interviewee had said something other than what he intended to communicate, he read or played back the response to verify if it accurately reflected his or her thoughts. Nothing was regarded as trivial.
- ❖ The researcher kept reactions to himself; he was more likely to obtain accurate data if he did not show surprise or disapproval concerning what the participant told him (Cohen et al, 2007:376).
- ❖ The participant’s responses were treated as perceptions rather than as facts even if the participant appeared confident and convincing (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:149). The researcher verified all data to ensure that data collected was true and could be relied upon.

- ❖ The researcher conducted the interviews and generated data. The questions were directly related to the research problem and followed a specific sequence adhered to in the interview as suggested by Auriacombe (2001:48). The researcher categorized participants' questions. Responses, which were more or less the same, were identified and classified in a specific category as suggested by Cohen et al (2007:378).
- ❖ This interview aimed at gathering data concerned with lived experience (absenteeism). Probing and open-ended were posed to the participants. The participant was seen as an expert of his/her own life situation (absenteeism). As mentioned in the sampling section, sampling was done purposively and the participant had a specific experience (absenteeism in this regard). When using in-depth interviews, usually only one to three questions are posed but due to the nature of this study and the complexity of investigating human behaviour, more than three questions were posed as illustrated by Dyer (1995:56-58).
- ❖ The questions were open-ended in nature and the interviewer was the research instrument. He influenced the flow of information from the participants depending on the way in which interviewee handled the situation. The researcher did not participate in the discussion but facilitated the flow of information (Walford, 2001:90).
- ❖ The researcher set participants at ease. Aspect such as clothing, initial attitude and the way the introduction took place were of utmost importance. As mentioned, questions posed to the participants were given well in advance; the field and interaction with the participants was taken into cognizance (Kvale, 1996:11-14). The researcher guarded against pre-empting what the participants had to say, they were free to answer all questions and to refrain from answering any questions as they deemed fit.
- ❖ Interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewee and the same questions were asked all participants to ensure the trustworthiness of the investigation as emphasized by Leedy and Ormrod (2005:68).
- ❖ The researcher conducted these interviews in way that the sensitive reader should refer to the situation whilst listening to another participant; the researcher was able to say what the participant was saying as cited by Oppenheim (1992:65). This also helped the researcher to categorize data; he avoided identifying a specific response with a specific participant.

- ❖ Field notes concerning the researcher's experience were written preferably after each interview. These were observational, theoretical, methodological and personal notes. Field notes formed part of the data and were also analysed in the same way as data from the interviews. This known as triangulation of data and field notes. After that recorded interviews and field notes were transcribed (typed verbatim). The transcribed interviews formed part of the data for the investigation (Patton, 1990:206).

### **3.2.2.2 Focus group interviews**

Morrison (1996:34-36) proposes the following pertinent guidelines which are relevant for this study. The researcher was expected to:

- ❖ Divide his attention and to share out the interviewee's responses, giving all the participants a chance to speak in a group.
- ❖ Have the ability to handle participants who were too quiet, too noisy, who monopolized the conversation or argued and disagreed with each other.
- ❖ Ask named (coded) individuals questions and encouraged participants to answer questions without being forced.
- ❖ Possess the skill of handling a range of very different responses to the same question.
- ❖ Know and be able to explain why he brings together particular people in sequence in a group.
- ❖ Control if learners with more experience always answer first in a group interview.
- ❖ Understand what learners as children meant and what they said.
- ❖ Have children reveal what they really thought and felt rather than what they thought the researcher wanted to hear.
- ❖ Gather a lot of information in short time because children's attention span was very limited.
- ❖ Keep the interview relevant and avoided the situation being seen by the learner participant as a test.
- ❖ Overcome young children's unwillingness to contradict an adult or assert themselves; children might be inarticulate, hesitant and nervous.
- ❖ Elicit genuine responses from children rather than simply responses to the interview situation.

- ❖ Avoid the situation where the child would say “yes” to anything (acquiescence bias); in this study the researcher achieved this by avoiding yes/no questions in a favour of open-ended questions.
- ❖ Overcome the problem that some children would say they ‘do not know “or simply shrugged their shoulders and remained silent.
- ❖ Decide on the number of focus groups for single topics; one group was regarded as insufficient to know whether the outcome was unique to the behaviour (learner absenteeism) of the group.

In conclusion, the researcher was very patient as he was extracting data from young children. He guarded against putting words in children’s mouths and coercing them to say what he wanted to hear as this would negatively influence the credibility of his findings.

### **3.2.2.3 Participant observation**

By using observations the researcher sought to see and hear how learner absenteeism manifests itself in the schools. Participant observation was used as an essential data collection strategy (Flick, 1998:137). This also helped the researcher collect all qualitative data in a way that allowed the participants to respond naturally and honestly as proposed by Dyer (1995:181-184). Entry into the field was a critical step in data gathering. Once the site was located and mapped, access to the site was needed. Once access was approved, data collection was planned and executed. In Leedy and Ormrod (2005:145-146) guidelines were suggested and the following are pertinent for this study as they assisted the researcher to manage and monitor observations:

- ❖ When the researcher began his observations, someone introduced him to the participants he was observing. At this point, the researcher briefly described the aim of the study and got the participant’s consent.
- ❖ The researcher remained relatively quiet and inconspicuous, yet friendly to anyone who approached him. The researcher did not have to discourage participants from developing relationships with him and taking him into their confidence.

- ❖ When the researcher took field notes, he considered dividing each page of his notebook into two columns; he used the left column to record his observation (making notes) and use the right column to write his preliminary interpretations.
- ❖ The researcher had to ensure that he did not confuse his actual observations with interpretations. He needed to be objective and kept the records of and interpretation of what he had seen or heard.

In the field, participants developed research roles, which established the position of the investigator and his relationship with others in the situation as suggested by Wragg (1994:64). The researcher initiated the role of participant observer; this helped him to extract data from an absentee learner. By so doing he learned and understood behavioural patterns of an absentee learner as proposed by LeCompte and Preissle (1993:93-94). He totally immersed himself in the endeavour to understand learners' absenteeism by visiting absentee learners' homes to understand reasons behind a particular learner's behaviour. When assuming the participant observer role, he avoided preconceived judgments about absentee learners or absenteeism as a problem.

The researcher employed the following steps when conducting qualitative observations as suggested by McMillan and Schumacher (2010:350):

- ❖ Once the site was selected, the researcher identified an initial role which guided the first sets of observations.
- ❖ There was a brief, initial and fairly general period of observation during which the researcher eased into the site.
- ❖ The researcher built rapport and familiarity with the setting.
- ❖ With preliminary data collected, the researcher identified in greater detail the specifics of more intense observation and adjusted to his role as needed.
- ❖ At this point more extensive, targeted observations were conducted. These observations occurred over time and changed from the initial plan as needed. This also happened partly because qualitative researchers often change their roles during data collection.

When first entering the research site, the researcher took on primarily an outsider role. As the study progressed, more of an insider role was developed. The importance of this process was to extract more data from the participants because if he hastily developed an insider role, attrition (loss of participants during research) might occur since the study was investigating unacceptable behaviour.

During and immediately after the observations, the researcher took field notes to record not only what was seen and what he heard. The researcher also recorded reflection on what occurred. Following these observations, it was necessary to change the role and conduct further observations. Field notes were used as data that was analysed. Formal authorization was obtained (as essential for research ethics) to enter the field and establish the research role. Once authorization had been granted, the researcher conducted purposeful sampling and established a research role as proposed by Carspecken (1996:47). In this study the researcher developed an outsider role and then insider role. As the researcher obtained data through observations, data collection continued until the logical termination of a naturalistic event or until the situation changed so dramatically that the site was not relevant for the research foci. The researcher used participant's perceptions, events and processes expressed in their actions, feelings, thoughts and beliefs.

According to Atkinson et al (2000:78) the following perceptions were considered in this study: non-verbal cues which included facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice and body movements that suggested the subtle meanings of language. Some words revealed the whys and wherefores, beliefs, thoughts, feelings, value and essence about the logic of the content of a person's perceptions on learner absenteeism. To listen attentively required the researcher to put aside his own thoughts and seek first those of the participants as illustrated by Coolican (1992: 63-66).

Learner absenteeism involved social interaction. Therefore, the study relied on prolonged field residence to develop skills in deciding what should be included and what excluded. The researcher observed and recorded learner absenteeism as phenomena salient to the foreshadowed



problems (high failure rate, ineffective teaching and learning), the broader conceptual framework and the contextual features of interactions (Lincoln & Guba in Cohen et al., 2007:273).

In order to make salient field observations, field notes recorded descriptive details about who, what, where how and why an activity or social scene (learner absenteeism) occurred while the researcher was in the field. Fields notes were dated and the context was identified. The notes were usually filled with idiosyncratic abbreviations and were often difficult for others to read without editing. The researcher avoided notes that were vague and judgmental as suggested by Silverman (1993:146). The researcher wrote his observation field notes in such a way that they were able to shed a light on events and they were used as reference to a specific point later in the process of conducting research. The field notes were kept in the safe place for future use.

Reflex records (i.e., comments and interpretations) were made after leaving the site. The researcher separated tentative interpretation from the factual observation (data). Reflex records comprised a critical self-monitoring tool for identifying potential biases. The researcher reported biological sources of subjectivity and strategies to minimize the influence on data collection and analysis as suggested by Welman, Kruger and Mitchel (2005:211).

### **3.2.3 Data analysis**

The study clearly outlined and spelled out a set of procedures and the steps which were applied in the subsequent chapter. The analysis of data in this study was inevitably interpretive; hence the data analysis was less a completely accurate representation as in the numerical and positive tradition (Cohen et al, 2007:204).

Data analysis in this study included and established behavioural patterns and themes. The final report and presentation included ideas of participants, the reflectivity of the research and a complex description and interpretation of learner absenteeism. The researcher brought to the data his own perceptions, interests, biases, preferences, biography, background and agenda. The researcher was selective in his focus and the research was influenced by the subjective features of the researcher (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:75).

Qualitative data analysis of learner absenteeism was primarily an inductive process of organizing data into categories and identifying patterns and relationships among the categories. In this study there was a great amount of data to be analysed, summarized and interpreted. The researcher critically examined and synthesized pages of field notes and interview transcripts. Analysis in this study was conducted during data collection and it was an on-going part of the study. Inductive analysis was used, where he synthesized and made meaning from the data, starting with specific data and ending with categories and patterns. More general themes and conclusions emerged from the data rather imposed before data collection (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:354).

As the research progressed to more abstract levels of data analysis, a constant double checking and refinement was conducted. There was no set standard procedure for data analysis and for keeping track of analytical strategies. Making sense of data depended largely on the researcher's intellectual rigour and tolerance for tentative interpretation until analysis was completed. The researcher noted that as there are no strict rules that must be followed, he was allowed to be limitlessly inventive. Qualitative analysis was done artfully as it demanded a great deal of methodological knowledge and intellectual competence (Robson, 1993:374-375). Data analysis was also systematic as suggested by Coolican (1992: 69). The researcher:

- ❖ Had to compare different individuals and groups simultaneously and over time;
- ❖ Matched the responses given in interviews to observed behaviour;
- ❖ Ensured that deviant and negative cases are also analysed;
- ❖ Recorded frequencies of occurrences and responses.

The following steps and guidelines were applied to analyse and synthesize the information:

- ❖ Data organization- large amounts of data were organized to facilitate coding. The vast amount of data seemed overwhelming; the researcher had to organize data and separate it into workable units. Creating these units gave him confidence to make sense of data as proposed by Bogdan and Biklen (2007:369).

- ❖ Data was organised using predetermined categories with an interview guide and research questions. For this study the researcher used the category as an evaluator, such as the setting and context, programme descriptions, participant perceptions of the programme, critical incidents, processes, perceived outcomes and unanticipated effects (Coolican, 1992:78).
- ❖ The researcher also used the topic embedded in the questions asked. The researcher divided each category into subcategories as the data are analysed. The researcher noted that predetermined categories provided only a starting point; they were provisionally applied and refined as illustrated by Creswell (1998:147). When categorizing data the researcher was able to classify questions and responses which were similar. This helped him when analyzing and reflecting on the data obtained.
- ❖ When organizing data, the researchers used index cards that were clearly arranged by meaningful characteristics. He began with an overall organizational approach and made changes as data was collected as suggested by Vital and Jansen (2006:27). These index cards were identified with a particular participant's responses.
- ❖ In a nutshell, the researcher organized data to allow him make sense of the information by arranging it in a manageable form. According to Atkinson (1998:47), managing and organizing data required the researcher to count how many learners were prone to absenteeism; and describe absenteeism according to an in-depth analytic procedure.

### **3.3 TRUSTWORTHINESS**

The trustworthiness of this study was achieved by ensuring a mutual meaning between the participants and the researcher. The researcher used trustworthiness to address these two questions:

- ❖ Did the researcher observe what he thought he saw?
- ❖ Did the researcher as an inquirer actually hear the meanings that he thought he heard?

According to Denzin (1997:320) the researcher compared multiple data sources in search of common themes and the following were pertinent to this study to support the trustworthiness of this study (credibility, dependability, conformability, verification and transferability).

The study endeavoured to attain credibility, dependability, conformability, verification and transferability. The study was credible since the researcher was accountable to the whole research process which included action in preparation for the research field: the authority of the researcher was attained by seeking permission to conduct the research. The researcher had the authority to determine the sample state when the research commenced and ended. Dependability was achieved by ensuring that the research findings remained consistent: this was done by using another independent researcher who went through the raw data and came to more or less the same findings and conclusion (Denzin 1997:325). If another researcher followed the same research design, research instruments, the same sample and the same conditions of participants, the findings will be more or less the same. In this study, conformability was achieved: the researcher did not impose what the participants had to say or channel the outcome of the study. Conformability was attained by measures to prevent researcher bias (Vital & Jansen, 2006:11). The study would attain transferability if the results of this research could be applied in more or less similar contexts (Welman et al., 2005:19).

The following strategies were applied in ensuring trustworthiness in this study (Welman et al., 2005: 24):

- ❖ Extensive time in the field to ensure validity: the researcher spent several months studying learner absenteeism. Negative case analysis: he dealt with cases that contradicted existing ideas and continuously revised his explanation and theory until all cases had been accounted for.
- ❖ Thick description: the researcher described the situation in sufficiently rich and thick detail that readers could draw their own conclusions from the data presented.
- ❖ Feedback from others: the researcher sought opinions of colleagues in the field to determine whether they agreed or disagreed that he had made appropriate interpretations and drawn valid conclusions from the data.
- ❖ Participant validation: the researcher took his conclusions back to the participants in the study and verified if participants agreed with his conclusions and if participants made sense based on their own experiences.

Furthermore, trustworthiness helped the researcher obtain consistency, that is, the measuring instrument yielded certain results provided the entity measured had not changed. Denzin and Lincoln (in Cohen et al., 2007: 476) suggest the following strategies to address trustworthiness in qualitative research. These strategies were pertinent in this study:

- Stability of observations; the researcher should ensure that the same observations and interpretations conducted at a different time and in a different place yielded more or less the same results.
- ❖ Parallel forms: whether the researcher would have made the same observations and interpretations of what had been seen if he paid attention to other phenomena during observation.
- ❖ Inter-reliability: whether another observer with the same theoretical frame work and observing the same phenomena would have interpreted them in the same way.

In this study trustworthiness was regarded as a link between what the researcher recorded as data and what actually occurred in the natural setting, which implied the degree of accuracy and comprehensiveness of coverage (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992:48).

### **3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The researcher asked informed consent from the participants which included parents, teachers, principals, learners and educational authorities (school, circuit and district offices). Parents signed consent forms to participate in the study and they also signed assent forms on behalf of their children. Educational authorities granted the researcher permission to conduct research within their area of operation as proposed by Mason (2002:292). The participants were not forced to take part in the research; they were therefore not obliged to answer questions, to be interviewed, to have their home intruded into or to answer telephone calls or emails. Participants were guaranteed the right to privacy during the research (Welman et al., 2005:24). Participants remained anonymous in order to protect their identity. To ensure anonymity files were protected by means of passwords (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:36).

According to Welman et al. (2005:181), the following strategies were applied to ensure confidentiality:

- ❖ Deletion of identifiers, deleting names, addresses, or any other means of identification from the data released on individuals;
- ❖ Crude report categories by releasing the year of birth rather than specific date, release phase rather than the specific grade which the learner is attending;
- ❖ Micro-aggregation by construction of average person from data on individuals and the release of these data rather than data on individuals;
- ❖ Error inoculation, the researcher deliberately introduced errors into individual records while leaving the aggregate data unchanged.

Betrayal was avoided by the researcher. Betrayal happens when data disclosed in confidence are revealed publicly in such a way as to cause embarrassment, anxiety and suffering to the participant. The researcher took this into cognizance as one of the most important ethical consideration. He guarded against deception, such as not telling participants that they are being researched as this is tantamount to spying. Deception may be not telling the truth, (especially on the part of the participant) telling lies, compromising the truth and using participants in a degrading or dehumanizing way (Cooper & Schindler, 2001:16).

As part of considering ethics in this study as suggested by Welman et al. (2008:182), the researcher had a duty to illustrate his ethical code of conduct and to outline his responsibility to the research itself and his responsibility to participants' ethical code of conduct. The researcher outlined the study's ethical code of conduct as follows:

- ❖ The researcher revealed his identity and background;
- ❖ The purpose and the procedure of the research were explained to the participants at the outset;
- ❖ The research and its ethical consequences were seen from the participants and the school's point of view;
- ❖ Participants had the option to refuse to take part and the right to terminate their involvement at any time;

- ❖ This research was objective as possible and this required careful thought being given to the design, conduct and reporting of the research;
- ❖ Informed consent in writing was sought from all participants; all agreements reached at this stage were honored;
- ❖ The dignity, privacy and interests of the participants were respected and protected at all times;
- ❖ Deceit (deception) was avoided;
- ❖ The research was conducted rigorously and with correct procedures and the researcher avoided misuse of procedure at all stages;
- ❖ The researcher continued and reported procedures accurately and openly and made data available for checking;
- ❖ The researchers told the truth, refrained from falsifying data, avoided being unfairly selective to support a case and the researcher also refrained from misrepresenting data;
- ❖ The researcher maintained the integrity and anonymity of the research by avoiding censorship and interference with the research by those who gave permission for the research to be undertaken;

### **3.5 CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this chapter served as a blueprint of how this empirical investigation was conducted. It also served as a step-by-step procedure of how data was generated. It is this chapter which shaped how data was collected, generated and analysed in the subsequent chapter.

## **CHAPTER 4: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

The preceding chapter dealt with the discussion of the empirical research design used to investigate the research questions. This chapter provides information on the profile of school A and school B, including socio-economic background of both schools and the biographical information regarding participants. The chapter further provides findings and interpretation of findings which form the crux of this study. The chapter discusses and analyses findings of the interviews and the study of documents. This chapter aims at providing answers to the questions indicated in section 1.3 of Chapter 1. Data in this study is presented qualitatively and analysed inductively as illustrated in section 3.4 of Chapter 3.

### **4.2 PROFILE OF SCHOOL A AND SCHOOL B**



School A and school B are situated in the deep rural village of Acornhoek. The schools are located in Bohlabela District of the Mpumalanga Department of Education. The schools are located in a poverty stricken community where most families live far below the breadline. Most people in the community are unemployed. The few people who are working earn a living by working in the farms; these people work and live in the farms. They are unable to go home every day. The latter could be perceived as a fact attributing to the high levels of learner's absenteeism in the selected schools.

School A was established in 1983. It is an old school. The buildings are dilapidated and made from mud. Most Foundation Phase learners sit under the trees as there are inadequate class rooms. The school has 797 learners. Ninety-seven are orphans and two are disabled; 55 learners are vulnerable (i.e., victims of malnutrition, poverty and disease). Out of the 797 learners, 439 receive foster grants from the Department of Social Welfare. The school is regarded as a no fee school (learners are exempted from school fees).

The school has 26 teachers. Of the 26 teachers, three are males and most teachers are between 40 and 60 years. Teacher qualification ranges from a diploma to postgraduate degrees: 17 teachers have Honours degrees and one teacher has a Master's degree. The principal of school A is a female and only one male teacher is on the School Management Team (SMT). The school has two Heads of Department.

School B was established in 1976. It is a very old school. Most of the buildings in school B are made from mud and no new structure was erected since 1984. Unlike in school A where only learners in the Foundation Phase still learn under the trees, in school B learners in the Intermediate Phase still receive their lessons under the trees. School B has 613 learners: 67 learners are orphans and 45 learners are vulnerable due to starvation, poverty and disease. Out of 613 learners, 298 of them receive foster grants from the Department of Social Welfare. School B is also classified as a no fee school due to the high levels of poverty in the community where it is located. School B has 18 teachers of which only one is a male. The ages of teachers in school B ranges from 40 to 55. Teacher qualifications are as follows: all teachers have the Primary Teachers Diploma and ten teachers have their Honours degree. The principal of the school is also

a female, there are two Heads of Departments and there is no male on the School Management Team.

### **4.3 QUALITATIVE DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION**

This section deals with problems experienced by learners interviewed for this research. In this section, the biographical data of participants is discussed. However, biographical data of participants should not be confused with information discussed under documents studied (section 3.2.3 of this chapter). This study identified two dominant emerging themes. The themes have been categorised as illustrated in section 3.4 of Chapter 3:

- ❖ School based factors that contribute to learner absenteeism in the selected schools of Acornhoek;
- ❖ Socio-economic factors which contribute to learner absenteeism in the selected schools of Acornhoek.

The above two broad themes were further categorised into sub-themes. School based factors were sub-categorised as:

- ❖ Relationship between truancy, late-coming and learner absenteeism.
- ❖ Learner drop-outs as an effect of learner absenteeism
- ❖ Bullying.
- ❖ Overcrowding in classes.
- ❖ Poor school facilities
- ❖ Corporal punishment.
- ❖ Lack of parental involvement.
- ❖ Lack of sporting facilities
- ❖ Unhealthy relationship between learners and teachers.
- ❖ Unreliable class-attendance registers.
- ❖ Challenges brought by learner absenteeism in the administration of the school.

Socio-economic factors which contributed to learner absenteeism included:

- ❖ Unstable family background.
- ❖ Child abuse.
- ❖ Teenage pregnancy.
- ❖ Child labour.
- ❖ HIV/AIDS.
- ❖ Poverty.
- ❖ Lack of transport.
- ❖ Initiation schools.
- ❖ Social grant pay-out days.
- ❖ Union meetings and memorial service attendance by teachers.

#### 4.4 BIOGRAPHICAL DATA OF PARTICIPANTS IN THIS STUDY

The participants were 32 learners who were chronic absentees from school A and school B (18 boys and 14 girls). Two learners from each class in grade 4 to 6 and three learners in grade 7 in both schools were identified. This included 4 drop-outs.

Table 4.4.1 reflects data on learner participants.

**Table 4.4.1 Biographical details of the learner participants**

LEARNER PARTICIPANTS'	NAME OF SCHOOL	GENDER	GRADE	AGE
Learner 1	School A	Male	4	9
Learner 2	School A	Male	4	9
Learner 3	School A	Male	5	11
Learner 4	School A	Male	5	11
Learner 5	School A	Male	6	12
Learner 6	School A	Male	6	12(Drop-out)
Learner 7	School A	Male	7	13

Learner 8	School A	Male	7	13
Learner 9	School A	Male	7	13
Learner 10	School A	Female	4	9
Learner 11	School A	Female	4	10
Learner 12	School A	Female	5	12
Learner 13	School A	Female	5	11
Learner 14	School A	Female	6	12
Learner 15	School A	Female	6	12
Learner 16	School A	Female	7	13
Learner 17	School B	Male	4	10
Learner 18	School B	Male	4	09
Learner 19	School B	Male	5	12
Learner 20	School B	Male	5	11
Learner 21	School B	Male	6	12(Drop-out)
Learner 22	School B	Male	6	12
Learner 23	School B	Male	7	12
Learner 24	School B	Male	7	13
Learner 25	School B	Male	7	14(Drop-out)
Learner 26	School B	Female	4	10
Learner 27	School B	Female	4	10
Learner 28	School B	Female	5	11
Learner 29	School B	Female	5	12
Learner 30	School B	Female	6	12
Learner 31	School B	Female	6	11
Learner 32	School B	Female	7	15(Drop-out)

Thirty parents whose children were prone to absenteeism participated (25 females and 5 males). The biographical details of parents who participated in the study are reflected in Table 4.2.

**Table 4.4.2 Biographical details of parent participants**

<b>PARENTS PARTICIPANTS'</b>	<b>GENDER</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>WORK STATUS</b>	<b>PLACE OF WORK</b>
Parent 1	Female	24	Not working	_____
Parent 2	Female	24	Not working	_____
Parent 3	Female	27	Working	Farm
Parent 4	Female	30	Working	Farm
Parent 5	Female	32	Working	Farm
Parent 6	Female	30	Not working	_____
Parent 7	Female	34	Not working	_____
Parent 8	Female	35	Working	Selling vegetables
Parent 9	Female	28	Not working	_____
Parent 10	Female	23	Not working	_____
Parent 11	Female	25	Working	Farm
Parent 12	Female	31	Working	Farm
Parent 13	Female	33	Working	_____
Parent 14	Female	37	Working	Selling vegetables
Parent 15	Female	32	Working	Farm
Parent 16	Female	30	Not working	_____
Parent 17	Female	27	Working	Selling vegetables
Parent 18	Female	33	Not working	_____
Parent 19	Female	30	Not working	_____
Parent 20	Female	44	Not working	_____
Parent 21	Female	31	Not working	_____
Parent 22	Female	40	Not working	_____

Parent 23	Female	31	Not working	_____
Parent 24	Female	26	Not working	_____
Parent 25	Female	27	Not working	_____
Parent 26	Male	34	Working	Farm
Parent 27	Male	36	Not working	_____
Parent 28	Male	39	Not working	_____
Parent 29	Male	40	Not working	_____
Parent 30	Male	38	working	Farm

Thirty- two teachers who were class-teachers in charge of the class attendance registers from grade 4 to grade 7 (24 females and 8 males) formed part of this study. Biographical details of teachers who participated in the study are reflected in Table 4.4.3.

**Table 4.4.3 Biographical details of teacher participants**

<b>Educator participants'</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Name of school</b>	<b>Years of teaching</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Capacity</b>
Educator 1	Female	School A	19	43	Class teacher
Educator 2	Female	School A	19	43	Class teacher
Educator 3	Female	School A	22	48	Class teacher
Educator 4	Female	School A	19	43	Class teacher
Educator 5	Female	School A	19	41	Class teacher
Educator 6	Female	School A	18	43	Class teacher
Educator 7	Female	School A	18	38	Class teacher
Educator 8	Female	School A	17	40	Class teacher
Educator 9	Female	School A	20	43	Class teacher
Educator 10	Female	School A	19	43	Class teacher

Educator 11	Female	School A	19	43	Class teacher
Educator 12	Male	School A	19	43	Class teacher
Educator 13	Male	School A	19	44	Class teacher
Educator 14	Male	School A	20	46	Class teacher
Educator 15	Male	School A	17	43	Class teacher
Educator 16	Female	School B	19	43	Class teacher
Educator 17	Female	School B	23	47	Class teacher
Educator 18	Female	School B	19	43	Class teacher
Educator 19	Female	School B	16	47	Class teacher
Educator 20	Female	School B	05	43	Class teacher
Educator 21	Female	School B	19	37	Class teacher
Educator 22	Female	School B	18	38	Class teacher
Educator 23	Female	School B	19	43	Class teacher
Educator 24	Female	School B	18	42	Class teacher
Educator 25	Female	School B	18	42	Class teacher
Educator 26	Female	School B	19	43	Class teacher
Educator 27	Female	School B	19	43	Class teacher
Educator 28	Female	School B	24	48	Class teacher
Educator 29	Female	School B	19	43	Class teacher
Educator 30	Female	School B	18	41	Class teacher
Educator 31	Female	School B	17	43	Class teacher
Educator 32	Female	School B	20	42	Class teacher

All the classes (grades which participated in the study in the two selected schools) were divided into class A and class B for each grade from grade 4 to grade 7. Biographical details of principals who participated are reflected in Table 4.4.4.

**Table 4.4.4 Biographical details of principals**

Principal of school	Gender	Age	Working experience
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Principal of school A	Female	55	32
Principal of school B	Female	53	28

The total number of participants was 94. In terms of the biographical data above more females than males participated in this study. The participants were 66 females and 28 males. More girls than boys were frequently absent in school A and school B.

Learners chose to be interviewed in English but at some point, the researcher had to translate in the learner's mother tongue (Xitsonga and Sepedi) for better understanding. Parents were interviewed in Xitsonga and Sepedi (the researcher had to translate the questions as they were framed in English). Teachers and the two principals were interviewed in English. Pseudonyms were used to identify participants as already mentioned. Given the large number of participants, numbers were used to identify the participants.

Table 4.4.5 gives a brief summary of biographical data of all participants in this study.

**Table 4.4.5 Biographical details of all participants**

School A		School B		Total
Number of Learners	Female 7 Male 9	Number of Learners	Female 7 Male 9	32
Number of Parents	Female 14 Male 03	Number of Parents	Female 11 Male 02	30
Number of Educators	Female 11 Male 04	Number of Educators	Female 16 Male 1	32
Total	48		46	94

## 4.5 SCHOOL-BASED FACTORS



In terms of the finding of this study, school based factors are factors which emanated within the school context. These factors contributed to learner absenteeism in school A and school B. Learner absenteeism due to school based factors was either caused by learners, teachers or the infrastructure of the school. The following school-based factors were identified and were found to contribute to learner absenteeism in school A and school B.

#### **4.5.1 Relationship between truancy, late-coming and learner absenteeism**

This study revealed a close link between learner absenteeism, truancy and late-coming. In school A eight teachers reported that late-coming was the first stage before learners became chronic absentees. Late-coming which is a school based factor was mentioned 12 times by teachers as an underpinning reason for learner absenteeism. Learner 24 stated that late-coming caused him to be a chronic absentee. Learner 24 stated the following:

- *Once I realise that I'm late for school, I just decide to stay at home because, if you are late for school you will find that the gates are closed until 10o'clock and there is no need for me to go school after 10h00.*

In both school A and school B, teachers reported no standard procedures and measures to deal with truancy and late-coming. Teacher 14 and teacher 15 respectively reiterated that lack of policy on controlling truancy and late-coming gave rise to learner absenteeism. Two teachers respectively commented:

- *It is easy for us to control learners who arrive late for school but there is nothing that we do to them as there is no policy in place to deal with late coming and truancy.*
- *These learners are also aware that even if they arrive late for school or bunk classes there is nothing that can be done to them especially because punishing learners as a way to instil discipline is disallowed. There are no alternative measures to instil discipline on the part of the learners.*

Most parents were not aware that late-coming and truancy gave rise to absenteeism. Some parents claimed that they were not even aware that their children were arriving late for school. Parents confirmed their claim by saying the following (parent 12 and 28 respectively):

- *I never suspected that my child was frequently absent because I prepare him for school early and ensure that he leave for school as early as possible.*
- *I was surprised to learn by a child next door that the school starts at 7:30 whereas my child told me that their lessons start at 8h00. I realised that my child was taking me for a ride by not telling me that he arrive late for school almost every day.*

It was revealed by this study that late-coming and truancy contributed to learner absenteeism. This finding was reiterated by the principals of school A and school B. The principals had the following to comment on late-coming and truancy in relation to learner absenteeism:

- *It is very unlikely that learners who frequently arrive late for school and bunk classes will not be adversely affected by absenteeism.*
- *Late-coming plays a negative role in promoting learner attendance and unfortunately most parents are not aware that their children arrive late.*

#### **4.5.2 Learner drop-out as an effect of learner absenteeism**

Six teachers in school A and nine teachers in school B confirmed that learner absenteeism contributed greatly in promoting learner drop-out. Teacher 16 had this to say on the relationship between absenteeism and dropping out of school:

- *Between March and April, four learners in grade 6 dropped out of school. Before these learners could drop-out, they started by being chronically absent from school. This happened in spite of the interventions which I made by inviting the parents and even visiting the affected learner's home to establish the problem. In the same grade, last year under the same period, five learners dropped out of school; there was decrease of drop-out by one learner this year.*

Learner drop-out was mentioned seven times by all the participants in this investigation as a factor related to absenteeism. Teachers in the both school A and school B admitted that learners who were frequently absent from school did not perform to their optimum levels. According to the teachers interviewed, poor performance on the part of learners prompted them to be absent from school and ultimately drop-out of school. Teacher 10 confirmed this finding by stating the following:

- *More than 60% of learners who dropped out of school performed far below average, I'm fully convinced that their poor level of performance had everything to do with their absenteeism and their dropping out of school.*

Some drop-out learners interviewed confirmed that their poor performance contributed greatly in to their dropping out of school. Learner 18 (drop-out) had this to say:

- *I could not go to school any more as I saw no reason to because I did not pass even one subject, I thought I was not fit to go to school. I had to drop out of school as my friends were always making fun of me every time we receive test results.*

The three drop-outs in school A and one drop-out in school B confirmed that before they dropped out of school, they were chronically absent from school.

Dropping out of school was a common recurring factor mentioned in parent interviews. Parents admitted they were surprised to see their children ultimately dropping out of school. This was mentioned particularly by parents who work on the farms and are not at home on a daily basis. Parent 16 and 03 respectively described the issue of dropping out and had the following to remark:

- *I come home once a month. It is difficult for me to detect early signs of absenteeism as I'm seldom home. I have to believe what my children tell me that they are prompt with school attendance.*
- *I trusted my child when he tells me that he had to leave school as some teachers dislike him. I was surprised and disgusted to note that my child dropped out of school because he spent many days absent from school and he was scared to go to school as he feared to be punished by teachers.*

Learner drop-out was established by this study as one of the fundamental effects of learner absenteeism. Learners who were frequently absent ended up dropping out of school. Learner drop-out, which is a product of learner absenteeism, was influenced by several factors. Principals of school A and school B respectively mentioned the following factors:

- *Learner drop-out is not just a single event or occurrence; I view it as a process which starts from late coming up to absenteeism, to avoid learner drop-out we need to detect its symptoms which are late coming and absenteeism.*
- *Learner drop-out is very costly on the part of the school as the funds allocated for the drop-out learner goes to a waste when such children leave school in the middle of the year.*

#### **4.5.3 Bullying as a factor that contributes to learner absenteeism**

Bullying was also a main cause of learner absenteeism in this study. It is also the finding of this study that bullying was closely related to domestic violence. In school B, two boys who were notorious bullies were reported to be from family backgrounds where domestic violence was a daily norm. When the two boys were confronted about their unruly behaviour one of them (Learner 17) had this to say:

- *I am bullying other learners because I always feel angry. I see my daddy beat my mommy almost every day. When I beat or inflict pain to other children it makes me feel better. I do this so that other learners can see that I'm the boss.*

In school A, four boys also admitted that they came from a background where there was domestic violence. In school A eight learners (6 boys and 2 girls) confirmed that they could not come to school as they were bullied notoriously. Three of the bullied learners confirmed their frustration by stating the following:

- *Learner 32 had this to say: I could not come to school when I don't have money to give (X) (name withheld for ethical reasons) he beats me terribly if I give him little money and is worse when I don't have it at all. I even think of killing myself than to go to school and face him. My parents expect me to go to school every day and X warned me that if I dare tell my parents or my teachers he will kill me.*

- Learner 18 had this to say about absenteeism and bullying: *I could not go to school because my friends make me strip off my trousers so that they can see my private parts as I'm not circumcised. They take me to the toilet every day and make fun of me.*
- Learner 20 had this to say: *I could not come to school because my friends think I'm smart as teachers like me because they claim I'm intelligent and beautiful, they make my life hell, they always ridicule me and isolate me. I feel bad and think staying at home will be better; I'm also reluctant to tell my teachers as I think it will make things worse.*

A similar incident occurred to four learners in school B. Bullied learners admitted they sometimes had to steal money from their parents to please their bullies. It was also the finding of this study that learners subjected to bullying were threatened with death if they reported to their teachers or parents. According to this finding, staying away from school was seen as the only option as confirmed by the victims above. In both school A and school B, there were no policies on bullying. Learners reported that bullying ranged from beating, disrespect of privacy, taking one's money or lunch box and ridicule. The study further confirmed that bullies do this to vent their anger (as most of them confirmed that they are angry with themselves), to boost their low self-esteem and to please their friends at the expense of the victim. Teacher 40 had this to say about bullying and its relationship with learner absenteeism:

- *Learners who are perpetrators of bullying those who come from disintegrated family units where there are no morals or such a family is dominantly characterised by violent behaviours. Learners who bully other learners usually perform far below average and they do this to regain their lost ego.*

The study revealed that it was very unlikely that teachers, parents and the principals can associate learner absenteeism with bullying. The study further confirmed that teachers and parents run away from responsibility when it comes to who should control and prevent bullying at school. One of the parents' participants (parent 19) had the following to say about bullying in relation to learner absenteeism:

- *Teachers must ensure that they maintain discipline at school so that our children can learn freely. I was nearly tempted to transfer my child to another school because he was ever-absent from school as he feared being bullied.*

On the issue of bullying the study found that it was a problem which contributed greatly towards promoting learner absenteeism by up to 35% (1 in every 7 learners interviewed reported that they did not go to school because they were bullied). The principals of school A and school B respectively had this to comment on the matter in relation to learner absenteeism:

- *A greater percentage of learners who were reported to be chronically absent did so due to bullying.*
- *Bullying is a negative inhibitor of learner attendance because it goes hand in hand with inflicting pain to the victim. It is the easiest way of driving a learner out of the classroom.*

#### **4.5.4 Overcrowding in classes**

Overcrowding in classes has been identified by this study as one of the factors that contributed to learner absenteeism. Teachers involved in the study revealed that it was difficult to control and manage an overcrowded class. This made it very difficult to detect, control and prevent learner absenteeism in such a class. It was also the finding of this study that learner absenteeism was very rife in large classes. Teacher 26 who was a grade 7 class teacher in school A had this to say about overcrowding in classes:

- *Grade 7 has 107 learners who are cramped in one class (but two registers are used to mark the class). In such a class it is impossible to study the individual behavioural patterns of an absent learner, as a teacher you will not detect the early signs of absenteeism like late-coming and truancy as there are more than enough learners in one class.*

Teacher 22 who was also a grade 7 class teacher in school B had this to say about overcrowding in classes in relation to learner absenteeism:

- *Grade 7 has 93 learners, with a class this big; it is even difficult to know the names of your learners, let alone their behaviours in relation to absenteeism. Due to the huge size of the class coupled with heavy work load, it is difficult to control and mark the daily attendance register promptly.*

#### **4.5.5 Poor school facilities**

Poor school facilities and unreliable infra-structure negatively influenced learner attendance. As mentioned in the profiles of school A and school B, the buildings in the two schools are outdated, dilapidated and unfit for human occupation. This was confirmed by the Environmental Health Inspectors. To illustrate the relationship between poor school facilities and learner absenteeism, teacher 14 had this to say:

- *It is difficult for learners to attend school every day especially during unfavourable weather conditions because the roof is leaking and the windows doesn't have window panes , it makes learning and teaching very difficult, hence the high rate of learner absenteeism during very cold and rainy days.*

During extreme weather conditions the rate of learner absenteeism was quite high and this was attributed to the fact that, on these days, learners from different grades were forced to share one classroom which made learning difficult. Learner 12 had the following to say about poor school facilities and learner absenteeism:

- *It is useless to go to school on a very cold or rainy season because we will be forced to learn with other grades and in those days learning is not so effective, I think it's better to stay at home because on extreme weather, we spend the better part of our time playing outside.*

Learner 19 had this to say about poor school facilities in relation to learner absenteeism:

- *It is extremely difficult for me to go to school during those times of the month (referring to menstruation) as our school don't have enough toilets for girls to relieve themselves when on periods. The available toilets are for teachers, one for males and one for females and the learners have to relieve themselves in the nearby bushes.*

The principals of school A and school B respectively commented on overcrowding in classes:

- *As a school we are aware of the problem of overcrowding and its impact on learner attendance but we rely on the department for large scale furniture purchase.*
- *At school level we only identify the need for furniture and infra-structure and make requisitions to the department. Unfortunately the department will take time as they claim that they don't work with our school only, they have a long list of schools to provide furniture and recommend building new structures.*

#### 4.5.6 Corporal punishment

Despite the fact that corporal punishment is disallowed in the South African schooling system, almost all the learners who reported chronic absenteeism confirmed that corporal punishment was still widely practised in school A and school B. Learner 6 aptly described the issue of corporal punishment as follows:

- *As learners we are aware that corporal punishment is prohibited in our school. Our teachers still beat us for no apparent reason. Teachers beat us when we arrive late for school that is why if I realise that I'm late for school I just stay at home to avoid being spanked. Teachers will beat us when we fail tests; in our class most learners will not come to school on the days when we are supposed to receive our test results. Learners who are found to have failed are beaten and made to stay at school until four o'clock in the afternoon.*

Teachers in both school A and school B also admitted that they still practise corporal punishment as a way to instil discipline. Teachers also argued that they had no alternative measure to instil discipline in the absence of corporal punishment. To support their argument, teacher participants had the following claim to make, as illustrated by teacher 17 from school B:

- *As teachers we understand that corporal punishment is outlawed and very cruel. The government also did not provide an alternative in instilling discipline in the class and at school. What do you do when a learner deliberately speaks degrading or insults to a teacher? It is known to the learners that corporal punishment is outlawed and these learners do as they please.*

Further, teacher 16 had this to say:

- *We appeal to the government to provide alternative disciplinary measures to replace corporal punishment; the government did nothing to provide means to instil discipline in schools after taking away corporal punishment which acted as a regulator. Much as we acknowledge that corporal punishment is evil, we will be forced to use it even if we know is a criminal offence until the government come up with a proper disciplinary measure.*

It was also the finding of this study that corporal punishment contributed up to 40% of learner absenteeism. This was confirmed by learner 19 in school B and he had this to say:



- *Corporal punishment is very evil, and it scares me, I view teachers who practice it as devils, when I think of that I just stay at home than facing teachers who brutally beat us.*

The study further revealed that most learners were not even aware that they could report corporal punishment to law enforcing authorities and that it was a dismissible criminal offence on the part of teachers who practised it. Learner 8 from school B had this to say about the issue:

- *If I knew any better I would have taken further steps against teacher X who slapped me on the face last week for talking in the class without his permission.*

The study confirmed that corporal punishment was one of the painful factors which caused learner absenteeism. Most parents were aware that their children still undergo corporal punishment. Some parent participants, parent 23 and 27 respectively, had the following to comment on corporal punishment in relation to learner absenteeism.

- *I'm not surprised when my child is frequently absent from school as our children are brutally beaten. You cannot learn when in pain.*
- *It is ironic for teachers to complain to us as parents about learner absenteeism whereas in fact they are the ones who promote learner absenteeism by beating these children.*

The principals of the two schools were aware of the effects corporal punishment had on learner attendance. The principals of school A and school B respectively argued as follows about corporal punishment in relation to learner absenteeism:

- *I am aware that most learners are frequently absent from school for the fear of being brutally punished by teachers.*
- *Corporal punishment is an unlawful practice which adversely promotes learner absenteeism in our school.*

#### **4.5.7 Lack of parental involvement**

Lack of parental involvement in the education of their children was a common recurring factor in all the educator and learner interviews. This factor played a negative role in improving learner attendance. The educator interviewee (educator 19 in school A) aptly described the aspect of lack of parental involvement. Educator 19 had the following to say:

- *It is very difficult it to deal with learner absenteeism when parents are less concerned about the problem.*

It was the finding of this study that lack of parental involvement was attributed to the fact that most parents were not available as they worked and lived on the farms far from home. However, parents who were available were not interested in the school work of their children. Teachers were frustrated by the lack of parental involvement as stated by teacher 13 in school B:

- *Parents are regarded as primary educators; their influence in their children's attitude towards school attendance plays an important role in alleviating learner absenteeism. When parents act strongly against absenteeism, the behaviour is much more likely to decrease.*

The study further revealed that most of the learners who were frequently absent came from very poor family backgrounds where parents were illiterate and do not recognise the value of attending school regularly. This implied that most parents were not even aware that their children were not attending school. The following responses were noted from parents concerning their children's absenteeism from school:

- *Parent 12: I was not aware that my child was not making it to school. I thought it is the responsibility of the teachers to ensure that he makes it to school.*
- *Parent 19: I always ask my child if he makes it to school and he tells me that, he goes to school every day but I was surprised when he came home earlier last week Wednesday and Thursday, when I ask him he told me that the teachers told them to go home as they were attending workshops.*
- *Parent 06: I started to be suspicious about my child's progress because when I check his daily activity books, I found that he was not writing his activities in most days. When I ask him he gave an excuse that he lost the activity book he used to write his activities. When I check his mid-year progress report, it was very bad; he only passed one subject with 40%.*
- *Parent 27: I work and live in the farm. I only manage to come home once a month. My children do not have an adult person to monitor their school work. I think they do as they please. However my eldest daughter who is 14 years assured me that they go to*

*school every day. I am surprised to learn it has been a week since my son stopped going to school.*

In particular, the lack of parental involvement impacts negatively on learners with barriers to learning. Learners with barriers are much more likely to achieve better when their parents are involved and willing to work with teachers to overcome such barriers. Learner 30 with learning barriers had this to say concerning his problem and the involvement of his parents:

- *I had a problem of low vision, learning was difficult until my teacher called my mother to school and I was referred to an eye specialist free of charge. I got help from the eye specialist and now I learn better, and I thank my teacher and my mother for working together to solve my problem.*

It was further found that most teachers were unaware about the provision made by Section 5 of Chapter 2 of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996. This section of the Act compels the Head of Department (HOD) to issue a written notice to parents and guardians to ensure that learners indeed attend school as required. On the issue of provision made by the Act, educator 30 reported the following:

- *We were not aware of such a provision, we have many learners who even ended up dropping out of school as there was nothing we could do to force them to come to school.*

From the teachers interviewed, it was also established that learners whose parents were actively involved in their children's education performed much better in their school work than their counterparts whose parents were not involved. Learner 29 had this to say:

- *I'm motivated to attend school and to do better because my mother checks what I have learned every day.*

The principals of school A and school B respectively believed that when parents were actively involved, the problem of learner absenteeism would be minimal. The two principals commented as follows on the lack of parental involvement in relation to learner absenteeism:

- *When parents ignore their parental responsibility towards their children's school work, learner absenteeism will escalate and we will not win the war against it.*

- *Without any doubt, learners whose parents are actively involved in their children's education reported very low levels of absenteeism as compared to their counterparts whose parents are not involved.*

#### **4.5.8 Unhealthy relationship between learners and teachers**

An unhealthy relationship between learners and teachers was identified as one of the factors that led to learner absenteeism. In school A, 12 learners who participated in the study revealed that negative attitudes of teachers towards learners drove them out of school. One of the 12 learners, learner 22 had this to say:

- *I had a problem with teacher X who used to pass derogative remarks and make fun of me. He would ask me questions which he was aware that were difficult for me. When I fail to give a correct response, would make fun of me in front of my class mates. I was compelled to be absent from school as he did this thing every time he gets to our class. Absenting myself was the only way out.*

Most participant learners confirmed that once they have a poor relationship with teachers, they were more likely to fail the subject that particular teacher was teaching. They were also prompted to absent themselves from school to avoid such a teacher. Learner 15 aptly described the poor relationship between learners and teachers. Learner 15 stated the following:

- *I could not go to school because teacher X hates me. He always avoids me. Every time he asks me a question, he would not even say if I'm right or wrong, I think it is better for me not to come to school because of teacher X.*

Further, teachers' incompetence in the instruction of subject matter engenders a poor relationship between learners and teachers. Lack of competence by teachers was perceived to be attributed to overcrowding, poor school facilities and lack of support and recognition for their efforts. School B principal remarked the following:

- *Unhealthy relationship between teachers and learners is a fertile ground for learner absenteeism.*

Poor relationships between teachers and learners as a cause of absenteeism was also highlighted by parent participants. The study confirmed that parents also displayed a bad attitude towards teachers who had poor relationships with their children. Parents had the following to say:

- Parent 04: *I don't blame my child when he is absent because teacher X speak derogative remarks towards him.*
- Parent 29: *It goes without saying that you cannot enjoy to be in the presence of someone who dislike you, let alone learning effectively.*
- Parent 16: *Much as I discourage learner absenteeism I also condemn bad attitudes of teachers towards learners.*

Teachers were aware that poor attitudes towards learners promoted learner absenteeism. Teacher participants had this to say:

- Teacher 11: *It is difficult to maintain healthy relationship with a notorious learner.*
- Teacher 23: *Learners that we teach lack discipline.*
- Teacher 27: *Learners use this as an excuse to absent themselves for no apparent reason.*

#### **4.5.9 Lack of sporting facilities**

The study revealed that a lack of sporting facilities in both school A and school B promoted absenteeism. Sporting activities and extra-mural activities are factors which attract learners to attend school regularly. Lack of sporting activities caused boredom on the part of the learners. Learner 16 had this to report on the lack of sporting facilities and learner absenteeism:

- *It is boring to go to school every day when there are no sports and trips to be undertaken.*

Further the level of learner engagement in sport and extra-mural activities was minimal. Teacher 4 had this to say on the issue:

- *It is discouraging to involve learners because we don't have relevant equipment for sports. The worst part is that some learners have potential and can make a living out of sport. When learners are involved in sport, it promotes their attendance and decrease absenteeism.*

Both school A and B lacked policies and an annual programme for sport and extra-curricular activities. Learners in both schools confirmed that they had not participated in any games during the past three months prior to the interviews. Learners admitted that they were bored by going to school for formal lessons only. Learners confirmed that they absented themselves due to a lack of sport and recreation in their schools. Learner 20 said this:

- *Sporting activities makes learning fun and motivate us to go to school every day.*

In this regard, the principals of the two schools commented:

- *As the principal, I am aware that sports could at least promote attendance but given poor state of our school I think it will be luxurious to channel more money to sports whereas learners still learn under the trees.*
- *Even if we can have sustainable sports programs, learners will be interested for a while and go back to their absent habits. The best thing is for them to change their attitudes.*

#### **4.5.10 Unreliable class attendance registers**

It was revealed by this study that, despite numerous changes in the curriculum since 1994, ways of managing and controlling learner absenteeism and improving of learner attendance had not changed. Principal from school A had this to comment:

- *Much as we have experienced changes in many facets of our education system, not much or nothing at all was done when it comes to management and control of absenteeism in our schools.*

Further, class attendance registers remain the only instrument used by teachers to determine learner attendance and learner absenteeism. The class teachers and the two principals agreed that the design and layout of class attendance registers created loopholes which were easily manipulated by class teachers. Principal from school B had this to say about the design and layout of class attendance registers:

- *The layout of the registers leave much to be desired, one teacher had to mark the deceased learner present long after the death of the learner. It was possible for the teacher to do this as the register is poorly designed; lazy teachers take advantage of this.*

*However lack of proper accountability on the part of the School Management Team is partly blamed for mistakes of this nature.*

The research found that class teachers are obliged to be in charge of the class attendance registers; this adds to stress as teachers have to teach, manage and control attendance registers. The study further revealed that the inefficiency of class teachers was attributed to a heavy work load. Teacher 11 had this to say concerning the unreliability of the class attendance register:

- *As teachers we have a very heavy workload to teach. We have more than enough learning areas to teach. Most of the teachers have 3 learning areas with very big classes up to 107 (grade 7 class). It is difficult for a teacher to effectively teach many learning areas and still have to control and manage class attendance register effectively.*

Apart from the class attendance register as the only yardstick used to gauge learner absenteeism and learner attendance, in both school A and school B, policies regarding learner absenteeism were lacking. The principal of school A had this to report:

- *In this school things work completely different from school X when it comes to absenteeism and its related issues, for instance in this school, there is no guideline to specify when a child could be withdrawn from the attendance register, in school A a child can be withdrawn from the class- attendance register after 14 consecutive days of absence.*

In school B things worked differently and the principal in school B had this to say:

- *In school B a learner can only be withdrawn from the class attendance register when such a learner has absented him/her for 10 consecutive days.*

The variation in management and control of learner absenteeism in schools within close proximity revealed that no standard procedure existed to tackle learner absenteeism in the selected schools and in the Acornhoek area in general.

#### **4.5.11 Challenges brought by learner absenteeism in the administration of the schools**

Principals of school A and school B confirmed that learner absenteeism posed serious problems in the day-to-day running of the school. Principal from school A reported this:

- *Learner absenteeism can seriously disrupt our program in a very negative way. However absenteeism is often looked down upon by teachers and learners.*

According to the interviewed principals, learner absenteeism further created administrative and disciplinary problems in the school. Principal from school B had this to report in the interviews:

- *Learner absenteeism is the end product of social problems experienced by learners at home, it is more than a school based problem, for the school to effectively decrease and stop learner absenteeism we have to get parents and the community at large on board.*

The problems in the control and administration of the school resulted in poor performance by learners. According to the two principals, it is very costly and time-consuming to deal with learner absenteeism. When learners were absent, programmes and activities had to be repeated to cater for absent learners. In the selected schools, learner absenteeism contributed up to 12% in the wastage of school resources. Principal from school B had this to report on this issue:

- *Grade 6 class in school B has 60 learners, at a time when this study was conducted, this class had to sit for a test, 12 learners were absent on the day of the test. 12 copies of test papers were wasted as they were not utilized. The teacher who was supposed to administer the test confirmed that the 12 learners were to be given a special test, meaning that other copies of test items were to be used and that amounted to waste of time and resources.*

The interviewed principals emphasized that the schools did not have the capacity and expertise to deal with learner absenteeism effectively. According to the principals, interventions to deal with the problem were not provided for in the new curriculum. Further, coordination between the District of Education and the schools was lacking in relation to management and control of learner absenteeism. The principal of school A and school B respectively had this to say in relation to learner absenteeism and the administration of the school:

- *Principal of school A: It is very difficult to deal with learner absenteeism when there is no support from the upper structures.*
- *Principal of school B: We receive no feedback from either the Circuit level or District level concerning the Quarterly Survey which we submit to them.*



Furthermore, teachers feel overloaded with work when they had to teach and monitor learners' absenteeism and learner attendance. Principal from school A aptly described this aspect of teaching and monitoring learner absenteeism as follows:

- *Monitoring and controlling learner absenteeism forms an integral part of teaching and learning. It is as important as assessment session where learners need special attention when they have to sit for tests and exams. Monitoring learner absenteeism should not be the competency of teachers, special personnel had to be appointed, trained and work shopped to deal with learner absenteeism and learner attendance.*

School based factors were mostly found to involve learners, teachers and principals at school level. These factors impacted negatively on daily teaching and learning. They weakened the competency of teachers and performance of learners. The study revealed that school based factors had the potential to erode a sound culture of teaching and learning.

#### **4.6 SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS**

According to the findings, socio-economic factors are factors which cause learner absenteeism from a social context and an economic point of view. Social factors include child abuse or disintegrated family units; economic factors include poverty and lack of transport, to mention but a few. This section discusses socio-economic factors in detail and the following factors were identified by this study.

##### **4.6.1 Unstable family backgrounds**

Unstable family backgrounds played a negative role in promoting learner attendance. Twenty learners from school A and 25 learners from School B revealed that their absenteeism was much attributed to domestic violence which occurred between parents. Learner 23 in school A had the following to report concerning his absenteeism and his unstable family background:

- *I could not come to school for the whole of last week because my daddy beat my mommy and I had to go to my aunt because daddy said he did not want mommy at home or else he will kill her. I could not come to school because auntie stays far from my school. I felt bad because I was missing my lessons.*

Teachers interviewed reported that learners from families severely affected by domestic violence were reported to have high levels of chronic absenteeism. According to the six teacher participants, learners from unstable family units performed far below average. This poor performance was attributed to the fact that such children were too psychologically unstable to concentrate on learning. Teacher 24 had this to say about learner absenteeism and unstable family backgrounds:

- *It is very difficult and disturbing to teach a child from unstable family units. These learners are always withdrawn and distanced. They barely concentrate on what you teach. They are frequently absent from school which makes it difficult for them to perform in their optimum levels.*

Teacher 14, who closely and constantly monitored learner 26, commented on his patterns of absenteeism and his overall performance:

- *Before the start of learner 26's parents' divorce process, this learner use to get up to 90% in his Mathematics tests. Now that his parents' divorce is looming, the learner is performing below 40%. The learner is frequently absent from school, something that did not occur to this learner before the divorce.*

According to the study, a very close link existed between learner absenteeism and unstable family backgrounds. Unstable family backgrounds created a fertile environment for learner absenteeism and poor learner performance. The principal of school A and school B respectively had this to remark on the issue:

- *Learners who were frequently absent were found to be from family units which are unstable. When learners are distracted they are much more likely to be absent from school.*
- *It is easy for parents in a stable family structure to detect early symptoms of learner absenteeism than parents who are always in conflict as they don't have enough time to learn behavioural patterns of their children in relation to school attendance.*

Unstable family background was a continuous challenge that jeopardised learner attendance and contributed to 20% of learner absenteeism. Parents confirmed that they were aware that an

unstable family background contributed adversely to learner absenteeism. Parents 14 and 21 respectively had this to comment:

- *I am aware that every time I have a fight with my husband my children will miss 2-3 days of school as I will be away from home with them.*
- *My son is always absent when I have quarrels with his father because when he is drunk he beat me and my son. My son will be absent from school as he will be injured from his father's beatings.*

#### **4.6.2 Child abuse**

According to the findings of this study, four of the girls interviewed in school A and three of the girls interviewed in school B, reported to have been sexually abused in the past six months by their close family members. According to the teacher participants in this study, performance of learners who were subjected to sexual abuse deteriorated drastically. Teachers also confirmed that these learners start by arriving late for school and ultimately fail to make it to school. Learner 21 who was a victim of child abuse had this to report during the interviews:

- *I could not come to school for the whole week because uncle X (name withheld) did the bad thing to me. Mommy had to take me to the police station and hospital.*

Abused learners were scared to report their abusers to their parents, teachers or police and on that issue, learner 11 had this to report:

- *Uncle X told me not to tell anyone because no one will believe me. He said my parents will not love me any more when they find out that I did the "bad thing". After Uncle X did this to me, I felt I did not have to go to school anymore. I thought everyone knew what he did to me. I was scared my friends will make fun of me.*

Almost all the teachers in school A and school B admitted that they were not trained to deal with the problem of abuse. Some teachers had this to report about child abuse in relation to learner absenteeism:

- *For me as a teacher, it is difficult to detect a learner who is being abused unless if such a child tells me, and they hardly come open with the problem.*
- *Even if you suspect that a child is being abused, most of the victim doesn't agree to talk about it as they were threatened by their abusers.*
- *The performance of abused learners deteriorates alarmingly.*

- *More girls than boys become victims of sexual abuse. They are mostly abused by their close family members.*

Apart from the drop in learner performance, the study found that learners who were sexually abused ended up dropping out of school. Teacher 9 had this to report:

- *In the last term (quarter) three (3) girls who were victims of sexual abuse ended up not coming to school and one of them was reported pregnant at the age of 13.*

The study confirmed a link between child abuse and corporal punishment. Child abuse played a negative role in learner attendance. Learners who were abused either at home or at school displayed higher levels of absenteeism than learners who were not abused. Child abuse was also a common recurring factor that contributed to learner absenteeism. Principals of school A and school B respectively had this to say:

- *Learners who are abused at home or here at school were recorded to be in the forefront when it comes to absenteeism.*
- *Abused learners are frequently absent from school and perform far below average.*

Parent participants interviewed admitted that victims of abuse were found to be frequently absent from school. Parent 24 described the aspect of child abuse as follows:

- *Much as I condemn absenteeism on the part of learners, it is difficult for victim of abuse to attend school promptly hence the high rate of learner absenteeism amongst abused learners.*

#### **4.6.3 Teenage pregnancy**

According to the finding of this study, sexually abused girls contributed to teenage pregnancies which contribute to learner absenteeism. According to some teachers interviewed in this study, teenage pregnancy negatively impacted on learner attendance even if pregnant learners are allowed to attend school. A pregnant teenager had this to say about her pregnancy in relation to absenteeism:

- *I find it odd to attend school while pregnant. I just do it because my parents force me to. As a grade 7 learner I don't want to come to this school next year that is why I had to come to school even if I'm pregnant.*

The study found that allowing pregnant learners to attend had some impact on absenteeism. Pregnant teenager had this to report:

- *Although I'm allowed to attend school while pregnant, I have to be absent for some days when I had to go for check up in the clinic and when I feel sick, it is difficult to come to school regularly.*

It was the finding of this study that pregnant teenagers would be absent from school from their eighth month of pregnancy and came back to school after giving birth. Such learners were accepted back into the school. Teacher 6 who is a grade 7 class teacher in school A had this to report:

- *We accept the learner back to school especially if the learner gives birth shortly before final examinations can be written. We try to give the learner a second chance.*

During the last six months, four girls had fallen pregnant in school A and one in school B. Learners who became victims of teenage pregnancy failed to proceed to high school; they dropped out of school to work or look after their babies. At a time when this research was conducted, two grade 7 girls were found to be pregnant in school B. Parent interviewee (parent 18) aptly described the aspect of teenage pregnancy as follows:

- *It is just strange for a pregnant girl to go to school as if nothing has happened. My 14 year old girl who was pregnant could not go to school regularly because pregnancy is complicated and need special care. I'm surprised as to how can a learner concentrate on her lessons while pregnant. In my view pregnant learner should avoid wasting teacher's time by being frequently absent but should just resign until she give birth.*

The principal of the school A and school B had the following comments to make:

- *Allowing pregnant learners to attend school create serious problems and promote absenteeism because a pregnant learner is bound to be absent from school.*
- *I don't blame pregnant learners who are frequently absent because allowing pregnant learners to attend school is really absurd. In fact pregnant learners should not be allowed to attend school.*

#### **4.6.4 Child labour**

Child labour as a factor which led to learner absenteeism was mentioned 22 times in this investigation. Although there are laws which prohibit child labour, this study revealed that child labour was very prevalent in the community where the selected schools are located. In school A, five learners were victims of child labour whereas in school B, three were identified. Victims of child labour had this to say about child labour in relation to learner absenteeism:

- *I could not go to school because my mother told me to stay at home and look after the baby.*
- *I could not go to school because I finished cleaning the house very late.*
- *I have to be absent when I had to go and look for the lost cow.*
- *I have to be absent from school when I had to go to the market and sell vegetables when my mother is ill.*
- *I could not go to school because we are made to clean the classroom at school.*

According to the teacher participants, child labour was a problem that led to absenteeism and it affected more girls than boys. The study further revealed that some learners absented themselves from school as they were made to clean their classrooms; 70% of learner participants confirmed that they absented themselves on Fridays when learners were expected to do spring cleaning at school. Learner participants also confirmed that they were absent when they were expected to work in the school garden. Learner 19 and learner 20 had this to say in relation to child labour and absenteeism:

- *I find it disgusting to work in the garden because it is hard labour and we don't get marks or food for working in the garden, so I absent myself on those days.*
- *I think it is not our duty as learners to clean the classroom, ours is to learn, on Fridays I deliberately stay away from school.*

The study found that child labour which occurs at home or at school had the potential to promote learner absenteeism in school A and school B.

The concept of child labour was referred to by teachers attributed absenteeism to child labour. Teachers 3's response was:

- *Learners who are subjected to hard labour at home recorded high levels of absenteeism.*

The two principal interviews indicated that child labour plays a negative role in learner attendance. The study further revealed that learners are made to clean their classrooms and absenteeism rose when learners were supposed to clean their classrooms particularly on Fridays. The two principals respectively had this to say:

- *Learners who reported to do household chores and other tasks were amongst those who were frequently absent.*
- *Learner absenteeism and child labour goes hand in hand as it is difficult for learners to learn and do hard labour at the same time.*

According to the findings, parents did not really see child labour as a cause of learner absenteeism. Several parents subjected their children to this practice which led directly learner absenteeism. Parent 13 defended child labour as follows:

- *I was not aware that making my child do some chores can make her absent from school. I thought that was teaching my child responsibility*

#### **4.6.5 HIV/AIDS**

In both school A and school B, teacher participants confirmed that HIV/AIDS had a close link with learner absenteeism. The researcher noted that it was very difficult for parents whose children were affected or infected with HIV/AIDS to openly talk about it. The study revealed that HIV/AIDS was a very sensitive factor that led to learner absenteeism. However, from the 100 vulnerable learners (55 in school A and 45 in school B) 70 of the learners' parents admitted that their children were HIV positive. Given the high number of learners affected with HIV/AIDS, it was clear that HIV/AIDS had a negative role to play in the attendance of learners. Learners infected with HIV/AIDS were often absent from school from time to time as they were frequently ill due to HIV/AIDS.

Moreover, learners were absent on the days when they had to collect medication usually during school hours. The study further found that HIV/AIDS does not only affect HIV positive learners but learners who are not positive are absent from school as they were expected to look after their

sick siblings or ailing parents. Thus, learners assume early parental responsibilities which make them chronic absentees as they are expected to head families. In school B two girls at the tender age of 13 were heading families and this resulted in chronic absenteeism.

At the time of this research, three learners in school A reported that their parents were terminally ill; this was proved by chronic absence from school by the three learners. A close link between the effects of HIV/AIDS and learner absenteeism was found; up to 60% (6 in every 10 learner participants) of learners in both school A and school B were either affected or infected with HIV.

#### **4.6.6 Poverty**

According to this research, poverty amongst the learners was mentioned 31 times as one of the fundamental causes of learner absenteeism. In school A, 26 learners reported that they could not make it to school because there was no food at home. To confirm these finding six learners had the following to report:

- *I was too weak to walk the long distance to school because we slept on empty stomach last night and there is no food to eat this morning as you can see.*
- *The last time I had a meal was when we receive our feeding scheme meal at school at 10 o'clock yesterday, since then I haven't eaten anything.*
- *I am hungry and dizzy to concentrate on my lessons, so I decided to stay at home.*
- *Sometimes we go for three (3) days without food and for one to learn you have to be filled.*
- *As you can see, my trousers are torn and this is the only trouser I have, I cannot go to school in this situation.*
- *I have no jersey and shoes to wear and it is very cold to walk without a jersey and bare footed.*

The study confirmed that most households where the research was based lived far below the breadline. Most families did not have food to eat, clothes to wear or houses to sleep in. It was further established that young children as young as 10 could go for days without food. Wearing decent clothes appeared a privilege for these young people. These learners lived under appalling conditions; most learners were victims of starvation and nutritional deficiencies.



The feeding programme at school to alleviate starvation was not effective as learners received their meal at 10h00; this was the first meal for most and learners functioned on an empty stomach until that time. Further, the ration they received was not enough to keep the child going for the rest of the day. Learner 8 had this to report:

- *I appreciate the food that we are given here at school but it is not enough to keep me going the whole day.*

Poverty as a fundamental cause of learner absenteeism hinders regular attendance. This was confirmed by teachers. To support this argument teacher 2 reported the following:

- *As teachers we cannot divorce learner absenteeism from poverty. It is very difficult to teach learners from disadvantaged families, learners from such families tend to be frequently absent from school. It is evident that poverty contributes massively towards learner absenteeism.*

#### **4.6.7 Lack of transport**

Lack of transport contributed significantly to learner absenteeism. In school A 14 learners who were chronic absentees reported that they walked up to eight kilometres from home to school every day. This implied that young children between 7 and 13 years had to walk 16 kilometres to and from school every day. In school B, 12 learners who were chronic absentees reported that they walked up to six and a half kilometres from home to school, implying that primary school children had to walk up to 13 kilometres every day from home to school and from school to home. A few learners had this to report about long distance in relation to absenteeism:

- Learner 10: *I arrive late for school nearly every day.*
- Learner 17: *I'm already exhausted when I receive my first lesson.*
- Learner 02: *I fail to make it to school when I feel very tired after yesterday's long walk to school.*
- Learner 04: *I am afraid to walk alone to school once my friends leave me. I opt to be absent because young girl who walk alone are raped along the bushes to school.*
- Learner 23: *I don't go to school on the rainy day because I will be wet and cold by the time I arrive at school.*
- Learner 07: *As girls we are not safe to walk such a long distance on our own every day.*
- Learner 05: *My first lesson is always a disaster as I'm still exhausted during that lesson.*

- Learner 22: *I am always absent on Fridays as I am very tired after walking to school for the past 4 days.*

Most parents were not aware that their children do not make it to school. These learners leave home and create the impression that they are going to school. Parent 12 described the lack of transport and long distance in relation to learner absenteeism as follows:

- *It is very difficult for our children to walk such a long distance every day, I don't promote absenteeism but the government should do something to provide transport for our children because they arrive late for lessons, they are not safe and I don't allow my child to go to school on rainy days as one child drowned in the river on his way to school.*

The principal of school A had this to report.

- *It is pathetic to see young children walking long distances at this era in pursuit for education. Unfortunately the provision of scholar transport is not within the schools competency. It means we are still going to experience high levels of learner absenteeism.*

#### **4.6.8 Initiation schools**

Learner absenteeism was very prevalent during winter in both school A and school B. According to the teacher participants, this variation of absenteeism in relation to season could be attributed to cultural practices such as initiation schools conducted during winter months. Although there is a departmental regulation which controls time frames for initiation schools, this provision is usually overlooked.

In school A 33 boys were reported to have gone for initiation school from grade 4 to 7; even girls attend initiation school in the Bushbuckridge area. In school B 36 boys were reported to have gone for initiation school. The study revealed that in both school A and school B combined, 27 girls went for initiation school. The implication of this practice is that majority of learners did not write their mid-year examination. The principal of school A and school B respectively had the following to report on initiation school in relation to learner absenteeism:

- *It is very disturbing because initiation school around Bushbuckridge can last up to 2 months. Meaning that learners will be absent for 2 months.*
- *We have to respect our culture and it is also confusing because all the learners who went for initiation school had to be marked present even if they were absent, this is so despite*

*the fact that in our school a learner is withdraw when he/she is absent for maximum of the 14 consecutive absences.*

On the other hand, parents interviewed argued it is their children's right to attend initiation school. Parents maintained that initiation was part of learning and learners should be allowed to go to initiation school and later be accepted back at regular school. Parent 14, 29 and 30 had the following to comment on initiation school in relation to absenteeism:

- *It goes without saying that our children must be allowed at school when they come from initiation school since such a provision is made by the government.*
- *I understand learners will miss out lessons when they are in the initiation school but they still have a right to go for initiation school.*
- *I acknowledge that initiation schools give rise to learner absenteeism but learners must go for initiation school as part of their culture.*

#### **4.6.9 Social grants pay out days**

Learners were frequently absent from school during the days appointed to receive the social grants. According to the documents studied to generate data (section 4.4), school A had 439 learners who received foster grants. School B had 298 learners who received foster grants. In the light of the above figures, teacher participants confirmed that the absentee rate was very high during foster grants pay-outs. Teacher 16 aptly described the aspect of social grants days in relation to learner absenteeism as follows:

- *Much as social grants alleviate poverty for our learners as most of them live below breadline, learners are absent from school in their numbers during these days. It is also surprising because there are some learners who receive their pay-outs through the banks and the post office but they still absent themselves. Social grants pay out days play a negative role in the improvement of learner attendance.*

Learner 04 had this to say about social grant pay and days:

- *I have to be absent from school on this day because my mom will not buy things which I want and she will use all my money for herself only.*

Social grants pay-out days contributed to learner absenteeism up to 9% (1 in every 8 learners interviewed were reported to be absent on social payment days). Principal participants respectively had these responses:

- *We experience high levels of learner absenteeism during these days.*
- *There is technically no school during social grant pay-out days because learners are absent in their large numbers. This is attributed by the fact that we have high number of vulnerable learners.*

According to the study, parents denied having a stake in learner absenteeism. Parents maintained that they do not encourage their children to be absent from school simply because it was pay day. Parent 22 had this to say about social grant:

- *As a parent I cannot encourage my child to be absent from school for receiving social grant. I acknowledge that social grant promote learner absenteeism.*

#### **4.6.10 Union meetings and memorial services**

This study found that disruptions caused by teacher associations were mentioned 13 times particularly by learners and the two principals. This contributed significantly in promoting learner absenteeism. Learners had the following to report about meetings called by teachers during school hours in relation to absenteeism:

- *Learner 3: We are aware that once there is a notice by teacher unions for their meetings learning that week will be disrupted, I opt to stay at home because teachers are just going to let us play without teaching.*
- *Learner 7: There is no use going to school when teachers embark on their mass meetings.*
- *Learner 18: I don't go to school once I'm sure that teachers will be going for meeting even if they leave school at 10h00.*
- *Learner 12: It is disturbing because teachers have been engaging in their meetings every week since the beginning of the month.*

Teacher meetings and memorial services were usually scheduled for 11h00; however, teachers left learners unattended as early as 9h00. The principals of school A and school B respectively reported:

- *Much as we respect the democratic rights of teachers to display their grievances and mourn their colleagues, this trend promote learners absenteeism because once learners are aware of teacher's meetings or memorial services, most of them don't bother coming to school.*

- *Leaving learners unattended by teachers as early as 9h00 is tantamount to being absent from work, teacher absenteeism under the pretence of attending union meetings and memorial services contribute massively on learner absenteeism.*

In the Greenvalley Circuit of Acornhoek where this research was conducted, weekly memorial services had been held during the month of May. This implied that learner absenteeism was very high during the month in question.

The effect of union meetings and memorial services was a common recurring factor mentioned by parents interviewed. Parents argued that teachers should conduct their meetings after school hours. Parent 03 responded like this:

- *I find it irresponsible for teachers to promote learner absenteeism by attending their meetings during school hours. I strongly believe this trend has a negative role to play in promoting learner attendance.*

However, teachers were adamant about conducting their meetings during school hours. Teachers vehemently denied that this trend had anything to do with learner absenteeism; they claimed that they first report for work before going to their meetings. Teachers interviewed (educator 12 and 16) put forward their views on union meetings. Educator 12 and 16 respectively stated the following:

- *As teachers we have a right to attend union meetings and our meetings have no bearing to learner absenteeism.*
- *I acknowledge that there is high level of absenteeism whenever we conduct our meetings but not all teachers are subscribed to the unions. Teachers who don't belong to unions should be accountable for learners when we are out to prevent learner absenteeism.*

In the light of the above factors, it was clear that to achieve better teaching and learning goes beyond attending school daily. For the learner to attend school regularly, the socio-economic background of the learner must be acceptable. Such a learner should have a stable home which implies that the child has food, clothes, shelter and is free from social ills, such as abuse, child labour and disease.

## 4.7 DISCUSSION OF DOCUMENTS STUDIED

In an attempt to generate data to answer the research questions, the researcher studied various documents which included the following:

- ❖ Class Attendance Register
- ❖ Period Register
- ❖ Late Coming Register
- ❖ Quarterly Attendance Survey
- ❖ South African Schools Act.

A brief description of the documents studied ensues. However, it must be noted that these differ from literature review and do not serve the same purpose as literature review. Documents studied were described as follows:

### 4.7.1 Late coming register

In school A and school B late-coming registers existed but were not used effectively by the teachers to stop late-coming. Late-coming was closely linked to learner absenteeism. It was stated in the overview of data that learners who were frequently late for school are prone to absenteeism. If late-coming registers were efficiently monitored, it would limit the rate of learner absenteeism. The late-coming register comprised: the admission numbers of the learners, their dates of birth, the names of the learners, gender of the learners and the column where the learner was marked if he/she arrived late for school. The late-coming register did not indicate the reason for such late-coming. Another problem with the late-coming register was that teachers in school A and school B indicated that it was not clear when a child was late. Some teachers argued that a learner was late only if he/she misses the first lesson (period). Teacher 12 and 13 respectively had the following to comment about late coming registers in relation to learner absenteeism:

- *It is very difficult to effectively administer late coming register because I think that a learner is only late when he/she misses the first lesson period.*
- *In our school, we regard the learner as late when he/she comes after our first break which is at 9h00.*

Misunderstanding surrounding the late-coming register was largely attributed to the lack of a policy on late-coming in both school A and school B. Lack of policy on late-coming also

indicated that teachers did not have disciplinary measures to deal with late-comers who ultimately absent themselves from school. Both school A and school B had late-coming registers which were controlled by class teachers on a daily basis. The purpose of this register was to detect late-coming and prevent it because if not dealt with, it resulted in learner absenteeism.

#### **4.7.2 Period register**

The period register was studied as part of this empirical investigation. The period register like the late-coming register indicates the admission numbers, dates of birth of learner, names of learners, their gender, and periods which learners attend or did not attend. The purpose of this register is to ensure that learners attend all the periods to curb truancy. Period registers just like late-coming registers did not indicate the reasons for non-attendance and disciplinary measures to be instituted should a learner miss a lesson. Period registers for grade 4 to 7 were studied. Period registers for maths, English and social sciences served as examples of how the period register operates.

In terms of the findings, period registers had little bearing to learner absenteeism. Teacher 18 and 04 respectively had the following to say:

- *As a teacher I can effectively control period register but learners who are prone to absenteeism will still absent themselves.*
- *Even if learners can attend all his/her lessons, such a learner can still be a chronic absentee.*

#### **4.7.3 Class attendance register**

The class attendance register was one of the most important documents studied in this research. The class attendance register was the only instrument that was used as a yardstick to determine learner attendance and learner absenteeism. Class attendance registers indicate the grades, admission number and columns which indicated the attendance and absenteeism. The class attendance register also indicates particulars of parents such as their address, telephone numbers, and their occupations. Class attendance registers consist of: grade, admission number for learners, learners' dates of birth, learners' names, gender and a column which indicates the

attendance, absenteeism, number of weeks and total number of days per term. Class attendance registers for grade 4 to 7 in school A and school B were studied in this investigation.

The class teacher has the responsibility to keep the daily register of learner attendance. The register is based on an accurate class list of all the enrolled learners and thus reveals patterns of absenteeism. The register is used to record attendance and absenteeism; however, the class attendance registers in the selected schools lacked key information: the period of absenteeism, status of the absence (whether authorized or unauthorized), reason for absence and measures to be taken for absentees. On the aspect of class attendance register, teacher 07 and 19 respectively remarked:

- *Class attendance register have lot of loopholes which can be manipulated by the class teacher. Status of absence, reasons and measures to be taken when learners are absent are not reflected in the register.*
- *I think managing and controlling class attendance register should not be the competency of the teachers as they are already over loaded with teaching. As a teacher I teach 4 learning areas and class attendance register is just too much for me.*

When studying the registers in schools A and school B it was established that there was no coordination between class teachers in charge of the attendance register and the school administrators (clerks) who should pass information on absenteeism from school to the circuit.

#### **4.7.4 Quarterly attendance survey**

The South African School Act no 84 of 1996 (section 59[1] and [2] was studied. It stipulated the duty of schools to provide information and the Quarterly Attendance Survey is such duty. This Act directs that every school must supply information about the school as is reasonably required by the Head of Department. This also applied to school A and school B where this research was conducted. The Quarterly Attendance Survey was compiled by the Head of Department at school level. The Head of Department at school level consolidated information from class attendance registers as provided by the class teachers. The Head of Department at school level (including school A and school B) submitted the information to the Circuit.



The Circuit submits the information to the District and the District submits the information to the EMIS Head Office. In this regard the Head Office is in Nelspruit. Submission dates for Quarterly Attendance Survey are determined by the Head Office through circulars. Such a submission is based on due/target dates. The Quarterly Attendance Survey involves information on both learner attendance and absenteeism and teacher information. For this reason the link between teacher absenteeism and learner absenteeism could not be overlooked. Quarterly attendance surveys were compiled and submitted every term by the Head of Department at school level.

The Quarterly Attendance Survey consisted of columns where name of the school, EMIS number, name of the circuit and name of the district were recorded. The quarterly attendance survey also recorded number of official school days for the school term as per calendar which was known as Value A. The number of days on which school was closed due to strikes and stay-aways were also recorded in the quarterly attendance survey. Number of non-teaching days for the quarter which were utilized for examinations, sports and other non-teaching activities, such as educational trips and excursions, were also recorded in the Quarterly Attendance Survey.

Quarterly Attendance Survey also recorded number of grades in a school, number of learners enrolled as per class registers and the actual number of attendance. The Quarterly Attendance Survey further contained information on educators: number of educators appointed as per post provisioning in a specific year (2013 in this regard). In this survey, number of additional educators appointed by the School Governing Body in a specific year was captured in the survey. The survey also recorded total number of absences for educators per quarter. Number of educator days gained through substitution at school cost such as afternoon and Saturday classes without remuneration was also captured in the survey. The survey went on to indicate total number of absences for educators as per reason of health, holiday leave, study leave, special leave, death, funeral or memorial, resignation, official school work, official departmental work, official departmental course, and official school course. After recording the above information a total of number of absences irrespective of any reason was provided. Before submitting the quarterly attendance survey, the principal had to certify if the information provided has been checked and verified as correct and complete. The principal then signed her name and the date on which the

survey should be submitted. Upon arrival at the Circuit Office the Circuit Manager also verified, checked and certified if the information was correct and complete and he/she also appended the signature and date. The researcher analyzed Quarterly Attendance Survey of 2013 in school A. The quarter under review was from April to June, the second quarter of the year (2013). In terms of the survey in school A, learners in class (grade) were divided according to gender (boys or girls). In grade R there were 32 boys and 36 girls enrolled. The actual number of attendance in grade R class (including boys and girls) were 1 590 for the boys and 1 758 for the girls. Grade 2 had 45 boys and 34 girls enrolled as per class register.

The actual number of attendances for the quarter under review was 1 788 for the boys and 1 620 for the girls. In grade 2, no absenteeism was recorded. Grade 3 had 32 boys and 29 girls. Grade 3 boys recorded 1 625 attendance whereas girls were at 1 489 attendances. Grade 4 class had 34 boys and 33 girls. The attendances for boys in the quarter under review were 1 669 whereas girls' actual number of attendance was 1 559. Still in the fourth quarter absenteeism was not captured. In 5<sup>th</sup> grade there were 35 boys and 17 girls enrolled in the quarter under review. The attendance in grade 5 was 1 785 for the boys and 822 for the girls. In grade 5 there was no attendances recorded. In the 6<sup>th</sup> grade there were 33 boys and 27 girls enrolled in the quarter under review. The attendance for the quarter under review as per attendance register was 1 717 for the boys and 1 377 for the girls. In grade six just like in the previous grades no absenteeism were captured in the quarterly survey. The 7<sup>th</sup> grade had 59 boys and 35 girls enrolled in the second quarter of 2013. Attendances for the boys in the quarter under review were 2 940 whereas girls were at 1 733 in the same period.

The researcher further analyzed Quarterly Attendance Survey of 2013 in school B. The Quarter or term under review was also from April to June. It was the second quarter of 2013. In terms of the survey in school B, learners were also divided according to gender (boys and girls). In grade R 46 boys and 49 girls were enrolled in the period under review. The attendance in the quarter in question as per attendance register was 1 917 for the boys and 2 414 for the girls.

The first grade enrolled 69 boys and 72 boys as per class register. The attendance for the quarter under review was 3 400 for the boys and 3 644 for the girls. It must be noted that in grade R and

1 absenteeism was recorded in the quarter under review. Grade 2 had 69 boys and 59 girls enrolled. The attendance in the quarter under review was 3 721 for the boys and 2 818 for the girls. No absenteeism was recorded for the period under review. In the third grade, 36 boys and 52 girls were enrolled in the second quarter of 2013. In the same period, the number of attendance were 1 719 for the boys and 42 girls were enrolled for the second quarter of 2013. The number of attendance for the fourth grade in the period under review was 1 836 for the boys and 2 193 for the girls. In grade 3 36 boys and 42 girls were enrolled for the second quarter of 2013. The attendance for the fourth grade in the period under review was 1 836 for the boys and 2 193 for the girls. In grade 4, no of absenteeism was recorded.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, 44 boys and 32 girls were recorded. In the period under review was 1 836 for the boys and 2 193 for the girls. In grade 4, no of absenteeism was recorded. In the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, 44 boys and 32 girls were recorded in the second quarter of 2013. The attendance in the period under review for the fifth grade was 2 212 for the boys and 1 591 for the girls. In grade 5 no absenteeism were captured in the period under review. The attendance was 2 805 for the boys and 132 for the girls in the sixth grade; no absenteeism's were captured in the period under review. In grade 7, 59 boys and 48 girls were enrolled for the second quarter of 2013. The attendances for boys was 3 213 and 2 224 for the girls in the quarter under review. Commenting on quarterly attendance surveys, the principals of school A and school B respectively had the following to say:

- *It is discouraging to compile and submit information regarding learner absenteeism to the district and receive no feedback in return. It is indeed discouraging to make follow up regarding the information hence the high rate of learner absenteeism in our schools.*
- *In my view, compiling Quarterly Attendance Survey is a futile exercise as there is no feedback on information that our school submit to the circuit.*

In the light of the information above, it is clear that the methods of capturing learner absenteeism in school A and school B had several loopholes because the late coming register, period register, class-attendance register and the quarterly attendance did not make provision for capturing actual number of absenteeism, reasons for absence and status of the absence. This made it easy to manipulate the collection and capturing of absenteeism in School A and School B. It is also

important to note that the Quarterly Attendance Survey contains information on the learners and educators. Due to the nature and scope of this empirical investigation, educators' information had not been analysed.

#### **4.7.5 South African School Act 84 of 1996**

The researcher studied the Act to generate data on learner absenteeism in the selected schools. The aim was to establish what the law stipulated about learner absenteeism. Chapter 2 of Act states that every school-going child is compelled to attend school regularly.

Subject to this Act and other applicable provincial laws, every parent must ensure every learner for whom he/she is responsible attends a school from the first day of the year in which such a learner reaches the age of seven years until the last day of the school day of the year in which such a learner reaches the age of fifteen years or ninth grade whichever comes first (SASA, 1996). In the light of the above statement, the Act makes no provision for learners to be absent from school. Learners do not have the right to be absent from school for whatever reason unless their safety and health are in danger.

In terms of the South African School Act 84 of 1996, if a learner, who is subject to compulsory attendance in terms of subsection (1) of the Act, is not enrolled or fails to attend a school, the Head of Department has a prerogative to investigate the circumstances of the learner's absence from school and take appropriate measures to remedy the situation (this will depend on the nature of and reason for absenteeism). If the above fails, the Head of Department reserves the right to issue a written notice to the parents of the learner requiring compliance with subsection (1) of the Act. Regarding the provisions made by the South African School Act, principals of school A and school B respectively argued that:

- *We were not aware of the provision by the Act.*
- *I maintain that forcing a learner to come to school will not help the child, but changing the attitudes of such a learner towards his problem of absenteeism can help.*

Parent 20 and 24 had the following to comment on the provision of the Act in relation to learner absenteeism:

- *I believe that as a parent I have to do more to help my child overcome absenteeism than relying on the Act to do my parental responsibility.*
- *I was not aware of such a provision, we were never told about it when we attend parent meetings. If the Act is there to promote attendance, I recommend that it be used.*

Parents, teachers and learners should be aware that anyone, without a valid reason and after written notice from the Head of Department fails to comply with subsection (1) of the Act, is guilty of an offence and liable on conviction to a fine or to imprisonment for a period not exceeding six months. Any other person who, without valid reason, prevents a learner who is subject to compulsory attendance from attending school is also liable for imprisonment for a period not exceeding six months. In the light of the information provided in the documents studied, it is clear that in school A and school B there was no appropriate formal policy that guided the schools on how to record and monitor learner absenteeism. In terms of the document studied, no formula was used to determine when a learner should be withdrawn from the class attendance register. In school A, a learner could be withdrawn after 10 consecutive days of absence; in school B learners were withdrawn after 14 days of consecutive absence.

#### **4.8 CONCLUSION**

In the light of the data presented above, the researcher came to the conclusion that learner absenteeism is a serious problem that poses a serious threat to proper and professional practice (effective teaching and learning). Learner absenteeism was caused or influenced by school-based and socio-economic factors. Learner absenteeism negatively impacted on learner performance. Learners who were chronic absentees performed far below average compared to learners who attended school regularly. Another challenge posed by learner absenteeism was that it created a fertile ground for drop-outs and rising levels of illiteracy in the community where school A and school B were located. Learner absenteeism is a recurring problem in school A and school B. In both schools, there were no policies which dealt with learner absenteeism and its related issues such as truancy and late-coming.

## **CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter the researcher provides solutions to address the identified factors and challenges that contributed to learner absenteeism in the selected schools. Recommendations are made on how learner absenteeism may be reduced or prevented. Lastly, the researcher relates his findings to his literature review. An underlying assumption of the study was that learner absenteeism was linked to a high failure rate and the direct challenge was a decline in teaching and learning in school A and school B.

In the light of the above, the main research question of this study was: What are the factors and challenges contributing to learner absenteeism in the selected schools of Acornhoek? From the main research question, the following sub-questions were formulated:

- ❖ What was the role of learners in promoting and preventing absenteeism?
- ❖ How could parents ensure that their children attend school regularly?
- ❖ What was the role of teachers in alleviating or promoting learner absenteeism?
- ❖ What contribution did principals of school A and school B make in an attempt to resolve learner absenteeism?

Possible solutions to the above questions are proposed in a series of recommendations to support teachers, learners, parents and education officials in the reduction of learner absenteeism. The researcher provided recommendations for each school-based and socio-economic factor mentioned in 4.3.2 and 4.3.3 of Chapter 4.

### **5.2 LINK BETWEEN FINDINGS AND THE LITERATURE**

In terms of this study, there was a link between the researcher's findings and the literature studied and the following factors are pertinent:

The researcher revealed a close link between late-coming, truancy and learner absenteeism. According to this study, truants and learners who arrived late were found to be absent for a

specific period of time and they would arrive late or leave school before school closure. The literature studied reaffirms this finding: Moseki (2004:22) states that truancy could be defined as unauthorized absence from school; according to this explanation, the learner appears at school for a brief moment and disappears.

❖ In terms of the researcher's investigations, dropping out of school was the end product of chronic learner absenteeism. This finding was supported by Auditor General of Victoria (2004). According to this audit, learners who were frequently absent from school were at the risk of dropping out of school early and becoming unemployed in the long-term as it would be difficult to secure a decent job without proper educational background.

It was found by this study that bullying is one of the main causes of learner absenteeism. This was reaffirmed by Child Health Promotion Research Unit (2006:17). According to this research unit, bullying creates a hostile school culture for learners who were victims.

The research found that lack of parental involvement in the learner's education played a negative role in academic achievement of such learners. Railsback (2004:18) confirmed this finding by saying that when more adults are available in the household, the more likely that the learner from that household will be at school as required.

❖ According to this study, negative attitudes of teachers towards learners led to learner absenteeism. This statement was reaffirmed by Moseki (2004:38) who argued that in most British cities, learners maintained that negative attitudes displayed by teachers drove them out of school.

This study revealed that a disintegrated family background was one of the factors that contributed to learner absenteeism. The literature studied also reiterated this statement by stating that in a study conducted in the Eastern Cape, teachers reported that 74% of learners who experienced learner absenteeism came from unstable family backgrounds (Buchel 2006:68).

❖ It was also noted by this study that learners who were abused and subjected to child labour were more likely to be chronic absentees. This finding was also supported by South African Human Rights Commission (2007:57) which revealed that 38% of South African learners engaged in some form of household or domestic labour which in a way was equivalent to child abuse.

❖ In terms of these findings, school A and school B had 100 vulnerable learners and 70 parents of learners who were frequently absent admitted that their children were HIV positive. Buchel (2006: 94) confirms that 3% of children aged 12 to 18 were from child-headed families as a result of HIV/AIDS related illnesses.

❖ Poverty has been identified as one of the main causes of learner absenteeism by this study. This was reaffirmed by CASE report of 2007 which argued that 14% of South African school children attend school on an empty stomach.

According to this study, learners in school A and school B walked up to 16 kilometres daily. Lack of transport was identified as a deterrent to regular school attendance. This finding was confirmed by the literature studied; according to the South African Human Rights Commission report (2007:23), transport costs were a burden on parents and this led to learner absenteeism.

In the light of the above, the causes and effects of learner absenteeism in this study and those in the literature studied were more or less the same. However, the causes of absenteeism in school A and school B were peculiar to the environment in which the two schools were located. In a nutshell, the findings of this study reaffirm what has been studied in the literature review. On the other hand, there were other factors which were completely peculiar to this study and were not mentioned in the literature review: initiation schools, union meetings by teachers and social grant pay out days.



## **5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS ON SCHOOL-BASED FACTORS THAT LEAD TO LEARNER ABSENTEEISM**

### **5.3.1 Relationship between truancy, late-coming and learner absenteeism**

This study revealed that in school A and school B, no standard procedures and measures to deal with truancy and late-coming existed. The study also found that late-coming was the first stage before chronic absenteeism. Hunt (2007: 19) believes that late-coming and truancy could be blamed on ineffective school attendance policies. The researcher recommended the following strategies to deal with truancy and late-coming in order to reduce learner absenteeism:

- ❖ It is very important for teachers, principals and parents to know their children or learner's behavioural patterns in order to detect early signs of truancy and late-coming.
- ❖ Learners who are frequently truant and arrive late for school should be assigned with classroom tasks which will keep them busy and make them feel important; for instance, those who arrive late can be assigned with a task of ringing the bell to notify learners and teachers how lessons follow each other. Truant learners can be assigned with the task of collecting learners' exercise books to submit to the teacher for marking.
- ❖ Teachers must recognise efforts and reward good behaviour displayed by learners who arrive late or who frequently truant when they improve in their behaviour.
- ❖ To avoid truancy and late-coming, late-coming registers and period registers must be controlled and monitored promptly.
- ❖ Learners with late-coming and truancy problems should not be judged but teachers must carefully listen and understand reasons behind their truancy and late-coming and take appropriate action.
- ❖ The school should develop a policy on late-coming and truancy. This policy should also indicate measures to be taken against the learner who contravenes the rules stipulated in the policy.

### **5.3.2 Learner drop-outs as an effect of learner absenteeism**

It was found by this research that before learners drop-out of school, they started by being chronically absent from school. Most parents who participated in this study were surprised to see their children ultimately dropping out of school. According to the literature, children dropping out from primary school were often over-age learners. In Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali and Mozambique over-age learners accounted for 60% drop-outs. In attempt to reduce drop-out the following strategies were recommended:

- ❖ Introducing system of merits and demerits for learners who attend regularly and those who absent themselves. Learners who attend regularly should earn points for attendance and lose points when they are absent. The points earned should be converted into rewards, such as certificates. This will encourage learners to attend regularly.
- ❖ Developing methods to honour learners for attendance and encourage absentees to come to school may include organising reading festivals and awarding prizes to the most punctual learner or the best attending learner of the month.
- ❖ Providing access to sporting and extra-curricular activities such as football or netball matches.

### **5.3.3 Bullying**

Bullying has been found to be one of the main causes of learner absenteeism in this study and is closely related to domestic violence. It was also confirmed by this study that learners subjected to bullying were threatened with death if they reported to their teachers or parents. In terms of the literature, the Child Health Promotion Research Unit (2006:34) argues that bullying creates a hostile school culture for victims. According to this research unit, successful tackling of school bullying and the creation of a friendly school culture and environment encourage learner attendance and academic progress. To overcome bullying with the aim of enhancing learner attendance, the following interventions were recommended:

- ❖ Involve parents: parents of learners who bully others need to know that the school does not tolerate bullying.

- ❖ Involve learners: the victims and bullies must be aware that the school does not tolerate bullying; children must be empowered so that when they see their peers being bullied, they need to report the incidents to their teachers. Teachers and parents should ensure that victims are not scared to report these incidents.
- ❖ Using the curriculum to foster the culture of respecting other people's beliefs and values can reduce bullying. The curriculum provides workbooks in which these values are enshrined; by knowing the values, learners will learn that prejudice is unacceptable.
- ❖ The schools are advised to introduce conflict resolution and anger management skills. Teachers should be trained to impart knowledge to learners to behave themselves when they are angry or abused.
- ❖ Increase adult visibility: the schools should increase supervision at places around the school where most bullying occurs, such as toilets and playgrounds.
- ❖ As an intervention to combat bullying, teachers should be trained on how to resolve problems (problem solving skills) and be knowledgeable about where to get support and assistance if they struggle to deal with a particular incident of bullying. Teachers should be trained how to recognize bullying behaviour and to devise strategies to deal with the problem.
- ❖ Work with communities because bullying that takes place at school is often carried on outside the school. Engagement with the wider community will prevent bullying outside the school.
- ❖ Make it easy for pupils to report bullying: learners must be made to feel confident that they will be listened to and that adults will act on bullying.
- ❖ Develop a policy on bullying and a proper code of conduct which will ensure that learners are aware of the school's non-zero tolerance of bullying. Resolving the problem of bullying will reduce learner absenteeism.

#### **5.3.4 Overcrowding in class and poor school facilities**

These two factors have been deliberately clustered together because they are interrelated. According to the teachers who participated in this study, it was difficult to control and manage an overcrowded class. This made it difficult to detect, control and prevent learner absenteeism.

Further, the poor school facilities and unreliable infra-structure of school A and school B contributed to learner absenteeism (e.g., mud buildings and leaking roofs). The literature studied also reaffirmed that learners were more likely to be absent from school when their safety and wellbeing were not guaranteed especially during unfavourable weather conditions. To overcome overcrowding in classes and poor school facilities the researcher suggested this strategy:

- ❖ The schools should consider employing multi grade classes whereby learners of different grades are placed in one class, particularly during very cold or rainy days. However, it must be noted that provision of infrastructure is beyond the competency of the school.

### **5.3.5 Corporal punishment**

This investigation revealed that despite the fact that corporal punishment is disallowed in the South African schooling system, almost all the learners who displayed chronic absenteeism confirmed that corporal punishment was still practised in school A and school B. Corporal punishment was not mentioned in the literature studied. The researcher suggests the following interventions to reduce learner absenteeism in relation to corporal punishment:

- ❖ Teachers should respect the dignity and rights of learners without prejudice
- ❖ Maintain good communication between teachers and learners, which will help in avoiding confrontations between teachers and learners.
- ❖ Teachers should strive to eliminate unprofessional behaviour, such as insults and derogative remarks towards learners.
- ❖ Develop a code of conduct for learners so that they adhere to the school rules.
- ❖ Learners must respect the legitimacy and authority of teachers.
- ❖ Learners must avoid anti-social behaviour like bullying, not doing their school work and other activities which may disrupt the learning process.
- ❖ Learners must be encouraged to report incidences of corporal punishment to the law enforcing authorities because corporal punishment is a criminal offence. By stopping corporal punishment, learner attendance will improve and performance of learners will be enhanced.

### **5.3.6 Lack of parental involvement**

Lack of parental involvement in the education of their children was a common recurring factor in all the educators and learners' interviews. According to this study, lack of parental involvement was attributed to the fact that most parents were not at home regularly as they worked and lived on the farms. According to the literature studied, lack of parental involvement in the learner's education plays a negative role in the achievement of learners and learner absenteeism. Railsback (2004:18) argues that there is a positive link between parental and care-giver involvement in learner education and attendance. To address the lack of parental involvement the researcher suggests the following interventions:

- ❖ Efforts should be made to increase involvement of parent representatives of the School Governing Body and the community in general in ensuring attendance and monitoring absenteeism, late-coming and truancy.
- ❖ The school should invest in education programmes and communication initiatives to highlight to parents the importance of their involvement in their children's education.
- ❖ For learners who are chronically absent from school, teachers should design a diary which learners, teachers and parents will sign every day to ensure the learner's attendance.
- ❖ Teachers should keep close contact with the parents by inviting parents whose learners are frequently absent and by calling general parent meetings. The school should ensure that parents (not learners) collect the learners' progress reports; this will help the teachers and the parents discuss the academic progress of learners and other problems like learner absenteeism.

### **5.3.7 Unhealthy relationship between learners and teachers**

This study confirmed that unhealthy relationship between learners and teachers leads to learner absenteeism. A negative attitude on the part of teachers drives learners out of school. Similarly, Moseki (2004:44) argues that learner absenteeism rates are lower in cases where there is a positive relationship between the teachers and the learners. To solve this problem the following strategies were recommended:

- ❖ Improved communication between learners and teachers can play a significant role in reducing learner absenteeism.
- ❖ Both teachers and learners should improve their communication skills and this can be achieved by teachers and learners knowing their roles and responsibilities and interesting subject teaching which will encourage learners to be in class. Learners should take their school work seriously.
- ❖ The school should invest in educational programmes and good communication initiatives to highlight the importance of healthy relationship between teachers and learners. This will foster trust and healthy attitudes between teachers and learners and improve learner attendance.

### **5.3.8 Unreliable class attendance registers and challenges caused by learner absenteeism in the administration of the school**

This study revealed that poorly designed class attendance registers posed serious challenges to learner attendance. According to this study, learner absenteeism created administrative problems in the management of school A and school B. To resolve this problem, the researcher suggests:

- ❖ The school should develop and draft a clear policy for recording, monitoring and addressing learner absenteeism and ensure that this is communicated effectively to the teachers, learners and the parents.
- ❖ The school should establish a dedicated unit or employ a dedicated staff to specifically deal with learner absenteeism. This task should be the competency of special personnel to deal with capturing and monitoring learner absenteeism because teachers are already overloaded with teaching.
- ❖ The school should design an overall system for recording school and class attendance which is free from rigging as the current attendance register can be easily manipulated. The attendance register should include reasons for absenteeism to help teachers in charge of the register to follow-up.
- ❖ In order to completely eradicate learner absenteeism, more resources must be focused on researching and addressing problems, such as late-coming and truancy that give rise to learner absenteeism.

- ❖ More financial resources should be allocated to schools to deal with factors which cause learner absenteeism, such as the appointment of personnel to deal with absenteeism and the installation of an electronic system to replace the manual class attendance register.

It is clear from the above recommendations that learner absenteeism is caused by lack of policies in school A and school B. Lack of involvement on the part of the parents and community contributed greatly to the problem. When the school and the community engage in resolving the scourge of learner absenteeism, learner performance can be enhanced. Monitoring and follow-up procedures in controlling learner absenteeism can be cited as one of the problems which compromise learner attendance.

#### **5.4 RECOMMENDATION ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTES TO LEARNER ABSENTEEISM**

Approaches to managing learner absenteeism should be devised in a holistic way, to take account of the broader problems that contribute to absenteeism. The approaches should be specific to the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the schools and the surrounding communities where absenteeism is a problem. Solutions to the socio- economic factors identified in Chapter 4, section 4.3.3 are suggested.

##### **5.4.1 Unstable family background, child abuse, teenage pregnancy and child labour**

The above factors have been clustered because they were interrelated. This study revealed that an unstable family background plays a negative role in promoting learner attendance. According to this investigation unstable family background gave rise to social ills, such as child abuse, teenage pregnancy and child labour. The above factors create fertile ground for learner absenteeism to take root. Both this study and literature review confirm that unstable family background may lead to child abuse, teenage pregnancy and child labour which, in turn, lead to absenteeism. The researcher recommends the following strategies to reduce learner absenteeism:

- ❖ Teachers should detect and identify vulnerable learners who include learners who are from unstable family backgrounds, abused learners, pregnant teenagers and children subjected to child labour. Identifying such learners will help the teachers detect early signs of learner absenteeism which will help in preventing the problem.
- ❖ Schools should adopt a social worker, a nurse and the police to deal with social problems like child abuse, teenage pregnancy and child labour because teachers are not trained to deal with these problems.
- ❖ As for teenage pregnancy, sexuality education should be prioritised to alert learners about the effect of falling pregnant at an early age. Sexuality education will make learners aware of the danger of unprotected sex, which leads to teenage pregnancy and disease and ultimately, absenteeism.
- ❖ Counselling should be introduced to guide female learners after childbirth so that absenteeism is minimised.

#### **5.4.2 Poverty**

This investigation revealed that poverty plays a negative role in improving learner attendance. It was established by this study that some learners were absent from school as they had nothing to eat at home and no shoes or clothes to wear. The literature studied affirms this finding. According to the literature, poverty has prompted some schools to provide meals before school to ensure that learners start lessons well-fed (Bonzos, 2005:15). To improve learners' attendance in relation to poverty the following interventions were recommended:

- ❖ Parents of learners in the school should be encouraged to start a vegetable garden which will provide food to the needy learners. Surplus of food from the garden could be sold to help learners buy items like shoes and jerseys.
- ❖ The school should establish a fundraising committee in consultation with the parents. Proceeds from the fundraising should be used to buy basic food stuff for the needy learners.
- ❖ A social worker should be adopted to deal with problems of learners from poor backgrounds. The social worker can then refer these learners to the Department of Social Welfare in order to benefit from government social grants.



### 5.4.3 HIV/AIDS

This investigation confirmed that the number of learners who were reported to be absent from school due to HIV/AIDS related illness was very high. These learners were absent because they were sick themselves or they had to remain at home to look after ailing siblings and parents. The literature studied reaffirms this finding as Brookes et al (2004: 18) found that maternal orphan rate was 3.3% for children aged 2 to 18 and around 10% of children will have lost their caregivers by their 9<sup>th</sup> years of age. According to the survey, 3% of children aged 12 to 18 were heading households and 45% of these children heading families lived in homes where there is not enough money for food and clothes. In the light of the above, the following interventions were recommended:

- ❖ The school should draw up HIV/AIDS policies. These policies will make learners aware of the dangers and the effects of HIV/AIDS. By adhering to such policies, learners will be informed about HIV/AIDS and by so doing, the rate of learner absenteeism will be minimal.
- ❖ HIV/AIDS education programmes for teachers, learners, parents and wider community can have an effect in reducing learner absenteeism. As more learners are aware of the effects of HIV/AIDS, they will be better informed and take the necessary precautions.

This study found that initiation schools contributed largely towards learner absenteeism. It was found that learners in the Bushbuckridge area can be absent from school for two months while they are in the initiation school. In order to solve this problem and improve learner attendance, the researcher recommended this intervention:

- ❖ The schools in consultation with the Department of Traditional Affairs and Department of Education should alert the leaders of initiation schools to the provision made by the department. The provision includes adhering to the time frames to erect initiation schools when public schools close and closing initiation schools a weekend before public schools reopen.
- ❖ This study recommends that leaders of initiation schools who contravene this provision should not be granted the right to erect the initiation schools again.

In conclusion, socio-economic factors which led to learner absenteeism are interrelated. Unstable family background gave rise to all other socio-economic factors. When the family background is stable, social ills such as teenage pregnancy, child labour, child abuse and HIV/AIDS are minimised. However, addressing socio-economic factors is beyond the competency of a teacher and requires involving other role players, such as social worker nurses, police and the wider community, to reduce learner absenteeism.

## **5.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This section briefly outlines the limitations of this study and explained how these limitations were mitigated.

- ❖ The roads around school A and school B were in bad condition. It was difficult to drive around in a small car. To reach some of the participant's homes, one had to walk a long distance, which was time-consuming and tiring.
- ❖ It was difficult to reach some of the parents who worked and lived on the surrounding farms. Some intended participants were inaccessible and the researcher had to drive to farms to reach some of the parents.
- ❖ In the light of the two factors above, the researcher had to limit the number of participants due to inadequate financial resources.
- ❖ There was some conflict of interests regarding the timing of data collection. The researcher planned to do his research during school hours which conflicted with class time when both learners and the researcher as teacher were expected to be in class. To mitigate this limitation, the researcher had to make appointments with the participants to conduct research after school hours.

Apart from the limitations stated above, certain issues raised by the study require further research:

- ❖ Corporal punishment should receive further attention. Some participants believed that learners must be punished in order to instil discipline and improve academic progress. They felt that disallowing the use of corporal punishment created disciplinary problems and no alternative measures were available to instil discipline. Others felt corporal punishment contributed to learner absenteeism.

The key question on corporal punishment can be framed as: “What is the impact of corporal punishment on learner absenteeism?”

- ❖ Teenage pregnancy is another such issue. Participants had different opinions about whether pregnant learners should be allowed or not to continue with their learning. Others felt a need for schools which cater specifically for pregnant learners, such as the Pretoria Pregnant Secondary School. A key question on teenage pregnancy can be framed as: “Are pregnant learners eligible to attend school or should they remain at home and go back to school after they have given birth?”

Future research on these issues can shed more light on learner absenteeism and fill the gap in the knowledge base regarding learner absenteeism.

## **5.6 CONCLUSION**

Dealing with learner absenteeism requires a clear approach, a policy and an effective monitoring system that can provide a basis for decision-making and intervention. However, to address the causes of learner absenteeism goes beyond the scope of this study. Any attempt to reduce absenteeism should take account of the fact that it is generally a symptom of much broader socio-economic problems in South Africa. Yet reducing learner absenteeism can be assisted by measures within the control of the Education Department and that has been highlighted throughout this chapter. This empirical investigation succeeded in answering the research questions illustrated in section 1.4 of Chapter 1. The factors and challenges that contributed to learner absenteeism were identified and recommendations to prevent learner absenteeism were made. The aims and objectives of this study have been achieved because challenges and factors which contributed to learner absenteeism were identified in Chapter 4 and the researcher provided solutions to the identified problems. Thus, the study has contributed to the body of knowledge which seeks the betterment of school-based education for learners from challenging socio-economic backgrounds.

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## APPENDICES

Appendix A	Adult participants informed consent form
Appendix B	Learner participants consent form
Appendix C	Observation schedule for learners
Appendix D	Focus group interview schedule for learners
Appendix E	Focus group interview schedule for teachers
Appendix F	Focus group interview schedule for principals
Appendix G	Focus group interview schedule for parents
Appendix H	Checklist for registers
Appendix I	School record keeping and sources of documents
Appendix J	General record keeping for learner absenteeism

It is important to note that questions in the appendices supplement the main research question in section 1.4 of Chapter 1.

### APPENDIX A: ADULT PARTICIPANTS INFORMED CONSENT FORM.

To be completed by adult participants (teachers, parents and principals).

1. I understand the purpose and procedure of this research.	YES	NO
2. I agree with the ethical considerations of this study (anonymity and confidentiality).	YES	NO
3. I understand what this research involves.	YES	NO
4. I agree that there will be no compensation in form of money.	YES	NO
5. I am aware that summary of findings will be made public to me as participant.	YES	NO
Signature:		
Date:		

## **APPENDIX B: LEARNER INFORMED ASSENT FORM.**

To be completed by child participants (minors).

Mark with a cross for yes/no.

I understand statement of the purpose of the research.	YES	NO
A description of the procedure to be applied has been explained to me.	YES	NO
A statement that my identity as a minor participant will not be revealed.	YES	NO
I have been assured that there will be no potential risks and discomforts associated with the research.	YES	NO
I agree that no financial benefits will be received by me.	YES	NO
I agree that I am not compelled to participate in this study and will withdraw at any time.	YES	NO
I agree that I have discussed my participation with parents prior to signing the form.	YES	NO
I agree that parents/guardians will be asked for permission on my behalf.	YES	NO
I agree that parents/guardians will receive a copy the signed assent form.	YES	NO
Parents/guardians signature on behalf of the child:		
Child signature:		
Date:		

## **APPENDIX C: QUESTIONS FOR QUESTIONNAIRE**

Can learners absenteeism be regarded as a disciplinary problem?- yes/no

Can absenteeism impact on learners performance?-yes/no

Can teachers play a role in combating learner absenteeism?- yes/no

Can distance have a negative impact in learner absenteeism? – yes/no

Do an absent learner have any interest in learning/ -yes/no

Can distance have a negative impact in learner absenteeism? –yes/no

Are boys / girls mostly prone to absenteeism? – yes/ no

Is the school doing enough to monitor and manage absenteeism? – yes/ no

Do parents have a role to play in promoting absenteeism? – yes/ no

Can household chores and other responsibilities contribute to absenteeism? – yes/ no

Can absenteeism be related to late coming and bunking lessons? – yes/ no

#### **APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR LEARNERS WHO ARE FREQUENTLY ABSENT:**

How long have you been in grade six?

Do you like going to school?

What is it that you like most about going to school?

You are mostly absent from school, what makes you absent?

Do you live with your parents on a daily basis?

How many siblings do you have? If yes who looks after them?

How often does your mother come home?

Who help you and your siblings with your school work?

How far is your home from school?

What do you use to go to school? Do you have school bus?

If you answer yes to. How many kilometres do you think you are walking from school to home or home to school?

How do you feel when you arrive at school after walking a distance?

Does not fatigue distract you in your lessons?

Do you have breakfast before you come to school?

Do your teachers understand your situation?

Do teachers who don't understand punish you for absenteeism?

#### **APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR EDUCATORS.**

What do you think can be the causes of absenteeism in your school?

Between girls and boys, who are frequently absent from school?

What are the impacts of learner absenteeism towards learners' performance?

Can poverty and social ills be attributed to learners' absenteeism?

As a teacher what are you doing to help learners who are frequently absent?

What is the relationship between the learners, teachers and parents in trying to alleviate learner absenteeism?

What kind of support do the absent learners get from the teachers and the principal?

Your relationship with the absent learners. Do they confide in you?

What do you regard as a major role you have to play in your school to curb learner absenteeism?

Do you have enough time and expertise to curb learner absenteeism?

How does learner absenteeism impact in your work as a teacher?

Can you regard learner absenteeism as a barrier to teaching?

What kind of challenges does learner absenteeism pose to effective teaching and learning?

What are your future plans in combating learner absenteeism?

#### **APPENDIX F: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR PRINCIPALS.**

In your view, what do you think are the causes of learner absenteeism in this school?

Do you regard learner absenteeism as a disciplinary problem?

Do you also regard learner absenteeism as a behavioural or social problem? If yes explain further.

What impact does learner absenteeism have in the control and administration of the school? Explain.

Do you regard learner absenteeism as a management problem, if yes, why?

Does learner absenteeism have any impact in the average performance of your learners in general? Explain.

Do you have cooperation on the part of the part of the teachers and parents in an attempt and solve the problem?

What do you suggest should be done to resolve the problem?

**APPENDIX G: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR INTERVIEWS  
QUESTIONS WHICH WILL BE ASKED TO PARENTS WHOSE CHILDREN IS  
FREQUENTLY ABSENT:**

How often are you involved in your child's education?

How frequently do you check your child's school work?

If you answer yes to question 2, are you satisfied with the progress of your child's school work?

What are you doing to earn a living?

Do you stay with your child on a daily basis, if not why are you not staying with your children?

Are you aware that most of the days your child doesn't make it to school?

If you answer yes to question 6, what have you done to help your child?

Have you discussed this problem (absenteeism) with your child's teacher?

If you answer yes to question 8, did your child get any help?

Are you as a parent monitoring the attendance of your child?

**APPENDIX H: CHECKLIST FOR SCHOOL REGISTERS**

Name of School:

Date of visit:

How are learners that are absent recorded in the daily register? Describe (e.g. Name of learner, absent for whole day or part of the day).

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How frequently is learner attendance (and absenteeism) information aggregated?



Frequency of aggregation	Yes	No
Daily		
Weekly		
Monthly		
Quarterly		
Annually		
Not aggregated		

In what form is it recorded (where) what summary statistics if any, are recorded? Describe

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What is the total number of absentees for 2013?

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What is the total number of absentee days in 2013?

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If information is not available, why is that so?

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List the documents that the school uses to record learner attendance

- (i)
- (ii)
- (iii)
- (iv)

Provide information on the extent of use of each of the above listed official documents.

Which of the following aggregations are used by the schools in measuring learner absenteeism?

Number of absentee days of the year per learner?

Number of absentee days for the year for all learners?

Number of learners who are absent in a single day?

Number of learners who are absent per quarter or per annum?

#### **APPENDIX I: SCHOOL RECORD KEEPING AND SOURCES OF DOCUMENTS**

School	Document used	Does the school receive the relevant documents from dept. of education?
School A	Daily register, summary register and quarterly report	Yes/No
School B	Daily register, summary register and quarterly report	Yes/No

#### **APPENDIX J: GENERAL RECORD KEEPING FOR ABSENTEEISM**

School	Does school keep learner profile?	Does school keep records of withdrawals?	Does the school keep transfer cards?
School A			
School B			