

MANAGING LEARNER ATTENDANCE IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

BY

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DECLARATION

“I declare that the dissertation, which I hereby submit for the degree Master of Education at the University of Pretoria is my work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution”.

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my mother, the late Mantswape Rosinah Modise. May her soul rest in peace.

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ABSTRACT

Learner attendance in school is a focus for teachers to improve learner achievement (Applegate, 2003: 25). Colorado (2008:1) was of the opinion that “one of the most important things your child can do to achieve academic success is to go to school every day”. Thus, managing learner attendance has been and continues to be a major goal of many schools. The Department of Basic Education has developed a policy to promote regular school attendance (DBE, 2010:10) (hereafter referred to as the Policy). The key aspect of the Policy is that all learners must attend school on every day of school. The Policy was developed in response to the need for procedures for the recording, management and monitoring of learner attendance. The purpose of this paper is to find out what strategies principals are using to manage learner attendance in the three selected middle schools in the Tshwane North District of Gauteng Department of Education. In South Africa, middle schools are also referred to as Senior Phase, a level that falls between primary and secondary schools with grades seven to nine. The study applied the case study design and utilised the qualitative approach. Data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews with school principals, HoDs responsible for learner attendance and class teachers. Content analysis was used to analyse the management of learner attendance. Key findings of this research suggest that there are specific strategies in place used by principals to manage learner attendance in middle schools. Principals in middle schools actively managed the attendance records of their incoming learners, and engaged the learners and parents at the first incidence of non-attendance. Principals reached out to the community to build a culture of regular school attendance by identifying the causes of poor learner attendance. They conducted follow-ups on learners who absented themselves more than one or three days per week. They reached up to their district leadership and submitted quarterly attendance registers to their district offices for professional support.

Keywords: Management, learner attendance, middle schools.

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ACRONYMS

DBE – Department of Basic Education

HIV – Human Immune Virus

RSA – Republic of South Africa

SGB – School Governing Body

SMT – School Management Team

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1. INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

Since the democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, legislation has introduced reforms that have a significant impact on education. One of the introduced new laws is the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (RSA: 1996b) (hereafter referred to as the Schools Act). Section 3(1) of the Schools Act states that “every parent must ensure that every learner for whom he or she is responsible attends school from the first day of the year until the last day in which such learner reaches the age of 15 years or the ninth grade or whichever occurs first”. This implies that not only do all learners have a right to attend school regularly, but their attendance is compulsory by law. Learners therefore have no option but to attend school daily. Parents and educators expect learners to attend school regularly, but the learners themselves have a responsibility to do so.

The Department of Basic Education has developed a policy to promote regular school attendance (DBE, 2010:10) (hereafter referred to as the Policy). The key aspect of the Policy is that “all learners must attend school on every school day”. The Policy was developed in response to procedures that were set up for the recording, management and monitoring of learner attendance.

In order to develop strategies to manage learner attendance, the researcher firstly assessed the potential causes and effects of poor learner school attendance. Railsback (2004:356) asserted that before deciding what strategies to use to increase learner attendance, it will be beneficial to establish reasons as to why learners do not attend school. Already as far back as 1998, Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams and Dalicandro (1998:629) found that parents who are defensive in their application of discipline or less accepting, less consistent and not involved in their children’s work directly influence learners not to attend school regularly.

They implied that “strained and conflict-ridden teacher-pupil relations and a school curriculum that does not stimulate pupils’ interest are contributors to poor learner attendance”. William (2000:35) found that poor attendance by learners was caused by lack of parental involvement and chronic illness. Teasley (2004:118) found that the lack of transport to school is one of the reasons for poor learner attendance. Weideman, Goga, Lopez Mayet, Marcun and Barry (2007:34) also investigated reasons for poor learner attendance in the South African school system. They found that the most often cited reasons for poor attendance were “poverty, lack of transport, illness and lack of parental involvement”. Gardner (2012:2) maintained that there are three main broad factors for poor learner school attendance, that is, family, school and personal factors.

Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson and Kirk (2003:8) identified three interconnected effects of poor learner attendance. They are “academic underachievement, dropping out and social isolation”.

Numerous studies have been carried out to investigate learner school attendance and academic underachievement (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004:310; Jones, 2006:12; Rammala, 2009:8; Pitre, 2010:33; Mlambo, 2011:84; and Powell, 2012:20). They found that there is a direct relationship between learner attendance and academic achievement. Learners who do not attend school regularly generally fall behind their classmates in their academic success. They considered that school attendance to be a key factor in academic achievement. Researchers such as Lewis (2008:28) and Powell (2012:20) investigated the relationship between learner attendance and dropping out of school altogether. They found that learners who do not attend school regularly are more likely to drop out of school. The study by Mgwangqa and Lawrence (2008:21) found that poverty was often a major reason for learners not to attend school regularly and thus the overriding factor in learners dropping out of school.

On the other hand, Inglis and Lewis (2013:46) found that learners do not attend school regularly because of barriers to learning such as family conflicts, lack of parental support, substance abuse and that these factors placed learners at high risk of dropping out of school. Researchers such as Hocking (2008:18) also investigated poor learner school attendance and resultant social isolation and Powell (2012:10). They concluded “learners who do not attend school regularly become isolated from peers and adults”.

The literature suggests that regular school attendance in school is the best predictor of subsequent academic, social and career outcomes (Henry & Huizinga, 2009:513; Rossi, 2004:13).

This implies that when learners are not attending school regularly, they will miss valuable curriculum information on which to build subsequently taught and garnered knowledge, as well as social and life skills that are important for future success. To effectively support learners and avoid any developing lack of attendance syndromes, learner school attendance should be recorded, monitored and managed. Through existing legislation, there are systems in place to monitor and manage learner attendance at schools. They include policies and recording documents. Weideman, Goga, Lopez, Mayet, Marcun and Barry (2007:36) stated that “an international best practice at school level, as highlighted in the literature reviewed, is that schools that have been more successful at reducing non-compliance by learners and managing learner attendance have set up an effective learner attendance policy”. Policies are regarded as an important starting point from which to deal with the issue of poor learner attendance. According to the Policy (DBE, 2010:10), schools must develop their own learner attendance policy, but such a policy must be consistent with the national and provincial learner attendance policy.

School registers are official documents of the Department of Education. The following registers should be used in accordance with the policy (DBE, 2010:18).

They are the class register and the period register. A class teacher is responsible for compiling and marking the class register on a daily basis. The class teacher and principal use the class register to monitor learner attendance and highlight where a follow-up on poor learner attendance is needed and has to be arranged. The relevant subject teacher is responsible for marking the period register. It is used to check the learner attendance during each lesson (DBE, 2010:18).

1.2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

The South African Constitution (RSA: 1996) is the supreme law addressing learners' school attendance. Section 29 of the Constitution enshrines the learners' right to education and defines the positive responsibilities of the state in this respect. Section 29 states that; "Everyone has the right to a basic education, including adult education and to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible" (RSA: 1996:8).

Learner attendance in school is a focus for teachers to improve learner achievement (Applegate, 2003: 25). Rothman (2013: 64) believed that regular school attendance can help ensure learners' academic success. Colorado (2008:1) was of the opinion that one of the most important things a child can do to achieve academic success is going to school every day.

The rationale for the learner attendance policy outlines the importance of regular school attendance (DBE: 2010:33). It stated that; "Enrolment of learners and their regular and punctual attendance at school are a prerequisite for an educated nation". Initial enrolment in a school and subsequent punctual, regular attendance at school are vital because:

- (a) “Each school has a duty to protect each learner’s fundamental right to education”
- (b) “Enrolment at a school places a learner under obligation to attend such school punctually and regularly, unless there is a valid reason for absence”
- (c) “A school that successfully curbs learner absence without valid reason will most likely improve learner retention and performance”
- (d) “Regular attendance at school is a powerful brake on teenage pregnancies and HIV”.

The Policy on learner attendance outlines the responsibilities of learners, the school and parents with regard to learner attendance.

According to the Policy on learner attendance, learners have the responsibility to attend school punctually and regularly. Parents are expected to ensure that the learners attend school daily, on time and for the whole school day unless there is a valid reason for not attending. Lastly, the school is expected to promote and monitor school attendance in order to give learners the best chances of benefitting from the curriculum.

The Policy emphasises that the onus is on parents, teachers and the schools, but also the learners to guarantee regular school attendance. However, in practice, schools experience poor learner school attendance. The reasons, as outlined in literature, are varied and often of a sociological nature. As the law has to be complied with, and also to ensure a well-educated next generation is being raised in South African schools, schools will have to design strategies to enhance and manage learner school attendance.

1.3. RESEARCH QUESTION

Pernega (2004:191) defined a research question as “a statement that identifies the phenomena to be studied”. It inquires the goal or purpose of a study or topic. It illustrates what is being investigated and aims to provide answers or a solution to the problem.

The main research question that was answered by this study is:

- What strategies do principals of middle schools use to manage learner attendance?

The focus of this research hinged on the following sub-questions:

- What are the possible causes of poor learner attendance in middle schools?
- What are the effects of poor learner attendance on learner performance in the selected middle schools?

1.4. AIM OF THE RESEARCH

Andersson (2005:25) defined a research goal as “a statement that presents the purpose of the research”. The main purpose of this study was to find out what strategies principals are using to manage learner attendance in the selected middle schools.

1.5. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Reducing poor learner attendance has been and continues to be a goal of many schools (Minnaar, 2006:6). Because of the long history of concern over learner attendance, the issue has received attention from educational researchers (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002:12). Minnaar (2006:450), Crain-Dorough (2003:23) and Doll (2013:16) focused more on the issue of learners who drop out of school, than on issues related to daily learner attendance rates.

The studies conducted specifically on learner attendance suggest that it may be as important as any other issue confronting schools today (Sheppard 2007:39). Some studies suggest that schools can improve learner attendance by implementing specific procedures and activities (Reid, 2007:30). Sheppard (2007:38) indicated that learners with better school attendance also scored higher on achievement tests, and that schools with better rates of student attendance tended to have higher passing rates on standardised achievement tests. These studies provide convincing evidence that principals, teachers and parents need to take seriously the issue of learner attendance and that schools have to devise ways to improve learner attendance.

As such, school principals and teachers need to understand the causes and effects of poor learner attendance before they can develop strategies to manage learner attendance. There has been extensive research conducted on learner attendance as it relates to learners, parents, teachers, socio-economic status and school districts (Teasly, 2004:125; Davis & Lee, 2006:50; Southwell, 2006:95; Henry, 2007:30; and Sheppard, 2007:37). However, studies have not sufficiently explored the strategies principals use to manage or enhance learner attendance.

1.6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The researcher used Fayol's theory of management to frame/guide this study. Fayol believed; "that all groups and organisations require management at some level" and asserted that "management skills can be taught and developed over time" (Raymond 2013:10).

Fayol suggested five major functions of management, all of which remain relevant today (McNamara, 2009: 63). This was supported by Pryor and Taneja (2010:489), who stated that many management authors such as Parker and Ritson (2005:180), Wren (2001:477), Rodrigues (2001:882), and Fells (2000:350) believed that Fayol's work established the basic principles and framework for management theory and that it is the foundation of management theory as we know it today.

Although Fayol used his theory in mining and metallurgy, he also generalised and extended his theory to other types of organisations (including schools) that had to be managed well – if they were to succeed (Wren, 2001: 482). Fayol argued that; “management is an activity common to all human undertakings in business, government, sports clubs, schools and even in the home” (Smit, Cronje, Brevis & Vrby, 2007:38).

The researcher selected all four of Fayol’s management functions espoused by McNamara (2009:66), namely planning, organising, leading and control and three of Fayol’s principles of management, namely division of work, authority and discipline. These were selected from the 14 principles: unity of command, unity of direction, subordination of individual interests to general interests, remuneration, centralisation, scholar chain, order, equity, stability of tenure of personnel, initiation and esprit de corps) to support the study.

1.7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.7.1. Research Paradigm

Cole (2006:10) asserted that an “interpretative paradigm is more concerned about uncovering knowledge about how people feel and think in the circumstances in which they find themselves.” In this study, the researcher interviewed the participants about how they felt and thought about strategies they use at their schools to manage learner attendance. Therefore, the interpretive paradigm was identified for this study.

1.7.2. Research Approach

The researcher used the qualitative research approach. Drew, Hardman and Hosp (2008:26) maintained that “a qualitative research method involves collecting data in the form of words or a narrative that describes the topic under study and in a natural setting”.

Lodico (2006:15) stated that “qualitative research approaches collect data through observations, interviews and document analysis, and summarises the findings through narrative or verbal means”. The definition implies that the researcher has to gather data in the form of words and descriptions from participants’ actual settings. The qualitative approach assisted the researcher to gather the data directly from school principals, HoDs responsible for learner attendance and class teachers, interviewing them and establishing their views, perceptions and expectations in detail concerning strategies they use to manage learner attendance.

1.7.3. Research Design

Imenda and Muyangwa (2000:31) defined research design as “how the study is to be carried out”. McMillan and Schumacher (2011:31) described research design as “procedures to be followed for conducting the study, including, when, from whom and under which conditions the data will be obtained”. Within the qualitative approach, the researcher employed a case study as a research design.

Baxter and Jack (2008:543) defined a case study as “an approach to research that facilitates exploration of phenomena within its context using a variety a data sources”. This implies that it is an intensive description of a single individual or sometimes a group. A case study has a distinctive advantage over research strategies when “how or why” questions are posed to discover a current phenomenon and when the researcher has little or no control over events (Yin, 2003:14).

In this context, three middle schools in the Tshwane North District were selected with the interviewees comprising the principal and the HoD responsible for learner attendance and class; the teachers in each school were interviewed individually concerning what strategies they use at school to manage learner attendance.

A case study research design was chosen for a number of reasons. Zainal (2007:34) asserted that; “the examination of data is most often conducted within the context of its use, that is, within the situation in which the activity takes place”. In this context, the researcher interviewed the respondents (principals, HoDs responsible for learner attendance and class teachers) at their respective three middle schools about their actual, in-school experience and observation of learner attendance.

1.8. SAMPLING AND SAMPLING METHOD

A research population sometimes is referred to as the target population. Rossi (2004:4) defined target population as a “large number of individuals from which the sample is drawn and to which the study results will be generalised”.

The study concentrated on middle schools as the research population. The chosen area was the Hammanskraal Circuit of Tshwane North District in the Gauteng Province. The Hammanskraal Circuit has five middle schools catering for grades seven to nine. The researcher did not interview all five principals, HoDs and class teachers due to time and financial constraints. Nine participants were selected from these schools as a sample.

Dooley (1995:351) defined a sample in a research context as “a subset of individuals selected from a large group called population”. In simple terms, a sample is a smaller group of participants derived from a bigger group from which data will be collected.

The sample of this investigation was selected as follows: from the five middle schools, three middle schools were selected. The reasons for selecting the three middle schools were as follows. Firstly, the three selected middle schools all have grades seven to nine. Secondly, the researcher is familiar with the educators at the three middle schools and, as a result, it will not be a problem to interview them. Thirdly, the three middle schools have proof of lower learner attendance.

Lastly, the three middle schools are within reasonable reach of the researcher. Consequently, it will not be costly to visit these schools. This means that the three principals, three HoDs and three class teachers were selected as a sample. The sample used in this study is purposive sampling. Maree (2011:79) argued that qualitative research is generally based on non-probability and purposive sampling rather than probability or random sampling. The researcher selected purposive sampling, which will be discussed in more detail below. McMillan and Schumacher (2011:498) defined purposive sampling as a “type of sampling that allows choosing small groups or individuals who are likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomenon”.

Principals, HoDs responsible for learner attendance and class teachers who were willing to participate in the study, understanding what the study entails were interviewed.

1.9. METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

Kawulich (2005:85) defined data collection as the “systematic gathering of data for a particular purpose from various sources including questionnaire, observations, existing records and electronic devices”. In this study, semi-structured interviews were used. Raworth, Sweetman, Rouland and Hopkins (2012:5) maintained that unlike formal interviews, which follow a rigid format of set questions, semi-structured interviews focus on specific themes, but cover them in a conversational style. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants and were completed during one session with each participant. Participants were interviewed in the principals’ offices of the three selected middle schools. Before the interview, the researcher introduced himself to participants, explained the goal and projected length of each interview and the topic to be discussed. With the permission of the participants, the interviews were recorded.

1.10. DATA ANALYSIS

After collecting data from participants, the data was analysed. The researcher employed thematic analysis as a method of data analysis. Adams (2010:18) defined thematic analysis as “a way of seeing as well as a process for coding qualitative information”. This method is well suited to analyse data collected during the interviews. Thematic analysis interprets themes that are supported by data. It allows categories to emerge from such data.

The researcher familiarised himself with the collected data and transcribed the data into a written documents. Thereafter generated the initial codes by documenting where and how patterns occur. The researcher followed this process to search for themes and consider, which themes worked or did not work. Existing themes were defined and refined and presented in the final analysis.

1.11. DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

1.11.1. Managing

Fayol quoted in Akrani (2011:16) asserted that to manage is “to forecast and to plan, to organise, to lead, to co-ordinate and to control”. On the other hand, Saylor (2013:9) defined managing as “getting things done through others”. In this study, managing refers to principals managing learner attendance.

1.11.2. Learner attendance

Pitre (2010:1) asserted that learner attendance could be understood to mean consistently attending elementary or secondary school at which a student is registered.

In this study, the definition of learner attendance refers exclusively to middle school learners who attend school regularly.

1.11.3. Middle school

O'Donnell (2014:54) defined middle school as “a school which children attend between primary school and secondary school, typically between the ages of about 10 to 14 years”. In the South African school environment, middle schools are also referred to as Senior Phase, which falls between primary and secondary schools with grades seven to nine and learners whose ages range between 13 and 15 years.

1.12. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researcher received ethical clearance from the University of Pretoria.

After the ethical clearance had been granted, the researcher applied for permission from the Gauteng Department of Education Tshwane North District and the principals of the various middle schools for this study to be conducted.

Prior to conducting the interviews, the participants signed informed consent forms. The researcher explained to the participants what the research entailed and explained to them their right to refuse to participate. Therefore, participants were involved voluntarily. All the participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. The tape recordings, notes and transcripts were locked in a safe place.

1.13. SUMMARY

This study examined learner attendance. It also analysed what principals, HoDs and class teachers do to improve attendance levels. Regular learner attendance is required by law and is also the goal of all schools. Principals, HoDs and teachers are faced with the task of managing learner attendance on a daily basis. Research has proven that there is a high correlation between regular learner attendance and subsequent academic performance and success, while poor learner attendance is often the greatest single cause of poor learner performance and achievement (Dodge 2011:15).

In this chapter, the background to the problem was described, the research question formulated and the aim of the research stated. The significance of the study, the research design and methodology were also explained. Relevant concepts used in the research were clarified. The next chapter will discuss what literature reveals about the causes and effects of poor learner attendance and what strategies are used to manage learner attendance.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides the review of literature on learner attendance, causes of poor learner attendance, effects of poor learner attendance, and strategies of managing learner attendance. The purpose of the literature review is to provide an insight into the studies conducted on the management of learner attendance and what can be gleaned from their findings. The literature review should provide answers to research questions and enable the researcher to establish any gaps in the existing knowledge and research on this topic. The reviewed literature comprised primary sources, journals, dissertations, theses, secondary sources and articles.

Pitre (2010:6) defined school learner attendance as “consistently attending the school at which a student is registered.” During the course of their school years, it is normal that learners may miss some school activities and lessons, but it becomes a problem if the learners are absent from school for many days or even more extended periods. Attending school regularly is crucially important for the learners’ complete education and social skills (Rothman, 2013:65). Learners who attend school on an irregular basis are at a distinct disadvantage both socially and academically (Hall-Lande 2007:270). Besides lacking important curriculum information, they miss out on crucial stages of social interaction and development with their peers and this also impacts negatively on their academic progress (Jones, 2006:45) This can result in low self-esteem, social isolation and dissatisfaction that could well have precipitated non-attendance in the first place (Thunderbird, 2012:10).

2.2. FACTORS/CAUSES OF POOR LEARNER ATTENDANCE

Causes of poor learner school attendance can be attributed to factors linked to internal or external aspects of the school environment. Gardner (2012:2) maintained that “there are three main factors leading to poor learner attendance, that is, family, school and personal factors”.

It is important to note that these factors can vary across schools, communities and families (Cook & Esenin, 2010: 35).

2.2.1. Family factors/causes

Family factors are issues that impact on learner attendance within the control of parents or other family members responsible for supervision of school-going children (Cook & Esenin, 2010: 40). Gardner (2012:2) emphasized the following family factors; “low family income, single parent status, child malnutrition, parental disabilities, lack of parental involvement in education, family mobility, family care responsibilities”. Atkinson (2005:45) expanded on the role of the family and asserted that family factors include; “lack of parents and/or guidance, poverty, substance abuse in the home, domestic violence, lack of familiarity with the need of school attendance”. Past research has suggested that “family characteristics such as the number of parents in the household and parental practices” influence learners’ attendance; for example, Finlay (2006:50) found that learners from single-parent families are more likely to miss school than learners living within two-parent families. Research suggests that the family’s socio-economic status also yields a significant influence on the likelihood that learners will attend school regularly (Crowder & South, 2003:670; Henry, 2007:32; and Reid, 2005:65). Learners stay away from school for many reasons, but in many countries poverty is the root cause of irregular school attendance. Irregular school attendance may be the result of parents’ inability to pay school fees or buy uniforms; lack of transport to school; parents’ or children’s illness; poor nutrition; or hunger and child labour (Ready, 2010:280).

This implies that parents who lack the necessary financial resources cannot provide for children's basic education needs.

On the issue of lack of transport to school, parents sometimes are unable to pay for their children's transport to or from school or for school trips (Rogan 2006:22). This causes learners to have to walk long distances to and from school. The long distance to school increases the chance of road accidents and the threat of criminals attacking, robbing or raping learners. It also means that learners arrive at school tired and hungry, often without anything available for them to eat or drink. This, in turn, reduces their ability to concentrate on the school curriculum and to achieve the best marks possible.

This can result in repetitive and extended poor learner school attendance (Atkinson, 2005:53). In his study, Yazzie-Mintz (2009:5) interviewed learners concerning their parents' involvement in their education. Learners confirmed the role of their parents in their regular attendance and stated that they attend school because of their parents' or guardians' involvement in their school activities.

2.2.2. School factors/causes

Gardner (2012:2) found that school factors include school attendance policies, the relationship between students, families and teachers. Conroy, Conroy and Newman (2006:207) asserted that "the school climate indicates that several factors are associated with poor attendance, including a poor curriculum leading to learner boredom, a too rigid discipline for non-attendance, conflict between students and teachers, and a disregard for cultural and diversity issues between families and teachers".

Learners who feel unsafe within or threatened by the school community are also highly unlikely to attend school regularly. For example, in their study, Davies and Lee (2006:206) reported that “learners miss school due to their fear of ridicule or harm from other peers, fear of other learners and intimidation by peers or fear of bullying”. Besides a fear of other learners, the fear of or conflict with a teacher has been regarded to result in poor learner attendance .This is supported by Hendron (2014: 68) who found that student-teacher relations may be one of the school factors that contribute to poor learner attendance. Teachers may respond harshly towards learners who display bad behaviour. Learners, in turn, may miss school if they feel that attending class will not improve their grades because their relationship with teachers are poor .This could also lead to further negative perceptions of the overall school climate (Hendron, 2014:69).

2.2.3. Personal factors/causes

Personal factors causing learner absenteeism include substance use, limited social and emotional intelligence, mental health problems, poor physical health and lack of familiarity with school attendance laws (Gardner, 2012:2). Issues related to learners’ physical and mental health appear to be related directly to learners’ attendance (Kearney & Bates, 2005:210). Chronic poor health conditions are among the most significant predictors of poor learner attendance (Conroy, Conroy & Newman, 2006:397). In addition, researchers have found that teen pregnancy (Kirby, 2002:476) and drug and alcohol use/abuse (Roebuck, French & Denis, 2004:136) are also significant predictors of learners’ poor attendance. They found that marijuana use was strongly associated with truancy and increased likelihood of school dropout. Learner perceptions of the school have also been associated with learner’s attendance. Research strongly associates the student perception of the school culture and rigour of the academic programme with school attendance (Balfanz, Herzog & Maclver, 2007:225).

Researchers found that learners are less likely to attend school when they perceive that their classes are boring or irrelevant, where they feel unsupported or disrespected by teachers and other staff, feel uncomfortable or bullied by other students or feel targeted for discipline and behaviour issues (Wagstaff, Combs & Jarvis, 2000:25). The same study also cited that learners are less likely to attend school when they perceive that they had fallen behind with their school-work or could not balance the competing demands of work and school. It highlights the lack of logical thinking among learners who ideally should perceive that they would need extra studying and regular school attendance to catch up with the curriculum. Rumberger and Palardy (2005:2020) reported that “learners who perceived that their school was unsafe also had higher rates of dropping out of school”. In particular, learners who experienced bullying and victimisation by peers or their teachers tended to miss school more often than their peers who do not experience these conditions (Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara & Kernic, 2005:1030). The prevalence of fear and avoidance of further threatening incidents at school (or on their way from and to school) appeared greatest among middle school students and high school freshmen and sophomores (Dinkes, Kemp, Baun & Synder, 2009:23).

2.3. EFFECTS OF POOR LEARNER ATTENDANCE

Regular school attendance is crucial to a child’s ability to learn, grow and thrive. It forms the foundation for further academic and social development (Reid, 2005:63). Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson and Kirk (2003:28) identified three interconnected effects of poor learner attendance. They are;

- Academic underachievement
- School Dropout
- Social isolation.

Each of these effects of poor attendance will be discussed in detail.

2.3.1. Academic underachievement

Voegeli (2008:8) defined academic underachievement as a “child who has the capability to do well academically, but displays no motivation and works far below his or her potential”. A number of factors may cause academic underachievement. One of the factors is poor learner school attendance. In the study by Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson and Kirk (2003:13), teachers were interviewed concerning poor learner attendance and underachievement. The teachers indicated that poor or irregular school attendance led to underachievement. Research has shown a direct correlation between good school attendance and student achievement (Dekalb, 1999:25). Teasly (2004:120) stated that; “students who attend school regularly score higher on tests than their peers who do not attend school regularly”. Regular school attendance is an important factor in ultimate academic success. Studies show that better school attendance is related to higher academic achievement for students of all background (Rothman, 2013:64; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002:311; and Ready, 2010:282). Teachers are faced with a significant challenge to reduce poor attendance and thereby help increase the learners’ achievement at school.

Poor school attendance by learners may result in poor academic achievement because learners are not receiving instruction on a regular basis and cannot build upon prior knowledge.

This problem also causes low standardised test scores because learners are not present to learn key concepts and skills that are assessed on standardised examinations (Rothman, 2013:54). If they miss work even for short periods, there will be gaps in their knowledge that will cause problems and affect learning later in the year (Rothman, 2013:55).

2.3.2. School dropout

Chavez, Belkin, Hornback and Adams (2004:68) defined a dropout as “a learner who leaves school for any reason except death, before graduation or completion of a programme and without transferring to another school”. Doll (2013:360) and Slack, Jones and Johnston (2013:7) found that learners with poor school attendance are also far more likely to drop out of school altogether. Furthermore, these studies indicated that factors relating to reluctance to attend school in the first place originate mostly from home, that is, poverty, the need to be helped with school-work (and not being given such help), absence of parents and lack of interest by parents. At the same time, their peers who attended school perceived discrimination by the teacher and perceived lack of competency also appear to be pushing learners out of school.

Weideman, Goga, Lopez, Mayet, Marcun and Barry (2007:56) had asked teachers how long it took a learner to drop out of school after not having attended school. Responses were surprising. “The most common period of continuous absence that qualifies a learner as having dropped out is ten days”. This indicates that learners who do not attend school for ten consecutive days tend to drop out. While illness or other serious circumstances at home may have caused such absence, it is significant that it should lead to a total dropping out of school. In theory, a two weeks’ absence should be able to be corrected with extra studying. However, it obviously is believed to become increasingly difficult for learners to return to school and catch up with the work they have missed.

2.3.3 .Social isolation

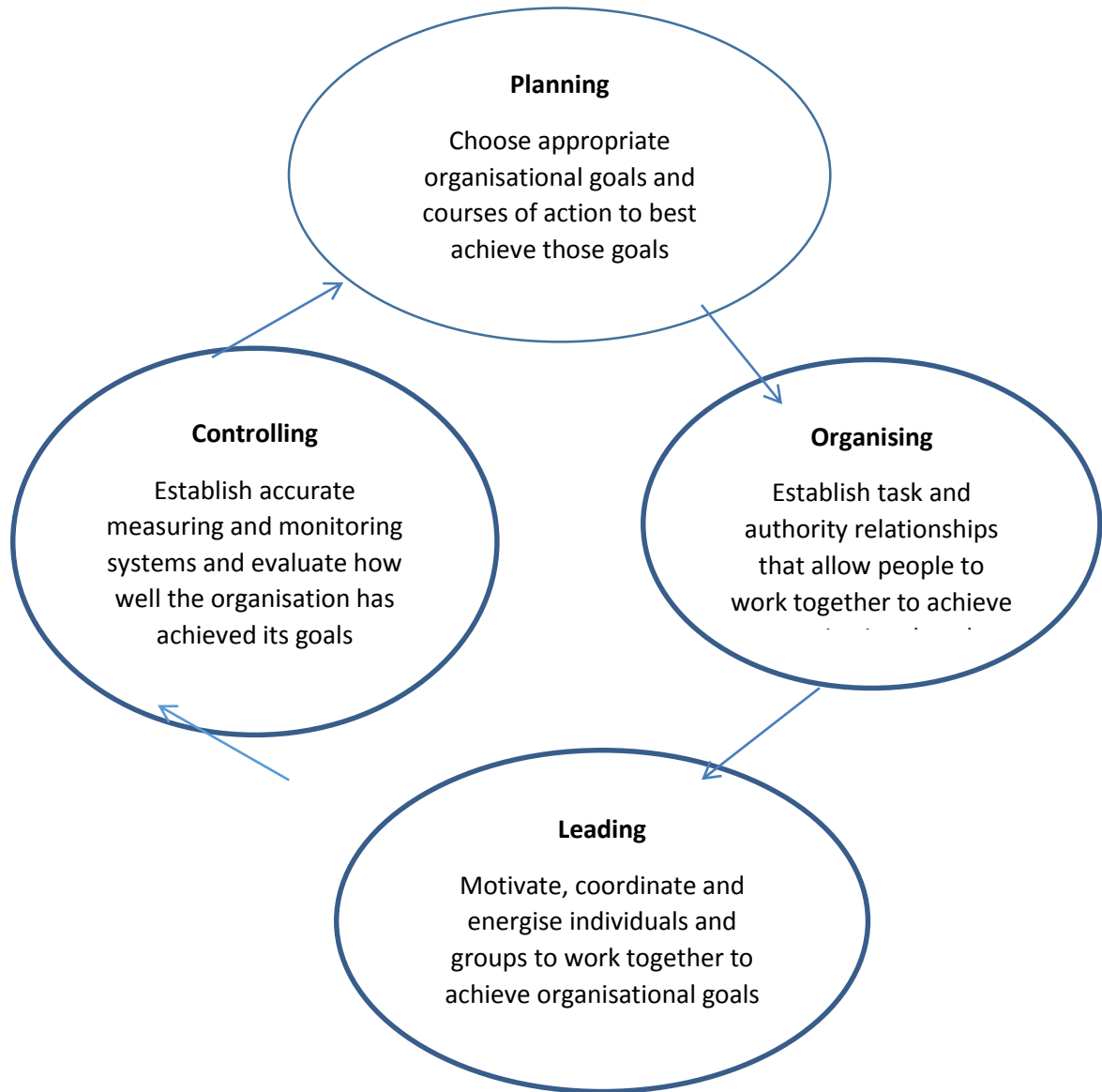
Nicholson (2008:1345) defined social isolation as “a state in which the individual lacks a sense of belonging socially, lacks engagement with others, and has minimal numbers of social contacts”. It is important to note that all children need a connection with their peers. If the child has no connection with his/her peers then they tend to lose friends, thus becoming isolated.

International research shows that poor attendance increases the likelihood of learner social isolation” (Galea 2004:182). For example, Malcolm et al. (2003:60) interviewed teachers on the effects of poor learner attendance. Teachers identified effects of poor learner attendance as academic underachievement and difficulty in making friends, which in turn could lead to boredom and loss of confidence. Murcia (2011:15) found that poor learner attendance has negative effect on peer relationships. Interaction with others is imperative to develop a child’s healthy self-image or self-esteem. Isolated children do not feel comfortable around others because they lack the ability to communicate and follow social cues. They may feel that they do not look good enough to fit societal norms, thus creating a poor self-image (Hall-Lande, 2007:380).

2.4. STRATEGIES TO MANAGE LEARNER ATTENDANCE

Fayol’s theory of management centred around five factors: “planning, organising, leading, coordination and control”. The purpose of these five factors is to determine goals and strategies to accomplish them (Loren, 2001:482-483). Applied to the study at hand, it means that management is an essential element of effectively managing learner attendance so that there is regular school attendance. The researcher selected all four of Fayol’s management functions espoused by McNamara (2009:66), namely planning, organising, leading and control. This is supported by Hissom (2009:3), who indicated that “the last word in every four tasks of management as we know them today is goals”. This is represented graphically as follows:

Figure: 1. The four tasks of management (Hissom, 2009:3)



Fayol's principles are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to provide managers with the necessary building blocks to serve as guidelines for managerial activities so that there should be efficiency, order, stability and fairness (Hissom, 2009:8). Applied to the researcher's study, this theory refers to the effective management of learner school attendance.

2.4.1. MANAGEMENT FUNCTIONS

Management is the process of "designing and maintaining an environment in which individuals work together efficiently in groups to accomplish selected aims" (Koontz & Wehrich, 1990:4; Everard & Morris (1990:5). Management, as defined in this way, applies to all types of organisations, be they businesses, educational institutions, hospitals, political organisations, or even families. Management in the educational environment is unique in that individual schools are unique (different socioeconomic levels, rural or urban character, infrastructure, teacher and principal experience and level of competence). Consequently, their management cannot be seen simply as being identical across the board and utilising identical methods to those of other organisations. However, since management occurs within all types of organisations, it is "an essential activity at all organisational levels because managers carry out their functions of planning, organising, leading and controlling" (Olum, 2004:11).

The management functions, as set out by Fayol, will be discussed in relation to learner attendance of schools.

2.4.1.1. Planning of learner attendance

According to Fayol, planning involves analysing the future and drawing up a plan of action (Wren, 2001:482). Planning can be regarded as one of the most important tasks of an educational leader, and it forms the basis of all other management tasks (Van der Westhuizen, 1997:139).

Planning – as a management task – aims to ensure that the organisation’s purpose, mission, goals and strategies are clearly understood by all the parties involved (Smit & Cronje, 1999:13). Applied to the researcher’s study, it means selecting a mission statement and defining objectives and the actions to achieve regular school attendance. According to Buchel (1992:9), when planning to manage learner attendance, school leaders should use the following guidelines or principles.

- “Planning on how to manage learner attendance should take place within the limits of the school policy on learner attendance”
- “All aspects of planning should be related. The principal’s own planning must be in line with the plans of the HoD responsible for learner attendance and class teachers as a school unit”
- “Written planning is essential for successful management of learner attendance”
- “Routine planning enables the principal to establish a familiar routine (that is, regular learner attendance) which creates a sense of security. This routine also helps to maintain learner discipline”.

An international best practice at school level, highlighted in literature review, is that schools that have been successful at reducing absence and managing poor attendance have attendance policies in place (French, Gerstle & Nielhaus quoted in Railsback, 2004:13). Policies on learner attendance are regarded as an important starting point from which to deal with the issue of poor attendance.

2.4.1.2. Organising of learner attendance

Fayol believed that an organisation’s structure is important, as it facilitates the optimum conduct of its business activities. Applied to the researcher’s study, this refers to managing learner attendance (Wren 2001:483).

Organising is “the implementation of planning and is an indispensable step in the management process of a school” (Van der Westhuizen, 1997:16). It is an indispensable step in the management process of a school because:

- “It clarifies the staff responsibilities (on managing learner attendance)”
- “Staff members will be expected to account for the outcome of the task that they are responsible for (for example, managing learner attendance)”.

The total workload of managing learner attendance is divided into activities to be performed by individuals or a group of individuals. Fullan (2001:136) asserted that the main role of the principal is to harness the collective capacity of many individual educators, who – when working together effectively – can challenge difficult circumstances (applied to the researcher’s study, it would mean managing learner attendance). Thus, the principal effectively extends managing learner attendance to the teachers, who, in this case, were viewed as co-producers of management because they were responsible for monitoring the class attendance register, the period registers, compiling quarterly learner attendance documents and making follow-ups on learners who were chronically absent from school (Harris, 2005:11).

2.4.1.3. Leading of learner attendance.

Fayol used the term leading to illustrate a manager’s responsibility to motivate and direct employees towards the achievement of organisational goals and strategies (Wren, 2001:483). Preedy (1993: 142) asserted that as a leader, the principal has the task of directing and coordinating the tasks relevant to group activities such as managing learner attendance at the school. This implies that one of the principal’s management tasks is to be an effective and efficient leader of his/her school. Leading is “the influencing of people so that they contribute to the organisation and group goals”. Organisation in this study refers to the schools and the tasks to managing learner attendance.

Leading is defined as “the process of directing the behaviour of others towards the accomplishment of predetermined goals” (Cronje, Du Toit, Marais & Motlatla, 2004:174). Sterling and Davidoff (2000:27-29) stated that each and every person who takes on the responsibility to grow as a leader can make a meaningful difference in their school (managing learner attendance effectively). Achilles, quoted in Greenfield (1987:20-21), listed the following aspects of school effectiveness (effective management of learner attendance); the principal must:

- “Strive to encourage the staff to increase regular learner attendance”
- “Ensure that the surroundings are neat and that there is proper behaviour, respect and pride that will encourage learners to attend school regularly”.
- “Ensure that learner attendance policies are enforced and monitor that teachers are planning and work as this will result in learners being motivated to attend school regularly”.

In the study of the principal’s role in restoring a learning culture in township secondary schools, it was found that the principal ability to direct and coordinate tasks yielded a possible learning culture (Masitsa 1995:45) applied to my study it would mean regular learner attendance.

2.4.1.4. Control of learner attendance

According to Fayol, control is “one of the most important responsibilities of a manager and involves exercising appropriate leadership to ensure that everything is working according to plan” (Wren, 2001:484).

Control is “a continuous process that will ensure that contingencies are in place, if there are deviations from the original plan and the ability to deal with any disruptions that seek to derail the achievement of set goals” (Wren, 2001:484). Dean (1985:170) believed that the principal should develop teachers to achieve the objective of the school, such as encouraging regular learner attendance, as well as their developmental needs by means of supervision and evaluation.

Effective control is “the management process through which education managers ensure, by means of assessing and regulating (aspects such as learner attendance) that deviations from or failure of planned activities are kept to a minimum” (Stoner & Wankel, 1986:574). Control is “complementary to planning, because – apart from revealing deviations – it also indicates whether plans should be revised as a result of environment and other changes” (Allen, 1997:5).

According to McCurdy (1989:81), evaluation is a tool that enables a person to do more effectively what the job calls for. Effective control is dependent on certain basic principles (Van der Westhuizen, 1997:217, Allen 1997:8), which are:

- “Ensure that all role players, especially the teachers, learners and parents know exactly what is required (namely increasing and maintaining regular school attendance)”
- “Information should be available to all regarding learner attendance, responsibilities and authority allocated to each staff member”
- “Policy documents on learner attendance and control measures must be well planned and available to all the stakeholders”
- “Delegate work to the HoD responsible for learner attendance, or to class teachers for accountability”
- “Principal must monitor progress closely to show interest in learner attendance”
- “Be quick with rewards and praise to teachers who execute their duty to manage learner attendance effectively and learners who attend school regularly.”

In the study of an induction programmer for newly-appointed school principals in Bophuthatswana, it was found that “teacher supervision and evaluation culminated in professional development, motivation of teachers and the improvement of academic performance, learners were also motivated to attend school regularly” (Legotlo, 1994:68).

2.5. MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

Fayol's managing principles will be explained further as "they are guidelines for managers to follow for effective management" (Wren, 2001:486). Applied to the researcher's study, it refers to effective management of learner attendance.

2.5.1. Division of work.

Management of learner attendance is a shared responsibility of all educators. Fullan (2001:136) asserted that the main role of the principal is to harness the collective capacity of many individual educators; who, when and if working together, can challenge difficult circumstances such as managing learner attendance. Division of work proposes that "the work can be performed more efficiently and more productivity if it is divided into smaller elements and assigning specific elements to specific workers" (Rodrigue, 2001:880). Teschke (1996:13), in the study of becoming a leader of leaders, found that the principal's role to distribute tasks to other teachers improved regular learner attendance. In the study on the induction of new principals in Kenya, Kitavi (1995:101) found that principals who became managers and who distributed tasks effectively also improved their schools' culture of learning and enhanced regular attendance by learners.

2.5.2. Authority

Smit and Cronje (1999:240) defined authority as "the legitimate right to command, to give orders or instruct". Authority applied in the school context includes that the principal has the right and responsibility to distribute and delegate tasks and to punish default or negligence by teachers and learners. Managers require formal and informal authority to carry out their managerial responsibilities, to give orders so that tasks will be accomplished (Rodrigues, 2001:881). Smit, Cronje, Brevis and Vrby (2007:194-195) defined formal authority as "the specified relationships among employees".

It is the sanctioned way of getting things done. Informal authority is “the pattern of relationships and communication that evolves as employees interact and communicate”. It is the unsanctioned way of getting things done.

In the study of an induction programme writer for newly appointed school principals in Bophuthatswana, it was found that principals’ formal authority (that is, supervision and evaluation of teachers) improved academic performance and learners were motivated to attend school regularly (Legotlo, 1994:74). The principal, therefore, has the authority to manage learner attendance as stated by the Head of Department of the provincial Department of Education (Joubert & Bray, 2007:3).

2.5.3. Exercising discipline

According to Fayol, the management principle of exercising discipline suggests that “clearly defined rules and procedures are set to attain good employee discipline and obedience” (Rodrigues, 2001:882). In his study into the induction of new principals in Kenya, Kitavi (1995:114) recommended that principals develop a code of conduct for learners and ensure their cooperation in terms of attending school regularly. In South Africa, a code of conduct for learners is a form of subordinate legislation that reflects the democratic principles of the Constitution (RSA, 1996b) by supporting the values of human dignity, equality and freedom. The code of conduct spells out rules regarding learner behaviour and describes the disciplinary process to be implemented concerning transgressions by learners (DBE, 2008:1). The drafting of the code of conduct should be characterised by the involvement of parents, learners, teachers and non-teachers at the school (Rossouw, 2007:82).

The effectiveness of the learner code of conduct lies in its enforcement to which code violations can be sanctioned appropriately by the School Governing Body, delegating day-to-day enforcement of the code of conduct to the school management team and teachers. The procedure for doing so should be clearly spelled out in the school policy on disciplinary measures (Nitsch, Baetz & Hughes, 2005:327).

2.6. SUMMARY

In conclusion, the literature review highlighted factors that contribute to poor school attendance and the effects of such poor learner school attendance as established by different researchers. Problems caused by irregular school attendance such as poor academic achievements or even dropping out of school and subsequent negative socioeconomic and social consequences are a global problem, as highlighted by international and local literature. The literature review on various strategies applied to manage learner attendance were also discussed, guided by Fayol's management functions (planning, organising, leading and control) and the 14 principles of management, from which the researcher selected three for his study (namely division of work, authority and discipline).

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research was to find out what strategies principals are using to manage learner attendance in the three selected middle schools.

The main research question that was answered by this study is: What strategies do principals of middle schools use to manage learner attendance?

The focus of this research hinged on the following sub-questions:

- What are the possible causes of poor learner attendance in middle schools?
- What are the effects of poor learner attendance in middle schools?

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research design, the research methodology comprising the selection of the population and sample, data collection and analysis, establishment of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

3.2. RESEARCH PARADIGM

The researcher chose an interpretivist research paradigm that strives to comprehend how individuals (principals and teachers) in their everyday settings construct meaning and explain the events of the world, namely the effective management of learner school attendance. The interpretivist paradigm “is characterised by a concern for the individual in contrast to the normative paradigm, which indicates that the human behaviour is essentially rule-governed and that it should be investigated by methods of natural science” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007:23).

The interpretive paradigm also emphasises social interaction as the basis for knowledge. The researcher used this study to try to establish how others understand their world, in this instance understanding what strategies principals of middle schools use to manage learner attendance. Knowledge gained on this topic is constructed by mutual negotiations and it is specific to the situation being investigated.

3.3. RESEARCH APPROACH

The researcher used the qualitative research approach to answer the question, “What strategies do principals use to manage learner attendance in middle schools?. Both a literature review and data collected during fieldwork were used. Langford (2001:139) explained the qualitative research approach as “an objective way to study the subjective human experience, using non-statistical methods of analysis”. According to Fossey, Harvey, McDermott and Davidson (2002:717), qualitative research “is a broad umbrella term for research methodologies that explore, describe and explain persons’ experiences, behaviours, interactions and social contexts without the use of statistical procedures or qualification”. Creswell (2009:4) defined qualitative research as “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem”. The definitions imply that the researcher gathers data in the form of words from participants’ actual settings. The qualitative research approach is appropriate for this study as it will allow the researcher to get the data directly from participants by personally establishing their views, perceptions and expectations in detail.

3.4. RESEARCH DESIGN

Imenda and Muyangwa (2000:31) defined research design as “how the study is to be carried out”. McMillan and Schumacher (2011:31) described the research design as “procedures to be followed for conducting the study, including, when, from whom and under which conditions the data will be obtained”. The researcher used a case study as a research design. Baxter and Jack (2008:543) defined a case study as “an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources”. This implies that it is an intensive description of a single individual or sometimes a group. In this context, the case study is investigating the management of learner attendance. This case study was conducted at three middle schools. The choice of a case study research design was influenced by reasoning given by authors such as Zainal (2007), who asserted that the examination of data is most often conducted within the context of its use, that is, within the situation in which the activity takes place. Case studies offer the opportunity to explain why certain outcomes happen more often and do not establish only what those outcomes are (Denscombe, 1998:31). This is an important reason for selection of a case study design to identify strategies principals of middle schools use to manage learner attendance.

3.5. POPULATION, SAMPLING AND SAMPLING METHOD

This section comprises the identification of a target population and selecting a sample from the population.

3.5.1. Population

Population is referred to sometimes as target population. Rossi (2004:4) defines target population as a “large number of individuals from which the sample is drawn and to which the study results will be generalised”. The researcher concentrated on principals of middle schools, the HoDs responsible for learner attendance and class teachers of selected middle schools.

In the South African educational environment, middle schools are also referred to as Senior Phase, which falls between primary and secondary schools with grades seven to nine. There are three reasons why middle schools were selected for this study. Firstly, the selected school sites were convenient locations for the researcher to conduct this study and he is a principal of a middle school. His personal experience of managing learner school attendance assisted him in the design and interpretation of this study. However, the researcher guarded at all times against any bias. Secondly, middle schools were selected because of poor achievements at this grade level; where especially in Mathematics and Science were a concern (Cleary & Chen, 2009:295). Lastly, a review of the literature suggests that middle school learners often do not attend school regularly (Campbell, 2011:34).

The chosen area was the Tshwane North District of the Gauteng Province. This district has ten middle schools. The target population of principals, the HoDs responsible for learner attendance and class teachers of ten middle schools is 30 potential respondents. Due to time and financial constraints, the researcher cannot interview the whole population for the study. A manageable number of principals, HoDs responsible for learner attendance and class teachers was selected as a sample. Dooley (1995:351) defined a sample in a research context as “a subset of individuals selected from a large group called population”. In simple terms, a sample is a smaller – but representative – group of participants derived from a bigger group from which data will be collected.

3.5.2. Sampling method

The purposive sampling technique was used to obtain the sample in this study. Maree (2011:79) maintained that “qualitative research is generally based on non-probability and purposive sampling rather than probability or random sampling”. The logistical, time and financial constraints compelled the researcher to choose purposive sampling, which will be discussed below.

McMillan and Schumacher (2011:498) defined purposive sampling as a “type of sampling that allows choosing small groups or individuals who are likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomenon”.

The following purposive sampling advantages were identified by Given (2008:698)

- “The people who do not fit the requirements are eliminated”
- “It is less time consuming”
- “It is less expensive as it involves lower research costs.”

The sample of this investigation was selected as follows: from the ten middle schools in the area, three middle schools were selected. The reasons for choosing the three middle schools are as follows. Firstly, the three middle schools all have grades seven to nine. Secondly, the researcher is familiar with the teachers at the three middle schools and will thus find it easy to be given permission to interview them. Thirdly, the three middle schools do not have 100% learner attendance and, consequentially, the three middle schools do not perform academically due to irregular learner attendance. Lastly, the three middle schools are within the researcher’s vicinity and it will thus not be costly to visit these schools. Therefore, three principals, three HoDs and three class teachers were selected as a sample. Only principals, HODs responsible for learner attendance and class teachers who meet the following criteria were included in the sample:

1. Three principals, three HoDs responsible for learner attendance and three class teachers of three selected middle schools of Tshwane North District of Gauteng Province.
2. Included in the sample were principals, HoDs responsible for learner attendance and class teachers who are fully aware of what the study entails and wanted to participate in the study of their own free will.

3.5.3. Research sample

Prior to the actual interviews being conducted, the researcher selected the participants. Smith (2013:14) defined sample size as “the number of units that were chosen from which we gather data”. This means sample size relates to how many people to pick for the study.

The sample size selected decides how much it will cost to fund projects and the level of accuracy of results. In this study, qualitative data will be collected from three principals, three HoDs responsible for learner attendance and three class teachers of three selected middle schools.

3.6. METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

In this section, method of data collection, biographical profile of the participants, list of the questions planned to ask the participants and preparation of the participants for the process of data collection are discussed. Kawulich (2005:85) defined data collection as “systematic gathering of a data for a particular purpose from various sources including questionnaire, observations, existing records and electronic devices”.

3.6.1. Data collection instrument

In this study, a semi-structured questionnaire was used, which facilitated open-ended questions contained in the interview guide. Raworth, Sweetman, Rouland and Hopkins (2012:5) maintained that unlike formal interviews, which follow a rigid format of questions, semi-structured interviews focus on specific themes, but cover them in a conversational style.

Semi-structured interviews were used because they allow for a flexible interview and no formalised questions were followed. Instead, a list of general topics – called an interview guide – was used. Questions were tailored in such a way to allow more fluid conversation.

This permitted two-way communication. In that way, rapport and trust were gained as well as a deeper understanding of responses. A semi-structured interviewing guide was drafted and the interview was conducted with three principals, three HoDs responsible for learner attendance and three class teachers. From the interview questions, the following main themes were identified:

Theme 1: Planning of learner attendance

Theme 2: Organising learner attendance

Theme 3: Leading of learner attendance

Theme 4: Control of learner attendance

Theme 5: Division of work

Theme 6: Authority

Theme 7: Exercising discipline

Theme 8: Causes of poor learner attendance

Theme 9: Effects of poor learner attendance.

The themes were generated from the semi-structured interview guide resulting from which questions were asked of principals, HoDs responsible for learner attendance and class teachers in (Appendix A, B and C.)

3.6.2. Data collection procedure

The researcher contacted the nine respondents (three principals, three HoDs responsible for learner attendance and three class teachers) in advance to explain to them the goal of the interview. He also obtained permission in advance from the selected principals, HoDs responsible for learner attendance and the class teachers the place for the interviews, in this instance in their respective schools. The location where the interviews would take place had to allow a confidential interview, had to be comfortable, quiet, and free of distracters. Respondents agreed in advance how long the interview was to take, that it should not exceed one hour, respectively.

During the actual interviews, the researcher used the following procedures. He introduced himself to the participants, reminded them of the goal and projected length of the interviews and the topic to be discussed. He opened the interview by explaining the guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity. He also established permission to use audio-recording.

Participants were encouraged to talk freely. This step was intended to build rapport and put the participants at ease to enhance the free exchange of information. The researcher listened to the participants' statements of their impression of facts and also their attitudes and beliefs. He probed participants to think about similarities and differences between some of the statements they made. All questions were probed to clarify facts and attitudes. At the end of the interview, principals, HoDs responsible for learner attendance and class teachers were asked if they, in turn, would like to ask any question. The researcher then thanked the participants and explained how the rest of the study project would proceed and that the results will be sent to them once the study is completed.

3.7. METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

After collecting data from the respondents, such data was analysed. Sobh and Chad (2006:1196) defined data analysis as "a process of interpreting, cleaning, transforming and modelling data with the goal of discovering useful information, suggesting conclusions and supporting decision making". The researcher used thematic analysis as method of data analysis as suggested by Brian and Clarke, quoted in Morales (2006:38) as guidelines, which are:

- "Familiarising yourself with your data"
- "Generating initial codes"
- "Read throughout each transcript to immerse in the data"
- "Reviewing themes"
- "Defining and meaning themes"
- "Producing the report".

After completing the data, the researcher transcribed the data into written form. He then generated the initial codes by documenting where and how patterns occurred. This was followed by searching for themes and considering what worked and what did not work within themes, which enabled the researcher to commence with the actual analysis of potential codes. The researcher defined and refined the existing themes that were presented in the final analysis. Lastly, the final report was written.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the researcher allowed research participants and other relevant people who had a specific interest in the research to comment or assess the research findings, interpretations and conclusions. In validating and verifying the findings, the researcher provided copies of a draft report to participants and asked for written or oral comments on the report. Lastly, he stated the limitations or problems experienced during collection and analysis of the data.

3.8. TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness of the research outcome implies that readers of the research will be able to believe what the researcher has reported. His conduct during the course of the investigation and analysis and interpretation of the results of the research must instil confidence so the study will be considered to be reliable. Simelane (1998:17) maintained that the researcher has an obligation to maintain trustworthiness throughout the research study. To enhance trustworthiness, the researcher verified the findings from three levels of interviews with principals, HoDs responsible for learner attendance and class teachers from three selected middle schools. This was done in order to control and avoid bias and also ensure that confidentiality is maintained. Since the research design was a case study, the researcher avoided generalisation as he investigated middle schools as a case. The steps the researcher followed had been suggested by Nieuwenhuis (2007:113-115) to enhance trustworthiness of qualitative research studies.

- "Using multiple data sources"
- "Controlling against bias"
- "Avoiding generalisation"
- "Maintaining confidentiality and anonymity"
- "Verifying and validating findings".

3.9. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.

In this section, the researcher dealt with a number of ethical considerations he abided to. This is supported by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009:193), who stated that the data collection stage is associated with a range of ethical issues. Marshall (2004: 56) defined research ethics as "the application of moral rules and professional codes of conduct to the collection, analysis, reporting and publication of information about research subjects, in particular active acceptance of the subjects' right to privacy, confidentiality and informed consent." The researcher applied for ethics clearance and followed the University of Pretoria application process. After the ethical clearance had been granted, he applied for permission from the Gauteng Department of Basic Education, Tshwane North District and principals of middle schools for the study to be conducted.

3.9.1. Ensuring participants have given informed consent

According to Saunders et al. (2009:193), the concept of informed consent refers to "the importance of informing the participants of the nature of the research study". Before the study was commenced, the informed consent forms (Appendix H and I) were signed by the principals, HoDs responsible for learner attendance and class teachers. The researcher explained to potential respondents what the research entailed and informed them of their right to refuse to participate. Therefore, participants were involved voluntarily, were not deceived or coerced into participating. They were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. In other words, even if they agreed to volunteer, they could decide to withdraw from the study at a later stage.

3.9.2. Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

The researcher ensured that the identity of all participants was protected at all times (Saunders et al., 2009:194). The essence of anonymity was that information provided by participants should in no way reveal the identity of an individual. Thus, as an ethical measure, the names of all participants in the study were treated in strict confidentiality and anonymity. The researcher linked to each principals, HoDs responsible for learner attendance and class teachers a pseudonym with their real name and identity on the tape recordings and transcripts.

Jamison (2007:5) defined confidentiality as “an explicit or implied guarantee by a researcher to a respondent in social sciences research whereby the respondent is confident that any information provided to the researcher cannot be attributed back to the respondents”. Saunders et al, (2009:194) postulated that the ethical principle of confidentiality aims to safeguard participants from any physical, psychological or emotional harm. The researcher was honest and respectful towards all participants. He ensured that participants’ confidentiality was guaranteed. This was done by taking the following precautions:

- “The list of names, transcripts and notes were kept in a locked safe”
- “The list of names were kept separate from recordings, transcripts and notes”
- “No name was attached to the tapes or transcripts or notes”.

3.9.3. Ensuring that permission was obtained.

It is important that official channels are cleared by formally requesting permission to carry out a study (Saunders et al., 2009:194). In this study, the researcher requested and obtained permission from the Gauteng Department of Education, Tshwane North District and principals of middle schools (APPENDIX J and K).

3.9.4. Ensuring that information was managed

Research data comprises of all recorded descriptive, numerical or visual material collected during the conduction of research. This data or information should be managed. Fouka and Matzorou (2011:68) defined management of information as “both the methodological and technological processes for the collection, storage, processing, retrieval, sharing and management of information”. The researcher kept the tapes, notes and transcripts in a locked safe to which he was the only one who has access. He assigned pseudonyms or numbers to the tapes, notes and transcripts to ensure anonymity. He did not disclose the names of other people such as supervisors and typists unless the principals, HoDs responsible for learner attendance and class teacher’s permission were obtained.

3.10. SUMMARY

The chapter explained in detail the rationale behind the methodology used in the study, starting with the use of the interpretive paradigm, the researcher’s choice of sampling method and data collection instruments used. The reasons for selection of each method were explored and ways to address any potential challenges discussed. Lastly, ethical issues to the study were also scrutinised. The next chapter proceeds with a detailed presentation of the research findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the presentation and discussion of the specific themes that emerged during the interviews and content analysis phases of the research.

The research involved three public middle schools in the form of a collective study. According to Zucker (2009:2), a collective study is “the study of a number of cases in order to inquire into a particular phenomenon”. The case studies involved three public middle schools in the same district. The data from each of these schools was presented separately and thereafter all case studies were discussed as a unit. Care was taken not to present the data as a comparative case study.

The interview data was collected from the relevant three educators per school. These included a principal, Head of Department responsible for learner attendance and class teachers from the three purposively sampled schools. All participants were asked questions according to a semi-structured question guide, questioning the role of teachers in managing learner attendance (Appendix A, B, C). The interviews were recorded with the permission obtained from the participants.

After in-depth assessment of each interview transcriptions, categories from each research site was grouped together, using codes for responses that were similar. From these categories, themes were developed. In line with Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007:462), an attempt was made to report direct phrases to keep the flavour of the original data and to be faithful to the exact words used. The researcher exercised great caution and awareness in analysing the data, for the analysis and the findings not to reflect the opinion of the researcher, by acknowledging “a reflexivity effect”, i.e. that researcher is part of the world he/she is searching. Reflexivity demands that “a researcher monitor himself to prevent bias and to increase objectivity” (De Lange, 2009:56).

4.2. PROFILE OF THE SCHOOLS IN THE STUDY

4.2.1 The three chosen schools

The three selected middle schools for this study are referred to as schools A, B and C. School A is located at the Lepheng section in Hammanskraal; it has 1275 learners and 38 teachers. The school is a no-fee school and has no scholar transport, learners are from a nearby village and get to school on foot. There are sporting facilities for soccer, netball and volleyball. There is also a nutrition programme provided by the Gauteng Department of Education.

The school starts at 7h30 and closes at 14h45, with no extra lessons provided after school. Parental involvement is very low, with parents' participation in school activities being minimal. However, the school is recording learner attendance from 2011 (95,3%), 2012 (94,4%) and 2013 (94%).

School B is located at Temba in Hammanskraal; it has 870 learners and 26 teachers. The school is a no-fee school and has no scholar transport, learners get to school on foot. There are no sporting grounds; however, the school is well-known for excellent achievements in music competitions. There is a nutrition programme in place provided by the Gauteng Department of Education. The school starts at 7h30 and closes at 14h30 with no extra lessons provided after school. Parental involvement is minimal and parents do not attend parent meetings. The percentage number of learners attending school stood at 94% in 2011, 93% in 2012 and 91% in 2013.

School C is located at Diloye in Hammanskraal; it has 366 learners and 12 teachers. The school is a no-fee school and has no scholar transport, learners get to school on foot. There are sporting facilities for soccer, netball and volleyball and there is also a nutrition programme in place provided by the Gauteng Department of Education.

The school starts at 07h30 and closes at 14h15. It provides extra lessons for grade 7 learners in subjects such as Maths, English and Setswana. A homework supervisor is employed by the Gauteng Department of Education to assist the learners with homework. The percentage number of learners attending school stood at 93% in 2011, 92% in 2012 and 91% in 2013.

4.3. THE BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The participants were provided with codes for confidentiality and anonymity purposes. The following codes were used:

AP1, BP2, CP3 represent Principals of schools A, B and C, respectively.

AH1, BH2, CH3 represent HoDs responsible for learner attendance of schools A, B and C, respectively.

AT1, BT2, CT3 represent class teachers of schools A, B and C, respectively.

TABLE 4.1. Participant Information

Principal	AP1	BP2	CP3
Gender	Male	Male	Male
Age	55	57	54
Professional Qualifications	STD, FED	JSC, STD, BED	JSG, FED, BED
Academic Qualifications	BED Hons	BED Hons	BED Hons
Further field of study	-	-	-
Years of experience in teaching	30	37	32
HoD responsible for learner attendance	AH1	BH2	CH3
Gender	Male	Female	Male
Age	55	48	60
Professional Qualifications	JSC, FED, BED	STD	PTC, FED, BED
Academic Qualification	BA,	BED Hons	BEDHons
Further field of study	-	-	-
Years of experience in teaching	30	25	39
Class teacher	AT1	BT2	CT3
Gender	Female	Male	Male
Age	36	55	35
Professional Qualifications	STD, BED	JSC, FED, BED	STD, FED
Academic Qualifications	BED Hons	-	BA
Further field of study	-	-	BED Hons
Years of experience in teaching	14	33	13

4.4. DATA ANALYSIS

Content analysis was used to analyse data in this study. Hsieh and Shannon (2005:1278) defined content analysis as “interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns”. The purpose of the content analysis is to provide knowledge, new insights and representation of facts (Oosthuizen, 2012:50). This analysis was guided by the stages of content analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006:16). The main steps are as follows:

Step 1: “Familiarising with the data”

Firstly, the recorded interview data was transcribed into written form. Then the data was read several times in order to become familiar with what the data entailed, paying specific attention to patterns that occurred and noting down initial ideas/patterns. The patterns were recorded in a journal where they were used for coding and checking accuracy.

Step 2: “Generating initial codes”

This step comprised the researcher coding some of the information from the highlighted texts and phrases from the data for the purpose of confidentiality and anonymity.

Name of school	Principal	HoD responsible for learner attendance	Class teacher
A	AP1	AH1	AT1
B	BP2	BH2	BT2
C	CP3	CH3	CT3

Step 3: “Searching for themes”

The codes were then categorised under “the factors identified, using the theoretical framework of Fayol to guide the researcher in identifying themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006:16).

The following themes were identified;

1. Planning of learner attendance
2. Organising learner attendance
3. Leading of learner attendance
4. Control of learner attendance
5. Division of work
6. Authority
7. Exercising discipline
8. Causes of poor learner attendance
9. Effects of poor learner attendance

These themes will be discussed in the next section, based on an account of literature reviewed in Chapter 2 on strategies principals of middle schools use to manage learner attendance, causes of poor learner attendance and effects of poor learner attendance.

Step 4: Analysis of the data using the themes

Finally, the findings were written up and their relation with research questions and literature was identified.

4.5. FINDINGS

4.5.1. Introduction

All participants understand the concept of what learner attendance is. They indicated that learner attendance means learners come to school daily, on time and remain in class. For example, AH1 stated: “it means being at school on time and in class on school days”.

BP2 also believed it meant “being at school on time and in class on school days”.

CP3 said: “learners should come to school daily by themselves”.

The state of learner attendance in the three selected middle schools ranges between 80% to 99,9%; for example, school A participants rated their learner attendance at 80% and 89%; school B participants rated their learner attendance at 90% and 99,8%. School C participants rated their learner attendance at 98% and 99,9%; however, CH3 rated learner attendance at a surprisingly low 30%, reasoning that “the code of conduct and managing functions are not effective”. This shows that learner attendance is not 100% in all three selected middle schools.

The importance of learner attendance was highlighted and all the participants agreed that learner attendance is important; for example, CT1 was quoted as follows; “they have to come to school regularly to reduce poor results and high failure rates”. CT2 stated; “by coming to school their future will be bright”. BH2 emphasised that “learner attendance is important for the learner’s academic achievement”.

4.5.2. Managing of learner attendance

The rest of the findings report on the management of learner attendance using the theoretical framework of Fayol (1949) and provide answers to the research question: What strategies do principals of middle schools use to manage learner attendance? The sub-questions asked were: What are the causes of poor learner attendance? What are the effects of poor learner attendance?

4.5.2.1 Planning of learner attendance

All participants in schools A, B and C indicated that there were learner attendance policies, learner attendance documents such as class and period registers in place. For example, AP1 in school A indicated that, “we do have the South African Act which guides us in compiling the policies that will manage attendance”. BH2 in school B indicated that “the policy is in place at our school for learner attendance”. CP3 in school C indicated that, “the policy is in place and derived from the South African Schools Act and district office policies”. The learner attendance documents they use are class and period registers. For example, AH1 in school A said: “we use class registers that are monitored by the educators; the period register is monitored by the subject educator”. BP2 in school B stated: “we use class registers, quarterly attendance registers”. CT3 in school C indicated that, “the documents they use are attendance (class) registers and a quarterly attendance register”.

School A had developed a management plan that indicates that class teachers mark class registers and period registers. AH1 said: “class teachers mark class registers ten minutes **before** the start of the first period every day”. The same approach is found in school B; however, in school C class teachers mark class registers ten minutes **after** the end of the last period every day.

This is done to accommodate those learners who come to school late because they travel from far (since the school does not have a learner transport programme). CT3 in school C stated: “we mark class registers ten minutes after the last period every day to make sure that we mark all learners, including those who came late in the morning due to transport problems”.

In schools A and B, class registers were given to the HoD every Friday before school closes, so that he/she could check and plan follow-ups with learners who were absent for more than three days during that week. For example, AP1 in school A stated: “we have a management plan in place that indicates that every Friday before school closes, class teachers must submit their class registers to the HoD to plan follow-ups with learners who were absent for more than three days”. BH2 in school B said: “we submit to the HoD so that she/he must check on those learners who are absent for three days”. In school C, this function is allocated to the deputy principal and not the HoD responsible for learner attendance. For example, CT3 said: “every Friday, we submit to the deputy principal and check on those learners who show a pattern of absenting themselves for more than once per week”.

4.5.2.2 Organising learner attendance

All participants in schools A, B and C agreed that learner attendance is a shared responsibility of all teachers and this responsibility is indicated in the school’s management plan. In schools A and B, it was found that class teachers mark class registers ten minutes before the start of the first period every day, subject teachers mark the period register during the start of the period to check learner class attendance.

In both schools, class registers and period registers are submitted to the HoD responsible for learner attendance every Friday before school closes so that the HoD responsible for learner attendance can plan follow-up with learners who were absent for more than three days during that particular week. For example, AH1 said: “class teachers mark class registers ten minutes before the start of the first period everyday”. AP1 said: “we have a management plan that indicates that every Friday before school closes, class teachers must submit class registers to the HoD to plan follow-ups with learners who were absent for more than three days”. BH2 in school B said: “we submit to the HoD so that she/he must check on those learners who are absent for three days”.

In school C, the deputy principal is the one who makes the actual follow-ups with learners who absent themselves for more than once per week, as stated in their management plan. For example, CT3 said: “every Friday, we submit to the principal and check on those learners who show a pattern of absenting themselves for more than once per week”.

4.5.2.3 Leading of learner attendance

All participants in schools A, B and C agreed that the principal takes the lead in managing learner attendance. In school A, they have a “morning briefing” of fifteen minutes before the start of the school on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, where the principal directs and motivates teachers to continue marking class registers. AP1 said: “I hold morning briefs with teachers every Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays to remind them to supervise learners during breaks and marking of class registers”.

In school B, all the members of the School Management Team (SMT) are given the opportunity to coordinate the pastoral duty list. All SMT members are allocated blocks of classrooms to check whether class teachers mark class registers ten minutes before the start of the first period every day. BH2 stated: “according to our management plan, all HoD members coordinate our blocks ten minutes before the start of the first period so that class teachers can mark class registers”.

In school C, the principal directs and encourages members of the SMT to check whether class teachers mark class registers ten minutes after the last period of the day. CP3 said: “the bell will ring after school closes to mark the start of the marking of class registers and all HoDs are required to manage their blocks, and after ten minutes of marking the class registers, the siren rings to mark the end of school day”.

CP3 said: “I have delegated this function to the HoDs to monitor the management of learner attendance and the deputy principal reports to me on follow-up he/she has made on learners who were absent for more than once per week”.

4.5.2.4. Control of learner attendance

All participants in schools A, B and C indicated that the principal monitors learner attendance. In school A, AH1 said: “I submit my report to the principal on Monday morning before the start of school”. BH2 in school B stated: “I have a meeting with the principal every Monday morning to discuss learners who were absent the previous week”. In school C, CH3 indicated that: “the deputy principal submits a report on learners who were absent the previous week to the principal on Monday morning”.

4.5.2.5 Division of work

All the participants in schools A, B and C indicated that management of learner attendance is divided among all teachers. For example, AH1 in school A said: “the class register is monitored by the educator and the period register is monitored by the class teachers ten minutes before the start of the first period every day”.

In school B, BH2 said: “we plan, we divide this into four HoDs, and usually divide HoDs into blocks and every HoD has his/her block to manage and the HoD takes class registers to class teachers, they mark and control the register”.

In school C, CT3 indicated that they have also included class representatives of learners to assist and stated: “I am expected to monitor and make sure that I mark class registers regularly and class representatives mark period registers regularly”.

4.5.2.6 Authority

All participants in schools A, B and C mentioned the principal as having the authority to manage learner attendance. For example, AT1 in school A said: “the principal has to enforce the regular attendance policy”. BP2 in school B said: “the principal must ensure that learners attend regularly by checking the class and period registers and making follow-ups”. CH3 in school C said: “the principal is the one who has the authority to manage learner attendance because he is the leader at the school”.

4.5.2.7 Exercising discipline

Participants from schools A and B did not mention any disciplinary processes and procedures when learners violated school rules on regular learner attendance. In school C, participants mentioned that they exercised discipline and made follow-ups to establish the causes of poor learner attendance; for example, CP3 said: “we are able to follow the learners who absent themselves from school and then we enforce the code of conduct for learners so as to ensure that learners do come to school regularly”.

4.5.2.8 Causes of poor learner attendance

All the participants interviewed mentioned “lack of parental involvement, lack of class activities and homework, child-headed families, cultural initiation, drug use, pregnancy” as the cause of poor learner attendance. CT3 believed that “some learners bullied others, teachers are not supportive towards learners and learners were ill, not healthy”.

These causes of poor learner attendance were identified when principals of the three selected middle schools made follow-ups. For example, AP1 in school A said: “we have a management plan that indicates that every Friday before school closes, class teachers must submit to HoD to make follow-ups on learners who were absent for more than three days”. BH2 in school B said: “we submit to the HoD so that he/she must check on those learners who are absent for three days”. CT3 in school C said: “every Friday, we submit to the deputy principal and check on those learners who show a pattern of absenting themselves for more than once per week”.

4.5.2.9 Effects of poor learner attendance

Eight of the nine participants interviewed mentioned “poor results/ performance” as the effect of poor learner attendance. The other effect of poor learner attendance mentioned by BT2 was “dropping out of school”. CH3 mentioned social isolation, saying “learners who do not attend regularly are always alone”. These effects of poor learner attendance were identified when the principals of three selected middle schools evaluated the impact of poor learner attendance. For example, AH1 in school A said: “Learners who miss school also have poor marks”. BH2 in school B said “I have a meeting with the principal every Monday morning to discuss learners who were absent the previous week. Learners often fail in school if they do not attend regularly”. CH3 in school C indicated that “Other learners do not mix easily with learners who hardly attend school.”.

4.6 Summary

The chapter presented the data analysis, themes were identified using Fayol's theoretical framework (1949) and data was analysed and reported about planning, organising, leading, control of learner attendance including division of work, authority, exercising discipline, causes of poor learner attendance and effects of poor learner attendance. The findings in this chapter are discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a general overview of the investigation to show that the aims of the research expressed in Chapter 1 have been achieved. The main purpose of this study was to find out what strategies principals are using to manage learner attendance in the three selected middle schools. The causes and effects of poor learner attendance and strategies to manage learner attendance were highlighted in Chapter 2 through a literature review. Chapter 3 described the research design, research methodology comprising the selection of the population and sample, data collection and analysis and establishment of trustworthiness and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 described the findings of this study after an analysis of the gathered data. The purpose of this last chapter is to discuss the research findings, to draw conclusions, provide limitations and make recommendations for future research based upon the findings.

5.2. DISCUSSING THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings are discussed with a view to answer the main research question “What strategies do principals use to manage learner attendance in middle schools? and the sub questions ”What are the causes and the effects of poor learner attendance?

5.2.1. Planning of learner attendance

The Department of Basic Education has developed a policy (the Policy) aimed at promoting regular school attendance. The main aspect of the Policy is that all learners must attend school on every school day (DBE, 2010:10). The Policy was developed in response to the need for a national procedure for the recording, management and monitoring of learner attendance.

Section 3 of the South African Schools Act of 1996 makes provision that “school attendance is compulsory for learners who are seven years to fifteen years old “(RSA, 1996). All the interviewed participants made it clear that learner attendance policies are in place at their schools. The policies are in line with those of national, provincial and district DoE policies.

All participants indicated they have developed a management plan that has allocated ten minutes before the start of the first period or after the last period to be used to mark and control class registers in accordance with the policy on learner attendance. Subject teachers also mark period registers when they start with their lessons. These documents are submitted to the HoD responsible for learner attendance and the deputy principal on Fridays before school closes so that the principal should make follow-ups with learners who were absent once or more than three days during that particular week.

5.2.2. Organising learner attendance

All participants agreed that all teachers share the responsibility to manage learner attendance. Class teachers mark class registers ten minutes before the start of the first period or after the last period. Subject teachers mark the period registers at the start of their lessons to check class attendance. This is supported by the school policy on learner attendance, which states that a class teacher is responsible for compiling and marking the class register on a daily basis and a subject teacher is responsible for marking the period register to check the learner attendance during each lesson (DBE, 2010:18). HoDs are responsible for learner attendance and the deputy principal collects class registers and period registers every Friday before school closes to make follow-ups with learners who were absent for more than one or three days in accordance to the school’s management plan.

The principals of the three selected middle schools informed parents through letters about their children's non-attendance. Chang and Romero (2008:4) suggested that the principal should actively engage parents about their children's attendance.

5.2.3. Leadership role of educators in managing learner attendance

All participants agreed that the principal actively directs and motivates teachers to manage learner attendance by following the school's management plan that has allocated fifteen minutes before the start of school on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays for morning briefs. Members of the School Management Team have been delegated to monitor the marking of class registers ten minutes before the start of the first period every day. Studies have found that attendance levels are higher when learners believe that the School Management Team (SMT) and teachers are taking the required lead as they are genuinely concerned about learner attendance and want to help (Smink & Reimer, 2005:35).

Principals of the three selected middle schools seem to have found their own styles to provide the leadership needed to address poor learner attendance, by pursuing the three RS – Reach down, Reach out and Reach up (Balfanz & Chang 2013:1). Applying Reach down, it was found that principals knew the attendance records of their incoming learners and engaged the learners and parents (via letters) at the first non-attendance. Principals also reached out to the community to build a culture of regular attendance by identifying the causes of poor learner attendance when they made follow-ups with learners who absented themselves more than once or three days per week. Reach up was applied when principals reached up to their district leadership. This process was followed when they submitted quarterly attendance registers to their district offices for professional support. No indication was given whether any problems were ever discussed or feedback given to principals as to how to improve learner school attendance.

Engaging the parents, learners and district leadership with an aim of building a culture of regular learner attendance, principals have to take a lead in providing a rich and engaged learning experience to increase learner attendance (Nauer, White & Yerneni, 2008:30).

5.2.4. Control of learner attendance

All the participants indicated that the principal monitors learner attendance every Monday morning before start of the school after he/she had a meeting with the HoD responsible for learner attendance or deputy principal, discussing learners who were absent the previous week. This information is gathered so that the principal informs parents about monthly attendance rates in the parents meetings. However, it was found in the three schools that parents did not attend any parents' meetings. Wu and Blazer (2011:12) suggested that schools post and announce daily, weekly and monthly attendance rates to parents. Regular communications with parents have been found to increase regular learner attendance.

5.2.5 Division of work

All the interviewed participants indicated that management of learner attendance was divided among all teachers. The SMTs have developed a management plan that clarified staff responsibilities. These were that

- a) class teachers mark and control class registers ten minutes before the first period
- b) or after the last period
- c) subject teachers control and mark period registers at the start of the lesson
- d) HoDs responsible for learner attendance or the deputy principal collect class registers and period registers every Fridays before school closes to identify those learners who have been absent from school for more than one or three days. They pass this information to the principals on Monday mornings

- e) the information is compiled to inform the parents in a parents' meeting and district leadership on quarterly basis for professional support.

It was found that learners also assist in marking period registers. Fullan (2001:136) indicated that the main role of leadership is to harness the collective capacity of many individuals, who, working together can challenge difficult circumstances.

5.2.6 Authority

All the participants agreed that the principal has the authority to manage learner attendance in that he/she enforces policy on learner attendance by checking that class registers and period registers are controlled and marked every day and he/she makes follow-ups with learners who were absent for more than once or three days in a week.

5.2.7 Exercising discipline

There was an indication that corrective discipline measures were not administered to learners who do not attend school regularly in schools A and B. School C enforced the code of conduct that included:

- Setting rules and expectations on regular attendance
- Monitoring compliance with rules and expectations on regular learner attendance
- Consistently enforcing rule violation on regular learner attendance.

The application of these measures was found to have reduced poor learner attendance in school C. Osher, Bear, Sprague and Doyle (2010:50) asserted that schools can establish clear expectations for learning and positive behaviour by providing firm but fair discipline.

5.2.8 Causes of poor learner attendance

All participants indicated that family factors are the main cause of learners not attending school regularly. This is supported by studies conducted by Crowder and South (2003:670), Reid (2005:30), Henry (2007:37) and Gardner (2012:2) who found that a family's poor socio-economic status yields a significant influence on the likelihood that learners will not attend school regularly. BT2 and CH3 indicated that "cultural factors – especially initiation school – are another cause of learners not attending school regularly". Mboweni (2014:81) also identified initiation school as one of the main causes of poor learner attendance. AT1 indicated that "personal and social factors are causes of poor learner attendance". This is supported by Kirby (2002:480), Roebuck, French and Denis (2004:136) found that pregnancy and drug /alcohol use/abuse are significant predictors of poor learner attendance. Researchers such as Balfanz and Herzog strongly associated the student perception of the school culture and vigour of the academic programme with either good or poor learner attendance.

All the participants agreed that the causes of poor learner attendance are family, cultural, personal and school factors. Principals of the three selected middle schools believe they manage these causes effectively by providing "leadership and pursuing the three RS – Reach down, Reach out and Reach-up" as suggested by Balfanz and Chang (2013:1). Reach-up was applied as principals knew the attendance records of their incoming learners and engaged the learners and parents at their first non-attendance. Reach out was achieved by reaching out to the community. Principals tried to build a culture of regular school attendance by identifying the causes of poor learner attendance when they made follow-ups with learners who absented themselves more than once or three days per week. Reach-up was applied by principals when they involved the district leadership by submitting quarterly attendance registers to the district office for professional support.

5.2.9 Effects of poor learner attendance

The participants were able to identify the ultimate effects of poor learner attendance such as poor academic achievements, dropping out and resultant social isolation. The participants' responses are in line with the results of studies by Rothman (2013:50), Epstein and Sheldon (2002:14), Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson and Kirk (2003:4) who asserted that better learner school attendance results in higher academic achievement. Tas (2013:356), Doll (2013:11), Lochmiller (2013:8), and Inglis and Lewis (2013:52) asserted that learners with poor school attendance are more likely to drop out of school. Galea (2004:6) asserted that "international research shows that poor learner attendance increases the likelihood of learner isolation".

Furthermore, Malcolm et al. (2003:4) indicated in their study that "one of the effects of poor learner attendance is the resultant difficulty in making friends which could lead to boredom and loss of confidence". The principals tried to minimise such potential negative effects of poor learner attendance when they used their management strategies:

- Principals have a policy on learner attendance, attendance documents such as class registers and period registers in place at their schools. They have developed management plan to use these documents. For example, class teachers mark and control class registers ten minutes before the start of the first period or the end of the last period every day. Subject teachers control and mark period registers at the start of the lesson. These documents are submitted to HoDs responsible for learner attendance or the deputy principal, on Fridays before school closes to make follow-ups with learners who absent themselves more than once or three days per week.

- The principals took a lead to manage learner attendance by directing, encouraging, motivating class teachers, subject teachers, HoDs and deputy principals to mark and control class registers, period registers in their morning briefs on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. The principals were found to monitor learner attendance every Monday morning by having a meeting with HoDs responsible for learner attendance and the deputy principal to discuss learners who were absent more than once or three days during the previous week. The management of learner attendance was divided among all teachers. Class teachers mark and control class registers; subject teachers mark and control period registers every day; HoDs responsible for learner attendance and the deputy principal collect these documents every Friday before school closes to identify those learners who have been absent more than once or three days during that particular week.
- The principals were seen to have the authority to manage learner attendance when they enforced the policy on learner attendance and checked that class and period registers were controlled and marked by teachers. Two schools were found not to administer disciplinary processes and procedures to correct violations of such policy.
- Only one school was found to enforce a code of conduct that assisted in reducing poor learner attendance.

5.3. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study was of very limited scope with only three middle schools from one district being included.

More research on primary, middle and high schools in the same and other districts should be conducted in the future for generalisation to be achieved.

Participants in this study were selected using a purposive sampling method rather than a random sampling method in order to capture data. The findings are also based on a qualitative method and can, therefore, not achieve quantifiable data. Current limitations are that no such data has been captured or analysed.

5.4. RECOMMENDATIONS RESULTING FROM THIS STUDY

The findings of this research led to the following recommendations regarding the teachers' role in managing learner attendance.

a) Learner attendance policies

Wu and Blazer (2011:487) recommended that learner attendance policies should be sound and reasonable with specific corrective consequences for missing school. The three schools are aware of the Policy, apply it through class registers and period registers, report back, discuss learners who default and write to parents. However, there is no attendance at parent meetings, no parent involvement, no community involvement beyond letters to parents and no corrective action for poor attenders, no punishment or motivation to improve.

b) Positive school climate

Studies have established that school attendance is more regular when students and parents perceive schools as welcoming, cheerful and safe (Balfanz, Durham & Plank, 2008:20).

c) Feeding schemes

Studies have found that a free lunch and in-classroom breakfast provided in areas of severe poverty dramatically increase learner attendance (Wu & Blazer, 2011:482)

d) Workshops

Research suggests that “schools should identify training needs and organise workshops, symposia, conferences and staff development programmes for teachers to enhance their skills to reduce poor learner attendance” (Gupta & Lata, 2014:15). Epstein and Sheldon (2002:15) suggested workshops to parents about attendance policies, procedures and consequences to help increase daily learner attendance. The only challenge will be to **motivate** parents and teachers actually to attend such meetings and training session.

e) Inclusion of psychologists, nurses, social workers and police as stakeholders

The department should involve psychologists, nurses, social workers and the police to manage learner attendance. This is in line with Powell (2012:18) who alerted the importance of stakeholders to improve regular learner attendance.

f) Provision of resources such as transport, furniture and awards

The department should provide schools with resources such as some form of school transport, essential furniture, basic equipment and overhead projectors. Mboweni (2014:97) indicated that learners who attend regularly should earn points for attendance. These points earned ultimately can be converted into rewards/awards such as certificates to encourage learners to attend school regularly.

g) Incentives

Researchers have found that “incentives motivate improved learner attendance. They advocate that schools offer rewards for excellent attendance records” (Hocking, 2008:17)

5.5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The researcher recommends that future studies should investigate strategies to manage learner attendance at primary and high school level in more detail. Such studies must also include what type of corrective action can be applied to defaulting learners or what motivational steps can be taken to encourage attendance. Which awards are the most motivating?

Future research should comprise of quantitative data as well as qualitative data. Quantitative data would be actual national, provincial and local statistics of measured school attendance data and academic achievement.

Future research should also include a correlation between school attendance data, academic achievement data and data as to which corrective action plans have been put in place in selected schools. If legal requirements have been put in place in all schools and attendance is measured and reported, and parents are notified about non-attendance of their children, but no corrective action is in place or part of the strategy how to guarantee regular school attendance, then such policy has “no teeth” and learners will not take the policy seriously.

5.6. SUMMARY

The central goal of the study was to investigate strategies used by principals of selected middle schools to manage learner attendance. Nine teachers participated in the study, three principals and three HoDs were interviewed. This study found that the main causes of poor learner attendance were due to problematic family, cultural, personal and school factors. The study found that the effects of learner attendance were poor academic achievement, learners dropping out of school and social isolation.

Principals of the three selected middle schools seem to have found their own styles to provide the leadership needed to address poor learner attendance, by pursuing the three RS – Reach down, Reach out and Reach up (Balfanz & Chang 2013:1). Applying Reach down, it was found that principals knew the attendance records of their incoming learners and engaged the learners and parents (via letters) at the first non-attendance. Principals also reached out to the community to build a culture of regular attendance by identifying the causes of poor learner attendance when they made follow-ups with learners who absented themselves more than once or three days per week. Reach up was applied when principals reached up to their district leadership. This process was followed when they submitted quarterly attendance registers to their district offices for professional support. No indication was given whether any problems were ever discussed or feedback given to principals as to how to improve learner school attendance.

Recommendations made could contribute to more effective management of learner attendance in middle schools.

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APPENDIX A – SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE MANAGING LEARNER ATTENDANCE IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Time of Interview: Duration.....

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:.....Pseudonym:

Gender:

Age:

The purpose of this study is to find out what strategies principals use to manage learner attendance in middle schools.

Semi- structured interviews for principals

- What do you understand by learner attendance?
- What is the state of learner attendance at your school?
- Why is learner attendance important?
- What is the responsibility of the following stakeholders towards learner attendance at your school?
 - Parents
 - Learners
 - The school
- Why is learner attendance important?
- Which policies are in place at your school for learner attendance?
- In your opinion are the policies effective to monitor / control learner attendance?

If yes, how are the policies effective to monitor/ control learner attendance?

If no, why are the policies not effective to monitor/ control learner attendance?

- Which documents are in place to monitor/ control learner attendance?
- In your opinion, are the documents effective to monitor/ control learner attendance?
- If yes, how are the documents effective to monitor/ control learner attendance?
- If no, why are the documents not effective to monitor / control learner attendance?
- What are the causes of learner non- attendance at your school?
- What are the effects of learner non- attendance at your school?
- What management functions do you as SMT, teachers use to influence regular learners attendance?
- How do you use these management functions as SMT, teachers to influence regular learner attendance?
- Which recommendations, suggestions or proposals as a principal can be implemented by the department to effect learner attendance?

APPENDIX B – SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE MANAGING LEARNER ATTENDANCE IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Time of Interview: Duration.....

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:.....Pseudonym:

Gender:

Age:

The purpose of this study is to find out what strategies principals use to manage learner attendance in middle schools.

Semi- structured interviews for HoDs responsible for managing learner attendance

- What do you understand by learner attendance?
- What is the state of learner attendance at your school?
- Why is learner attendance important?
- What is the responsibility of the following stakeholders towards learner attendance at your school?
 - Parents
 - Learners
 - The school
- Why is learner attendance important?
- Which policies are in place at your school for learner attendance?
- In your opinion, are the policies effective to monitor / control learner attendance?

If yes, how are the policies effective to monitor/ control learner attendance?

If no, why are the policies not effective to monitor/ control learner attendance?

- Which documents are in place to monitor/ control learner attendance?
- In your opinion, are the documents effective to monitor/ control learner attendance?
- If yes, how are the documents effective to monitor/ control learner attendance?
- If no, why are the documents not effective to monitor / control learner attendance?
- What are the causes of learner non- attendance at your school?
- What are the effects of learner non- attendance at your school?
- What management functions do you use as SMT, teachers to influence regular learners attendance?
- How do you use these management functions as SMT, teachers to influence regular learner attendance?
- Which recommendations, suggestions or proposals as a principal can be implemented by the department to effect learner attendance?

APPENDIX C – SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE MANAGING LEARNER ATTENDANCE IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Time of Interview: Duration.....

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:.....Pseudonym:

Gender:

Age:

The purpose of this study is to find out what strategies do principals use to manage learner attendance in middle schools.

Semi- structured interviews for class teachers

- What do you understand by learner attendance?
- What is the state of learner attendance at your school?
- Why is learner attendance important?
- What is the responsibility of the following stakeholders towards learner attendance at your school?
 - Parents
 - Learners
 - The school
- Why is learner attendance important?
- Which policies are in place at your school for learner attendance?
- In your opinion, are the policies effective to monitor / control learner attendance?

If yes, how are the policies effective to monitor/ control learner attendance?

If no, why are the policies not effective to monitor/ control learner attendance?

- Which documents are in place to monitor/ control learner attendance?
- In your opinion, are the documents effective to monitor/ control learner attendance?
- What are the causes of learner non- attendance at your school?
- What are the effects of learner non- attendance at your school?
- What management functions do you use as SMT, teachers to influence regular learners attendance?
- How do you use these management functions as SMT, teachers to influence regular learner attendance?
- Which recommendations, suggestions or proposals as a principal can be implemented by the department to effect learner attendance?

APPENDIX D

BIBLIOGRAPHY QUESTIONS

What is your age in years?

.....

What is your gender?

.....

What is your current marital status?

.....

What cultural group do you associate with?

.....



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APPENDIX E

August 07, 2014

The Principal

RE: Research work

Dear Sir/ Madam,

I, Modise Dimakatso William, Principal of Tsebentlha Middle School, am currently enrolled with the University of Pretoria for a Masters degree in Education Leadership. Part of my degree consists of a research study. I will be conducting research regarding “MANAGING LEARNER ATTENDANCE IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS.”

The Principal participation is highly important, but voluntary and his/ her identity will not be revealed in the dissemination of the research.

If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed about this topic. The interview will take place at your school but it will not interfere with school activities or teaching time and will not take more than one hour. The interview will be audio taped and transcribed for analytical purposes. If you decide to participate, but you change your mind later, you can withdraw your participation at any time. If you agree to participate in this research, please fill in the consent form provided.

Yours sincerely

Modise D.W. (Student)

modisedw@gmail.com

Prof Rika Joubert (Supervisor)

email: RikaJoubert@up.ac.za



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APPENDIX F

August 07, 2014

HoD responsible for learner attendance

RE: Research work

Dear Sir/ Madam,

I, Modise Dimakatso William, Principal of Tsebentlha Middle School, am currently enrolled with the University of Pretoria for a Masters degree in Education Leadership. Part of my degree consists of a research study. I will be conducting research regarding "MANAGING LEARNER ATTENDANCE IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS."

The HoD responsible for learner attendance participation is highly important, but voluntary and his/her identity will not be revealed in the dissemination of the research.

If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed about this topic. The interview will take place at your school but it will not interfere with school activities or teaching time and will not take more than an hour. The interview will be audio taped and transcribed for analytical purposes. If you decide to participate, but you change your mind later, you can withdraw your participation at any time. If you agree to participate in this research, please fill in the consent form provided.

Yours sincerely

Modise D.W. (Student)

modisedw@gmail.com

Prof Rika Joubert (Supervisor)

email: RikaJoubert@up.ac.za



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APPENDIX G

August 07, 2014

Class Teacher

RE: Research work

Dear Sir/ Madam,

I, Modise Dimakatso William, Principal of Tsebentlha Middle School, am currently enrolled with University of Pretoria for a Masters degree in Education Leadership. Part of my degree consists of a research study. I will be conducting research regarding “MANAGING LEARNER ATTENDANCE IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS.”

The teacher’s participation is highly important, but voluntary and his/her identity will not be revealed in the dissemination of the research.

If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed about this topic. The interview will take place at your school but it will not interfere with school activities or teaching time and will not take more than an hour. The interview will be audio taped and transcribed for analytical purposes. If you decide to participate, but you change your mind later, you can withdraw your participation at any time. If you agree to participate in this research, please fill in the consent form provided.

Yours sincerely

Modise D.W. (Student)

Prof Rika Joubert (Supervisor)

APPENDIX H

CONSENT FORM

I, _____ Principal of _____

agree / do not agree to allow _____ to conduct research in this school. The topic of the research being: **MANAGING LEARNER ATTENDANCE IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS**. I understand that I as the principal as well as HoD responsible for learner attendance and class teacher will be interviewed at my school for one hour, at the time that will suit us, but that will not interfere with school activities or teaching time. The interview will be audio taped.

I understand that the researcher subscribes to the principles of:

voluntary participation in research, implying that the participants might withdraw from the research at any time.

informed consent, meaning that research participants must at all times be fully be informed about the research process and purposes, and must give consent to their participation in the research.

safety in participation put differently, that the human respondents should not be placed at risk or harm of any kind e.g. research with young children.

privacy, meaning that the *confidentiality* and *anonymity* of human respondents should be protected at all times.

trust, which implies that human respondents will not be subjected to any acts of deception or betrayal in the research process or its published outcomes.

Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX I

CONSENT FORM

I, _____ agree / do not agree to take part in the research project: **MANAGING LEARNER ATTENDANCE IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS**. I understand that I will be interviewed at my school for one hour, at the time that will suit me, but that will not interfere with school activities or teaching time. The interview will be audio taped.

I understand that the researcher subscribes to the principles of :

voluntary participation in research, implying that the participants might withdraw from the research at any time.

informed consent, meaning that research participants must at all times be fully be informed about the research process and purposes, and must give consent to their participation in the research.

safety in participation put differently, that the human respondents should not be placed at risk or harm of any kind e.g. research with young children.

privacy, meaning that the *confidentiality* and *anonymity* of human respondents should be protected at all times.

trust, which implies that human respondents will not be subjected to any acts of deception or betrayal in the research process or its published outcomes.

Signature _____

Date _____



Faculty of Education

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APPENDIX J

August 08, 2014

The Director

Tshwane North District

Gauteng Department of Education

Wonderboom Mall

Wonderboom

0066

RE: Research work

Dear Sir/ Madam,

I, Modise Dimakatso William, Principal of Tsebentlha Middle School, Persal No: 14734360, am currently enrolled with University of Pretoria for a Masters degree in Education Leadership. Part of my degree consists of research study. I will be conducting research regarding "MANAGING LEARNER ATTENDANCE IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS."

The Principal, HoD responsible for learner attendance and class teacher will form part of the study and their participation is highly important, but voluntary and their identities will not be revealed in the dissemination of the research.

I am therefore requesting your permission to conduct this study. My contact numbers are as follows (Cell No: 082 555 9091, email address: modisedw@gmail.com)

Yours sincerely

Modise D.W. (Student)

Prof Rika Joubert (Supervisor)



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APPENDIX K

August 08, 2014

The Principal

RE: Permission to conduct research at your school

Dear Sir/ Madam,

I, Modise Dimakatso William, Principal of Tsebentlha Middle School, Persal No: 14734360, am currently enrolled with University of Pretoria for a Masters degree in Education Leadership. Part of my degree consists of research study. I will be conducting research regarding “MANAGING LEARNER ATTENDANCE IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS.”

The Principal, HoD responsible for learner attendance and class teacher will form part of the study and their participation is highly important, but voluntary and their identities will not be revealed in the dissemination of the research.

If you grant the permission to conduct research at your school, I want to interview you the principal and HoD responsible for learner attendance and one class teacher for about 1 hour at your school and it will not interfere with school activities or teaching time.

I am therefore requesting your permission to conduct this study.

Yours sincerely

Modise D.W. (Student)

Prof Rika Joubert (Supervisor)

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I, Barbara Wood, hereby confirm that I have edited the thesis:

MANAGING LEARNER ATTENDANCE IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

WRITTEN BY

DIMAKATSO WILLIAM MODISE

Mini Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of
MASTER OF EDUCATION

IN

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

SUPERVISOR: PROF RIKA JOUBERT

Johannesburg, June 2015