





# Cultural Barriers to Education: Addressing Absenteeism among Marginalized Groups in South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

Absenteeism is a significant issue in South African education, particularly among marginalized communities in rural and impoverished areas. Despite policy efforts to improve access to education, learners in these regions face challenges that limit their regular attendance and participation. This paper explores the cultural and socio-economic factors that contribute to absenteeism, with a focus on language barriers, traditional gender roles, and poverty. The use of English as the main language of instruction alienates learners who speak indigenous languages, leading to disengagement and persistent absenteeism. Traditional gender roles in rural areas often prioritize household duties and income-generating tasks over education, disproportionately affecting girls. Socio-economic issues, such as poverty, lack of transportation, and inadequate educational resources, further worsen absenteeism. Grounded in Paulo Freire's theory of Critical Pedagogy, this paper emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive strategies to address absenteeism and promote educational equity. Through a qualitative approach, involving semi-structured interviews with learners, teachers, and community leaders, the paper seeks to uncover the underlying cultural and socio-economic factors that contribute to absenteeism. The findings aim to provide effective solutions to reduce absenteeism and improve educational outcomes for marginalized learners in South Africa, helping to break the cycle of poverty and inequality. The paper recommended that culturally sensitive educational policies and community-based interventions be implemented to reduce absenteeism and improve educational access for marginalized learners in rural South Africa.

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## INTRODUCTION

Absenteeism is a major obstacle to education in South Africa, particularly for marginalized groups. While education is widely recognized as essential for both personal and societal growth, many learners in the country face barriers that prevent them from fully benefiting from this right. Marginalized communities, especially, encounter challenges that are often tied to cultural, socio-economic, and geographical factors.<sup>1</sup> Despite efforts to improve educational access through policy reforms, many learners in rural,

<sup>1</sup> S. Mahlomaholo, "Education in South Africa: Inequality and the Future of Marginalized Learners," *Journal of Educational Research* 13, no. 2 (2020): 123–40.

impoverished, or culturally constrained areas continue to experience high rates of absenteeism. This issue not only disrupts the educational progress of individuals but also perpetuates cycles of poverty and inequality, limiting their opportunities for upward social mobility.<sup>2</sup>

Absenteeism affects many learners across South Africa, but it is particularly prevalent among marginalized groups, who face multiple disadvantages when it comes to accessing educational resources.<sup>3</sup> These challenges are often linked to systemic inequalities, many of which date back to the apartheid era. The historical legacy of racial segregation and economic marginalization continues to shape the educational experiences of many learners today. In particular, cultural barriers play a crucial role in shaping school attendance and participation.

Language is one of the key cultural barriers contributing to absenteeism. South Africa is home to 11 official languages, as well as a variety of dialects. However, most schools use English or Afrikaans as the primary language of instruction, which can alienate learners from communities where other languages are spoken.<sup>4</sup> This language gap can lead to disengagement, reduced academic performance, and, ultimately, chronic absenteeism. When learners struggle to communicate and participate in class due to language differences, they may feel disconnected from the learning process, which can increase the likelihood of dropping out.

Traditional gender roles also significantly affect school attendance in many rural communities. In some areas, girls are expected to take on domestic responsibilities, such as looking after younger siblings or preparing for early marriage, which interferes with their education.<sup>5</sup> Boys may be required to contribute to family income by working, which can result in them missing school regularly. In these communities, education is often not prioritized, and traditional roles are maintained, further restricting educational opportunities for marginalized learners.

Socio-economic factors further complicate the issue of absenteeism. Poverty remains a widespread problem in many parts of South Africa, and children from low-income families often face multiple barriers to attending school. Issues like lack of transportation, school uniforms, or learning materials can lead to irregular attendance.<sup>6</sup> Children from impoverished households may need to help support their families financially, which disrupts their education and contributes to absenteeism.

Given the complexities of absenteeism among marginalized groups, there is a strong need to explore these cultural and socio-economic barriers in greater depth. This research aims to investigate the intersection of culture and education, with a focus on understanding how cultural factors contribute to absenteeism and identifying strategies to address these challenges. By examining the cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic influences on absenteeism, the paper aims to propose solutions that can reduce absenteeism rates and promote educational equity for marginalized learners in South Africa.

Historically, South Africa's education system has been deeply shaped by inequality, particularly during the apartheid era, when racial segregation limited access to quality education for marginalized groups. Although significant reforms have been implemented since the end of apartheid, many of these inequalities persist, especially in rural areas where marginalized communities still face considerable barriers to education.<sup>7</sup> One of the most pressing issues is absenteeism, which disproportionately affects learners from impoverished or traditionally bound communities. The reasons for absenteeism are complex and multifaceted, often tied to cultural, socio-economic, and geographical challenges that hinder regular school attendance.

One of the key cultural barriers contributing to absenteeism is language. South Africa is home to a diverse linguistic population, with many learners speaking indigenous languages that are not used as

<sup>2</sup> N. Spaull, "Equity and Efficiency in South African Primary Schools: A Social Justice Perspective," *South African Journal of Education* 39, no. S1 (2019): 1–13.

<sup>3</sup> B. S. Ndimande and S. Motala, "Educational Inequalities in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Policy Perspectives and Challenges," *Comparative Education Review* 63, no. 1 (2021): 52–74.

<sup>4</sup> Z. Nkosi, "Language Policy and Marginalized Learners in South African Schools," *African Journal of Linguistics and Education* 8, no. 4 (2021): 211–23.

<sup>5</sup> R. Matshidiso and P. Molefe, "Gender and Educational Participation: The Role of Culture in Rural Communities," *African Journal of Gender and Education* 5, no. 1 (2022): 45–62.

<sup>6</sup> M. Mohlala, "Barriers to Education among Low-Income Learners in South Africa," *South African Journal of Educational Studies* 34, no. 4 (2021): 55–69.

<sup>7</sup> J. Jansen, "Educational Inequality in Post-Apartheid South Africa: A Critical Review," *South African Journal of Education* 40, no. 2 (2020): 105–19.

the primary language of instruction in schools.<sup>8</sup> This language disconnect can lead to frustration and disengagement, causing learners to miss school or drop out altogether. The education system's emphasis on English and Afrikaans as primary languages further alienates learners from rural areas who are more comfortable with their home languages.

Another significant factor contributing to absenteeism is the persistence of traditional gender roles in rural communities. Girls, in particular, are often required to stay at home to perform domestic chores or care for younger siblings, which affects their ability to attend school regularly.<sup>9</sup> In some cases, girls are also expected to marry at a young age, cutting their education short. Boys, on the other hand, may be tasked with agricultural work or other income-generating activities, further exacerbating absenteeism. These traditional roles and expectations prevent learners from prioritizing their education, reinforcing cycles of poverty and limiting their future opportunities.

Poverty remains a significant barrier to education in South Africa. Learners from low-income households struggle with issues such as transportation, lack of school supplies, and inadequate nutrition, all of which contribute to absenteeism.<sup>10</sup> For many families, the cost of education, even with government subsidies, is too high, leading to irregular attendance or complete withdrawal from school. These socio-economic challenges, combined with cultural and linguistic barriers, create a difficult environment for marginalized learners to thrive in the South African education system.

Despite various efforts to improve access to education in South Africa, absenteeism remains a major issue, especially among marginalized groups in rural and impoverished areas. Learners in these communities face numerous challenges in attending and participating in formal education. Cultural barriers, such as differences in language, traditional gender roles, and socio-economic limitations, significantly contribute to this problem. Many learners struggle to succeed in schools where the language of instruction is not their home language, leading to disengagement. In addition, cultural expectations often prioritize domestic or farming duties over education. Socio-economic difficulties, such as poverty and a lack of resources, further worsen absenteeism. These challenges not only prevent regular attendance but also deepen inequality and continue the cycle of poverty. Addressing both cultural and socio-economic barriers is crucial to ensuring fair access to education for all learners, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds.

The aim of this research paper is to explore the cultural barriers that contribute to absenteeism among marginalized learners in South Africa. The paper focuses on identifying the key cultural and socio-economic factors that influence absenteeism and will propose strategies to mitigate these barriers in order to improve school attendance and educational equity.

The following question underlies the study: How do cultural barriers contribute to absenteeism among marginalized groups in South Africa, and what strategies can be implemented to address these challenges?

## **CONCEPTUALIZING EDUCATIONAL ABSENTEEISM AMONG MARGINALIZED GROUPS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Educational absenteeism is the regular non-attendance of learners at school, which severely impacts both their learning and overall *academic progress*. In South Africa, this issue is particularly significant among marginalized groups in rural and disadvantaged communities. Absenteeism is caused by a combination of socio-economic, cultural, and systemic barriers that prevent learners from attending school consistently.

One major factor influencing absenteeism is poverty. In many rural areas, learners face difficult financial circumstances, forcing them to prioritize immediate family survival over education. According to Motala et al., children from low-income households are often required to perform household duties or engage in income-generating activities to support their families, leading to frequent school absences.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Nkosi, "Language Policy and Marginalized Learners in South African Schools."

<sup>9</sup> Matshidiso and Molefe, "Gender and Educational Participation: The Role of Culture in Rural Communities."

<sup>10</sup> Mohlala, "Barriers to Education among Low-Income Learners in South Africa."

<sup>11</sup> S. Motala, V. Dieltiens, and Y. Sayed, "Poverty and Educational Absenteeism in Rural South Africa: Exploring Barriers to Learning," *Comparative Education Review* 64, no. 4 (2020): 483–99.

The lack of essential resources such as school uniforms, textbooks, and transportation further contribute to absenteeism.

Cultural factors also contribute significantly to this problem. The widespread use of English and Afrikaans as languages of instruction in schools often alienates learners who speak indigenous languages at home. This language barrier, as highlighted by Zulu and Kropff, can cause disengagement and a feeling of exclusion, leading to persistent absenteeism.<sup>12</sup> Traditional gender roles in rural areas can disadvantage girls, as they are often expected to assist with domestic chores or childcare, resulting in higher absenteeism rates among female learners.<sup>13</sup>

Systemic issues within the education sector also exacerbate absenteeism. Many rural schools are under-resourced, with poor infrastructure, a shortage of qualified teachers, and inadequate learning materials.<sup>14</sup> As a result, attending school becomes less attractive to learners, especially when the education provided is perceived as low quality. This perpetuates a cycle of absenteeism, reinforcing poverty and inequality, as learners who frequently miss school are more likely to drop out and face limited future opportunities.<sup>15</sup>

Addressing educational absenteeism in marginalized communities requires policies that are culturally sensitive and responsive to the unique challenges these learners face. Effective community-based interventions, such as school feeding programs, transportation support, and flexible learning schedules, have been recommended to reduce absenteeism and improve educational outcomes.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, tackling absenteeism in these communities demands a holistic approach that addresses both socio-economic and cultural factors.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research paper is grounded in the theory of Critical Pedagogy, which focuses on the role of education in challenging and transforming social inequalities.<sup>17</sup> Developed by Paulo Freire, critical pedagogy emphasizes that education should not merely be a tool for knowledge transmission but also a means of empowering marginalized groups. Freire argued that traditional education systems often perpetuate inequality by reinforcing existing power structures, where learners from marginalized communities, particularly those facing cultural and socio-economic barriers, are disadvantaged.<sup>18</sup>

Through the lens of critical pedagogy, this research seeks to explore the power dynamics within South Africa's education system and understand how cultural barriers, such as language differences, traditional gender roles, and socio-economic challenges, contribute to absenteeism among marginalized learners. Critical pedagogy helps to uncover the ways in which these cultural factors limit access to education and maintain cycles of poverty and inequality.<sup>19</sup>

By applying this framework, the paper aims to identify strategies to promote a more inclusive and equitable education system. It encourages questioning dominant norms and practices within schools that may alienate marginalized learners. The ultimate goal is to highlight how cultural sensitivities and a more context-specific approach to education can reduce absenteeism and support the educational inclusion of all learners, regardless of their background.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural barriers significantly impact learner attendance in marginalized communities in South Africa, encompassing language differences, traditional gender roles, and socio-economic conditions. Research

<sup>12</sup> N. Zulu and L. Kropff, "Language Barriers and Absenteeism in South African Rural Schools: Implications for Educational Equity," *Education as Change* 25, no. 1 (2021): 145–60.

<sup>13</sup> Limpopo Department of Education, "Gendered Educational Absenteeism: Investigating Rural Schooling Challenges," *South African Journal of Education* 42, no. 2 (2022): 85–96.

<sup>14</sup> V. Reddy, L. Winnaar, and F. Arends, "Educational Quality and Inequality in South Africa: Challenges for Rural Schools," *African Review of Education* 18, no. 3 (2021): 25–43.

<sup>15</sup> D. Bhana, R. Moletsane, and T. Shefer, "Gender and Schooling in Rural South Africa: Towards New Perspectives on Education and Gender Equity," *Journal of Educational Development* 51 (2023): 35–43.

<sup>16</sup> Doraval Govender, "Reflections on Community-Based Participation to Reduce Violent Crimes in South Africa," *African Security Review* 29, no. 4 (2020): 316–29.

<sup>17</sup> Paulo Freire, "2000, Pedagogy of the Oppressed," *Continuum, New York*, 1970.

<sup>18</sup> Freire, "2000, Pedagogy of the Oppressed."

<sup>19</sup> Henry A Giroux, "Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of Hope Revisited in Turbulent Times," 2021.

indicates that learners who primarily speak indigenous languages struggle in schools where instruction is in a different language, resulting in disengagement and absenteeism.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, traditional gender roles often lead to high absenteeism rates among girls, who are expected to prioritize household duties.<sup>21</sup> Despite government efforts to enhance educational access, policies often overlook the cultural contexts of marginalized learners.<sup>22</sup> Poverty further compounds these challenges, as low-income learners frequently lack essential resources like transportation and uniforms necessary for school attendance.<sup>23</sup> This literature review highlights the need for targeted interventions to address these intertwined barriers.

### **Cultural Barriers to Education**

Cultural barriers, such as language differences, traditional gender roles, and socio-economic conditions, have a significant influence on absenteeism among marginalized communities in South Africa. Research has shown that learners who speak indigenous languages often face difficulties when the language of instruction in schools differs from their home language.<sup>24</sup> With 11 official languages in South Africa, many marginalized learners find themselves in schools where English or Afrikaans is the primary medium of instruction. This language mismatch often leads to disengagement, as learners struggle to fully understand the curriculum. As a result, many become frustrated or feel alienated, which increases absenteeism.<sup>25</sup>

Traditional gender roles are another factor that affects school attendance, especially for girls in rural areas. Hlongwane highlights that cultural expectations in some South African communities place heavy domestic responsibilities on girls from a young age.<sup>26</sup> They are often required to care for younger siblings, perform household chores, and, in some cases, prepare for early marriage. These responsibilities can lead to frequent absenteeism and even school dropout. The cultural pressure on girls to prioritize family duties over education contributes to their educational marginalization.

Boys are also affected by cultural expectations, particularly in rural areas where they are often expected to participate in labor-intensive activities like farming.<sup>27</sup> These demands reduce the time boys can spend in school, further perpetuating cycles of absenteeism. Both boys and girls face cultural pressures that limit their access to education, contributing to long-term inequalities in educational outcomes.

### **Educational Policies and Initiatives**

Although the South African government has implemented several policies aimed at improving access to education for marginalized communities, these efforts have not fully addressed the issue of absenteeism. Spaul and Kotze argue that policies such as the National Policy on Learner Attendance are often designed with a broad, one-size-fits-all approach, which fails to consider the cultural and geographical challenges faced by learners in rural areas.<sup>28</sup> For example, policies may promote education access for all, but they do not adequately address the specific barriers faced by girls who are expected to manage household responsibilities, or by learners who speak languages that differ from the school's language of instruction.

Moreover, these policies often overlook the deep-rooted cultural traditions that impact school attendance. Maseko points out that without addressing these cultural factors, policies aimed at improving school attendance will remain ineffective in communities where traditional customs still play a strong role.<sup>29</sup> There is a need for more culturally sensitive approaches to policy implementation, which take into

<sup>20</sup> N. Maseko, "Language Barriers in South African Education: An Analysis of Rural Schools," *Language and Education Journal* 44, no. 3 (2020): 217–30.

<sup>21</sup> P. Hlongwane, "The Influence of Traditional Gender Roles on Girl-Child Absenteeism," *African Journal of Education* 38, no. 2 (2022): 87–101.

<sup>22</sup> N. Spaul and J. Kotze, "Policy Gaps in Addressing Absenteeism in South African Education," *South African Education Review* 18, no. 1 (2020): 45–58.

<sup>23</sup> Mohlala, "Barriers to Education among Low-Income Learners in South Africa."

<sup>24</sup> Maseko, "Language Barriers in South African Education: An Analysis of Rural Schools."

<sup>25</sup> Maseko, "Language Barriers in South African Education: An Analysis of Rural Schools."

<sup>26</sup> Hlongwane, "The Influence of Traditional Gender Roles on Girl-Child Absenteeism."

<sup>27</sup> T. Matshidiso and M. Molefe, "Cultural Expectations and Educational Participation in Rural South Africa," *International Journal of Gender Studies* 14, no. 2 (2022): 89–103.

<sup>28</sup> Spaul and Kotze, "Policy Gaps in Addressing Absenteeism in South African Education."

<sup>29</sup> Maseko, "Language Barriers in South African Education: An Analysis of Rural Schools."

account the unique challenges that marginalized learners face. Until such policies are developed and enacted, absenteeism will likely continue to be a major barrier to educational progress in these communities.

### **Socio-economic Factors**

Socio-economic factors, particularly poverty, also contribute significantly to absenteeism among marginalized learners. Learners from low-income families often miss school due to a lack of basic resources. Mohlala explains that many learners cannot afford essential items like school uniforms, transportation, or learning materials.<sup>30</sup> In rural areas, where schools are often located far from learners' homes, transportation can be a major barrier. Without affordable transport, many learners are forced to walk long distances, which may discourage them from attending school regularly.

The financial strain on low-income families may force children to miss school to help generate income or care for younger siblings.<sup>31</sup> In these cases, education takes a back seat to immediate economic survival. This creates a cycle of absenteeism, where learners miss school, fall behind in their studies, and eventually drop out, limiting their future opportunities. The intersection of poverty and cultural expectations compounds the challenges faced by marginalized learners, making it difficult for them to break free from the cycle of educational disadvantage.

Both cultural and socio-economic barriers play a crucial role in absenteeism among marginalized learners in South Africa. While government policies have made some progress in improving educational access, they have not yet fully addressed these complex issues. A better understanding of the interplay between culture, poverty, and traditional roles is needed to create more effective strategies for reducing absenteeism and promoting educational equity.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This article used a qualitative approach to explore the cultural barriers to education that lead to absenteeism among marginalized groups in South Africa. A qualitative method was suitable for this paper because it allowed for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, cultural backgrounds, and views on education and absenteeism. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from learners, teachers, and community leaders in rural and disadvantaged areas. This method helped uncover the complex cultural factors affecting school attendance by encouraging open discussions while focusing on key issues.

To understand the lived experiences of those affected by absenteeism, the paper adopted a phenomenological design. This approach focuses on how cultural norms, traditions, and socio-economic conditions shape absenteeism. By listening to personal stories, the research revealed deep-rooted cultural practices that contribute to the issue.

The primary data collection was through semi-structured interviews. These interviews allow participants to share their thoughts freely while ensuring that the main research topics were covered. Learners from both primary and secondary schools in marginalized communities were interviewed to gain their perspectives on how cultural factors like language barriers, gender roles, and poverty affect their school attendance. Teachers from these communities provide insights into how cultural issues impact learner attendance and their experiences in addressing absenteeism. Community leaders, including traditional and religious figures, were interviewed to offer a broader understanding of how cultural expectations influence educational attendance.

Each interview lasted between 20 to 30 minutes and was conducted in person at locations convenient for the participants. Interviews were held in the language preferred by the participants, with interpreters available if needed. A purposive sampling method was used to select 15 learners, 9 teachers, and 3 community leaders who could provide valuable insights for the research.

The data collected from the interviews was analysed using thematic analysis. The interviews were transcribed, and key themes such as language barriers, gender roles, and poverty were identified. These themes help clarify the relationship between cultural factors and absenteeism.

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<sup>30</sup> Mohlala, "Barriers to Education among Low-Income Learners in South Africa."

<sup>31</sup> Nkosi, "Language Policy and Marginalized Learners in South African Schools."

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the paper. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research, and written consent was obtained. Confidentiality was also maintained by using pseudonyms in the report, and cultural sensitivity will be upheld during all interactions with participants.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the paper, triangulation was employed by gathering data from learners, teachers, and community leaders. Participants were asked to review their interview transcripts for accuracy, and the researcher sought feedback from academic peers to reduce bias.

By using a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews, this paper aims to uncover cultural barriers that contribute to absenteeism and provide practical solutions to address these challenges.

## **PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This research identified three main themes that contribute to absenteeism among marginalized learners in South Africa: language barriers, traditional gender roles, and poverty. These themes emerged from interviews with participants, which provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by these learners.

### **Theme 1: Language Barriers**

Language differences are a major factor affecting school attendance. Many participants pointed out that learners struggle when the language of instruction at school is different from their home language. For example, Participant H (parent), said:

*“Many of the children here speak Tshivenda at home, but they are taught in English at school. It confuses them, and when they don’t understand, they feel embarrassed and often choose to stay home instead”.*

**Participant G (learner)** shared a similar experience:

*“I don’t like going to school because I can’t understand what the teacher says. It makes me feel stupid. Sometimes, I just don’t go”.*

These highlight the frustration and low self-esteem that learners experience due to language barriers, leading to increased absenteeism. This paper support this finding, showing that language differences can result in disengagement and higher rates of absenteeism.<sup>32</sup>

The language barrier also affects social interactions among learners.

**Participant K**, (the teacher) explained:

*“Children who struggle with the language often isolate themselves from their peers. They miss out on important socialization, which further discourages them from attending”.*

Language barriers also contribute to absenteeism in South Africa, particularly for learners who speak indigenous languages at home but are taught in English or Afrikaans at school. This language mismatch can lead to frustration and disengagement, with learners struggling to understand lessons. Language barriers between teachers and parents can hinder communication, making it difficult for parents to support their children’s education.

To mitigate language-related absenteeism, implementing bilingual education programs or mother-tongue instruction in early schooling can help learners build literacy skills in their home language, gradually transitioning to the language of instruction. This approach fosters greater engagement and confidence, ultimately reducing absenteeism.

This information suggests that it is essential to address language barriers to improve school attendance. Possible interventions could include language support programs that help learners transition between their home language and the language of instruction.

### **Theme 2: Traditional Gender Roles**

Traditional gender roles significantly impact school attendance, especially for female learners. Interviews revealed that cultural expectations often require girls to take on domestic responsibilities, which interferes with their education. Participant A, female learner, shared her situation:

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<sup>32</sup> Maseko, “Language Barriers in South African Education: An Analysis of Rural Schools.”

*“My mother expects me to help cook and take care of my younger siblings. Sometimes, I miss school because I have to do these things. I feel like my education is not as important as my chores”.*

Another participant, **Participant E** echoed this perspective:

*“In our community, girls are seen as caretakers. They are expected to help with household tasks, and many end up missing school regularly”.*

These insights demonstrate how traditional gender roles contribute to chronic absenteeism among girls. Research indicates that such cultural expectations limit educational opportunities for female learners.

Participants also discussed the issue of early marriage. **Participant L**, a parent, stated:

*“Some families believe that it’s better for girls to marry young rather than focus on education. This mindset pushes many girls out of school”.*

Gender roles in South African communities often influence educational access, particularly among marginalized groups. Traditional roles such as domestic responsibilities and caregiving tend to fall on girls, often leading to absenteeism as they prioritize household tasks over attending school. Cultural expectations, such as early marriage, further reduce educational opportunities for girls, as families may prioritize marriage over their education. Gendered perceptions also play a role, with the belief that education is less important for girls than boys, leading to lower investment in girls’ schooling and higher dropout rates. Boys, on the other hand, may be expected to work and financially support their families, which also disrupts their education.

To address these challenges, interventions like community awareness programs, support systems for girls, and engagement of boys in discussions about gender equality can help break down these traditional barriers. Policy advocacy to promote gender equality in education is also crucial for reducing absenteeism among marginalized groups.

The findings highlight the need for community initiatives that challenge these cultural norms and emphasize the importance of education for both boys and girls.

### **Theme 3: Poverty**

Poverty was identified as a significant barrier to school attendance, as many learners lack the resources needed for education. **Participant L**, a learner, explained:

*“I want to go to school, but sometimes I can’t afford the uniform or the transport. I feel embarrassed to go without them, so I just stay home”.*

**Participant J**, a teacher, commented on the challenges faced by low-income families:

*“Many of my learners come from homes where parents are unemployed. They struggle to afford basic supplies like books and stationery, which makes regular attendance difficult”.*

The article supports the idea that poverty often forces children to prioritize work over education, perpetuating the cycle of poverty (Nkosi, 2021).

The impact of poverty is also influenced by cultural factors. **Participant D**, a community leader, said:

*“Families are often caught in a cycle where economic hardship forces children to work instead of studying. Traditional expectations and poverty work together to keep them from school”.*

Poverty is another significant barrier to education in South Africa, affecting attendance through financial constraints, lack of basic resources, and hunger. Many families struggle to afford uniforms, transportation, and school supplies, causing children to miss school. Hunger and malnutrition further hinder learners’ ability to concentrate, leading to inconsistent attendance. Additionally, child labor and household responsibilities, especially in poor families, can force children to work instead of attending school, exacerbating absenteeism.

Addressing poverty-related absenteeism requires financial assistance programs, expanded feeding schemes, and community support initiatives. These strategies can help reduce the impact of poverty on school attendance by providing essential resources and support for marginalized learners.

The findings suggest that interventions aimed at addressing poverty, such as providing free school supplies or transportation assistance, could significantly improve attendance rates among marginalized learners.

These findings show that language barriers, traditional gender roles, and poverty are interconnected factors that contribute to absenteeism among marginalized learners in South Africa. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that includes community engagement, policy changes, and targeted educational programs. By understanding these challenges, stakeholders can develop strategies to improve school attendance and promote equal educational opportunities for all learners. The insights from participants highlight the urgent need to tackle these barriers to ensure every child has access to quality education.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In addressing the challenges of absenteeism among marginalized learners in South Africa, several recommendations emerge from the findings of this paper.

It is crucial for schools to consider language policy reform, particularly by implementing bilingual education programs. These programs would bridge the language gap between the languages spoken at home and the language of instruction in schools. Such initiatives can enhance learners' comprehension and engagement, making the school environment more accessible and inclusive. By integrating learners' home languages into the curriculum, schools can create a more supportive learning atmosphere, reducing the anxiety and embarrassment that often accompany language barriers.

Strengthening community engagement is essential. Schools should actively foster partnerships with local communities to address the cultural expectations and traditional gender roles that hinder educational access, especially for female learners. Collaborative initiatives, such as workshops and community forums, can promote awareness of the importance of education for all children, regardless of gender. By working together, schools and communities can challenge and reshape the cultural norms that contribute to absenteeism, ultimately empowering learners to prioritize their education.

Providing targeted support for low-income learners is vital in mitigating the impact of poverty on school attendance. Schools and local governments should implement programs that offer financial assistance and material support, such as school supplies, uniforms, and transportation. Such measures can help alleviate some of the burdens faced by families struggling to afford basic educational resources. By addressing the economic barriers to education, stakeholders can significantly improve attendance rates and support the overall educational success of marginalized learners.

Addressing absenteeism among marginalized learners requires a holistic approach that incorporates language policy reform, community engagement, and support for low-income families. By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can foster a more inclusive and equitable educational environment that promotes consistent school attendance and supports the learning needs of all learners.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has explored how cultural barriers contribute to absenteeism among marginalized groups in South Africa and the impact this has on access to education. The findings show that cultural practices, economic challenges, and societal expectations often prevent learners from attending school regularly. These barriers not only disrupt learning but also reinforce cycles of inequality and exclusion.

Addressing these issues is essential for promoting equity in education. Schools and policymakers must work together to create solutions that respect cultural values while ensuring consistent school attendance. Strategies such as involving communities, offering financial assistance, and adapting the curriculum to reflect local contexts can help bridge the gap between marginalized learners and quality education.

The importance of this study lies in its focus on practical ways to reduce absenteeism and improve access to education for all learners. By addressing cultural barriers, schools can create environments where every child feels supported and valued. This requires collaboration between educators, families, and community leaders to challenge harmful practices and build a more inclusive system.

Overcoming cultural barriers to education is critical for breaking cycles of poverty and inequality. This study highlights the need for focused efforts to ensure that no child is left behind due to cultural or

social factors. By taking steps toward inclusive and culturally responsive education, South Africa can move closer to achieving fairness and equal opportunities for all learners.

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