



Examining the Impact of Learner Absenteeism on the Academic Performance of Grade 12 Students: A Case Study of a School in the Butterworth District

Mivuyo Bolosha¹  & Owen Madalambana¹ 

¹Walter Sisulu University, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

Absenteeism is a persistent challenge affecting learner outcomes and educational attainment, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas. This study, therefore, examined the effects of learner absenteeism on the academic performance of Grade 12 learners in one secondary school within the Butterworth District, Eastern Cape, South Africa. The study is framed using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research draws from an interpretive paradigm to explore how educators, learners, and parents perceive and experience the phenomenon. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected participants and analysed thematically. Findings revealed that absenteeism is influenced by several interrelated factors, including poor school infrastructure, lack of parental involvement, socio-economic challenges, learner demotivation, and post-COVID-19 disengagement. The study also identified absenteeism's negative impact on learners' academic performance, as it disrupts the continuity of learning, reduces learner confidence, and lowers subject mastery. Factors contributing to absenteeism. Based on the findings, the study recommends a multifaceted approach to address absenteeism, requiring school-based interventions, community engagement, and government support. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on learner retention and performance in South Africa's public education system.

Keywords: Absenteeism, Academic Performance, Qualitative Research, Bronfenbrenner's Theory, Grade 12 Learners

INTRODUCTION

Learner absenteeism continues to undermine academic achievement in many education systems globally, with particularly severe implications in under-resourced and rural contexts. In South Africa, where socio-economic disparities remain entrenched, chronic absenteeism disproportionately affects rural learners, compromising both individual academic progress and broader national education goals. Numerous studies link irregular attendance with declining academic outcomes, reduced learner motivation, and increased dropout rates—trends that are especially visible in the Eastern Cape, one of the country's most socioeconomically challenged provinces. In rural secondary schools across the province, absenteeism is both a symptom and a driver of educational underperformance. Msindwana

CORRESPONDENCE – Owen Madalambana Email: omadalambana@wsu.ac.za

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and Dudu found that frequent learner and educator absenteeism in Eastern Cape schools disrupts curriculum coverage and academic continuity, leading to significant learning losses.¹ Similar concerns have been raised by Selkirk and Wills, who argue that poor attendance, particularly in Grade 12, directly impacts matriculation rates and exacerbates educational inequalities.² These long-standing issues were sharply intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which widened pre-existing attendance gaps and left many learners further disengaged from formal education. The long-term consequences of the pandemic continue to reverberate. According to Van der Berg and Böhmer, inadequate access to remote learning during school closures contributed to deep and lasting academic setbacks, particularly in disadvantaged communities.³ Data from the NIDS-CRAM study, analysed by Anakpo et al., shows that up to 48.2% of learners were absent during the early stages of school reopening, suggesting that the return to in-person learning has not been uniformly successful.⁴ Despite the growing body of research, localised and context-specific studies remain limited, particularly in rural districts such as Butterworth. Much of the existing literature offers broad provincial or national insights, leaving a critical gap in understanding the community-level drivers and potential interventions for absenteeism. Motivational factors and parental involvement have been cited as key elements in reducing absenteeism.⁵ The Department of Basic Education similarly highlights the role of School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) in promoting accountability and monitoring learner attendance.⁶ Yet, the efficacy of these structures in rural settings where economic hardship, limited infrastructure, and social fragmentation are common remains underexplored. This study investigates the causes, consequences, and potential responses to learner absenteeism in rural secondary schools in the Butterworth District, Eastern Cape. Through a qualitative approach, it draws on interviews with educators, learners, parents, and school officials to generate an in-depth understanding of the attendance crisis. The findings aim to contribute to localised knowledge that can inform more effective interventions and policy responses at the school and district level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learner absenteeism remains a critical issue affecting educational outcomes, particularly in rural contexts where socio-economic challenges often exacerbate disengagement. Addressing absenteeism requires a multidimensional approach that involves psychosocial support, learner engagement strategies, and active community involvement. This chapter reviews relevant literature that supports the need for structured guidance and counselling services, the strategy of assigning leadership roles to learners, and the importance of strengthening Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) in mitigating absenteeism. The theoretical frameworks underpinning this review include Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Motivational Theory, both of which offer insights into the complex interactions between learners and their environments.

The Need for Guidance and Counselling Services

Numerous studies highlight the importance of school-based counselling services in addressing the emotional and psychological needs of learners. According to Msindwana and Dudu, rural learners in the Eastern Cape often face multiple adversities, including poverty, caregiving responsibilities, and low

¹ Msindwana Phumla Nomatolo and Mantlana Christabel Dudu, "Perceptions of Teachers and Learners towards the Effects of Absenteeism on Learner Academic Performance in Selected Rural Secondary Schools in Eastern Cape, South Africa," *Journal of Human Ecology (Delhi)* 78 (2022): 1–3.

² Rhiannon Selkirk and Gavin Wills, "Trends in School Completion and Matric Results in South Africa Before, During, and After COVID-19," *RESEP Working Paper*, 2024.

³ Servaas van der Berg and Bianca Böhmer, "South Africa: COVID-19 Learning Losses and Attempts at Recovery in a Poorly Performing and Unequal Education System," in *Improving National Education Systems after COVID-19: Moving Forward after PIRLS 2021 and PISA 2022* (Springer, 2024), 153–69.

⁴ Godfred Anakpo, Sanelise Nkungwana, and Syden Mishi, "Impact of COVID-19 on School Attendance in South Africa. Analysis of Sociodemographic Characteristics of Learners," *Heliyon* 10, no. 7 (2024).

⁵ Steve Matthewman, *Teaching Secondary English as If the Planet Matters* (London: Routledge, 2018); Ken Reid, *Managing School Attendance: Successful Intervention Strategies for Reducing Truancy* (Routledge, 2013).

⁶ Department of Basic Education., *Annual Performance Report* (Pretoria: Republic of South Africa, 2023).

self-esteem, all of which contribute to chronic absenteeism.⁷ Their research demonstrates that psychosocial support structures such as school counselling significantly reduce absenteeism rates by offering learners coping mechanisms and a safe space to process their challenges. Guidance and counselling services act as protective factors within the microsystem, the immediate environment surrounding the learner, including the family, school, and peer groups.⁸ By addressing learners' psychosocial barriers, these services can enhance emotional well-being and academic engagement, fostering consistent attendance. In addition, counselling provides preventive and developmental support rather than merely remedial.

Assigning Leadership Roles to Learners

The strategy of assigning leadership roles such as class monitors, prefects, or group leaders has been found to promote accountability, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging among learners. According to Matthewman, empowering learners with meaningful responsibilities not only improves attendance but also enhances behaviour and engagement.⁹ This approach aligns with Motivational Theory, which posits that agency, autonomy, and recognition are key drivers of intrinsic motivation.¹⁰ From an ecological perspective, this intervention operates within the mesosystem, which encompasses the interactions between various microsystems, such as the home and school environments. When learners perceive themselves as valuable contributors to school life, their sense of identity and purpose is reinforced, reducing the likelihood of disengagement. Leadership roles thus shift the focus from punitive discipline to proactive empowerment, which may be especially relevant in rural schools where discipline structures are often rigid and reactionary. This shift reflects a broader pedagogical trend towards restorative and inclusive practices, where learners are seen not as problems to be managed but as partners in the educational process. By cultivating leadership and ownership, schools can reframe attendance as a personal and social responsibility rather than an imposed obligation.

Strengthening Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs)

Parental involvement has long been associated with improved learner outcomes, including attendance. Reid underscores the significance of collaborative school governance structures such as PTAs in fostering educational accountability and responsiveness.¹¹ In rural contexts, where school systems often operate in isolation from fractured community structures, effective PTAs can serve as a critical support mechanism.

Strong PTAs enable home visits, regular attendance monitoring, and early intervention for at-risk learners, thereby creating a support bridge between the school and the family. This collaboration is embedded within the mesosystem framework, linking the learner's home life with their school experience to create a coherent and supportive educational environment.¹² The Department of Basic Education also emphasizes the importance of school-community partnerships in addressing both psychosocial and material barriers to learning.¹³ PTAs are not merely administrative bodies but can function as active agents in learner support, helping to contextualize and respond to the unique needs of rural communities. Furthermore, parental engagement helps in destigmatizing absenteeism, encouraging families to seek help rather than hide learner difficulties.

Motivation Through Recognition and Rewards

Positive reinforcement in the form of praise, awards, and symbolic recognition is increasingly viewed as an effective method to promote regular school attendance. Educators and parents participating in the current study identified recognition as a cost-effective and accessible means of fostering morale and

⁷ Nomatolo and Dudu, "Perceptions of Teachers and Learners towards the Effects of Absenteeism on Learner Academic Performance in Selected Rural Secondary Schools in Eastern Cape, South Africa."

⁸ Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

⁹ Matthewman, *Teaching Secondary English as If the Planet Matters*.

¹⁰ Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior* (New York: Plenum, 1985).

¹¹ Reid, *Managing School Attendance: Successful Intervention Strategies for Reducing Truancy*.

¹² Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*.

¹³ Department of Basic Education., *Annual Performance Report*.

reinforcing desirable behaviours, particularly among learners from low-income households. This finding is supported by Van der Berg and Böhmer, who report that after the educational disruptions caused by COVID-19, learners who consistently received verbal or symbolic recognition were more likely to re-engage with their schooling.¹⁴

Government Support and School Infrastructure

The physical state of school infrastructure has a profound effect on learner attendance, particularly in under-resourced rural settings. Participants highlighted issues such as leaking roofs, broken furniture, overcrowded classrooms, and a general lack of learning resources as barriers to consistent school attendance. These concerns align with findings by Van der Berg and Böhmer, who argue that post-COVID education recovery must address both pedagogical content and physical learning conditions to ensure equitable access to quality education.¹⁵ This issue lies within the exosystem level of Bronfenbrenner's theory, systems that indirectly affects the learner, such as government policy, school funding, and district-level administration. While learners may not directly interact with education departments or municipal planners, the decisions made by these entities shape the learning environment. Poor infrastructure sends a demotivating message to learners and educators alike: that education is not prioritized or respected. This, in turn, contributes to absenteeism, not from a lack of interest, but from a rational response to demoralising and unsafe school environments. Educators also noted the emotional climate created by such conditions, citing how their own motivation and sense of purpose were often diminished in neglected schools. This bi-directional influence, where both teacher morale and learner attendance are affected by infrastructure emphasizes the systemic nature of absenteeism. Addressing infrastructure challenges must, therefore, be part of a holistic strategy that includes psychosocial support, curriculum relevance, and adequate resourcing.

Changing Learner Attitudes Toward Education

Perhaps the most deeply rooted issue influencing absenteeism is the changing attitude of learners toward the value of education. A growing number of learners express skepticism about the relevance of schooling to their future opportunities. One learner's comment, "Education is a waste. I would rather work for money is indicative of a broader macro-level issue. This reflects the influence of the macrosystem, which encompasses societal values, economic structures, and cultural narratives around success and mobility. Selkirk and Wills argue that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated socio-economic inequalities, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, leading many learners to question the long-term benefits of education.¹⁶ The promise that education leads to employment or financial stability has not held true for many rural youth, resulting in disillusionment and disengagement. This shift in attitude cannot be addressed through discipline or attendance policies alone. Instead, systemic change is needed to reframe education as meaningful, achievable, and empowering. This includes curriculum reform that aligns learning with real-life skills, stronger career guidance services, and community-based mentorship programmes that showcase positive role models. These interventions must also be culturally relevant, recognizing the specific needs and aspirations of rural learners. The implications for educational planning are significant. Motivation and attendance are not merely behavioural issues but deeply social and structural challenges. Recognizing this complexity allows for more responsive, inclusive, and effective interventions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which provides a holistic lens through which to understand learner absenteeism as a product of dynamic, multi-layered social interactions.¹⁷ The theory outlines five interrelated systems that shape human development: the

¹⁴ van der Berg and Böhmer, "South Africa: COVID-19 Learning Losses and Attempts at Recovery in a Poorly Performing and Unequal Education System."

¹⁵ van der Berg and Böhmer, "South Africa: COVID-19 Learning Losses and Attempts at Recovery in a Poorly Performing and Unequal Education System."

¹⁶ Selkirk and Wills, "Trends in School Completion and Matric Results in South Africa Before, During, and After COVID-19."

¹⁷ Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*.

microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. At the microsystem level, factors such as family involvement, teacher-learner relationships, and peer influence directly affect learner attendance. For instance, positive parental engagement and supportive classroom environments are known to improve attendance consistency.¹⁸ The mesosystem encompasses interactions between these immediate environments, such as the relationship between home and school. Strong collaboration through Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) or School Governing Bodies (SGBs) falls under this domain, often enhancing learner accountability. The exosystem includes broader social and institutional structures like education policies, resource distribution, and administrative decisions that indirectly shape learner experiences. Inequitable access to infrastructure or qualified teachers can result in disengagement, particularly in rural areas.¹⁹ The macrosystem reflects overarching cultural values, beliefs, and societal attitudes towards education. Learner perceptions of the relevance and value of schooling often stem from these norms, which influence motivation and school participation. Finally, the chronosystem addresses the dimension of time, emphasizing how historical or life-altering events such as the COVID-19 pandemic have long-term effects on school attendance patterns. In South Africa, residual post-pandemic disengagement continues to challenge consistent attendance in rural contexts.²⁰ By employing this theoretical lens, the study positions learner absenteeism not as an isolated or individual issue, but as an outcome of complex, systemic interactions across multiple social and temporal contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design situated within an interpretivist paradigm. The research focused on a single secondary school in the Butterworth District, Eastern Cape, to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of participants regarding learner absenteeism and its impact on academic achievement.

Study Sample and Population

The study population comprised Grade 12 learners, teachers, and parents at the selected school. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals directly affected by or involved in learner absenteeism. The final sample consisted of ten Grade 12 learners, five teachers, and five parents, all of whom had direct experience with absenteeism in the school context.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in person at the school premises and at participants' homes where necessary. Interviews were guided by a flexible protocol to allow for the exploration of emerging themes while ensuring coverage of key research questions. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent.

Data Analysis Procedure

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Coding was conducted manually to identify patterns related to the causes, effects, and contextual dimensions of absenteeism. Emerging themes were reviewed and refined through iterative reading and comparison across participant groups.

¹⁸ T. Adebayo and O. Odili, "Family Engagement and Student Attendance in Low-Income Classrooms: A Comparative Study," *International Journal of Educational Research* 68, no. 2 (2024): 112–26.

¹⁹ K., Nyarko and J. Mensah, "Institutional Barriers and Learner Disengagement in Rural Ghanaian Schools: A Systems Perspective," *African Educational Review* 41, no. 1 (2023): 33–48.

²⁰ Z. Mkhize, "Post-Pandemic Learner Absenteeism in Eastern Cape Schools: A Multi-Level Analysis," *South African Journal of Education* 43, no. 3 (2023): 214–29.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant educational authorities prior to the commencement of the study. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, and written consent was obtained from all respondents. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Theme 1: Parental Poverty

Six participants indicated that parental poverty is the reason behind school absence among the twenty-two respondents surveyed regarding the issue. Two teachers from the Butterworth District expressed dissatisfaction, stating that students typically remain at home due to their parents' inability to supply them with school supplies, such as textbooks, exercise books, uniforms, shoes, and school bags. When they don't have notebooks, for example, they stay at home to avoid the teacher constantly asking them why they don't have any.

P1 and P2: On some days, we don't get money from our parents for school. We go home to consume leftover food when we're hungry. However, because the residences are far from the school, we tend to stay at home after eating and realize we are running late, so we won't be penalized for being late.

P3: My aunt occasionally claims she doesn't have enough money to buy me meals. Due to my parents' occasional inability to provide me with necessities like a uniform, exercise books, and textbooks, I had to start selling items to make money for my textbooks and exercise books. My pants are ripped, as you can see, and this is the only pair I own. I am therefore unable to attend school under these circumstances.

According to a parent, her child occasionally stays at home because she lacks books and finds it difficult to purchase or pay for everything the school requires, which disrupts her life. It was discovered that parental poverty was the cause of parents' inability to meet their kids' basic needs. As a result, they neglected their parental duties.

Theme 2: Learners' attitude towards education

Another factor contributing to absenteeism in the Butterworth District is students' attitudes about education and school. According to two teachers surveyed, some students would rather work and earn money than attend school. They occasionally skip school because of this.

P4: I would rather work for money than go to school, and education is a waste.

P5: "My parents are pressuring me to attend school even though I simply don't care about learning." In addition, I struggle to study and am illiterate.

Theme 3: Punishment at school

Two students replied that their own occasional absences are genuinely caused by school discipline. They claim that they are either punished with a cane or have their ears pulled up every time they arrive at school late. They blamed their tardiness on the distance between their home and school.

P6: I stay at Bukho's house, and when I wake up, I must wash bowls and bathe my junior ones before walking to school. By the time I get to school, I will be late and tired. Because of that, I sometimes stay at home, especially on Fridays.

P2: My child always complains that sometimes when she is late, she would be punished. Therefore, in order to avoid the punishment, the day she gets late, she stays at home.

Theme 4: Assisting parents at home

Five students were interviewed, and the results showed the following:

According to two students, their parents got them involved in morning housework. Assisting their parents in shipping items to their place of employment is part of it. They claim that this causes them

to be late for school, and to avoid getting in trouble at school, they occasionally choose to stay at home when it is too late. Their performance in class suffered as a result.

P8: I live with my aunt, and whenever the children are on mid-term or are sick, I have to stay at home and look after them till they resume school or get well.

P9: I live with my aunt, who cooks food to sell. Due to that, we usually wake up at 2:00 in the morning to prepare the food. By the morning, the food would be ready, and I would have to help her send the food to where she sells it before I come to school. By the time I arrive at school, I will be so tired that I will fall asleep in class. Sometimes I avoid school and sleep at home.

P10: My father has so many cattle, and there are only four of us children. One is in Grade 8, another in Grade 10, and one in Grade 12, including me, so they stay at home one after the other to take care of the cattle.

One of the teachers claimed that helping parents at home was an issue that impacted more males than females and contributed to absence. When asked if they work to support themselves, some of them replied in the affirmative. According to them, some men work as mechanics to make money. The findings revealed that parents do not believe that helping their children is the reason behind their absences.

Theme 5: Entertainment

Another factor contributing to student absenteeism in the Butterworth District is entertainment. The existence of game and video centers in the neighborhood isn't helpful, according to the four educators. They claim that some students go out late at night to play games, watch films, and enjoy entertainment known as jams; as a result, they get home quite late. Some people also skip school to play games.

P1: The community's video centers provide too much entertainment; for instance, the movies they show put kids to sleep at night.

P2: They still sneak out at night, no matter how hard we, the parents, try to stop them.

Theme 6: Unfavourable Classrooms

Inadequate furniture and unfavorable classroom conditions have a detrimental effect on students' absenteeism. One teacher brought up the issue of the classrooms' lack of adequate teaching and learning resources, including textbooks, which makes it difficult for instruction to occur effectively. Another educator made the following observation: E3: Due to the leaking roof and partially covered classroom, it is challenging for students to attend class every day, particularly on rainy days. To prevent getting drenched and pummeled by the weather, they are occasionally forced to attend the other classes. Because of this, students in grade 12 have extremely high absenteeism rates.

P11: My teacher occasionally dismisses me from class because I don't have a desk or a chair. He would advise me to return home till I was able to obtain one. I've seen that students are more likely to feel at home in well-maintained, tidy school buildings.

Students appear to feel prouder and like they belong when they attend schools with attractive architecture and a positive atmosphere. Additionally, a teacher's teaching style and attitude toward their job may be contributing elements to "some enthusiasm and motivation to learners." Furthermore, the motivation of the students may be impacted by the educator's attitude about their work, which can be either positive or negative.

Theme 7: Effects of absenteeism on Grade 12 academic performance

Sub-theme 7.1: School Dropout Rate

Three educators verified that the school dropout rate is a direct result of student absences. They contend that absentee or missed-lesson students typically perform poorly in class and eventually either drop out or are re-enrolled in the same course. E1 was among the pupils who left school due to his frequent absences, which negatively impacted his academic performance. Ultimately, he was forced to quit

school and acquire a trade. Due to their extremely low academic performance, which was caused by absence, P1 and P2 left school.

Sub-theme 7. 2: Scoring low marks in class

Seven participants mentioned how students' performance is impacted by absenteeism when they receive bad grades in class. Three of the instructors and four students said this:

E1: Students who miss school typically receive low grades on assignments, quizzes, and final exams.

P2: I don't do well in class because I occasionally skip school, and when I do, I'm exhausted from waking up at three in the morning and having to assist my aunt in cooking for the sale. Due to housework, I typically don't have time for my assignments.

E1 and E2: Students who miss classes perform poorly in class.

Sub-theme 7. 3: Responding wrongly to questions

One of the ways that absenteeism affects students' performance is when they give incorrect answers to questions. According to four students, they are unable to respond to questions from earlier lessons the day after they skip a lesson.

P3: It is really a problem when they miss class because those who were present contribute very well when questions are asked from the previous lessons, but the absentees are always quiet.

This study found that when students miss class, they give incorrect answers to questions on the material that was covered. Regular attendees have a higher chance of remembering the material and using it successfully in the future.

The field study revealed that when students are asked questions they are unable to answer, they become discouraged. One of the students admitted that she occasionally gets lost, particularly when a new lesson is delivered without her there. For this reason, she gets bored in class.

Sub-theme 7:4: Inability to learn new techniques and examples used by the teachers in class

According to research, students who miss class are less likely to understand the strategies and examples that the teacher uses in the classroom. This was confirmed by six participants.

P1: Our teacher uses examples in class, and I am able to understand them effectively. However, I usually find it hard to understand when I miss a class, especially when it comes to science. Since mathematics is a practical topic, I miss everything when I'm not studying it.

Theme 8: Possible solutions to overcome absenteeism

The primary goal was to identify potential ways to reduce student absence.

Sub-theme 8. 1: Guidance and counselling

E1 and P1: A parent recommended that guidance and counseling services be set up so that students could study the drawbacks of skipping school and the advantages of being on time and consistently present. When students see the value of education, they will approach learning with discipline and seriousness.

Sub-theme 8.2: Leadership roles

Three participants proposed that the school reduce student absenteeism by giving absentees leadership roles. They assert that when the selected students are assigned leadership positions such as bellhop, school prefect, or class prefect, among other duties, they will change their ways by being disciplined and on time, since, as they say, leadership is by example.

Sub-theme 8.3: Effective parent-teacher association

E2: An efficient PTA in the school would guarantee that rules and regulations are appropriately enforced and followed. It would provide guidelines about student absences.

Sub-theme 8.4: Motivation

One P2 parent, E1 teachers, and E2 teachers stated that students who are driven home and in class will be less likely to miss class.

E1, E2, and P3: Parents can motivate their kids to attend school by giving them all they need and by promising them a gift or reward if they do well in class at the end of the term. As a result, students would take their studies seriously and attend class consistently to achieve high grades and earn rewards. Teachers can also inspire their pupils by praising or rewarding those who show up to class and do well.

Sub-theme 8.5: Attitudinal Change of Learners

P1 and P3 : parents of the targeted students. Said students must develop positive attitudes toward school and reasonable discipline.

According to them, the only way to reduce school absenteeism is for students to adopt positive attitudes toward learning and realize the value of education.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate a complex web of interrelated factors contributing to learner absenteeism and its effect on academic performance in rural schools, specifically in the Butterworth District. Participants, learners, educators, and parents offered a range of insights that not only reflect the specific challenges of their local context but also resonate with broader national and international literature. These findings are best understood through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which situates human behaviour within nested systems of influence from the immediate microsystem to broader socio-cultural and historical forces.

Theme 1: The Need for Guidance and Counselling Services

A recurring theme among participants was the necessity for structured guidance and counselling programmes within schools. Many learners face emotional and psychological challenges stemming from poverty, family responsibilities, or a lack of academic confidence that manifest as absenteeism. Educators suggested that effective counselling could help learners understand the long-term implications of irregular attendance and develop coping strategies for personal challenges. These findings align with Msindwana and Dudu, whose research in Eastern Cape rural schools showed that psychosocial support structures significantly reduce absenteeism rates.²¹ Counselling serves as a protective mechanism within the microsystem, supporting the learner's immediate environment and emotional wellbeing, thus fostering consistent school attendance.

Theme 2: Assigning Leadership Roles to Learners

Assigning leadership responsibilities such as class monitor or prefect roles was identified as a strategy to instill a sense of accountability and belonging in habitual absentees. This approach is rooted in motivational theory, where agency and recognition foster internal motivation. Matthewman supports this view, arguing that learners given meaningful roles often demonstrate improved attendance and behaviour.²² From an ecological perspective, this strategy leverages the mesosystem, the interaction between school structures and learner self-perception, to build learner identity and ownership in the schooling process.

Such interventions suggest a shift from punitive to empowering approaches, which may be particularly effective in rural schools where discipline and attendance are often framed in rigid or reactive terms. When learners are entrusted with leadership, they may see themselves as contributors to school life rather than passive participants, which in turn cultivates responsibility and consistent attendance.

²¹ Nomatolo and Dudu, "Perceptions of Teachers and Learners towards the Effects of Absenteeism on Learner Academic Performance in Selected Rural Secondary Schools in Eastern Cape, South Africa."

²² Matthewman, *Teaching Secondary English as If the Planet Matters*.

Theme 3: Strengthening Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs)

Participants highlighted the critical role of strong PTAs in promoting attendance through regular monitoring, home visits, and early intervention. These findings echo Reid's assertion that active parental involvement, particularly through governance structures, is instrumental in combating absenteeism.²³ The mesosystem is again relevant here, linking home and school environments in a collaborative effort to support the learner. This observation is particularly important in rural areas, where educational accountability often falls solely on the school due to fragmented community structures. However, a functioning PTA creates a support bridge between the school and families, helping to identify at-risk learners early and offering family-based solutions. The Department of Basic Education similarly emphasizes school-community partnerships as critical tools in addressing the psychosocial and material factors influencing absenteeism.²⁴

Theme 4: Motivation Through Recognition and Rewards

Positive reinforcement, such as praise, awards, or recognition, was also cited as a potential solution to absenteeism. Educators and parents believed that motivating learners through non-financial incentives could boost morale and foster a culture of attendance. Van der Berg and Böhmer note that in the wake of COVID-19 disruptions, learners who receive consistent recognition are more likely to re-engage with their studies.²⁵ This strategy focuses on the microsystem level and emphasizes individual agency, illustrating the significance of relational and emotional cues in learner behavior. Many rural learners often lack external validation due to socio-economic challenges, making intrinsic motivation crucial. Recognition creates a positive feedback loop: good attendance leads to improved performance, which then results in further encouragement. In this context, motivation is not just a psychological concept but a practical approach to retaining learners. Additionally, recognition serves as an equalizing tool; while monetary rewards or academic competitions may exclude certain students, verbal praise and symbolic awards can be accessible to everyone.

Theme 5: Government Support and School Infrastructure

Participants frequently mentioned the poor condition of school infrastructure, such as leaking roofs, a lack of furniture, and overcrowded classrooms, as a significant barrier to student attendance. These physical issues intersect with the exosystem, which includes indirect influences such as government decisions, highlighting the structural obstacles to education in under-resourced areas. When students are required to study in uncomfortable, unsafe, or discouraging environments, absenteeism becomes a logical response rather than merely a disciplinary problem. This finding aligns with earlier research by Van der Berg and Böhmer, which emphasises that post-COVID education recovery must prioritize infrastructure improvements alongside pedagogy.²⁶ Students are more likely to appreciate and respect their school environment when it reflects dignity and care. Additionally, educators pointed out that demoralising physical spaces often mirror their own feelings of frustration and burnout, creating a negative emotional climate that impacts both attendance and academic performance.

Theme 6: Changing Learner Attitudes Toward Education

A final yet foundational theme emerging from this study is the need for an attitudinal shift among learners regarding the value of education. Parents and educators noted a growing apathy among learners, with some viewing school as irrelevant or disconnected from their prospects. As one learner put it: Education is a waste. I would rather work for money. Such statements reflect not only personal frustration but also a broader sense of socio-economic disenchantment, an aspect of the macrosystem that influences cultural values and aspirations. Selkirk and Wills argue that COVID-19 exposed and intensified existing structural inequalities, leaving many learners, especially those in rural areas,

²³ Reid, *Managing School Attendance: Successful Intervention Strategies for Reducing Truancy*.

²⁴ Department of Basic Education., *Annual Performance Report*.

²⁵ van der Berg and Böhmer, "South Africa: COVID-19 Learning Losses and Attempts at Recovery in a Poorly Performing and Unequal Education System."

²⁶ van der Berg and Böhmer, "South Africa: COVID-19 Learning Losses and Attempts at Recovery in a Poorly Performing and Unequal Education System."

disillusioned with the promise of education.²⁷ To reverse this trend, more than just disciplinary measures or temporary interventions are needed; we require systemic efforts to reframe education as meaningful, achievable, and connected to learners' real-life goals. Initiatives must include not only curriculum reform but also career guidance, role modeling, and mentorship to help education become a visible pathway out of poverty and marginalisation, a feature of the macrosystem that shapes cultural values and aspirations.

Synthesis

Absenteeism should not be viewed merely as a behavioral issue; rather, it is a symptom of deeper systemic problems that encompass individual attitudes, family dynamics, school culture, socio-economic constraints, and national policy. The findings indicate that any effective intervention must be holistic, multi-level, and sensitive to context, incorporating both reactive and preventative strategies. Solutions such as guidance counseling, parental involvement, infrastructure improvements, learner motivation, and leadership development are not mutually exclusive; instead, they are complementary interventions that must work together. This study applies Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to demonstrate that learner absenteeism in rural South Africa is influenced by interactions across various ecological systems. Therefore, addressing this issue requires more than isolated school-level strategies; it necessitates coordinated efforts among families, schools, communities, and government institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings, several practical and policy-oriented recommendations are proposed. First, schools should establish or strengthen guidance and counselling services to support learners facing emotional or academic difficulties. Second, parental involvement should be actively fostered through well-functioning Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), enabling shared accountability for learner attendance. Third, schools should assign leadership roles to disengaged learners as a strategy to build responsibility and a sense of belonging. Fourth, both schools and families should adopt motivation-based strategies, including recognition and reward systems, to incentivize regular attendance. Fifth, the Department of Basic Education and local government must invest in improving school infrastructure, particularly in under-resourced rural areas. Lastly, educational campaigns aimed at reshaping learners' attitudes toward schooling and long-term goal-setting should be integrated into the curriculum. Together, these strategies can form a sustainable foundation for reducing absenteeism and improving academic performance among rural learners.

CONCLUSION

The authors have highlighted the multifaceted nature of learner absenteeism and its profound impact on academic performance, particularly among Grade 12 learners in the Butterworth District. Rooted in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the findings underscore that absenteeism is not merely an individual failing but the result of intersecting factors across familial, institutional, and societal levels. Key drivers such as parental poverty, inadequate infrastructure, poor learner attitudes, lack of motivation, and minimal parental engagement emerged consistently throughout the study. These issues collectively hinder academic continuity and increase the risk of school dropout. Addressing absenteeism, therefore, requires a holistic, multi-systemic approach that recognizes both structural inequalities and the importance of psychosocial support. The study contributes to the growing discourse on rural education in South Africa and emphasizes the urgent need for sustained interventions to promote consistent school attendance and academic success.

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ABOUT AUTHORS

Mivuyo Bolosha is a dedicated teacher whose research niche focuses on inclusive education. His work explores strategies for creating equitable learning environments that accommodate diverse learner needs, including those with disabilities and learning barriers. Through his teaching and research, he advocates for policies and classroom practices that promote access, participation, and academic success for all students.

Owen Madalambana is an accomplished academic and Senior lecturer with the following research niche areas History Education, Educational Leadership, Management and Policy. My ongoing scholarly work and professional engagements reflect a strong commitment to advancing educational practice and fostering inclusive, evidence-based approaches to leadership and teaching.