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The management of learner absenteeism at an urban secondary school

By

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Declaration

I declare that:

The management of learner absenteeism at an urban secondary school, is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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Signature   Date

"He will cover you with His feathers and His faithfulness will be your shield" - Psalm 91:4

Abstract

Learner absenteeism poses serious challenges to schools in their endeavours to manage the phenomenon effectively. Schools should draw a clear distinction between authorised and unauthorised absenteeism. The different manifestations of learner absenteeism cannot be dealt with in the same manner, but requires actions and/or sanctions which fit a specific type of absence.

This study explores the manner in which a secondary school, situated in a semi-urban area managed learner absenteeism. A detailed study of a secondary school from the district Ekurhuleni (D4), situated in Gauteng East, was conducted. For purposes of this study the following documents were utilised in attempts to address propositions relating thereto: national legislation, the Policy on Learner Attendance as well as ancillary documents relating to the management of absenteeism *in casu.* In-depth interviews were conducted with the principal, educators and learners in order to understand what their perception of absenteeism is, the reasons for absenteeism, and how it is managed at the school. Interviewees were observed over an extended period of time in order to further supplement the data.

The data presented, indicates that the school uses an advanced electronic system to record learner attendance which is validated by manual systems for the recording of learner absenteeism. The school has developed a learner Code of Conduct which set the standards for school attendance as well as the sanctions applicable for absenteeism. Despite these measures at the school, learners are still absent for part of the day or a full school day. Absenteeism includes both authorised and unauthorised absenteeism as well as valid and invalid reasons. Although the school imposes sanctions outlined in their Code of Conduct, this has not eradicated the challenge of learner absenteeism.

I argue in the study that different schools encounter different challenges regarding absenteeism, to be addressed on an *ad hoc* basis. Each individual school should be encouraged to develop measures to be incorporated in individual policies regarding absenteeism. Special attention has to be given to valid yet unauthorised absenteeism and how to manage it. It is therefore recommended that *lacunae* in the Policy on Learner Attendance should be addressed accordingly to ensure effective management of attendance.

Key terms:

Authorised/unauthorised absenteeism, valid/unacceptable reasons, learner/parent initiated, causes, consequences, intervention, policy, management, national legislation, Policy on Learner Attendance, Code of Conduct.

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CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1   Introduction

"Warning systems exist to keep us out of harm's way. The car's dashboard light warns of low tire pressure; the urgent weather bulletin advises us to evacuate ahead of a storm. We are conditioned to take these warnings seriously and act upon them.

Now, just weeks into the new school year, another warning system is sending a message to parents and educators: the early signs of chronically absent learners" (Chang *et al.* 2014:1).

Absenteeism, whether at school or in the workplace, is a serious challenge in South Africa, leading Chauke (2012) to claim that the cost of absenteeism *"kills"* the South African economy. Research conducted on absenteeism in South Africa confirms that staggeringly high levels of worker absenteeism are costing the country billions annually. Both direct and indirect costs are associated with absenteeism. This is also true of learner absenteeism where research recorded a rate of between 5 and 15 percent of learners being absent per day (CASE & JET, 2007).

The purpose of the study was to explore the way in which a secondary school, situated in a semi-urban area, managed learner absenteeism. A school in a semi-urban area poses particular challenges to school attendance which are often not the same as experienced by schools in townships or urban areas, as I will indicate further on. Very little research has been done in respect of the learner absenteeism phenomenon. Consequently, there was a need to study the management challenges emanating from absenteeism.

What complicates the management of learner absenteeism is that absenteeism can either be authorised and valid, or unauthorised and invalid, or unauthorised and valid. Each type of absenteeism may require a different sanction and remedy which may create other challenges in differentiating between the most appropriate sanction for each type of absenteeism.

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As an educator responsible for dealing with the school's attendance register, I became acutely aware of the problem in our school and the challenges that we face in dealing with the dilemma. In reading about the problem it was evident that learner absenteeism was not a major concern in the less developed regions of the world. Absenteeism might be dealt with through broader schemes that pursue more persistent educational matters. Learner absenteeism, however, is a pressing concern in more advanced regions of the world where well-functioning educational systems are in place. These education departments authorise funds to record, track, observe and manage the problem of learner absenteeism (CASE & JET, 2007:38-39).

Given the lack of research into the phenomenon of learner absenteeism, this study sets out to investigate the management of absenteeism in a secondary school, and was therefore exploratory. It attempted to discover the ways in which the school dealt with the corrective challenges posed by learner absenteeism in the specific community. When exercising their managerial duties schools need to take the following into account, *"In order to ensure the safety of learners at public schools at all times during the school day the Department will be strictly ensuring the implementation of the relevant legislation and policies to attain this purpose"* (GDE, 2002:2).

Internationally, research has already established a link between learner attendance and academic performance. It is known that the incidence of absenteeism leads to poor academic performance. In the long run, learners who find it hard to progress academically in the system, are to be expected to find post-schooling education challenging.

Schools are therefore challenged to ensure that learners attend school regularly and this explanation is expressed by education officials and parents/guardians alike, and: *"When goals are not met, people lose confidence in and tend to blame those believed to be responsible for leadership"* (Stewart, 2006:3). Transformation in education places a great premium on the relationship between management and school improvement according to Harris (2003). As a result the principal is seen as the key to a good school. The management style of the principal is critical to the

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success of educational programs (Hallinger, *et al.,* 1996:527). This research states that there is agreement in the United States of America and also in South Africa, that school managers play a vital role in creating conditions for improved education.

The primary role of the principal, in the pursuit of excellence in education, is encompassed in the term 'instructional leader' (Chell, 2013:9). This consists of beliefs, evaluations, tactics and approaches principals adhere to in order to ensure instructional efficiency in schools. It is presumed that principals have a direct and indirect influence on the learning of learners. Effective management and leadership is a requirement for the attainment of organisational ability. As stated by Murphy (2007), instructional leadership comprises everything a principal does to support the learners' achievement and improve the competency of educators to teach.

Effective observing of the phenomenon of absenteeism provides insight into the tendencies and patterns associated with learner absenteeism. Information and data regarding absenteeism should be gathered by the principal in various ways. By means of different technologies corrective measures intended to bring absenteeism rates down can be developed. Monitoring measures have been stipulated by the Department of Education which should guide the principal in managing learner absenteeism (CASE & JET, 2007:57). These procedures guide the principal and SMT in managing absenteeism. The Policy on Learner Attendance compels principals to develop the school's policy on learner attendance in consultation with the SGB. The SGB is a statutory body which consists of educators, parents/guardians, non-teaching staff and learners. Cognisance should be taken of the fact that, even though reference is made to the principal, it is suggested that this should, in all instances, be interpreted as collaboration between the principal, educators, parents/guardians and learners.

1.2   Background to the study

From a review of the literature, it is clear that most studies focus on truancy and unauthorised absenteeism. Although these are important aspects of learner absenteeism, it does not take into consideration the full scope of absenteeism that may be encountered. Two of the more important aspects that received scant

attention is valid unauthorised absence and authorised absence. These two forms of absenteeism cannot be dealt with in the same way as truancy or invalid, unauthorised absenteeism. It is in this respect that the study hopes to make a contribution.

The consequences of learner absenteeism have been reported in numerous studies. Learner absence has a destructive impact on the classroom atmosphere. It impacts on educators who become petulant, and learners, who do come to class, turn out to be distressed (Marburger, 2001).   Additional outcomes of absenteeism include rework and misuse of time for teaching (Lalek, 1995; Rumberger, 1997).   Reid (2005) interjects to this debate by hypothesising that learners who are absent from school face a series of short term educational consequences.   The outcomes of failure to perform well in school include increased crime, the need for social services and poor levels of health (Halpern, 2007).

The reasons for learner absenteeism are well-reported in literature. It is, however, important to identify the broader problems that contribute to absenteeism. Ramodike (nd), in his research, found that socio-economic factors are the main reason for absenteeism in that it constrains full learner attendance.   Wadesango & Machingambi (2011:91) confirm that male learners from either poor upbringing, or single parent families, and male learners whom are self-subsidised, suffer absenteeism of this nature.

Similarly Porteus *et al.* (2000) argue that *"physical poverty"* is a major influence on learners, aged 7-15 years, for being out of school. Additional reasons according to Lotz & Lee (1999) confirm that learners refer to negative self-perception as motivation for absence. When older learners are compelled to remain in school, although they are apathetic, it might give rise to absenteeism (Williams, 1999). Deplorable relationships between learners and educators, is another reason why learners avoid school with the intention of avoiding their educators (Teasley, 2004).

Due to the incidence of learner absenteeism in South African schools the Policy on Learner Attendance was introduced in 2010. Through this policy an attempt is made to reduce absenteeism. Attendance policies are also recommended to improve the

management and the monitoring of learner absenteeism. This national policy underwrites national norms and standards for learners in public schools. Regulations, administrative procedures and policies on provincial level should be consistent with the Policy on Learner Attendance. The policy, in line with the SASA, further stipulates that it is the responsibility of the parent/guardian to ensure the daily attendance of school of the learner. Also, the policy attends to concerns relating to daily attendance of learners enrolled in schools. The success of the policy, however, depends largely on how it is implemented and managed at public school level. Despite these measures, learner absenteeism remains a challenge.

Schools in South Africa are diverse in terms of their geographical spread, language, ethnic group/s, religion/s, socio-economic status and other determinants. Schools situated in semi-urban areas are therefore faced with their own set of complexities, and the causation and effects of learner absenteeism. The South African social environment is also typified by poverty and discrimination (Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011:95).

1.3   Rationale

My interest in the study was embedded in my personal experience as an educator at a secondary school. The occurrence of learner absenteeism drew my attention as I am responsible for the completion of the standard class register, on a daily basis. Some learners repeatedly absent themselves from school for reasons being either valid or invalid.

So "…*to improve daily attendance, schools must have accurate and systematic ways of recording it*" (Hallam & Roaf, 1995:37). The daily management of attendance is very important as emphasised by Hallam & Roaf. In order to improve attendance, management needs to be able to identify and understand the factors that contribute to absenteeism in their specific community. Only then can measures be developed to curb the recurring incidence of absenteeism. It was imperative to assess these factors, and determine how they related to certain challenges as experienced by management of the school.

This research is grounded in the claim that although a national policy on Learner Absenteeism is in place, current systems for monitoring absenteeism at public school level are not effective enough to curb absenteeism successfully. This claim must be understood in terms of the nature of the school situated in a semi-urban area. It is important to take the social-economic status of the community into consideration, as well as the fact that many learners attend school far from their homes. As a result issues relating to transport, and financial constraints further complicate school attendance. The problem is that many of these hindrances are only known through anecdotal data or newspaper reports. Limited research, aimed at understanding how schools manage these problems, has been done.

In this study it will be argued that the management of learner absenteeism is not merely a process of ticking off learners who are at school, but is embedded in a much deeper concern which is informed by educative and educational concerns. The educative concerns relate more to the values and norms that schools want to inculcate, such as diligence, self-discipline, good work ethics, cooperation with others, etc. Regular school attendance is also necessary to ensure that the right to education is made possible. Furthermore, there are also educational concerns. Learners need to master certain skills, attain knowledge and develop attitudes as a threshold for entering into the world of work and to be well-rounded citizens.

Absenteeism makes it hard for learners to achieve the desired outcomes when some concepts are missed, in light of these outcomes serving as key building blocks to learning. On a global level irregular school attendance may lead to dropout (USAID, 2015:3). Therefore, because of these reasons, schools have a responsibility to ensure that learners do attend school regularly, and this must be managed effectively. In view of this it is also imperative that a school has a policy in place to help absentees catch up on work lost due to an absence.

The Ministry of Education, New Zealand, argues that principals, who develop and use management systems to support and enhance learner learning, are knowledgeable about effective management practices and systems; and model consistent use of such systems. They are able to prioritise and utilise resources effectively targeting areas in need of improvement. Evidence is used to monitor

progress, plan ahead and to manage change. They also delegate the running of systems to appropriate staff. Established contingency strategies should also be in place in the event of unseen circumstances. Finally, attendance data are analysed to understand school patterns (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2015).

In South Africa the Policy on Learner Attendance similarly provides a rationale for the management and monitoring of learner attendance. It was therefore necessary to conduct research. not merely on the policy and its implementation, but also on the deeper lying educative and educational concerns, as well as the extent to which these informed the management practices of the school principal of the sampled school.

1.4   Definition of absenteeism

A learner is regarded to be *"present"* at school when the learner is either present in class or partaking in an authorised school activity within or outside the school premises when the class register is marked (CASE & JET, 2007:8). A distinction can be drawn between authorised and unauthorised absenteeism, as well as between partial and full absenteeism. Unauthorised absenteeism suggests absence from class/school without permission to be absent, whereas unauthorised absenteeism refers to a learner who has not been given permission to be absent (Ramodike, nd). Partial absence, whether authorised and unauthorised, refers to a learner not being present for part of the school day. The Policy on Learner Attendance stipulates that if learners are not present during registration period they will be recorded as absent. The class register is the official record of learner attendance and absence. In the event of a class register being marked twice a day, and a learner is only present for a part of the day, it will result in the learner being documented as present for that specific day (CASE & JET, 2007).

In order to monitor attendance during the school day the period register is regarded as an effective instrument. In the case of the school being closed temporarily by the provincial head of department, the reason for the closure must be written in capital letters in the class register on that day. Learners cannot be marked *"present"* even though they are absent for a valid reason. In this regard absenteeism can be

authorised or unauthorised. An example of a valid reason for absence includes the death of a *"family member"*. In order to limit abuse of this provision, the register class educator must assess the merits of the individual case. As stated by the policy any absence that is not valid is by definition unauthorised. Invalid reasons for absence are therefore regarded as unauthorised and include family holidays undertaken during the school term and not official school holidays and staying away before/after exams as well as on no-examination days (Education Department, 2010).

Reasons for absence are clearly stated. The school's policy may indicate punitive actions to be taken against learners who are not prompt in attending school without a legitimate reason. According to the policy the class register must be marked at the start of the morning session. In order to attain data about learner absentee rates only information from the class register is utilised. The policy stipulates that schools must have programmes in place to support a learner who has been absent, either to catch up on time lost, or to complete assessments. Another stipulation assigns the register class educator and principal with specific follow-up duties with regard to repetitive absences. If circumstances necessitate further action, the school should engage with social agencies (Education Department, 2010).

Emphasis is placed on the fact that absenteeism may manifest in excusable or inexcusable format. The literature accentuates the difference amid authorised and unauthorised absence in that authorised absenteeism implies absenteeism as authorised by either the school or the parents/guardians. Conversely, unauthorised absenteeism implies non-attendance of school due to reasons which are unknown to the school or parents/guardians, or both, or due to learner initiated misconduct such as the skipping of specific classes or playing hooky. In some instances the parents/guardians are aware of their child's absence but feign not to be when confronted by the school (CASE & JET, 2007:8). Absenteeism according to Reid (2005:74) is a significant undercurrent that culminates in eventual abandonment of school. Flisher *et al.* (2010:249) argue that a major impediment to addressing the problems of absenteeism is the lack of research on this topic in South African schools. Wadesango & Machingambi (2011:96) confirm that the problem of absenteeism is quite widespread in the South African education system.

Absenteeism as such is not only an aspect which impacts on education, in addition it is a social and political setback which poses huge social expenses (Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011:96). Surprisingly, most studies have found a converse connection between absenteeism as such, and a learner's degree of success in a specific module. The relation proposes that attendance influences learning to a large extend. The outcome is a difference of about a full *"letter grade"* between regular attendees and periodic absentees.

Teasley (2004) makes reference to the fact that learners are supposed to keep quiet in class and only respond when they are addressed, which might inhibit their enthusiasm about learning. Also, learners have to sit still for lengthy times and pay attention to boring lessons. In order to increase attendance, attention should be paid to the development of new techniques that will involve learners in the process of learning.

In order to determine the frequency of learner absenteeism the customary method is utilised. It comprises quantifying days or intervals of time when a learner is not attending school (Kearney, 2008:461). Extra-curricular activities, participation in sport, improved communication between parents/guardians and the school, as well as systems of merits and demerits are identified as effective initiatives to curb absenteeism. Another example of an initiative to curb absenteeism is to set up a nutrition programme at school (CASE & JET, 2007:9). It is vital that educators should be well-informed about the assessment and methods of mediation of unexcused absences from school in order to inhibit future occurrence (Kearney, 2008:465).

The Report on Learner Absenteeism (2007) in South Africa revealed that most of the schools which formed part of the study kept daily attendance registers. Attendance and absenteeism is recorded by class and grade and the data is categorised according to gender. Various schools keep a summary register and quarterly reports. These are submitted to the district offices of the Provincial Education Department (PED). Only a few schools keep period registers. From the report it was evident that district offices' roles in monitoring learner attendance and

absenteeism is essential. The district office will only intercede once problems manifest at schools (CASE & JET, 2007:10). The problem is that non-attendance and skipping of class are habit forming and an impending decline in rates is questionable without proper intervention. A history of absenteeism sets off in the primary school. Absentees and learners who play hooky become younger; interestingly a higher percentage of girls than boys are found to be absentees (Malcolm *et al.*, 2003).

1.5   Classifying learner absenteeism

Figure 1.1 graphically illustrates the types of absenteeism that form the basis of this research.

Figure 1.1:   Distinction between authorised and unauthorised absenteeism.
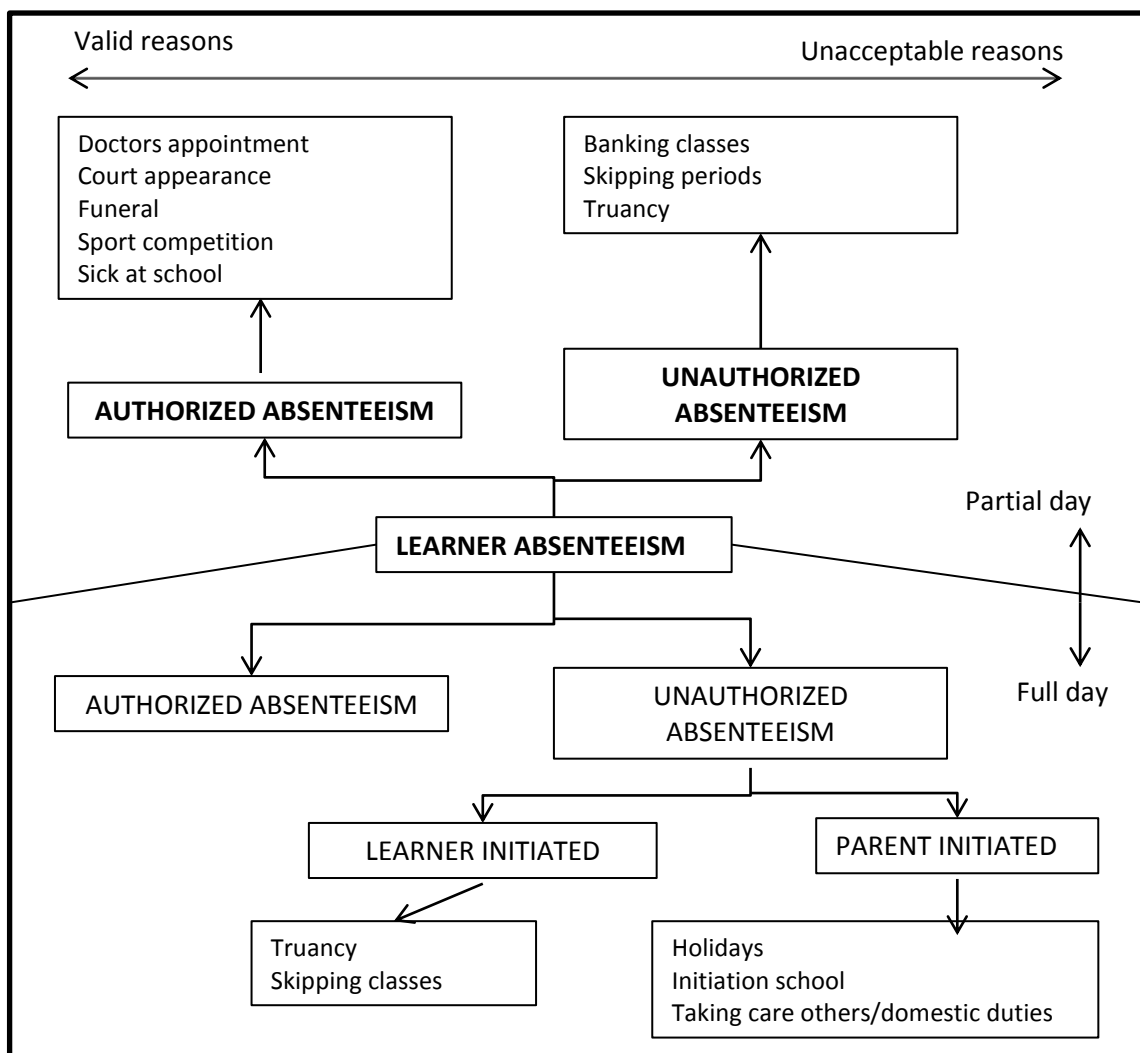
Figure 1.1 draws a distinction between partial absence, where learners are absent for only a part of the day, and full day absence. It further distinguishes between authorised and unauthorised absence. In the further development of the study it will be argued that the different forms of absenteeism cannot be dealt with in the same manner, but calls for action and sanctions that fit the type of absence.

1.5.1 Clarification of concepts concerning absenteeism

For the purpose of the study, absence is regarded as the occurrence where a learner is not present at an event or organised activity that he/she has to participate in, whether the event is school related, and irrespective of the length of the absence. The learner may be absent with or without consent.

Taking into consideration that absenteeism could take on various forms, it is important at the outset to differentiate between authorised and unauthorised absenteeism. A further distinction is drawn between absenteeism initiated by the learner as opposed to by the parent. Consequently, these forms of absenteeism can occur for a full or partial day.

Based on the literature a learner is regarded to be *"present"* at school when the learner is either present in class or partaking in a school activity such as authorised educational, cultural, recreational or social activities within or outside the school premises when the class register is marked (CASE & JET, 2007:8). Absenteeism, which is the focal point of this study, is not the same as truancy. However, truancy, fear of going to school, distance, bullying or victimisation are undercurrents which may also impact on daily attendance. Kearney (2008:452) confirms that absenteeism implies valid or unacceptable absences from school.

Educators and psychologists have recommended different terms to describe this phenomenon within their respective disciplines (Kearney *et al.*, 2001:3). In view of this a child may be guilty of school refusal behaviour/absenteeism in one of the following four circumstances:

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a) complete absence from school,

b) absence for part of the school day,

c) only present at school after severe emotional resistance in an attempt to avoid school and;

d) attend school coupled with trepidation and subsequent requests to be absent in future (Kearney et al., 2001:3).

Kearney (2008:276; 2008:564) acknowledges the fact that different researchers and professionals utilise different principles, definitions, approaches, terminology and focus on different aspects in addressing the issue of absenteeism and its accompanying risk indicators. The literature obviates that this complicates any attempts to reduce and prevent absenteeism.

Although dropping out of school does not form part of the study, it is heralded in the literature that this occurrence should be addressed at an early stage, as these learners tend to be absent from school more frequently than their fellow classmates, thus impacting on the daily absenteeism rates (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002:308).

According to Kearney (2008:451) absenteeism from school is a severe concern, not only for educators but also for mental health professionals. Absence from school could be a result of psychiatric disorders which may lead to extended absences. The issue of learners' absence is a complex challenge since absentees do not represent a consistent group (Malcolm et al., 2003:12). Furthermore, on the word of Kearney (2008:453) absenteeism is not linked to gender.

From an international perspective, Reid (2005:59) identified additional types of school absenteeism including absence from specific lessons, post-registration absence, parentally pardoned absence, school rebuff and school phobia which complicates the understanding of absenteeism. Roderick et al., (1997:4) found that secondary schools normally detect learners with attendance problems only when such absence reaches approximately nine consecutive days in an individual term. The authors suggest that schools therefore apply a broader definition of absenteeism which would include learners guilty of inconsistent attendance and those who

deliberately omit to attend certain classes. The aim of this chapter is *inter alia* to differentiate between the different types of authorised and unauthorised absenteeism.

Against the literature background it became apparent that educators are challenged when trying to categorise reasons for learners' absence (Reid, 2005:60). It was observed that problematic attendance starts early in secondary school only to worsen as the year progresses. Interestingly, absentees are ever so often discovered in and around the school premises.

1.5.2 Variation between authorised, unauthorised, partial and full absenteeism

For the purpose of the study a distinction can be made between authorised and unauthorised absenteeism as well as partial and full absenteeism. Unauthorised absenteeism suggests absence from class without a good reason provided by the parent/guardian, while partial absenteeism refers to absence for a part of the day only (Ramodike, nd).

In light of this distinction authors identified a further aspect of absenteeism by differentiating between failing to attend a full school day and merely missing some classes (Virginia Department of Education, 2005:3). The importance of including this distinction is supported by the following: *"Truancy (absenteeism) is not the problem – it's an indicator of other problems. When learners aren't in schools, we need to understand why they stay away before we can effect solutions"* (Virginia Department of Education, 2005:4).

In terms of policy, authorised absence implies absence from school during school hours with permission from an educator/authorised representative of the school. This form of absence necessitates the school to provide approval in advance for the learner's absence, or accepting a realistic explanation for the absence (Thambirajah *et al.*, 2008:12) which is also encapsulated in Section 4 of the SASA. Authorised absenteeism relates to valid reasons for absence and the following activities may be regarded as authorised absenteeism – learners attending doctor's appointments, court appearances, funerals, and participation in sport. Learners who fall sick during school hours are also validly excused from attending school.

Unauthorised absenteeism sometimes overlaps learner initiated absenteeism in that unacceptable reasons for absence include skipping classes or specific periods, along with truancy. Stoll (1990) defines truancy as *"absence from school for no legitimate reason"* thus resulting in unauthorised absence. On the other hand parents initiate absence when they engage in activities where they plan holidays during school terms or by sending children to attend initiation ceremonies. Furthermore, they promote unauthorised absenteeism whereby they expect of their children to perform household duties such as taking care of other siblings or relatives or by requiring learners to supplement the family income by working or performing domestic duties such as herding cattle. Learners cannot be penalised for decisions made by their parents regarding their duties.

In view of the previous remarks, authorised and unauthorised absenteeism may occur for a full day or part of the day, for reasons being valid or unacceptable. Absenteeism may be learner initiated or parent initiated and still be regarded as unauthorised. It is important to note that partial suggests absence for a part of the school day whilst full refers to absence for the entire school day.

1.6   Theoretical lens utilised

There are numerous theoretical lenses through which learner absenteeism can be studied. One such theory is that of Bronfenbrenner (1994) who argued…

"…that in order to understand human development, one must consider the entire ecological system in which growth occurs. This system is composed of five socially organized subsystems that help support and guide human growth. They range from the microsystem, which refers to the relationship between a developing person and the immediate environment, such as school and family, to the macrosystem, which refers to institutional patterns of culture, such as the economy, customs, and bodies of knowledge."

Applying this theory to the research implies that absenteeism should be understood from the perspective of the ecological system. Although this could be very valuable, I have decided to use another sociological theory.

The Broken Windows Theory of James Q. Wilson (1982) is a criminology theory which found wider application in other disciplines, like education (Plank, *et al.*, 2009). Wilson argues that if a window in a building is broken and it is not fixed, it sends out the message that those who live in the building do not care. The result is that more windows are broken by unscrupulous characters. In the end, the whole building gets vandalised. If applied to education it implies that if one learner is absent from school with no valid reason and it results in no action being taken, other learners will interpret it that the school does not care if they are absent, and they will follow suit. In the end learner absenteeism might become unmanageable.

With regards to the Broken Window Theory, Great Schools Staff emphasises the importance of partnerships between the school, parents/guardians and the community. They refer to the National Center for Learner Engagement which states that attendance rates are extraordinary when all these stakeholders involved cooperate to retain learners in school. They *inter alia* list the following in order to increase attendance:

1. Maintain a school atmosphere which is hospitable to learners;
2. Make personal contact with parents/guardians of learners who absent themselves to show parents/guardians that the school is really interested in every learner;
3. Engage with absentees after occurrences of absence and convey the message that when they fail to attend, educators are aware of their absence (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2015).

Wilson & Kelling (1982) claim that in order to prevent a broken window situation rules should be defined and enforced. Attitudes should change – learners who have a more favourable opinion of school will attend school. If absenteeism is not addressed learners who are *"law-abiding"* may become absentees too. *"Untended"* absenteeism leads to the breakdown of discipline and control. Unpunished absenteeism conveys an uncaring attitude. Schools should reclaim authority. Detecting absentees are important and the local community should be involved in this campaign.

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The authors further assert that intervention is fundamental. According to this theory, absenteeism could be prevented by sustaining and monitoring learner absenteeism. Like broken windows should be repaired within a day or a week, absenteeism should be followed up to prevent future incidence. Society's disregard towards any form of *"broken window"*, in this regard unauthorised absenteeism, is indicative of its lack of concern. The broken windows theory is a way of explaining to people and their interactions with space (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Likewise, if the school does not respond to learner absenteeism within a day or two it has the same effect as the broken window theory. Similarly, if the learners are under the impression that the school doesn't care, and that there are no consequence for absence, they may develop chronic absenteeism because nobody cares. A pattern of future absenteeism may set in. These absences may escalate into more serious transgressions and in the worse cases it may lead to drop-out. The challenge is that authorised and valid unauthorised absence cannot be dealt with in the same way as invalid and unauthorised absenteeism.

A zero tolerance approach towards absenteeism, as advocated by Taqi-Eddin & Macallair (1999), is not viable, as some forms of absenteeism are valid and not deserving of the same types of sanctions as invalid absenteeism, particularly from a moral point of view. This might be true especially if it is taken into account that learner absences are often the result of parentally condoned absence for reasons such as taken care of a younger sibling, or in cases of child headed households. It is therefore imperative that the focus should be on the manner in which a school manages learner absenteeism, be it authorised or unauthorised.

1.7   Research questions

1.7.1 Main research question:

How do the school principal and the SMT manage learner absenteeism in a secondary school?

1.7.2 Sub questions:

a) What is the incidence of learner absenteeism at school, specifically in terms of possible trends? (E.g. absenteeism on a specific day)

b) What are the challenges absenteeism pose with regard to managing of the school, both at classroom level and in general?

c) What are the consequences of repetitive absence?

d) What approaches are followed to curb absenteeism?

e) What lessons have been learned from managing learner absenteeism?

1.8   Research paradigm

Silverman in Vivar *et al.* (2007), states that the most significant consideration in opting for a research paradigm transpires from the purpose of the study. Consequently the choice of a research paradigm is reliant on the nature of the phenomenon to be studied.

This study followed an interpretive stance of a *"softer, more subjective, spiritual or even transcendental kind"*, that may lead to a more subjective, partaking role. According to Cohen in Maree (2010:32) an interpretive paradigm is an analysis of social science, therefore it is a lens through which you observe the practice of research. The intent of the study was to make sense of the meanings of others (principal and SMT) about learner absenteeism. At first a theory or pattern of meaning was generated, instead of starting off with a proposed theory (Creswell, 2009:8).

In this study I attempted to portray the management challenges as posed by absenteeism, and the manner in which a school principal and his SMT dealt with it. These experiences should be seen through the eyes of the principal and the SMT, as portrayed in their own words. An exploratory approach was employed as I was interested in unfolding, recording and comprehending these perceptions.

1.9   Research design and methodology

The strategy of a case study design was selected considering that it assisted in the process of attaining knowledge regarding the social issue being studied (Maree, 2010:293). According to Stake in Creswell (2009:13), case studies investigate a programme, event, activity or process, of one or more individuals in depth. Stake claims that time and activity constraint these cases. The participants in the study were selected because of their defining features; they possessed data that was required for the investigation and provided descriptions of their perceptions. Purposive sampling was employed in order to obtain the richest resource of information to answer the research questions.

The case study design is especially effective for learning about data which have previously been interpreted inadequately or about situations which is mostly unknown. Wimmer & Dominick in Maree (2010:294) confirm that the case study design presents the researcher with a large quantity of information and detail about the proposed research topic. As a researcher I was exposed to a wide variety of raw data.

1.9.1   Data collection plan

Figure 1.2   Data collection Figure

On-going observation – insider perspective as participant observer

Document analysis

Interviews
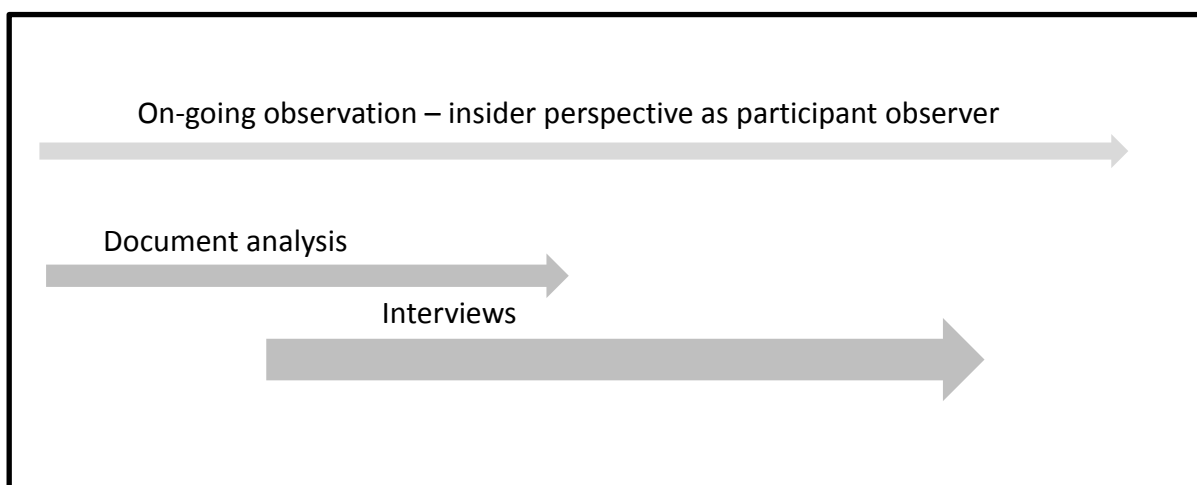
A detailed study of the management of learner absenteeism in all its forms at the secondary school in the district of Ekurhuleni (D4) was conducted. The participants were carefully selected based on their experience as educators and availability for interviews after school hours. Semi-structured interviews were employed with the intention to generate data on the detailed views and opinions of participants regarding the implementation of the Policy on Learner Attendance (GDE, 2002). Open-ended questions, aimed at drawing viewpoints and opinions from participants, were used (Creswell, 2009:181).

An interview schedule was developed to guide the researcher, in order for participants to share their experiences, regarding the challenges and consequences of absenteeism, during interviews. Consistent with Leedy & Nimrod in Maree (2010:297), face-to-face interviews had the benefit of gaining the cooperation of participants as relationships could be founded. In turn this facilitated the production of high response rates. As such these relationships enabled the researcher to gain more information and data (Maree, 2010:297). Face-to-face interviews allowed me to have control over the line of questioning (Creswell, 2009:179).

As a researcher I exercised interview protocol for the recording of interviews, and confirming information, in writing, during the interviews. Protocol involved making handwritten or typed notes although the interviews were audiotaped. Provision was made to transcribe the tapes. Gathered information represented primary information gathered directly from the participants under study, or secondary material or indirect interpretations of the participants written by others, but were not the case in this study. It was imperative to take note of this difference in material (Creswell, 2009:183).

1.9.2 Data analysis and interpretation

According to Creswell (2009:183) data analysis is a process of preparing data for analysis, performing different analyses, signifying the data and clarifying the importance of the data. Maree (2010:298) is of the opinion that the first step in analysing qualitative data involves the absorption of the researcher within the data. The purpose of the research was to become acquainted with the material.

All through the course I interpreted collected data, notes, interviews and transcripts in order to form clearer perceptions of the information. I encrypted the data and performed content analysis by focusing on specific words to identify themes as acknowledged by Terre Blanche & Kelly in Maree (2010:298).

Creswell (2009:184) avers that the process of interpretation involves continual contemplation over the data, asking methodological questions and making memos during the course of the study. This also involves the gathering of flexible data that is founded in general questioning. An analysis was formed based on the information provided by the participants as suggested by Creswell (2009:184).

1.10   Delimitations of the study

The delimitations are typical of a case study. The study was conducted in a bounded system which is characterised in terms of context, socio-economic status, learner characteristics, etc. As a consequence, no claims could be made in terms of generalisation.

This study was limited in that it focussed on one secondary school situated in a semi-urban area, and therefore it cannot be generalised to all secondary schools, as each school and its community differs in context and have its own set of variables. This study provides a picture of a particular environment that may reveal aspects that could also apply to other contexts, and therefore has transferability as a quality. Another constraint was the complexity of the research problem. Given that individuals process ideas differently I had to deal with ambiguous variables too.

1.11   Layout of the research

This study consists of five (5) chapters as outlined below:

Chapter 1

This chapter contextualises the study and provides a broad overview of the central research question, aims and objectives. The impact of the Policy on Learner Attendance was highlighted, as well as how management applied this policy. The success of the policy depended largely on how the policy is implemented and managed at public school level. Despite existing measures, learner absenteeism remained a problem. Management is challenged in a way that is quite different to challenges experienced by secondary schools from other backgrounds.

Chapter 2

The reviewed literature unfolds in Chapter 2. Relevant literature was evaluated to provide a theoretical framework for the study. It became evident that not much is known about learner absenteeism as classified in its different forms. The relevant causes, reasons, effects, and factors influencing absenteeism were emphasised against the backdrop of basic statutory provisions relating to school attendance.

Chapter 3

The research design and methodology of the qualitative research study was set out in this chapter. Specific attention was paid to the type of case study used, the selection of participants, the data gathering techniques that were applied, and the proposed data analysis process. The chapter concluded with a clarification of the ethical issues considered, and how trustworthiness and credibility were assured throughout the study.

Chapter 4

This chapter aimed at the explanation of the manner in which a typical secondary school managed learner absenteeism. The reason for this specific examination emanated from the fact that many schools experienced problematic issues relating to learner absenteeism. This chapter started off with a description of the case study school and averred that the management of absenteeism was distinctive in relation to many secondary schools in South Africa. This school's policy framework regarding learner absenteeism was examined by utilising official documents collected from the case study school. These were then juxtaposed to the very descriptive detail obtained from management in terms of how they managed the occurrence of absenteeism. Collectively, these sets of information were termed as the official policy of the school.

Chapter 5

This concluding chapter contained the aim of the study, and endeavoured to answer the research questions based on the gathered data. The findings were presented and each research question directly discussed. The main research question guided the investigation. A summary of the conclusions, recommendations and limitations of the study were formulated. In conclusion suggestions for future research were also singled out.

CHAPTER 2

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND ABSENTEEISM

2.1   Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on the discussion of the literature pertinent to learner absenteeism and the management thereof. The rationale is to provide a conceptual orientation. Learner absenteeism is a highly complex issue as it encompasses various types of absenteeism caused by numerous factors, thus making the management thereof not straightforward or easy to address.

The management of absenteeism is complicated due to the fact that only a relatively small percentage of parents/guardians endeavour to fulfil a fundamental role in their children's education by sending them to school on a daily basis, to ensure that they become academically successful.   In a developing country context like South Africa, parents are often the cause of learner absenteeism as they refrain from sending their children to school, or they are neglecting to send them, or are assigning other domestic duties to learners that prevent them from attending school.   Many parents/guardians commute to work and leave home early. These learners are left with the responsibility of getting themselves to school on time (CASE & JET, 2007).

From the literature review it is also evident that not much is known about learner absenteeism in South African schools, the degree of absenteeism or the measures exercised to reduce absenteeism (CASE & JET, 2007:19). Roderick *et al.*, (1997:3) calls attention to the lack of an approved standard, concerning which level of absenteeism might present a major threat to learning.

In this chapter I will commence with discussion of the legal and policy framework regulating learner attendance at school. I will highlight the constitutional protection of a child's right to education and how it is protected and promoted by the SASA. I will also assess what has been reported in the literature as causes of learner absenteeism, and discuss the difference between authorised and unauthorised absenteeism. It is important to differentiate between valid and invalid reasons for absenteeism. This will enable the discussion of valid, but unauthorised absenteeism as a phenomenon which requires specific attention.

This chapter will also evaluate the impact of learner absenteeism on learners, the school and the broader community and how learner absenteeism could be managed in different contexts. In the end, the aim is to provide a comprehensive conceptual framework, enabling me to interpret the data gathered during the interviews.

Considering the mentioned objectives, this chapter illustrates that early intervention is essential, once signs of problem attendance transpire, as moderate truants and sometimes learners with good attendance also become disengaged as the school year progresses. Consequently, attendance problems corrupt learners who would normally obey school rules (Roderick, *et al.*, 1997:5). In this regard I will indicate how unattended learner absenteeism can easily result in the enactment of the Broken Window theory.

The golden thread running through this study is the fact that the issue of absenteeism has not received the requisite consideration from researchers with the educational background it deserves (Corville-Smith, 1995 in Epstein & Sheldon, 2002:308). Regrettably, there has been a tendency to place emphasis on dropout, instead of the causes of daily absence over the years (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002: 308).

2.2.   Basic statutory provisions relating to school attendance in South Africa

2.2.1   South African School Act (SASA)

Section 3 of the SASA, regulates compulsory school attendance and the responsibility of parents in this regard. Section 1 of said act defines a parent as a parent or guardian of a learner. This section also defines a parent as the person who is legally entitled to custody of a learner. A learner is furthermore described as *"any person receiving education or obliged to receive education"* in terms of this act.

From these sections it is evident that the act places a duty on a parent/guardian to ensure that a learner attends school. The duty on the parent/guardian is of uninterrupted nature in ensuring that a learner takes part in the complete, germane

and compulsory educational programme of the school unless validated. On the other hand no direct duty is placed on the learner to attend school or to participate in school activities. The learner, unlike the parent/guardian, is not guilty of an offence in the event of not attending school (Visser, 2007:638-639).

Distressingly enough learners are subject to punitive measures when absent from school, due to inability of parents/guardians to adhere to basic legislative provisions governing school attendance.

The head of a provincial education department has a discretion in terms of the SASA to take steps when learners are not enrolled at a school or are absent. This is an important legal duty against the background of Section 28 (2) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act No. 108 of 1996 ("the Constitution") which reiterates that the best interest of the child is always of paramount importance. This means that the head of the department is obliged to take steps to rectify non enrolment or absence. Parents/guardians who fail to comply with the provisions envisaged in SASA may be criminally charged (Visser, 2007:639).

It is important to note that emphasis is placed in legislation on the parent/guardian who acts *"without just cause and in an intentional or negligent manner"*. Visser (2007:640-641) avers that proper implementation of the legislation is crucial. He acknowledges the fact that there are numerous learners who still do not attend school as they should. Unfortunately, as will be indicated, provincial structures and the management thereof, are not in place to guarantee greater levels of school attendance. He concludes that it is imperative to focus on this aspect instead of adopting new legislature.

In the final instance the author reckons that school attendance alone is not sufficient without accompanying methods to ensure that a school functions properly. (Visser, 2007:641).

2.2.2   Additional regulatory framework

In addition to the above legislation, the Policy on Learner Attendance came into effect on 1 January 2011. This policy *inter alia* addresses matters relating to daily attendance of learners enrolled in schools to secure their basic right to education as enshrined in the Constitution.   It clearly underscores the responsibility of parents/guardians to ensure that learners attend school daily.

In addition to this policy, the SASA, stipulates a list of actions to be taken if a learner of compulsory school attendance age doesn't attend school without explanation. Section 5 authorises the provincial head of department to then investigate the circumstances of absence and to take appropriate measure to remedy the situation. If such a remedy is unsuccessful the provincial head of department may issue a written notice to the parent to comply with Section 1 of the said act which lays down the following principle:

> "Subject to this Act and any applicable provincial law, every parent must cause every learner for whom he or she is responsible to attend a school from the first school day of the year in which such learner reaches the age of seven years until the last school day of the year in which such learner reaches the age of fifteen years or the ninth grade, whichever occurs first."

2.2.3 Procedure in respect of authorised approval

An authorised approval from the school must be obtained in advance according to Section 4.4(1), of Circular 13 of 2002 (Gauteng Education Department, 2002). The following procedure must be adhered to when a learner intends to leave the school property for any reason.   Such a learner must arrange for a letter from the parent/guardian indicating the following:

- reason for leaving the school;
- enclosed proof (doctor's note, etc), and/or phone numbers to confirm the appointment;
- time of leaving and arrival back at school; and
- the letter displaying the signature of the parent (GDE, 2002).

In terms of the Policy on Learner Attendance, learners who are not present during registration period will be denoted as absent. Attendance is monitored during the school day by the period register which is regarded as an effective instrument. Consequently the class register is the official record of learner attendance and absence. In the event of a class register being marked twice a day, and a learner is present for only part of a day it will result in the learner being documented as present for that specific day (Education Department, 2010:10).

Unauthorised absence is a disciplinary offence. As envisaged above, many learners absent themselves from school and are therefore, in effect, engaging in unauthorised activities resulting in unauthorised absenteeism. When it comes to the school being closed temporarily by the provincial head of department the reason for closure must be written in capital letters in the class register.

Where a learner is absent with permission, from an authorised person within the school, this will result in valid authorised absence. Another example of authorised absence would be when the learner was unwell or was prevented from attending school due to an inevitable cause.

Absenteeism ensued on a day set aside for religious observance by the religious group to which the learner's family belongs, is also perceived as authorised. There is even a notion in Bangladesh to close the school during Eid to enable Muslim learners to attend (*Chowdhury, et al.*, 2007:14). Justification for late coming because the school is not within walking distance from the learner's home, and no prior arrangements were made for transport to school, will constitute authorised absenteeism (Hallam & Roaf, 1995:68).

2.2.4 Excusable and inexcusable absenteeism

The literature touches on another aspect of absenteeism. Apart from the terms authorised and unauthorised absenteeism, school *nonattendance* may further be described in terms of excusable or inexcusable absenteeism.

When absent from school, it may either be defined as excused or unexcused absence. Illness, medical visits or involvement in sport activities may be classified as excused absence. Should a learner be absent from school without the consent or

knowledge of a parent, guardian or the school, this behaviour will be classified as unexcused absence (Gage, *et al.*, 2013:117-118). These affirmations are in line with what has been stated in Figure 1.1.

The individual school's policy allows for absence for religious or cultural observances. Paragraph 13(d) of the national policy stipulates that school closures for these observances may be approved by the SGB for a maximum period of two school days per year.

Another example of an excused absence is maternity leave. The number of days to which a mother is entitled to be absent from school is determined by the mother and the child's health. The issue of paternity leave as a valid reason for absence depends on the respective school's policy.

It goes without saying that any absence that is not valid amounts to unauthorised absence in terms of the Policy on Learner Attendance. If a learner goes on a family holiday during the school term or stays at home before and after exams and on no-examination days, these examples will result in unauthorised absence, or differently defined as an unexcused absence. In instances like this, schools are necessitated to act in accordance with the provisions contemplated in the Code of Conduct and General Policy ("the Code of Conduct") (2015) relating to learner absenteeism. These measures would ensure that these occurrences are not condoned. From a moral perspective punishment seems unfair due to the fact that the learner is punished for conduct initiated by the parent/guardian or lack of interest by the parent/guardian.

2.2.5 Outline adopted for purposes of this study

Taking into consideration the above differentiation, the Constitution as supreme law of South Africa, guarantees the right to basic education in Section 29. The role of parents/guardians in ensuring that this human right of learners is achieved is of paramount importance. Every learner and parent/guardian therefore has the obligation to enforce this constitutional right by attending school. Should learners fail to attend school, whether it be for a full day, part of a day or only a single class, it would be contrary to the purpose and intent of the fundamental right to education as well as negation of the obligation placed on parents/guardians and learners. The

sanction to be imposed in instances where this duty is not fulfilled must be established in terms of the causality and duration of the negligence in fulfilling this duty.

The literature states that *"school nonattendance"* in fact implies *"school absenteeism"*. This study adopts the description of absenteeism as a situation where a learner is not at school for the entire day as stated by Thambirajah *et al.* (2008:12) or for a part of the school day. According to the same author it is imperative to utilise an umbrella term to include all pupils who fail to attend school.

It is more difficult to put a figure on absenteeism in secondary school learners (which also forms the basis of this study) because many leave school for good (Kearney, 2008:454). Alas, what learners learn about acceptable social behaviour from these environments, debilitate them to the same degree as a lack of opportunity to obtain a secondary education (Roderick *et al.*, 1997:7). Tyerman (1968) in Zhang (2003:10) retains truancy/absence as "*a child who is absent from school purely on his or her own initiative and without parents' permission*". Although it is a restricted definition with limitations regarding validity and reliability according to Zhang (2003:10), it still impacts on the understanding of absenteeism.

Although policy allows register class educators to authorise absence, this might lead to a discrepancy in the manner in which they authorise absence. Furthermore, the reliability of the truancy figures which schools report on yearly *per se*, cast doubt relating to reliability according to (Zhang, 2003:10).

2.3   Causes of absence

The causes of absence have been widely researched and the following categories distinguish between the different causes. First of all some causes are broadly associated with the social class and society to which a learner belong, secondly, those who are closely linked to culture and and/or cultural practices (e.g. initiation) and thirdly, factors relating to parents/guardians and the home environment (e.g. children required to fulfil certain duties to assist the family). In the fourth instance personal and psychological reasons may be regarded as reasons for absence.

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Austin and Totara (2011:193) are of the opinion that even though school absenteeism may not be a new occurrence, it may be escalating. Kearney (2008) in Austin and Totara (2011:193) lists the following causes of school absenteeism: *"medical conditions, risk propensity (including risk associated with drugs and drinking): psychological problems, environmental risk factors such as homelessness, poverty, teen pregnancy, school violence, school climate, parental involvement and family and community factors such as parental divorce and unsafe neighbourhoods."*

Having regard to the literature, it is a complicated issue for schools to develop their own learner attendance policies which are to be in line and consistent with the Policy on Learner Attendance. In terms of this policy the following valid reasons are also noted: absence for religious or cultural observances, doctor's appointments, court appearances, funerals, sport activities and when learners fall ill during school hours.

Schools are guarded against abuse of the provision relating to death of a *"family member"* as a valid reason for absence. Mothers may absent themselves from school for the purpose of giving birth as this will be regarded as authorised absenteeism. The other reasons for valid absence have been discussed in detail above.

2.3.1 Four categories relating to causes of absence

a) Reasons relating to societal and social class

Baker, *et al.* 2001; Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998; Jenkins, 1995 in (Virginia Department of Education, 2005:8) affirm that variables relating to family structures, including families with minimal disposable income and/or parents/guardians who never completed high school, lay the foundation for an increase in absence/truancy as learners get older. Conversely these authors claim that male learners are more prone to be more absent than their female counterparts.

b)   Causes pertaining to culture or cultural practices

Within the South African context the most common example would relate to learners attending initiation ceremonies during which their adulthood is celebrated, but not much has been documented. It is therefore difficult to ascertain what the impact of initiation is on school attendance, since limited research has only been done in Malawi and Kenya. During 2013 a study was conducted in order to summarise the consequences of initiation ceremonies. The researcher concluded that training received during initiation ceremonies are considered to be an important ingredient in respect of transgression to adulthood. He found that initiation therefore impacts negatively on school attendance as attending school isn't regarded as important as attending initiation ceremonies. Additionally, these ceremonies might lead to drop out and absenteeism. Learners might become infected due to sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS once they have completed initiation and become more aware of the opposite sex during early experimentation (Malawoni, 2013:25).

By the same token maintaining family links influences Bengali learners' school attendance. Arranged marriages and weddings still form an integral part of the Bengali culture which necessitates learners to attend these ceremonies and family holidays to understand the essence of the Bengali culture. An additional influence on attendance in Bangladesh is climate change – out of their own accord parents arrange these holidays during winter times as opposed to summer as a result of the fact that learners are more prone to fall ill during stringent weather conditions in summer. These familial holidays are not necessarily in accordance with school holidays and effectively lead to more absences (Chowdhury*, et al.*, 2007:14,15).

c)   Factors in respect of the home environment and parents/guardians

Although it is a debatable aspect, Corville-Smith, *et al.* 1998 and Jenkins, 1995 in the Virginia Department of Education (2005:8) found that there is a correlation between a learner's attendance record and assistance by parents/guardians in helping with homework and awareness of school matters.

d)   Personal and psychological reasons and other

Daily decisions regarding attendance or skipping school is a personal factor influencing individuals' attendance patterns (King and Bernstein, 2001 in Virginia Department of Education, 2005:8). These learners experience school negatively and therefore their academic performance in class is below standard.

Taking into account that school attachment comprises of the school climate coupled with disciplinary measures which have bearing on the school environment, it influences the manner in which learners perceive their relationship with the school. This attachment impacts on relationships with fellow learners, educators and other role players (Jenkins, 1995 in Virginia Department of Education, 2005:8). Authoritative schools attain high-level attendance, not only because of extreme requirements but also because they provide sufficient encouragement. Permissive disciplinary mandates result in higher dropout rates.   The nature of learner configuration should be taken into account when the SGB considers the development of the policy on learner attendance relating to their specific community (Virginia Department of Education, 2005:8).

2.3.2 Unacceptable reasons for absence

a)   Reasons relating to societal and social class

On a national level, literature highlights that school violence in South African high schools may prompt learners to stay away from school (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013:7). Learners perceive bullying, corporal punishment (which is in contravention of legislation) vandalism, gangsterism, drug abuse and sexual harassment as the main ingredients of school violence (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013:5). To a certain extent, xenophobia may also cause school violence (Bester & du Plessis, 2010:209). Learners who are exposed to these forms of violence at school may refrain from attending school out of fear of falling victim to violence. Although the absence remains unauthorised in principle, it may constitute a form of excusable absence whether supported by parents/guardians or not.

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It is trite that South African girls perceive violent behaviour and abuse emanating therefrom as unavoidable within the school context.   It is asserted that these female learners suffer from sexual abuse in different forms by fellow male learners and educators. This devastating experience may lead to girls either losing interest in school, changing schools or even dropping out of school (National Women's Law Center, 2007).

b)   Causes pertaining to culture or cultural practices

As mentioned, due to the lack of documented research, it is difficult to determine the impact of these practices on school attendance. The yearly spike in the number of cases where boys end up in hospital after attending initiation schools does bear witness that initiation remains an important factor that could have a serious impact on absenteeism. Seokoma indicated that in 2015 the government closed down more than 400 initiation schools in the Eastern Cape that were operating illegally. In 2014 more than 100 boys died as a result of poor initiation practices and many more ended up in hospital (Seokoma, 2015).   In response to the challenges created by initiation schools and the number of boys dying as a result of illegal practices, the government has drafted a policy, formally known as the Draft National Policy on the Customary Practice of Initiation in South Africa which is aimed at dealing with the problem (Mkani-Mpolweni, 2014).

The ultimate success in running these schools, which are still regarded as part of the culture of many communities, seems to be in the differentiation between illegal initiation schools *versus* legal ones. All stakeholders, including traditional leaders, parents/guardians and the Department of Health should endeavour to subject male learners to legal initiation schools only. The Western Cape cultural affairs MEC indicated that all initiation schools should be registered with the relevant departments and penalties should be imposed in instances where illegal schools are operated. This will set clear guidelines for parents/guardians proposing to send their children to initiation programmes (Mkani-Mpolweni, 2014).

c)   Factors in respect of the home environment and parents/guardians

Bergman *et al.* (2011:468) explored extrinsic dysfunctions which emanate outside the school grounds but which impact directly or indirectly on learning, teaching and administration of the school. A set of the following dysfunctions, closely related to the learner's home environment, are likely to lead to absenteeism *"e.g. abject poverty and unstable home environment, including repeated changes in household structure and foster care arrangements; continuous exposure to violence in the home or neighbourhood; physically or sexually abusive parents or other care providers; HIV and AIDS status of care providers or learners; child headed households; continued exposure to alcoholism or chronic drug use at home."* It is important to note that it is difficult to categorise these reasons under separate headings, as some of these reasons may overlap because of its dualistic nature.

The literature also elaborates on the fact that health and welfare are other subcomponents of extrinsic influences which includes malnutrition or lack of access to health care for learners; continued exposure to trauma; child labour; unstable and unsafe living arrangements and nutritional provisions; and long and unsafe travel to school*. "Some learners engage in law breaking that impinges directly or indirectly on the school, such as drug dealing, money lending (in one case a Grade 7 learner was selling drugs and loaning money with interest to educators), theft, robbery, prostitution, etc."* (Bergman *et al.*, 2011:468-469).

Interestingly, Zhang (2003:10) asserts that although poverty as a social phenomenon is difficult to quantify, free school meals is an indicator of child poverty, which in turn influences attendance to a certain degree. Zhang (2003) confirms that absenteeism and child poverty are strongly connected. It is challenging to separate the symptoms from the root causing absenteeism. Absentees are unmistakeably drawn from working-class families. Therefore, if the factor of child poverty is not addressed prematurely it might be substituted by other influences, for example, peer pressure, school work and youth felony.   In consequence, school absenteeism is often connected to rowdy teenagers who shirk school. Areas with the highest levels of child poverty similarly had sub-standard absence rates. Conversely areas mostly unaffected by child poverty sported the best attendance records. The literature

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points out that children in poverty stricken areas are still more inclined to be absent from school since they lack funds and other means to easily attend school (Chang & Romero, 2008:12).

With regard to attendance in secondary school, the literature furthermore establishes the link between child poverty and absence in that attendance is comparatively weaker as these learners are more affected by non-familial factors (Zhang, 2003:14). Sanzila (2011:22) found that school fees, along with the cost of school, stationery and uniforms might deter learners from attending school as this may lead to them being branded as poor. This clearly echoes Kearney's finding that poverty is related to absenteeism from school (2008:458). Frequent absence from school coupled with being born into a family strained with financial burden, consequently affects a learner's economic success as an adult. Being raised within a poor family might therefore detriment a learner more than being raised by a single parent only (Horgan, 2007:1). Hunter & May (2002:32) confirm that poverty is a predictor of dropout from school amongst teenagers from poor households. This occurrence applies to both genders.

According to the authorities in respect of research regarding the cause of absenteeism, Hersov and Berg (1980) in Zhang (2003:11-12) detected the importance of background in further determining the "*prevalence of unjustifiable absence from school*", while emphasizing that "*it is still uncertain to what extent factors within school contribute to the problem*".

d)   Personal and psychological reasons and other

It might be difficult to manage learners who refuse to attend school for either positive or negative reinforcement. Examples of positive reinforcement are evident when children refuse to attend school in an attempt to be noticed by others or to engage in supportive influences from outside school i.e. substance abuse, sleeping late etc. Negative reinforcement is classified as "*school based stimuli*", such as anxiety and depression, which prevent learners from attending school. Endeavours to evade tests and/or exams may also be regarded as an example of negative reinforcement (Kearney *et al.*, 2001:3). Unfortunately it seems as if lateness may result in a learner

being absent for a whole day. Learners would rather be absent instead of being subjected to disciplinary action relating to being late for school (Chowdhury, *et al.*, 2007:15).

Weeks (2012:2) refers to Masita's (2005:205,207) and affirms the concept of a below average ethos for learning which includes vandalism, gangsterism, drug abuse, an undesirable high dropout rate, unsatisfactory academic performance and discouraged learners. He reiterates the notion of Heystek and Lethoko (2001:222) that South Africa is faced with the important challenge of reinstating a philosophy of learning and teaching in South Africa.

Furthermore, Sedibe (2012:28,29) in Weeks (2012:9) portrays inappropriate behaviour such as insufficient interest and dedication towards learning coupled with the occurrence of sexual harassment and adverse pass rates as destructive items in achieving acceptable attendance rates at school.

Additionally, Andrews and Taylor (1998:1) in Rossouw (2003:414) indicate a correlation between discipline and school absenteeism. They state that misbehaving learners tend to perform inadequately and are more inclined to be absent from school.

Socialising with the wrong crowd and antipathy towards structures of authority are also some of the impediments preventing attendance. Difficulty in interacting with people, as well as experiencing inadequate parental encouragement, may have an adverse effect on attendance. Being behind peers, as a result of failing a certain subject encourages nonattendance.

Learners skip school due to poor academic progress specifically in respect of math and reading competency. Absence from school is also influenced by a learner's perception that activities at school are boring and tedious. Personal impediments such as language problems also cause absence from school. It goes without saying that learners skip school when they have been expelled or suspended (Virginia Department of Education, 2005:7).

2.4 Aetiology – philosophical study of causation

Sanzila (2011:20) also effectively captures the categories of absenteeism. He however, distinguishes between the following factors influencing learner absenteeism, which are closely related to the four causes discussed above:

- personal reasons, for example illness and learner disabilities;
- socio-economic reasons for instance, transport and lack of parental involvement;
- socio-cultural reasons which include beliefs and lifestyles;
- socio-political reasons which relate to power, politics and decisions;
- school-based reasons for instance boredom and punishment.

Against this backdrop the causes of absenteeism have been examined. The multitude of causes of learner absenteeism are evident in the influence of friends and peers, relationships with educators or a lack of respect for learners, subject matter and delivery of the national curriculum, family aspects comprising parents' attitudes or familial difficulties, bullying and the classroom setting for instance lack of control or leaners with learning problems. These are identified as the main reasons for truancy and disruptive behaviour (Kinder *et al.*, 1996).

It is therefore essential that these causes be clustered as the aetiology is diverse and the treatment or management is seminary diverse. Malcolm (2003) confirms this finding because, according to parents, bullying, troubles with educators and pressure from peers to stay away from school, are the main causes for truancy.

The phenomenon of learner absenteeism was researched through the theory of Bronfenbrenner as well as the Broken Window theory.

2.4.1 Exogenous and endogenous factors influencing absenteeism

Figure 2.1   Exogenous and endogenous factors

Endogenous: i.e. factors that originates from within individuals and causes them to be truant or absent (e.g. illness, anxiety, fear, etc.)

Exogenous: i.e. factors originating from within the context or environment causing learners to be absent (e.g. poverty, gangsters, drugs, shebeens, etc.)
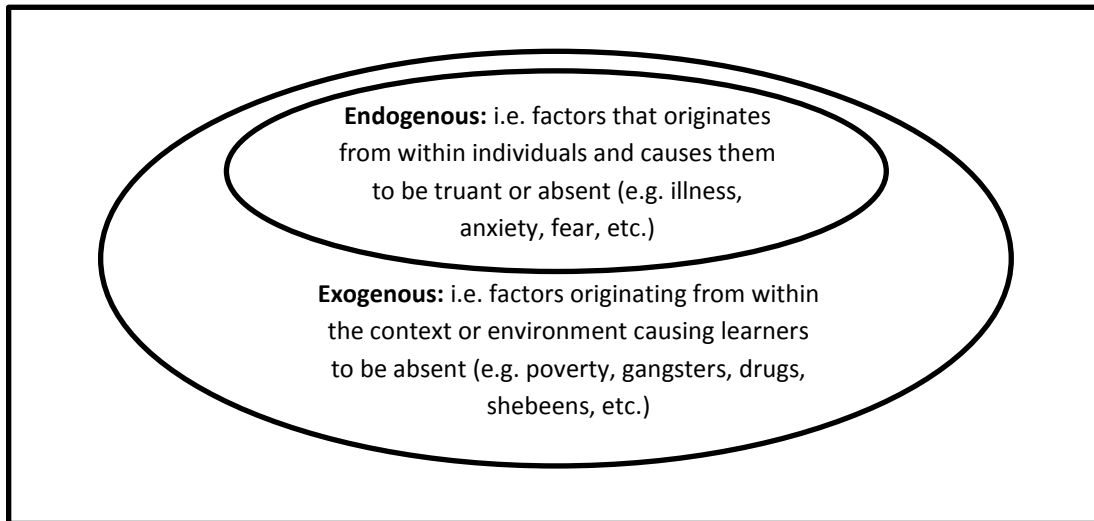
Source: Own representation

2.4.1.1   Exogenous factors

In exploring school based absenteeism, Roderick *et al.* (1997:8) found that schools with low academic benchmarks and ineffective norms give the impression that it is acceptable to respond to boredom, disliking an educator or pressure from peers for incorrect conduct. Reid (2002a) includes the rigidity of the national curriculum as a key reason for absence rates remaining high and corroborates peer pressure as a significant reason for absence. Absentees also identified boredom as a reason for missing school.   It was found that only 16% of secondary school learners acknowledged truanting from school (Malcolm *et al.*, 2003:vi). Often learners who achieve disappointingly don't attend school.

a)   Effect of parental involvement

The lack of parental involvement is illustrated by parents/guardians who don't insist on school attendance, those excusing absence or those with either a criminal record or conviction (Reid, 1999). The absent parent/guardian can, as illustrated above, take the form of a migrant parent and/or a commuting parent/guardian. Emphasis has been placed on how absentees could assist families to fulfil their duties of care

which consequently leads to denying a learner the right to education. This example illustrates the latent contradiction within the legislative context. If we accept the fact that the best interests of the child are always of paramount importance, then surely a decent meal ways heavier than a suitcase filled with text books.

In this regard, and as mentioned earlier, Douglas (1964) in Zhang (2003:12) emphasised parental attitude as a feature which strongly impinges learner attendance. To begin with, middle class parents showed more interest in their children's development contrary to working class parents' lack of interest. Douglas learned that over time middle class parents became more interested in that they also made frequent visits to school and made appointments with the class educator and principal. Strangely enough manual working fathers rarely visited school, displaying a lack of interest in their children's progress. In addition, a mother's ambitions should not be disqualified as it also affects attainment (Zhang, 2003:12). Inadequate motherliness amid children of working class families played a role in the prevalence of respiratory illnesses in that it differed between social classes. Because of poor housing and inadequate motherliness, learners living in this environment had a higher occurrence of ill health. This also influences the relationship between the parents and educator because of the fact that communication is impaired. (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005:15 in Sanzila 2011:27).

Reid (1999) found the home and social background to be a cause for truancy resulting in persistent absenteeism. The following socio-economic features were identified: families consisting of one-parent families, those with a high number of children, those living in crammed conditions or council-owned housing or poor quality housing. It also included those involved with social services and inability in coping with social pathologies that lead to abnormal conditions e.g. alcoholism, and families who are unreceptive to authority in general.

What became apparent from the literature is that parental involvement relates to both academic achievement and attendance of a learner (Kearney, 2008:459). Uninvolved parents don't monitor school attendance, check homework or attend parent evenings and they tend to be inactive in the development and progress of a learner's school career (Kearney, 2008:460).

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Additional influences that impact on absenteeism are divorce, child self-tending, problematic neighbourhoods and also abuse. Abused youths miss school more than peers who are cared for (Kearney, 2008:461). From the above it is evident that the role of parents/guardians in reducing absenteeism is essential. These role players are key contributors in establishing a regular daily attendance pattern (Attendance Works, 2013:2,3).

b)   Socio – economic links with absenteeism

Reid (2000) similarly found economic links with truancy and absenteeism in families which consist of parents who are unskilled workers or where paternal unemployment is standard. Also included in economic links are families with a low income, maternal unemployment or when free meals are provided at school. Financial difficulties, those caught in the poverty trap and families on income support clearly suffer. Transport difficulties, poorly clothed learners and low quality food are additional deficits.

The plethora of socio-economic absenteeism is also evident in the neighbourhood's money matters and employment deficit which strongly influence learners from primary schools more so than learners from secondary schools. Poverty seems to be the key associated factor of nonattendance as this habit typically sets off in primary school. Once again, intervention in attending to family wellbeing matters should start early (Zhang, 2003:10). Learners with a tendency to truancy/absenteeism were found to be more prone to transgress than regular attenders and are also more likely to carry out repeated crimes (Reid, 2005:74).

Douglas was unsure of the following, concerning learners from poor families, *"they lose an excessive amount of time from school though one cannot say yet whether this is because they are in fact more prone to minor illness and keep them unnecessarily at home"* (Zhang, 2003:12). According to Tyerman (1968) in Zhang (2003) absence amongst learners of uneducated fathers was twice as high as learners from professional fathers. The author concluded that outside influences were stronger than those inside the school, confirming that the effects of the home were more influential than powers of the street. In conclusion the relationship between destitute homes and absence from school is instantly recognisable (Zhang, 2003:12).

Gage *et al.* (2013:118) although referring to the term truancy, avers that the rate of absenteeism is more likely to increase in areas where learners are linked to households where parents have not been properly educated and where learners are not monitored after school. These learners do not perform well academically and correspondingly, do not have high educational aspirations.

c)   Additional exogenous factors

In direct contrast with national legislation and policies compelling parents/guardians to send their children to school on a daily basis, research has shown that parents/guardians and learners are confronted with a challenging dilemma. The role of learners as caretakers of the sick at home has already been discussed. Girls are mainly elected to fulfil this role. Contrary boys are required to stay home to support a supplementary income for the family by taking care of livestock. Another task, which burdens these learners from families from a lower financial status, is to take care of younger siblings preventing them from attending school. These examples border the phenomenon of child labour (Sanzila, 2011:23). Learners tend to withdraw from school to look after others. These learners are likely to underperform academically and they might terminate their school career prematurely which limits their career possibilities (Bialobrzeska *et al.*, 2007:5).

d)   Interesting facts relating to absence

Although 87% of destitute school-age learners are enrolled in school, only 77% attend school regularly according to a study in the US. Poverty, as discussed previously, is also related to absenteeism from school (Kearney, 2008:458). Causal reasons for recurring absenteeism include the family's need for financial backing from youths and insignificant parental interest in education (Zhang, 2003). Teenage pregnancy and its difficulties prompt youths to leave school permanently (Kearney, 2008:458). Secondary school learners fear to attend classes due to violence directly connected to previous unfair treatment by either educators or peers (Astor *et al.*, 2002). They skip school in an attempt to dodge being bullied. Weisman & Gottfredson (2001) confirm that boredom is also a reason why youths leave school early.

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Interestingly the period most missed during a school day is the first period. Poor attendance is consistent among subjects, thus reflecting poor general school conditions (Roderick *et al.*, 1997:6). The Nelson Mandela Foundation (2005) in Sanzila (2011:35) touches on the occurrence of lower attendance on Monday, being the first day of a week and a Friday being the last day of the week. This study even suggests that weather conditions such as cold and rainy seasons might lead to lower attendance.

e)　　Influence of digital/social media

Teenagers frequently make use of the internet and the worldwide web. So far the literature has not focussed on the impact of this usage on absenteeism (Austin & Totaro, 2011:193). These authors found that the availability of extra venues of internet access increase absenteeism. One might argue that both male and female learners access the internet for academic purposes, but these authors assume that learners utilise the internet for recreational purposes and that a large portion of this usage therefore relates to the downloading of music and/or social networking. They make it very clear that their study did not specifically focus on the question whether learners make use of the internet for academic or social purposes. Their study indicates that *"learners may indeed be missing school to surf the net"* (Austin & Totaro, 2011:198).

f)　　Lack of documentation for admission purposes

A cluster of environmentally related risk factors in the sphere of absenteeism, are dealt with by Kearney (2008). The first requirement relates to the fact that many school districts necessitate documentation as requirement for admission. Homelessness and the absence of the requisite documentation therefore cause an impediment to school attendance for learners if the minimum requirements in this regard cannot be met.

The SASA and the Admission Policy for Ordinary Public Schools (1998) regulate the admission of learners to public schools. The only documents to be furnished on applying for admission of a South African learner, subject to certain exceptions, are

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the learner's birth certificate, proof of immunisation and a transfer card if the learner is transferred from another school. These factors therefore complicate admission to school.

2.4.1.2   Endogenous factors

From the literature it is evident that in the sphere of personal reasons, learners with weak skills experience difficulty with both academic and social burdens of the secondary school. Fewer absences were identified among learners with good academic skills (Roderick *et al.*, 1997:7). Interestingly, secondary school learners ascribed their absence from school to school-related factors discussed above, rather than home-related factors and social isolation (Malcolm *et al..* 2003:vii). This confirms the fact that tenacious absentees and truants are likely to originate from an extensive range of social handicaps (Reid, 2005:62).

In another study truants were found to be *"lazy, lacked concentration, were restless, were difficult to discipline, did not care about being a credit to their parents, and were not clean and tidy on their arrival at school",* according to Farrington (1980) in Zhang (2003:13).

Kearney and Albano (2004:147-161) reported that children with *"problematic school absenteeism"* usually experience *"separation anxiety disorder, generalised anxiety disorder, social phobia, oppositional defiant disorder and depression."* These conditions have been *inter alia* listed as major risk factors for dropping out, unemployment and missing out on economic benefits.

a)   HIV/AIDS

Another reason contributing to absenteeism on a personal level is illness. Within the South African context it is valuable to refer to HIV/AIDS since this epidemic impacts on the infected person, the lives of their families, friends and wider communities which in essence magnify the problem (Bialobrzeska *et al.*, 2007:1). Even a study conducted by the United Nations concluded that the learning process in schools will be compromised by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in that it will impact on school

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attendance. The effect of AIDS on school attendance became evident through a number of studies. A World Bank study indicated that school attendance by learners between 15 – 20 years was reduced by 50% because of the occurrence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This incident occurred in the United Republic of Tanzania and was typical of households where an adult female passed away (World Bank, 1995). Country specific research was undertaken in Botswana, Malawi and Uganda.

Interestingly, absenteeism in Botswana was very low and orphans acquired better attendance rates than non-orphans even though Botswana is regarded as one of the countries with the highest HIV prevalence rates. Conversely Uganda and Malawi recorded higher rates of absenteeism among orphans than among non-orphans (Bennel *et al.*, 2002).

b)   Teenage pregnancies

Teenage pregnancy shows a definite link to personal reasons of absenteeism. *"South Africa has a huge teen pregnancy problem – one in three girls has had a baby by the age of twenty,"* David Harrison, chief executive officer of LoveLife avers. He goes further to say that: *"School going is protective. [Teenagers] not at school are more likely to fall pregnant than those at school"* (IRIN news, 2007).

Teenage pregnancies not only compromise the education and future of expectant mothers but also put additional pressure on their families in respect of additional monetary maintenance of the mother and child (International Business Times, 2013).

South Africa counts among one of the few countries in sub-Saharan Africa which enables young women to continue schooling after child birth. Even though these adolescent women may return to school, circumstances at home may prevent them from doing so. If they are not supported by other female family members in bringing up the child, they may be forced to stay at home and take care of the baby. The authors hypothesise that women who managed to perform well prior to the birth of the baby are more likely to return to school and continue schooling until completion of Grade 12 (Grant & Hallman in Macleod & Tracey, 2006).

Even highly motivated teenage mothers might be handicapped in returning to school. Girls from urban and rural areas are sometimes further burdened with the role of child care taking and their families are sometimes reluctant or unable to put up with these young mothers attending school. Families often believe that being a mother suggests that you have entered adulthood and that the young mothers should therefore adopt adult responsibilities, implying that they should stay at home (Lloyd *et al.*, 2000).

Barnes indicated that of nine million girls aged between 13 and 19 years in South Africa, "*80% of those were missing a week of school every month*..." (Cook,2014).

In addition, research has also revealed the majority of less fortunate girls may miss up to 50 days of annual schooling due to the lack of access to adequate sanitary protection (The Imbumba Foundation, 2015).

c)   Inherent factors relating to absenteeism

Truancy is not only an unrecognised problem, the causes are also complex and disputed in that it starts young and it causes harm (Malcolm *et al.*, 2003). Absentees are disliked by other learners, they seem unhappy, hopeless, troubled, have poor concentration spans, tell untruths, are defiant and possibly pinched things occasionally (Reid, 2005:62). The intention could be to miss class by arriving late for school as secondary school learners are given increased responsibility for getting themselves to school.

Conversely, long distance public transportation and difficulty in handling the task might be logical reasons for absence (Roderick *et al.*, 1997:5).

d)   Gender

Contrasting opinions exist about which gender is more likely to be absent from school. Initially researchers believed that boys are more prone to be absent from

school than their female counterparts (Newsome, 2008:23). This no longer seems to be the case as Malcolm *et al.*, (2003) indicate that a larger number of female learners than male learners is absent from school for unacceptable reasons. Guare & Cooper's (2003) in Austin & Totaro (2011:193) perception is that the rates of absenteeism for boys are exactly the same when compared to those of girls. Contrastingly, another study discovered that boys, as opposed to girls, between the ages of 9 – 10, become more detached from school should they originate from a destitute neighbourhood (Horgan, 2007:20).

In essence Hall & De Lannoy (2014:1) concluded that there isn't a significant difference in attendance between the two genders.

2.5   Effects of absence

In view of the causes, absenteeism influences not only the learner but also fellow classmates and the school in general. The community is also affected, whether in the short term or in the long run. What researchers deducted over the past twenty years, is that truancy and chronic absenteeism are early indicators that learners may potentially experience future problems at school and in life (Newsome, 2008:34).

Lamdin (1998) in Epstein & Sheldon (2002:308) suggests that chronic absenteeism impacts negatively on schools and learners seeing that absent learners are not equipped with the essentials which ensure achievement.

2.5.1 Effect of absenteeism on the learner

A study commissioned by Chowdhury*, et al.* (2007:13) found that, should learners not attend school regularly, it may impact severely on their education. From a statistical point of view this study shockingly revealed the fact that an absentee who misses only one day a week, results in this absentee being absent for a period of two years of his total tuition. Statistics obtained from a study conducted in Ohio suggest that the relationship between learner attendance and learner achievement varies between adequate and strong (Roby, 2003:13). Borland and Howsen (1998) in

Roby (2003:14) agree with the purpose of this study in that they acknowledge the need for further research in respect of the link between attendance and achievement. They propose that exploration of causes of absenteeism should be carried out by means of interviews with school staff and related stakeholders in order to determine the effects thereof.

Negative after-effects include early school termination preceded by increased absence combined with low grades (Morris, Ehren & Lenz, 1991 in Virginia Department of Education, 2005:9). The snowball effect of being absent forecasts further negative consequences such as cigarette and alcohol usage, indulging in excessive drinking and drug abuse (Byrant & Sheldon, 2002 in Virginia Department of Education, 2005:9). The occurrence of absenteeism escalates within a habitual absentee's school career (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002 in Virginia Department of Education, 2005:9). Initial absence in primary school and negative school attachment predict health and demeanour complications (Virginia Department of Education, 2005:9).

The Report on Learner Absenteeism acknowledged the following effects of absenteeism with specific emphasis on the learner as a poor attender. These learners may become socially isolated when they don't attend regularly. Due to the fact that their safety cannot be guaranteed during the periods of absence, they place themselves at risk of being harmed while being unsupervised. Absentees have a tendency to be involved in socially unacceptable and/or illegal activities. It is trite that absentees lack knowledge and understanding of the importance of the required educational outcomes (CASE & JET, 2007:13).

These effects are confirmed by Malcolm *et al.* (2003:15-16) when they categorise the effects of absenteeism on learners. They also emphasise academic underperformance while stating that absence whether sporadic or twice weekly, was damaging. They collaborate the finding by the Report on Leaner Absenteeism (2007:13) that poor attenders were inclined to lose their friends, become isolated and easy prey to company. Poor attenders are not up to date with their work, they become prematurely sexually active (Malcolm *et al.*, 2003:16) which is a catalyst for unsafe sexual behaviour and the danger of HIV according to Kearney (2008:455).

Absentees in the role of caretakers are burdened with severe stress, because of their adult like imposed responsibilities. Sometimes they experience guilt because they are at school when they are expected and necessitated to be at home to look after siblings or parents. Their focus is not on acquiring communication and language skills and training for working life, because they were not disciplined to get up every morning to go to a certain place (Malcolm *et al.*, 2003:16).

When singling out the negative effects of absenteeism on learners, Malcolm *et al.* (2003:6) confirms that attendance issues are linked to learners' behavioural problems in that both learners and educators could become apathetic. Because of the cyclical effect of truanting behaviour it is difficult to change.

Secondary school educators also believed that academic underachievement impaired learners' job prospects in future. Furthermore, absentees had trouble in making and keeping friends and their friendship groups shrank which lead to isolation affecting them negatively. This in turn, leads to a loss in confidence which then results into attention seeking through troublemaking behaviour.

The multitude of negative impacts of absenteeism is also illustrated by the fact that a learner's background influences the relationship between class attendance and attainment, including factors like culture and ethnicity (Schmulian & Coetzee, nd). Interestingly there seems to be a correlation between a learner's degree of individuality and his/her partiality to learn by doing or through observing which in turn impact on attainment and attendance (Sugahara *et al.*, 2009). An educator's style of instruction and whether he/she adds value in the classroom are matters which might strongly influence a learner's attendance (Schmulian & Coetzee, nd:3). Correspondingly, attainment and attendance are interlinked. The literature presses upon the fact that good attendance equals enhanced achievement. In light of this claim, positive reinforcement is deduced from a good attender's relationships with parents and the school environment. These learners possess the virtues of inspiration, willpower and endurance to complete set tasks (Sheppard, 2010).

School refusal behaviour leads to academic problems and social isolation. The learner may also experience distress and disruption of the family's life may occur. Legal and financial difficulties may be caused by school refusal behaviour (Kearney *et al.*, 2001:3).

Effective teaching and learning are severely compromised by school violence in South African high schools which is becoming a matter of great concern on national level. In a study conducted the following were perceived as the most predominant forms of school violence: bullying, corporal punishment, which is in contravention of legislation, vandalism, gangsterism and sexual harassment. Even peer victimisation was mentioned as a reason for poor performance because of school violence.

The violence influences effective learning and teaching which subsequently results in poor school attendance and to eventual high failure rates. Additionally, learners who are subjected to bullying, bunk classes and consequently drop out of school. Educators are also adversely affected by school violence. Classes are empty due to the fact that learners leave school during teaching time. Learners attend poorly and educators are challenged to complete the syllabus timeously and they focus on sorting out problems resulting from school violence, which means that valuable tuition time is wasted (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013:1;5;7;9-10).

It has become very simple to bully fellow learners as a result of access to the internet. Learners access Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media platforms which may subject them to cyber-bullying attacks. The author clearly emphasises the consequence of the different types of bullying. Sadly some of these horrors have resulted in self death as a consequence of continuous bullying. An intervention like changing of school, does not seem to provide an answer in the long term (Harmon, 2013:1,2).

Habitual absence impedes learners' academic performance. Poor attendance of an individual learner is symptomatic of detachment along with scholastic difficulties. However, low attendance of many learners, challenges the capacity of all learners and educators to engage in high quality schooling. Frequent absenteeism, unpunctuality and class cutting increase when learners progress to secondary school (Roderick *et al.*, 1997:1).

Learners who are absent from school may be subjected to several short term effects of which the following is noteworthy: they fail to complete school projects and as a result they are unable to perform adequately (Hocking, 2008:13).

2.5.2 Effect of absenteeism on the classroom and school

As indicated above, educators are very well equipped to list possible effects of learner absenteeism on poor attenders, other role players and the environment in general, but Malcolm *et al.* (2003) managed to effectively differentiate between the effect of absenteeism on other learners on the one hand, and the effects thereof on educators on the other.

In the first instance Malcolm *et al.* (2003:18) pronounces that absence impacted upon learners who regularly attend school in a few ways. Poor attenders and their friends may become lonely and secluded as a result of abandonment by others. A possible disruption evolves in the classroom upon the return of poor attenders. Absentees require assistance with catching up and some learners perceive this as unfair. Another negative consequence of absenteeism is evident in the antipathy amongst good attenders. They usually resent the poor attenders as these learners might go without punishment even though they were acting in a disorderly manner. Good attenders might even feel let down and confused, despite adhering to rules and attending school.   In addition, good attenders show disappointment and puzzlement towards poor attenders.

The possibility exists that poor attenders might even become role models as absentees are seen as daring and others desire to become like them.

Secondly, Malcolm *et al.* (2003:20-21) continues to elaborate on the effects of absenteeism on educators. Educators are backtracking all the time as they are continuously confronted with the frustrating task of assisting absentees to catch up. They are diverting time from the rest of the class. Educators are offering their spare time during breaks and lunchtime to help absentees, which is a very time consuming exercise. Often educators are annoyed by the return of poor attenders as the latter never seem to know how to behave and to get on with their work.

Similarly, educators are prevented from accurate record keeping, because it is difficult to write an annual report for someone who has been absent from school often. It is also difficult to plan effectively as it is never certain when to expect an

absence, which also leads to a frequent adjustment in plans. One of the most important areas of concern is the weakened educator-learner relationship. It is challenging to build a stable and credulous relationship with a child who is often away.

No wonder that all the above mentioned effects leave educators feeling deskilled and depressed (Malcolm *et al.*, 2003:20-21).

2.5.3 Effect of absenteeism on the community

Education enhances the economic growth of a country on different levels in that the employment skills of citizens are enhanced and the earning power and effectiveness of productive effort of individuals are increased. Citizens benefit socially in that they are all equipped with the skills to achieve. Education further leads to a politically developed country which is the cornerstone for a stable political culture essential in maintaining a democratic society (Harber, 2010 & Harber & Davies, 1997) in Harber & Mncube, 2011:233-234). A negative cycle commences when children from poor backgrounds attend poor schools following poorly paid, low status jobs or even worse case scenario facing unemployment (Holsinger & Jacob, 2008, Harber, 2009) in Harber & Mncube, 2011:234.

Regular school attendance and the subsequent forming of relationships between learners and educators, determine learner achievement. The effects of absenteeism impact negatively on both the individuals involved and their communities. A very bleak future awaits poor attenders as they are not equipped to maximise their educational, social or psychological potential. Their prospects of future career paths are substantially limited (CASE & JET, 2007:13).

Philips & Schweisfurth (2007:60) in Harber & Mncube (2011:233) emphasise the link between a properly educated population and national development in all its spheres. They refer to education as a *"weapon"* in the process of alleviating poverty and other phenomena of underdevelopment. Education is regarded as an important provider to public good.

Finally, one of the long-term effects of absenteeism needs attention. Absenteeism is a waste of our country's money (Chauke, 2012). Chauke (2012) indicated that absenteeism has had a negative effect on the South African economy. Productivity and financial output at the workplace are affected by absenteeism. Education is the most crucial ingredient in breaking the cycle of absence. Schooling equips learners with the necessary skills to be punctual and to be a valuable asset to a prospective employer which in turn will secure a stable income stream for the South African economy.

2.6   Manners in which schools deal with absenteeism

Figure 2.2:   Schematic representation of four broad strategies to manage the broad categories of absenteeism
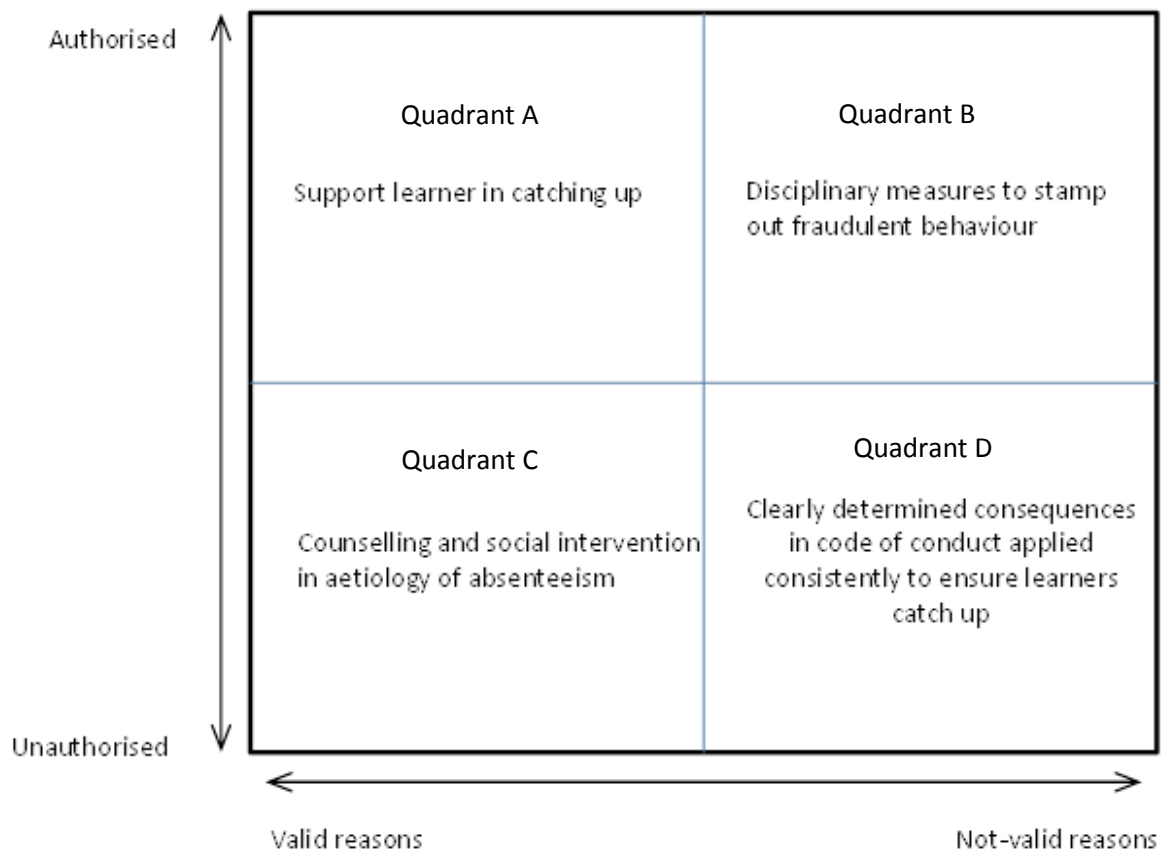
The way in which schools will deal with absenteeism in Quadrant A (authorised and valid) should differ from Quadrant D where absenteeism is due to non-valid and unauthorised reasons. Quadrant C is problematic as it entails absenteeism that is unauthorised but valid, such as psychological fear of going to school, long distances to school, adverse weather conditions, etc. Quadrant B includes incidences where the absence was authorised but the reasons were not valid. This could be incidences where learners faked parent letters to the school etc.

In 1997 the Deputy Minister of Education said: *"Many of our children are always absent from school, lack discipline and manners, regularly leave school early, are usually late for school, wear no uniform, have no respect for educators, drink during school hours are involved in drugs and gangs, gamble and smoke at school, come to school armed to instil fear in others…"* (Mkhatshwa, 1997:14-15 in Harber & Mncube, 2011:37-38). This quote summarises some of the aspects impacting on the management of absenteeism by schools.

First of all, learners should be supported in the process of catching up lost work while they were absent due to valid or invalid reasons. In the second instance schools need to be very vocal on disciplinary measures to be taken in events where learners are absent from school due to invalid and unauthorised reasons. Thirdly, counselling and social intervention are important catalysts in combatting unauthorised absenteeism. In the final instance schools should determine consequences in codes of conduct to be applied consistently to ensure learners catch up with the rest of the class.

"You can't teach an empty desk" and in order to combat the occurrence of chronic absenteeism, it is vital to have definite processes and measures in place to monitor learner absence (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002:308). The literature emphasises the fact that school districts and/or individual schools with admirable attendance records, need to be approached to obtain information relating to methods in place to ensure attendance. In this regard the methodology of parents/guardians to ensure attendance may be valuable (Roby, 2003:14).

2.6.1 Patrons involved in overseeing absenteeism

The role of educators in influencing attendance rates should not be discarded, but fundamentally structural changes in a school with a focus on liaison between learners and educators are encouraged. The importance of quality subject material should also not be underestimated (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002:309).

In the past, schools have blamed individual learners for not attending school, but authors now advocate that family practises might have an influence on attendance (Rumberger, 1995 in Epstein & Sheldon, 2002:309). As there is no consensus as to which specific activities undertaken by parents might impact on their children's attendance, it is suggested that schools engage with parents to deal with attendance issues (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002:309).

Strategic partnerships between schools, families and communities seem to be the focal point of schools effectively combatting absence (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002:309). Epstein 1995 in (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002:309) notes that developing schools focus on the following interaction "using six types of involvement:

   a) parenting,
   b) communicating,
   c) volunteering,
   d) learning at home,
   e) decision making, and
   f) collaborating with the community."

Epstein & Sheldon (2002:309) are of the opinion that a school's attention to these six areas of involvement, will ensure that the input of parents and the community may be instrumental in increasing attendance rates. Authors suggest that the following actions may lead to better attendance: parents/guardians of absent learners need to be advised telephonically of the *status quo* and parents/guardians need to be advised as soon as learners excuse themselves from school in order to create an immediate awareness of a possible problem (Roderick *et al.* 1997   and   Helm   & Burkett, 1989, Licht, Gard & Guardiano, 1991 in Epstein & Sheldon, 2002:309).

2.6.2 Policies in dealing with absenteeism

Research indicated that the following three school policies may reduce frequent absenteeism: a) engaging with parents, the community and schools in activities to ensure and improve attendance, b) focus on activities characterised by positive undertones instead of measures to punish, c) continuous goal of enhancing attendance.

a) **Engaging with parents/guardians, the community and schools in activities to ensure and improve attendance**

The importance of effective communication channels between parents/guardians and the school in respect of attendance, constructive workshops and regular visits to the homes of learners are illustrated in the research. The fact that a certain person is singled out by the school with which parents may liaise in the event of attendance problems also indicate the important role parents/guardians play in improving attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002:317).

Schools also contribute to increased attendance rates when they honour learners for being present and when they create opportunities for absentees to interact with therapists to address attendance issues (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002:317).

b) **Focus on activities characterised by positive undertones, instead of measures to punish**

Parents are regarded as catalysts in ensuring and improving attendance. When parents are knowledgeable about procedures and policies in place relating to attendance and when they are aware of the close link between attendance and successful rates, they are able to transmit the importance of attendance to their children (Epstein & Sheldon, 2007:317).

Henderson, (1991) and Simmons & Farabaugh, (1999) in Epstein & Sheldon, (2002:317) elaborate on the human aspect forming part of processes to combat absenteeism. They are of the opinion that positive reinforcement instead of penalties associated with absence, should be invoked. The idea that a school is really concerned about learners' welfare is reiterated when

learners are punished constructively (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002:317). This approach is obviously in sharp contrast to the "zero tolerance" approach propagated by many states in the United States of America lately.

c) **Continuous goal of enhancing attendance**

An effective manner, in which schools may improve not only daily attendance, but attendance in the long term, is when specific objectives are put into place to measure attendance continuously. The involvement of parents, the community and school in a proactive way enable schools to maintain and improve excellent attendance rates. Partnerships between all stakeholders involved, guarantee improved attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002:317).

2.7 Breaking the cycle of absence

The high rates of absenteeism necessitate both educators and schools to pay new attention as it points to an overall breakdown in school norms. It reveals an absence of devotion to the learners' need for challenge, structure, as well as supportive relationships. Uninterested, unchallenged learners in schools where high standards of behaviour aren't imposed daily and where schools neglect to monitor behaviour and only intercede to correct troubles, guarantee learner disengagement. It is predictable that learners would test their borders.

It is proposed that frequent day to day absence, whether authorised or unauthorised should be the focus instead of instances where learners don't attend school on a sporadic basis. The first mentioned forms of absence tend to have more severe short and long term consequences on *inter alia* achievement, conduct and school interactions (Chowdhury*, et al.*, 2007:23).

2.8 Fundamental themes that inspire successful school approaches

Low attendance rates and test grades are typical features of a challenged school serving high-risk learners. This school should invent a system which carefully observes learner attendance. In addition a school environment portraying high degrees of teamwork among staff, respect for learners and distinct and reliable expectancies should be founded. A zero tolerance approach (although not

applicable to the South African context) to absence and a call to parents/guardians on the same day are very effective.

A parent/guardian conference could be scheduled when more than three absences ensue. Since absenteeism overly influences low-skilled learners, the school needs to focus on academic and behavioural problems. Learners should be inspired to partake in supplementary tutoring and homework assistance opportunities. Awards for improved attendance and attainment motivate learners. An *"in your face"* approach rather than a one way telephone system is more specified. In talking directly to parents opportunities are created to review causes and solutions to the problems learners face (Roderick *et al.*, 1997:11).

2.9   Conclusion

Absenteeism takes on various forms and each individual occurrence should be assessed on an *ad hoc* basis against the background of different factors impacting on the specific type. This explorative study aims to shed light on how absenteeism is managed by stakeholders in respect of a secondary school.

From a moral point of view, learners cannot be held responsible for being absent since parents/guardians are instrumental in ensuring that learners attend school. The complexity of the issue is illustrated by the absence of traditional familial structures. The existence of peer groups in the form of gangs and the outbreak of turf wars in communities adversely affect attendance.

Regardless of the above mitigating circumstances, there is a reciprocal duty on both the learner and parent/guardian to ensure that the learner attends school daily.

In light of this assumption parents/guardians could, to some extent, be held responsible should they omit to send their children to school. Then again, some children act against their parents' wishes to learn and progress, and attend school. Child-headed households or parents who commute and leave home during the early hours of the morning, reveal that parents are not *'present'* as before. Based on this a learner cannot be penalised for absence initiated by the parent/guardian.

CHAPTER 3

Research design and methodology

3.1   Introduction

The exposition offered in Chapter 2 already alluded to the fact that absenteeism appears in different forms (authorised/unauthorised; valid/non-valid reasons; etc.). It is accordingly assumed that educators and schools would deal with the respective manifestations of absenteeism differently. It implies that schools will be required to interpret each incident of absenteeism on an *ad hoc* basis. This election will enable a school to ascertain which type of absenteeism is relevant in order to impose the most apposite sanction. It is this process of interpretation that I wished to unpack and comprehend in this research, by utilising a lens which would enable me to decipher absenteeism as perceived by the school.

In this chapter, the qualitative research design adopted for this study will be set out. Specific attention will be paid to the type of case study which has been used, the selection of participants, the applicable data gathering techniques and the proposed data analysis process. This chapter concludes with an explication of the ethical issues considered and how trustworthiness and credibility were assured.

3.2   Interpretivism as method to explore the manner in which absenteeism is dealt with

The purpose of this research is not merely to describe the management of learner absenteeism, but also to understand why the sampled school managed absenteeism the way it does. It is therefore imperative to penetrate the construction of meaning as revealed through the manner in which absenteeism is managed. For this reason it was necessary to adopt an interpretivist approach.

Interpretivism is defined as the encapsulating of participants' lives. I intended to understand, and interpret meaning. Consequently, I aimed to portray the reality of participants based on their own understandings. I acted as a co-creator of meaning, but bearing in mind that observation was not flawless, and all theory was amendable (Henning *et al.,* 2004:19).

Given that interpretivism concentrated on the significance assigned to personal experience, inter subjective meanings were therefore essential to enable me, in my capacity as researcher, to interpret meaning (Maree *et al.*, 2010:21). Data was gathered in order to constitute observable happenings, descriptions of participants' way of life, principles and motivations in addition to connotation, and self-understanding (Henning *et al.*, 2004:20). I gathered detailed information using an array of data collection techniques. Most of the data collected was verbal, by means of interviews, including field notes, transcripts and accounts of conversations (Bassey, 1999:43).

In view of the research being grounded in interpretivism, it essentially focussed on meaning, and it pursued understanding of the social participants' explanations and said situations. Therefore, this paradigm was not interested in seeking valid laws or rules, instead it strived to generate explanatory analysis which placed emphasis on a profound, and interpretive understanding of social happenings.

Presuming that behaviour comprised social customs, interpretation was necessitated, seeing that facts do not speak for themselves (Maree *et al.*, 2010:21). The rationale was to secure a meaningful level of interpretation of the opinions of a particular group.

Research ensued over a period of time. Based on the interprevist approach the purpose of interviewing was to understand the meanings these participants attached to the phenomenon of learner absenteeism in its different forms, and just how they contemplated the problem. It was therefore important to understand their denotation of absenteeism.

Thus, research focussed on the understanding of individual participants' experience and assessment of their specialist roles as lived through their everyday working environment. The viewpoint was their unique perspectives and backdrops (Henning et.al, 2004:21).

Considering this framework, it was important to acknowledge that the interpretivist viewpoint was influenced by certain assumptions (Maree *et al.*, 2010:59). First of all, a human living could only be known from the inside. Secondly, societal conduct was shaped by pre-knowledge about the social world. In conclusion, the communal

world and human comprehension were closely connected to each other. On condition that the interpretive approach pursued participants' *'insider view'* as opposed to the *'outsider view'* (Mason, 2002:56), emphasis fell on the importance of open-ended questioning considering that it gave the researcher access to the *'insider view'* (Creswell, 2009:8). As an interpretive researcher it was important to acknowledge that the setting which was studied might well change by asking open-ended questions and through observing participants in their setting. Conversing with participants was characterised as the initial data collection approach. I engaged in open-ended questioning to gain insight into the participants' lives.

Having regard for the theoretical basis of interpretivism, it was the pertinent lens for this study, as the intellectual puzzle could be summarised as learners who were absent from school, and seemingly, this problem was not managed effectively. The purpose of this study was to question the meanings people, specifically participants, attached to absenteeism in its different forms, and how they reflected on the problem. It was important to understand the way in which they gave meaning to absenteeism. In other words, during the course of the interviews the happenings were observed, and the sanction was examined with the intention to understand and make sense of it. On the word of Travers (2001:10) interpretivists relied on exactly how members/individuals of civilization valued their own actions, as the purpose of sociological exploration.

3.3   The single complex case study

3.3.1 Definition of a case study

Stake (1995) in Creswell (2009:13) confirmed that a case study as an approach, investigated a programme, event, activity, process or individuals in its entirety, thus making it clear that there were different types of case studies. As stated previously, this case study focussed on an event, the understanding of absenteeism, and its meaning to the individuals involved. Interest fell on the process rather than the outcomes (Henning *et al.*, 2004:41). Schratz and Walker (1995:168) in Knight

(2002:42) advised that there was more to a case study than having a collection of data, it was important for the researcher to concentrate on how to draw on information.

Bromley (1990:302) in Maree *et al.* (2010:75) explained that a case study was a methodological inquest into an occurrence, in this case, absenteeism, with the purpose of explaining and clarifying the subject of relevance. A case study was therefore of significance in defining a unit of examination, for instance, representing a case study of a specific organisation like a school, or to depict a specific research approach.

In view of this, Yin (1984:23) in Maree *et al.* (2010:75) confirmed that the case study research strategy is an *"empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and in which multiple sources of evidence are used".*

Case study research has been applied as a method in multiple fields to answer questions on exactly "how" and "why". In this specific case, besides the opinions and perspectives of the participants in the school, it also provided an opportunity to give the right of speech to the weak or the disregarded. The most important characteristic of this case study was the fact that the researcher aspired to secure a deeper understanding of the changing aspects of the setting (Maree *et al.*, 2010:75).

3.3.2   Complexity of the case study

A case study as a format of design was employed, and was aimed at an in-depth analysis of a single complex case. The case was complex in terms of the various forms of absenteeism being studied, but also in terms of the diverse nature of the participants, the dynamics of the setting, the diverse causes of absenteeism, the different forms thereof and the manner in which it was managed. The intention was to describe and investigate, and to present a full picture of the phenomenon.

The case was also intricate as a result of the fact that I was teaching at the school, which I regarded as the Achilles heel of the interview sessions. Although it afforded me the benefit of a good insider perspective and the advantage of being familiar with the various role players, it constantly challenged my own predisposition which I had to manage. I was constantly tested to mitigate my own biases in order to ensure accurate and representative feedback. It also contested me in terms of power relationships. The principal remained the principal and I a relative junior educator. Where and how the study was executed, planned questions and interpretation of hypotheses were important concerns that were taken into consideration. Time was regarded as a constraint as well as the availability of interviewees after school hours. Load shedding during one of the interviews and also during transcription of interviews presented additional intricacies. All interviews, except for one, was conducted and recorded on the school premises. Emphasis fell on the description of the political awareness of the classroom, school, involved participants, and the area in which the study was undertaken (Janesick, 2004:37).

An awareness of biased impressions, similarly originating from theory, was developed beforehand. Without being prejudiced I had to be enthusiastic about the interviews in order to bring about a better positioning in ensuing the interviews. I was required to set participants at ease and had to ensure that interviews provoked natural conversation. As a researcher it was important to be sympathetic and open to conflicting evidence, and to be able to identify data that did not make sense. The participants under study were treated with respect, and I showed a sense of understanding and sympathy, without derogating from being unbiased (Janesick, 2004:35-36).

3.3.3 The essence of a single case study

Since reliance was based on a single case, critique against the case study approach concentrated on the absence of offering a simplifying supposition. This was not the objective or rationale of case study exploration; the intention was to acquire insight and an awareness of the changing aspects of a site. A single case study was well received as the focus of study as observed in the literature (Maree *et al.*, 2010:76).

Adelman *et al.*, (1980:59-60) in Bassey (1999:23) regarded case studies as "*a step to action*" since they originated in a world of action. Not only did they weigh in, understandings might directly be construed and put to use. For this reason a single case study had been selected as the technique of choice since the occurrence being studied was not that easily discernible from its setting (Yin, 2003:4). The case study assisted in the process of attaining knowledge regarding the issue of absenteeism under study.

The case study emphasised the detailed contextual analysis of the limited number of events and/or conditions and their relationships. In the case of the proposed research, focus fell on the daily management of learner absenteeism in a specific secondary school. Consequently, the research was done in a bounded system which was the prime consideration in a good case study. Stake (1988:255) in Henning *et al.* (2004:32) averred that *"bounded system"* referred to having some understanding of the unity of a system and its boundaries, or foreseen problems. *"System,"* in this regard, referred to all the role players involved in the school since they were bounded by constraints. As social units they showed specific subtleties and significance, and disclosed information that was secured within the boundaries, thus classifying it as a case study. Interestingly, Checkland and Scholes (1990) in Knight (2002:41-42) claimed that boundaries, the way in which it was theorised, and described, manipulated the discoveries which were generated. Adjusting the limits might therefore have influence on the outcome of research findings. Stating the boundaries of the case was not uncomplicated.

As stated by Macmillan (2006:316,317) case study design and data examination thereof were fixed on one unit of analysis, in this instance absenteeism. Knight (2002:41) confirms that a case study was an investigation into one unique happening. Adelman *et al.* (1980:59-60) in Bassey (1999:23) acknowledged that case studies permitted simplifications about a case or from a case to a class. I had in actual fact been careful to make widespread generalisations as research was based on a single case.

Case studies were inclined to be limited and were not simulated like experiments or surveys. Therefore it inspired thorough investigation and compelled me to seek meaning, as well as to construct conceptions and pick up what was actually going on in relation to the occurrence of absenteeism. The density and changeability of the society was taken into account, seeing that it gave rise to correctives concerning determinism and generalization (Knight, 2002:41-42).

Yin (2003:69) however, had reservations about whether a single case study could in fact validate claims. He argued that it was not possible to corroborate claims without the certainty of true experiments. Nevertheless, a case study could propose suggestions pertaining to underlying relationships. These suggestions proved to be valuable since true experiments were not applicable in this case study. The phenomenon of absenteeism had not been sufficiently researched and therefore qualitative methods and experiments are not necessitated. In addition, because of the diverse and complex nature of absenteeism, exploratory research enabled me to analyse it in depth by touching on the complexities of absenteeism and the concomitant management thereof.

Performing a case study proved to be more useful than ignoring an inquiry. The extract's reasoning included fundamental requirements about a descriptive case study. However, it did not hold adequate data or even verified proof to support logic. The core of rationality served as kick-off for interpretation on how to work out the explanatory case study. Combining operational notes to the initial copy turned out to be useful.

3.4   The manner in which the case study was approached

Quality features of a case study necessitated a dual purpose. Regarding this, the specific case under study was not only significant, but had the intention to attract public interest, and it was meaningful to me. Current fundamental issues have global importance for education concerning theoretical or practical standings. Thus, confirming that a case may disclose the actuality previous researchers were unable

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to study. This proved to be revelatory to the educator acting as researcher. By itself a contribution would be made to theory, and a researcher's expert interpretation of the phenomenon studied, might lead to explanatory research. Limitations were considered, like the divergence between the phenomenon under study, and its manifold setting. The in-depth process of accumulating evidence was significant, triangulated and revealed adequate data. Evidence was presented with caution to enable the reader to develop an unbiased opinion about the qualities of the study (Janesick, 2004:36-37).

The case study initiated participation owing to how it was compiled. This would enable the reader to see the subject and the environment by way of explanatory writing.

In engaging in research, data was linked to propositions, and the topic was clarified by turning to the available literature. As a researcher, personal theories were developed and tried against the literature. The exploratory case necessitated examination of the value of additional theories (Janesick, 2004:37-38). Adelman *et al.* (1980:59-60) in Bassey (1999:23) were of the opinion that case studies, if regarded as outcomes, might form a collection of explanatory material. This was the intent of the research. Should the data be suitably rich, it might give access to subsequent reinterpretation.

An important consideration to reflect on in case study research was the element of examination. It this case it concentrated on a method of action, instead of one person or unit of persons. Therefore, the case study was discerning, thus concentrating on one matter, which proved to be important in interpreting the system and management thereof. The fact that several sources and methods were employed in gathering data was a central feature of the case study research. As a result I was enabled to determine beforehand which evidence to gather, and what methods to employ in order to answer the research question. In general, most data collected was qualitative, but it also included quantitative data when statistics were analysed making use of the class registers. Instruments applied in gathering data were the assessment of documents and observation (Yin, 1994 in Maree *et al.*, 2010:76).

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According to De Vaus (2002:11) observation required creative imagination as there was no perfect way of discovering the actual happening. I experienced this averment on a first hand basis. In essence, observation, according to Mason (2002:84-85) implied methods by which data was assembled. I was required to immerse myself into a situation to experience and observe features first hand. An epistemological stance suggested that significant understanding of all aspects relating to absenteeism could not be constructed without observation. I acted in the capacity of a participant observer due to the fact that I was part of the school which participated in the research. This opportunity provided me with the benefit of observing from an insider perspective. In acting as an observer I concentrated on the role as viewer of the situation. Searching for the outlines of behaviour in a specific group of people, like in this instance, enabled me to value the suppositions, principles, and way of life of participants. However, I was detached and did not manipulate the situation in any way. I carefully noted body language and facial expressions by mere observation (Maree et al, 2010:85). Janesick (2004:32) was of opinion that case study research enabled the educator-researcher to analyse an occurrence in depth and breadth, through observation in this instance. Also the case study was a justifiable form of social inquest.

McMillan and Schumacher (2006:317) confirmed that the case study design was evolving, and the decisions of this study hinged on preceding information. Methods such as focussed sampling, data gathering and analysis were concurrent, and interlinked instead of ensuing chronologically. Research was concentrated on a small and diverse group, also referred to as a *"single-case"* study. A natural socio-ethnic borderline and uncompromising interface encircled this group.

3.5   Sampling within context of the research

Patton (1990) in Wengraf (2001:102) defined typical case sampling as purposeful with the intent to clarify whatever was distinctive, conventional or else ordinary.
The secondary school under study was not purposefully selected based on certain features of the representative sample. Due to unforeseen circumstances the first school which was approached, based on purposeful selection, withdrew from the

study. This school gave verbal consent to conduct the study, but became very distant when the research was about to commence with data collection. The researcher's contact at the school passed away suddenly, and from thereon it seemed impossible to get hold of the principal. This school was situated in a township, the problem of absenteeism seemed rife, and these factors made this school perfect for the study.

The second school, situated in town, also provided consent subsequent to a formal meeting with the principal. All paperwork was in order. Once again I was under the impression that the research would commence soon. Unfortunately, a few weeks later it was impossible to get hold of the principal, to set a date for the research to commence as the gate-keeper only jotted down messages, and never permitted direct contact with the principal. No calls were returned in either case. From these experiences I deduced that the topic was sensitive and that school principals might be afraid that the research could lead to some heinous discovery that could embarrass the school if the findings become public. The fact that anonymity and confidentiality was promised did not allay the fear. In a certain sense, the fact that the two schools withdrew was fortuitous as it offered me the opportunity to study the phenomenon of learner absenteeism in much greater depth in my own familiar school environment.

The third parallel medium school which was approached, and where I was teaching, is also situated in town which provided me with immediate authorisation to conduct the study. The only condition relating to authorisation was a request to be provided with access to the study so that any existing policies might be amended and/or adjusted and to evaluate findings. Form the research dissemination point of view, my study enhanced the possible contribution that could be made. Months had passed since the first school has been approached and valuable hours had been spent in endeavours to find a school suitable for the study. Once clarity on the school to be used as case study was obtained, I could sample within the study school.

The sample was chosen on the basis of what I regarded as distinctive units. Units were selected in view of being the most common in the populace under examination (Bless et.al, 2013:172). In line with criterion based sampling, the school had been selected for the case study and I purposefully sampled within the school. All the members of the SMT, including the principal, were interviewed. Educators were chosen randomly based on their availability after school hours, and learners and members of the Executive Committee (prefects) had attained the age of 18 years prior to interviews being conducted. It was very difficult to get in touch with members of the SGB and to set up an interview as these parents mostly ran their own businesses and were sole proprietors. Gender did not have an influence on the selection process.

Participants forming part of the group *in casu* were chosen from a Section 21 parallel medium school situated in Gauteng East. The SASA defines a Section 21 school as a school which is responsible for the governance of its own funds. The Department of Education effects payment of funds into a school's account at commencement of each financial year. At the time of the study 680 learners had enrolled in Grades 8-12. The teaching staff consisted of 37 educators including the principal. Of this total 28 educators were state-employed, and 9 of them occupied SGB posts. These parties aim at enhancing education at school in all spheres. Interviewees were selected based on their involvement in the school either as educators, members (parents) of the SGB, members of the SMT or learners in Grades 11 or 12 (older than eighteen years). I was specifically interested in this study as a result of the fact that one of the learners was absent from school for a period of 30 days, excluding school holidays and other educators also mentioned that they had come across similar scenarios. I was fascinated by these alleged incidents and wanted to understand the *ratio* behind absenteeism and the manner in which the school deals with these occurrences.

Although the sample school compels learners to make use of their personal access cards to clock in, and granting that any absence is reflected on the class register, this method was apparently not effective enough to manage or curb daily absenteeism. As stated previously, the study was undertaken to determine how authorised and unauthorised absenteeism were managed, and if a clear distinction was made between these two forms of absenteeism.

In accordance with Wengraf (2001:95) a variety of participants gave rise to a difficulty regarding selection and other matters. In particular, social research leaned toward interest in the types of individuals, which in turn affected the question of how samples were collected. The fundamental research question, as well as questions concerning theory, influenced the nature of data that was collected from suitable individuals. Interface between the choice of individuals and how the succession of interview questions suitable for them advanced, was observable. A general description of the type of individual and criteria differentiating between good and weak examples representing the category, were vital for research resolves. On a more practical level, I had to ensure that when I selected learners, it had to include two categories of learners: those who had a record of being absent from time to time, as well as those who less frequently absent themselves from class or school days. Access to the participant, the possibility of truthfully engaging in dialogue and the ability to be outspoken were principles that necessitated consideration.

Additional deliberations included a participant's degree of experience regarding absenteeism, also their capability to communicate these understandings into words *versus* expression through action and therefore I deliberately opt not to include novice educators. It is clear from the above that I steered clear of a random choice of participants. In addition, the criteria of suitable participants had to be matched in order for participants to take part in the study. Participants were chosen so as to explain absenteeism in simple terms, in other words they had to talk about what they observed and practiced and how they reflected on these. The decisive factor was based on my knowledge of absenteeism.

A purposeful selection of participants was fundamental. This allowed for the way in which they were located and pursued as it was reflected in analyses and reporting. Any direct or indirect connection with the participants or amongst them was stipulated forthright. This facilitated non cross-examining relationships to have an influence on interview data that was produced during the conversation.
Emphasis fell on the involvement with participants, also the technique used for selecting participants as this enables the reader to understand the situation (Wengraf, 2001:95-96).

3.5.1   Purposive sampling

As indicated previously, this research made deductions from purposive sampling. Purposive sampling as stated by Patton in McMillan and Schumacher (2006:319) was "*selecting information-rich cases for study in depth*", the validation being to understand learner absenteeism. Patton (1990) in Wengraf (2001:102-103) justified how purposive sampling might well be "*information-rich*". The objective was to opt for data to be rich, as the study rested on volume and analysis of objectives. This typical case sampling was a case of purposive sampling in that it pointed out and focussed on what was distinctive, normal or just ordinary as applied in this study. Combined with critical case sampling it consented to rational sweeping statements, also extreme application of information regarding other examples. The rationale was whatever remained spot-on for one case might possibly also be spot-on for this study (Wengraf, 2001:102). Purposive sampling was applied to increase the utility of information from the small sample.

The school under study was a typical secondary school situated in a semi-urban environment. In my opinion a typical secondary school in a semi-urban area would be regarded as a school which structurally consists of an old brick building with no or limited modern alterations to the existing structures.

Palys (2008) argued that sometimes we are interested in a case because it was not unusual in any way, or so it seemed, before the study was completed. As stated by Maree *et al.*, (2010:79) qualitative research was mostly grounded within purposive sampling as was observed in this study. Sampling was flexible and ever developing until no new themes transpired from the data collected, therefore until saturation was attained.   Decisions about purposive sampling entailed more than selecting participants, other concerns included settings, cases, happenings and actions to be added to the collected data.

Maree *et al.*, (2010:79) describes stratified purposive sampling as the method of selecting participants in line with principles that were applicable to a specific research question. This sample included the participants who were concerned or those affected by how absenteeism was managed at the specific school. The size

and inclusion of different stakeholders were aimed at data saturation. A defect that was taken into consideration was that this approach could inhibit data from saturation. To prevent this from happening, a purposive sample size was selected, and directed at theoretical saturation. In brief, saturation refers to the point in the process of data collection when no other understandings, regarding the research question are brought forward by new facts. Purposive sampling turned out to be most effective when data was examined, and probing was done coinciding with data collection.

On the word of Janesick (2004:38), participants from the sample created an appreciation of their world, as it filtered through their viewpoints or as reflected through their own inhabited life encounters. Bless *et al.* (2013:172) cautioned that this style of selection was more dependent on the personal considerations of the researcher than on impartial decisive factors, which in my opinion might have lead to bias. Furthermore, granting that it was of significance, this method, time and again resulted in non-representative samples. According to McMillan & Schumacher (2006:321) a case suggested a comprehensive examination of an occurrence, and not the number of participants sampled.

Sampling by case type, was employed in this research, and focussed on typical case sampling since absenteeism is not a unique, extreme, intensive, reputational, critical, or theory based occurrence. The participants who contributed to the study were described in a way so as to attempt to protect confidentiality of data.

3.6   Data collection instruments

3.6.1 Document analysis

In order to ensure that case study research was effective, it was based on multiple sources of data collection, as stated previously. For the purpose of this research I combined document analysis mainly based on the review of applicable legislation, class registers, the Code of Conduct, term reports and whole school evaluation, through interviews. It provided qualitative data in textual format on learner absenteeism trends. I intended to give voice and meaning to the research question by analysing these documents.

3.6.2 Semi-structured interviews

I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews during my research. I planned the semi-structured interviews and opted for these interviews as I could vary the course of the interviews based on the manner in which participants responded to the questions.   An interview schedule was developed to guide me in covering the aspects I aspired for participants to share in relation to experiences regarding the challenges and consequences of absenteeism.

Not only were these research interviews founded on day-to-day conversations, it was also proficient in nature, according to Kvale (1996:5). The author (Kvale, 1996:2) defined an interview as an exchange of opinions between individuals discussing a shared interest. Arksey and Knight (1999:12) in Knight (2002:36) compiled a list of suggestions which set in-depth interviews in motion.

Firstly, I fostered high levels of reliance and conviction, and was persistent in attending to ethical concerns. I invested in interchange regarding knowledge and experience when countering questions, and also offered support. It was important to remain impartial and not to try to exert control. This research strived towards personal concern allowing for revelation on the part of the interviewee's background and pastimes. Confidence was instated in the interviewees to engage actively. Criticism on interview texts and document analysis were also requested (Knight, 2002:36).

Probing, directed at additional explanations, was a skill that needed to be employed accurately. For instance, an interviewee was asked to shed light on a specific answer to prevent me from making inaccurate assumptions. Sub-questions lead to a more thorough inquiry into any answer. Sometimes the same question was posed, using different wording. I had to be inquisitive and kept on probing. If a question wasn't answered well enough I sometimes went on to the next question and soon after I posed the same question differently. Sometimes questions were skipped and occasionally the interviewees asked to go back to answer those questions. If not, it resulted in inaccurate or emotional answers. Allowance was made for enough time

to answer the question was made, without showing any signs of impatience, and no hints at a possible answer were made (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:206). Maree *et al.*, (2010:87) agree that semi-structured interviews make allowance for the clarification of answers.

Semi-structured interviews with the principal and other participants were employed. The intention was to answer the research questions, and to generate data on the detailed view and opinion of the principal regarding the implementation of the Policy on Learner Attendance (GDE, 2002). As stated by McMillan & Schumacher (2006:204) semi-structured questions posed no alternatives from which the participant might choose a response. As a result, semi-structured questions were formulated to make allowance for personal answers. The posed questions were considered to be flexible, as mentioned above, however unambiguous in purpose. Maree *et al.*, (2010:87) review semi-structured interview schedules as outline for the course of inquest. I listened carefully to the participant's answer. Not only did it help to detect new developing fields of inquiry linked to absenteeism, these prospects were also probed and investigated.

According to McMillan & Schumacher (2006:203) interviews were in effect verbal surveys with direct interface between parties. It had benefits and weaknesses when compared to a questionnaire. This method was however accommodating because it was applied to this diverse problem and to different kinds of individuals. Voiced and unspoken conduct was taken note of during head-on interviews. Interviews also brought about a greater response value. In this instance I, as the interviewer, was perceived as an unbiased medium. This ensured that my presence did not have an influence on the interviewee's opinions or responses.

McMillan & Schumacher (2006:205) emphasised the importance of appearance during the interview. I was also well prepared and acquainted with the questions. I also endeavoured to quote some of the responses in a *verbatim* manner which ensured that the message I wanted to convey came across accurately.

3.6.2.1 Interview collection strategy

During the process of open-ended questioning I maintained professional and continued to remain focussed on specific themes. I was not influenced by the fact that participants were known to me and I ensured that I remain impartial. I was constantly aware of the fact that I had to remain detached and not to influence the participants' answers. Open ended questions had the potential to persuade participants to reveal information previously withheld, and moved them from their comfort zone. I provided participants with an opportunity to express their perceptions through these one-on-one interviews even though there was control over the line of questioning. In addition these open-ended questions were posed since they were few in number with the intent to draw viewpoints and opinions from the participants (Creswell, 2009:181) and to collect historical information. McMillan & Schumacher (2006:350) defines in-depth interviews as open-answer inquiries with the intent to gain data of participant meanings, which I endeavoured to achieve. I endeavoured to garner the reasoning underlying the answers of participants. And I also attempted to delve into new topics which could have developed outside the ambit of the set questions.

Being a good listener was of the essence, and a lack of prejudice ensured open communication. Emphasis fell on what was said, the unspoken, and body language which I have accordingly jotted down during interviews. Research was dynamic and accommodating, taking into account that situations might be unpredictable, and considering them as prospects not as risks. An unambiguous understanding of the topic under study was vital.

3.6.3 Observation

Through observation, information was recorded as it occurred, and unfamiliar features were identified. I recognized possible strains relating to structured observation. Still, it appealed to me who performed limited research since this small amount of observation time produced a great volume of notable data. In my capacity

as a participant observer I was immersed in the situation and had the insider's perspective in respect of absenteeism occurring at the school. I could bracket my own experiences, but I had a unique insider's perspective in relation to the phenomenon. In my opinion it was advantageous in that the information could be regarded as authentic. This data was informative in that it revealed outlines below the interviewee's threshold of cognizance (Knight, 2002:60). Consistent with Travers (2001:16), the hypothesis, observing ordinary things in the world around you, would qualify you to describe happenings like scientists describe events in the natural world. With practise anyone should be able to explain suppositions. Even though this wasn't a scientific project the same principles applied.

Observations needed clarification according to De Vaus (2002:9) just as explanations needed to be compared to facts. Merely collecting facts was therefore not sufficient. Besides, explanations could not be formed if testing against facts did not ensue. Sociological investigation required continuous interaction between observation and explanation, which the researcher endeavoured to pursue. Additional facts were collected to test the explanation, and to further modify the explanations. In order to generate suitable explanations, two interrelated methods were employed, namely theory construction and theory analysis. These methods did not result in other possible ways to attain sufficient theory, but rather to signify two phases with differing kick-offs. Travers (2001:80) claimed that to understand what people do at work compelled observation and repetitive conversing with participants about how they valued their everyday responsibilities.

3.6.4 Field notes

The relevant topics were explored which were awkward for participants to share initially. Field notes contained the activities of individuals at the research site and the behaviour of the participants (Creswell, 2009:179-181). I wanted to remember and record the behaviour of participants and field notes guided me herein.

I utilised field notes regarding observations and critical incidences which added value to the data. According to Knight (2002:2) field notes might develop into effective research data. Also, private writing assisted in setting up a research memory.

Janesick (2004:20) defined field notes as the process of composing explanations while leading an interview that is being recorded. These comments to the self were then interpreted based on the researcher's observation during the interview. Mason (2002:99) considered field notes as unrefined data which were constructed into a data collection, ready to be examined. It also served as evolving strategies for verbalizing the researcher's conception of the setting, alternatively it was utilised for creating and analysing critical concepts. Field notes included personal insights, understandings and involvements. It was important to determine a format concerning how field notes were logged - these notes were alphabetically listed and marked. I also dated the notes and recorded the time of the recording. McMillan & Schumacher (2006:472) reviewed field notes as data which the researcher attained through studying a participant against the real background. Mason (2002:67) concluded that qualitative interviewing was a complicated and strenuous task. In spite of this it turned out to be stimulating and gratifying.

As a researcher I employed interview protocol for recording and writing down information obtained during the interviews. Protocol involved making handwritten notes although the interviews were audiotaped, and made provision for the transcription of tapes. A brand new tablet, purchased for the sole purpose of utilisation during interviews, was defective and could not be replaced by the service provider timeously. Due to serious time constraints and in light of the fact that all interviews had already been scheduled by then, I was left with no other alternative but to make use of tape recordings.

3.7 Data collection plan

I conducted a detailed study of a secondary school from the district Ekurhuleni (D4), situated in Gauteng East. With the intention to answer the research question I assessed documents, conducted interviews and made field notes and observations as outlined previously. Travers (2001:35) avowed that research necessitates serious expertise given that any society, in this instance a school, consisted of different classes of people, including diverse pastimes and views.

Data from document analysis was assessed as a source of information and as written evidence. Knight (2002:118) included the surveying of past happenings and conditions, the inspection of the surety of claims and accounts, and interpretations in the present, as analysis of records. Even though the author warned that these records might be incomplete or difficult to understand, none of these impacted on the study *in casu*. In addition, Knight also mentioned that these witnesses tend to be prejudiced and often impart an official narrative but the researcher contended that the participants engaged in open and honest interviews.

As stated by McMillan & Schumacher (2006:426-427) historic proof included written sources conserved in chronicles, manuscript collections, public libraries or private anthologies. The authors referred to documents as accounts of prior happenings which consisted of written or printed materials. In relation to this case study I availed I myself to some of these sources. Proof of registration was regarded as statistical records and was included in this study. Word of mouth declarations were testimonies of participants who witnessed happenings of scholastic importance and these were recorded and transcribed. These declarations were connected to the phenomenon under analysis. Relics imparted information about the past, granting that they did not intentionally convey information about the past, but that it naturally formed part of the interviews. These graphic and objective strengths provided chronological support. Buildings, Figures and reports were examples of relics.

Janesick (2004:253) emphasised the importance of both verbal and body language to keep the interviewee talking or to indicate when enough information was collected. Genuine interest and clear explanation about why the interview was conducted works wonders. It was because of these comments that the researcher attempted to ensure a frank interest during interviews.

3.8   Data analysis

Data analysis was the main component of qualitative research (Henning *et al.,* 2004:140). Bassey (1999:83-84) contended that it was an extremely difficult process to analyse a substantial number of data and then to finally present it in a significant and reliable conclusion. What complicated the matter further was that I was required to illustrate how the conclusion was reached. Every situation was distinctive and should be assessed on an *ad hoc* basis.

The transcription process, although very interesting and informative, was time consuming. I attempted to transcribe interviews as soon as possible after the interview had been conducted while the specific issues raised by the participant were still fresh in my memory. I had to listen to the interviews more than once to ensure that all the detail was captured and to ensure that the transcription was a verbatim account of all interviews. Information could represent primary information and therefore I gathered it directly from the participants under study. Secondary material, or indirect interpretations of the participants written by others, resulted in another form of information. It was imperative to take note of this difference in material, according to Creswell (2009:183).

Upon successful transcription of the interviews and once I was satisfied that the transcriptions were complete and without errors, I was fully equipped to commence with analysis of the data (Henning *et al.*, 2004:80). Creswell (2009:151-153), also provided valuable information to the researcher for purposes of analysing and interpreting the data.

The analysis process was regarded as the "heartbeat" of the research and displayed the quality of thinking of the researcher (Henning *et al.*, 2004:103). Without discussing the different phases and types of qualitative data analysis it is important to note that I mainly utilised content analysis which focussed on comprehending the data to form an overview, consequent coding and categorising and finally writing and presenting data and related themes (Henning *et al.*, 2004:138). I read through all the interviews after transcription to become familiar with the contents and thereafter I commenced with coding and development of themes by writing the main themes down on spaces allocated next to hard copies of the interviews.

Through this process I was able to express an understanding of the transcribed interviews. The fact that I was solely responsible for each and every transcription ensured that I stayed close to the data and transition from the spoken word to written format was an elementary task (Henning *et al.,* 2004:105).

Through coding I labelled the data into meaningful segments which consequently lead to grouping and/or categorising of data. The different codes eventually formed certain categories which highlighted certain themes deducted from the data. This is regarded as an essential characteristic of the qualitative content analysis which in the final instance enabled me to become aware of the complete picture of the research (Henning *et al.,* 2004:105-106). Creswell (2009:218) labelled this process as data transformation. He further encouraged researchers to analyse the data in such a manner that it might highlight codes that researchers were likely to establish and which were based on general knowledge. These codes should also emphasise interesting information which hadn't been anticipated at commencement of the study and should also emphasise codes which were not usual and which were of theoretical value to readers. Finally, he emphasised the need for codes which focussed on hypothetical aspects of research (Creswell 2009:186-187). I came across interesting codes in this regard. Some themes were often repeated by the participants and some themes were mentioned once. I attempted to capture both.

Even though analysis of data was aimed at setting certain patterns or themes, the impact of interpretation should not be excluded as analysis contained a large component of explanatory measures.

3.9 Components of trustworthy research

For purposes of this study I adopted the same distinction as Guba (1981) in Maree *et al.*, (2010:123) to ensure that my research was of a trustworthy nature: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. Trustworthiness seemed to be one of the most important ingredients of qualitative research (Nieuwenhuis in Maree *et al.*, 2010:123). Conversely, trustworthiness related to the principle of truthfulness of a case study (Bassey, 2009:75).

3.9.1 Credibility

Nieuwenhuis in Maree *et al.* (2010:123) stated that credibility was concerned with answering questions relating to findings in respect of research. Was it possible to draw a parallel between findings and real life? How would these findings be

accepted by the public? In an attempt to guarantee, as far as reasonably possible, I mainly focussed on development of a research design which aimed at a combination of purposive sampling, well organised data collection methods and triangulation. As stated by Nieuwenhuis in Maree *et al.* (2010: 121) triangulation or crystallisation enabled me to grasp the phenomenon of absenteeism on a more difficult and profound level as a result of the use of different data collection methods. Data sources represented the phenomena from which data could be generated (Mason, 2002:51). As stated above, trustworthiness and credibility form the main constructs. Since this phenomenon is poorly researched, data sources were vital. With the intention to saturate data, everybody who was affected by absenteeism had to be interviewed. The degrees to which their input was triangulated determined their participants' trustworthiness and credibility. This design required wide and deep examination in exploring absenteeism in all its manifestations.

Due to the fact that participants were known to me, I managed to acquaint myself with them prior to conducting of interviews and I relied quite extensively on file notes and member checks to ensure that the research resembled credibility.

This component might also include actions like challenging of findings by a colleague, checking of data against sources and provision of sufficient audit trails relating to the case study (Bassey, 2009:75-76). Henning *et al.* (2004:149) continued to emphasise the importance of communication during the validation process. Research participants were questioned about the validity of my research data which is a well-known measure to qualitative researchers. This process was preferable to appointing an independent person to validate research findings.

3.9.2 Transferability

Nieuwenhuis in Maree *et al.* (2010:123-124) averred that the purpose of transferability was to provide readers with a basis to establish a link between the research done and their own perceptions and/or research. A researcher should avail him/herself of thick description and purposeful sampling in order to safeguard transferability. In this regard I have provided insight to prospective readers of the context of the research, the interviews conducted and the design in respect of the

research so that they may reach their own conclusions in respect of the potential transferability of the study. In the second instance I selected the participants carefully whether they were in fact representative of the whole community/population.

3.9.3 Dependability

Dependability could be associated with reliability. Essentially, the process followed, in respect of the research design and subsequent implementation thereof, should be comprehensive enough so that any other person would be in a position to comprehend how I derived at certain conclusions (Nieuwenhuis in Maree *et al.*, 2010:124). In order to comply with this requirement I labelled all documents and data, categorised findings and ensured that I kept hard copies of all documents, field notes, interviews and other information.

Dependability mainly referred to the process to ensure that data collected was precise and reliable. The term validity related to the accuracy of data presented by the researcher from an internal perspective i.e. the researcher concluded valid inferences from the data collection process (Maree *et al.*, 2010:299-300.

3.9.4 Confirmability

For reasons stated previously I could easily have become biased during the currency of the research. I had to ensure that I remained impartial so that I could present an accurate and true account of what transpired during interviews (Nieuwenhuis in Maree *et al.*, 2010:125). To illustrate conflicting views expressed by participants I often quoted their opinions *verbatim.* My description of participants and the setting of the town in which the research took place also required a very distinctive choice of words so that confidentiality was not compromised at any stage.

A case study relates to the study of a single subject which has been chosen by the researcher as a result of personal interest. The researcher aspired that the research might evoke the same response from its readers and therefore validity was not that important (Bassey, 2009:74-75).

In line with this case study, Maree *et al.* (2010:300) warned that based on the perceptions of selected interviewees the purpose was not to generalise the outcome of the study.

3.10   Ethical considerations

According to Kvale (1996:110) ethical concerns should be taken into account from commencement of the research to completion of the final report. I adhered to these guidelines for the duration of this study.

For purposes of this study I applied and obtained approval to proceed with fieldwork in respect of this specific study from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria. Similarly, the GDE was then approached and clearance was obtained to conduct the research within the designated district. (Appendix "A") In the final instance I liaised with the sample school and obtained permission from the SGB on behalf of the principal and the SMT to conduct research. (Appendix "B") Participants were required to provide consent to the proposed study. In order to ensure that participants took an informed decision relating to partaking in the study, I prepared a comprehensive form of consent. (Appendix "C") This official document *inter alia* made participants aware of the purpose of the study, the fact that they could withdraw at any stage of the process, and the fact that their anonymity were guaranteed. Prior to signing participants were requested to read the form of consent, ask possible questions relating to this study and/or process and finally to sign the form and to give informed consent to become part of the study.

Prior to commencement of interviews I undertook not to reveal the identity of participants to anyone and I also scheduled meetings without providing reasons to other learners and/or colleagues as to why certain people engaged in activities at my classroom. I gave participants the assurance that everything they revealed would be dealt with in a confidential manner and that I also had to adhere to certain principles from a confidential point of view.

I assured participants that the focus would be on privacy, confidentiality and the anonymity of all participants. Participants were advised that even the presentation of the results of the study would be made public without revealing the identity of participants. It is for this reason that I will destroy the tapes upon expiry of the prescribed period for storage.

3.11   Limitations of the study

The study focussed on only one secondary school situated in a semi-urban environment. As a result this study does not cater for possible permutations of other schools. In addition, the school was located in the larger urban node of Gauteng and did not reflect on rural challenges, etc.

In light of the fact that research was conducted at a school situated in a semi-urban area, the findings contained herein will be less applicable to schools in rural areas. As stated the school was adjacent to an industrialised urban node and the findings might be of limited application to farming communities. Based on the fact that research was conducted at a secondary school, the data could relate more to adolescents than to younger age groups.

3.12   Conclusion

This chapter outlined the research design which was utilised for the study. It also described the methodology of data collection employed. The manner in which the case study school and participants were elected was also discussed against the background of qualitative data collection strategies. Chapter 4 will be devoted to a detailed presentation of data collected.

CHAPTER 4

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1   Introduction

This chapter aimed at the explanation of the manner in which the case study secondary school managed learner absenteeism. This chapter commences with a description of the case study school and avers that the management of absenteeism was distinctive in relation to many secondary schools in South Africa.

I then endeavoured to examine the school's policy framework regarding learner absenteeism by utilising official documents collected from the case study school. These were then juxtaposed to the very descriptive detail obtained from educators and management in terms of how they managed the occurrence of absenteeism. Collectively, these sets of information were termed as the official policy of the school. These were then pitted against the rich data obtained from learners in terms of their own views on absenteeism. Accordingly, the next chapter will provide an exposition of my conclusions as based on the rich and varied data obtained.

From the above it is therefore evident that the analysis was connected to the aim of this study. In attempting to answer every research question, focus might well have fallen on the primary problem of the study (Bassey, 1999:83). Following collection of the data as envisaged above, the main purpose was then to collect raw data and following analysis, it was converted into findings which illuminated the problem statement.

In short, a total of 26 interviews were conducted and the participants included learners, educators and the management of the school. The interviews, as will be demonstrated, enabled me to obtain data saturation.

4.2 The case study school

4.2.1 Historical overview

a) From the past to the present

The case study school was situated in a residential area in the Gauteng Province. The history of the school could be mapped out to the early 1900's, the year in which the school was founded, initially as a primary school. The first Standard 7 (Grade 9) learners enrolled at the school during the 1930's, and during the middle 1930's the number of learners increased to 600. During the course of 1940 the school converted into an Afrikaans medium school. The next transformation was into a Junior High School which also resembled a decrease in the number of learners to 186 during 1943. Towards the end of 1940 the school received high school status. The name was officially changed during the middle 1960's, and is still used at present. Given the current political scenario in South Africa the school was instructed by the GDE during March 2015 to embark on a process to change the name of the school. It is pertinent that the name has to be in line with our South African history.

Being granted the status of a Model C school in 1992, it however regained its status as a Departmental School after a period of four years. In 1995 the school became a parallel medium school. This school is categorised as a Quintile 5 school. Within the South African public schools system, schools are categorised into 5 quintiles. This categorisation is mainly done for financial purposes. A Quintile 1 school is regarded as the poorest school as opposed to a Quintile 5 which is considered to be the least poor.

Consistent with school records the school had 680 learners enrolled in Grade 8 -12 at the time of the study. The teaching staff consisted of 37 educators, including the principal - 28 were state-employed, and 9 educators held SGB posts. The SGB was a statutory body and consisted of educators, non-teaching staff and learners who all aimed at enhancing effectiveness at school. Accordingly, the last mentioned educators were employed by the school and remunerated from school funds (NEEDU School Evaluation Report, 2014:4-7).

b)   Internal operation of the case study school

From an architectural point of view it might be noted that the structure of the school was typified as a double storey red brick building. The building consisted of 32 classrooms, a staffroom, the principal's office, two administrative offices, a hall plus male and female ablution facilities positioned in the main building. Ablution facilities for learners made provision for 15 toilets each for boys and girls alike.

On extra-curricular level the sports field was suitably sized for the sporting needs of the learners and accommodated sporting activities such as athletics, rugby, hockey and cricket. At present the indoor sport facility, situated on the school premises, is utilised as a cricket academy.

In recent times, and in line with demanding security requirements, the school was securely fenced with palisade fencing, and entering to and exiting the school property were enabled with remote controlled gates.

Maintenance of the school was overseen and delegated by management and was to a large extent reliant on sponsorships from the community. Workers in the employ of the GDE were responsible for cleaning the school buildings and premises. Within the educational sphere departmental schools were responsible for maintaining the school premises from limited school funds to their avail. Alternatively, these schools might opt to wait upon GDE to provide funds for upgrading purposes. Unfortunately, due to the backlog relating to capital projects, schools might elect to expedite upgrades by raising their own funds for this purpose.

Against this background of the school and because of limited funding from the GDE and/or sponsors, the structure had become neglected over the years and maintenance was necessitated as it was in an appalling condition. Since the roofs weren't watertight it resulted in leakage. This caused additional damage to the ceilings, electronic apparatus and learning resources in the teaching space. Pillar points were severely damaged and asbestos wall panels were fractured. It was evident that the roof slabs over the staircases in the main building and the upper tier, required urgent renovation. It appeared as if the building is in a state of deterioration. The floor in the hall was also in the process of lifting, due to water damage. Consequently, this building posed severe safety hazards and health risks.

The library/learning centre was operative and was supervised by a knowledgeable educator. The science laboratory and computer centres were also functional. Books were stored in both classrooms and small storerooms, however, shortcomings included a lack of furniture, and chairs were in short supply. Chalkboards were sufficient for teaching purposes and the school lately had installed eight electronic smart boards recently which had been sponsored.

The school was unable to run a formal feeding scheme (nutrition programme) because of numerous reasons. At the time of the study sandwiches were made available to nearly 60 learners who come from a poverty stricken background. These were distributed daily during first break as to avoid loss of instruction and learning time. The deputy principal managed the programme in a manner that did not offend or embarrass any learner. The process followed in this regard was that packaging of these sandwiches conformed to those being sold at the tuck shop, so that fellow learners might not even notice that poor learners were accommodated.

Parents and educators donated and delivered ready prepared sandwiches to the tea lady on a daily basis. In turn, she toasted the sandwiches to be in line with the sandwiches sold at the tuck shop, and the deputy principal collected these before first break so that she could distribute these in the privacy of her office. The reason for this measure was to furthermore ensure that every affected learner only received one sandwich, as some learners had in the past indulged in more, leaving other learners hungry for the entire day, which defeated the purpose (NEEDU School Evaluation Report, 2014:5-6).

The case study school not only focussed on academic education, sport and culture, but also strived to prepare and equip learners for the future. From an academic point of view the Grade 12 learners obtained a total of 52 distinctions during the 2014 NCS (District Gauteng East) examination. Only 5 out of 121 Grade 12 learners failed the official examination and the passing rate was therefore 95.86%. The group average obtained was 58%. Only 31.89% of the individuals obtained admission to university while 57.75% managed to qualify for studies at post-school institutions.

Eisteddfods, debate competitions and choir festivals formed the basis of cultural activities in which learners could partake. Rugby, cricket, athletics, chess, hockey, tennis, netball, golf, "jukskei" and cross country set out the platform for sport at the case study school. Under the new principal's auspices the school had endeavoured to improve sporting and cultural achievements over the past few years. Individual learners managed to obtain provincial colours on random occasions, but in general the school's performance in respect of these activities had been average.

To summarise: the case study school was typical of the average suburban school. It was neither a high achievement school nor was it a dysfunctional school; it was average in size and offered the typical suit of extramural activities and performing on average in all sporting codes. This profile made it an excellent case to subject to an intensive study of learner absenteeism and the management thereof.

4.2.2 Social concerns

The school was situated in a small gold mining town in the Gauteng Province. The focus was therefore on mining activities but the town was also renowned for its heavy industries. The town fell within the ambit of the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality which was established in 2000. Within this district unemployment and levels of poverty were extremely high and the people were not in close proximity to employment opportunities and social facilities (Statistical Services of SA, 2014). Parents/guardians are mainly employed at mines, heavy industries or within the automotive industry. However, the parents/guardians were aware of the importance of education.

The quality of education and learning at the case study school were directly affected by social issues, within the classroom and externally. Social issues included, but were not limited to, cases of bullying, safety risks and/or teenage pregnancy.

Access to the school was regulated and the grounds were fenced off with palisades and remote controlled gates, as stated above. This was an attempt to secure the safety of educators and learners. Each learner had a personal access card which warranted entry to and from the premises. The clock-in system was effective to

censor learner movement into and out of the school grounds during the school day. An electronic print-out could be made available to management when requested, in an attempt to monitor attendance. Cutting-edge electronic equipment (CCTV) not only protected the building, but also enabled the principal to monitor learners within the classroom from a monitor which had been installed in his office.

Teenage pregnancy, as a social concern, impacted on school attendance. Precautionary measures were therefore taken to limit teenage pregnancy in that the deputy principal had been tasked to alert learners to the aftereffects thereof, as teenage pregnancy had specifically been included in the national curriculum relating to Life Orientation in the FET phase. Born2Care, a local, non-profit organisation provided support to expectant mothers in the form of counselling as well baby products and/or supplies. Other interested parties and social workers joined forces and also provided support to pregnant mothers. In line with GDE's policy, expectant mothers are permitted to attend school until the eighth month of pregnancy and return to school as soon as possible after delivery.

Another social issue which impacted on attendance at the case study school was substance abuse. Abuse of illegal substances, like cocaine or heroin, hardly ever occurred among the learners, but the abuse of dagga did occur in certain cases. During the course of 2013, ten had learners tested positive for dagga. An offense of this nature had major consequences. The manner in which the school dealt with this form of abuse was stipulated in the Code of Conduct and in the school prospectus, the contents of which will be discussed herein.

Even though this form of abuse did not form part of this study, it was interesting to know that should the school become aware of the fact that a learner might have abused drugs, the first step following suspicion of drug abuse, was to notify the parents/guardians. Secondly, the suspected learner was subjected to a drug test at a cost of R104 which was to be paid by the learner. Should the results be negative the R104 would be refunded to the learner. On the other hand, should the outcome be positive it was considered to be a serious contravention of the Code of Conduct. Depending on evidence gathered regarding the alleged abuse, this behaviour could result in permanent expulsion. This process necessitated involvement of all stakeholders comprising of possible witnesses, parents/guardians and the South African Police Service (NEEDU School Evaluation Report, 2014:6-7).

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4.3 Overview of the data

The learner attendance profiles are set out in Graphs 4.1, 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4. These graphs depict the incidence of learner absenteeism in the case study school per grade and gender.

Graph 4.1: Learner attendance – 2nd quarter 2014
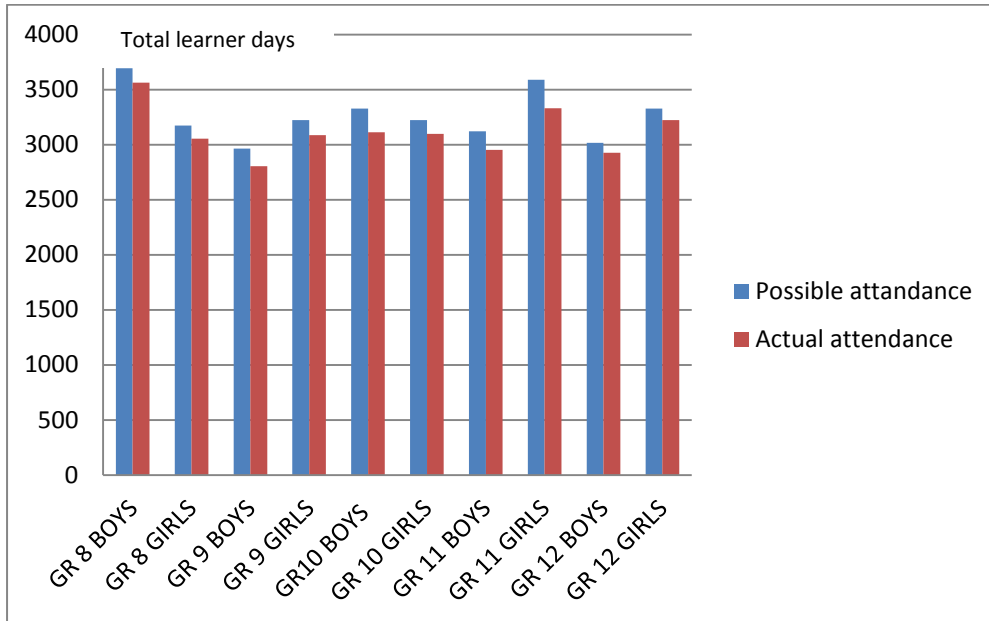
Graph 4.2: Learner absenteeism 2nd quarter 2014
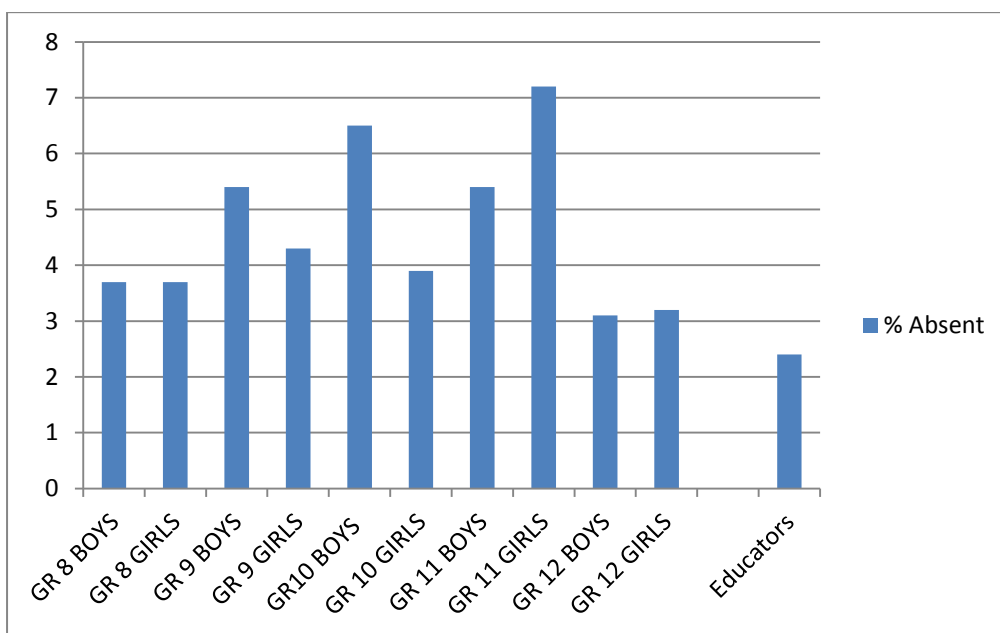
Graph 4.3: Learner absenteeism comparison 2013 and 2014
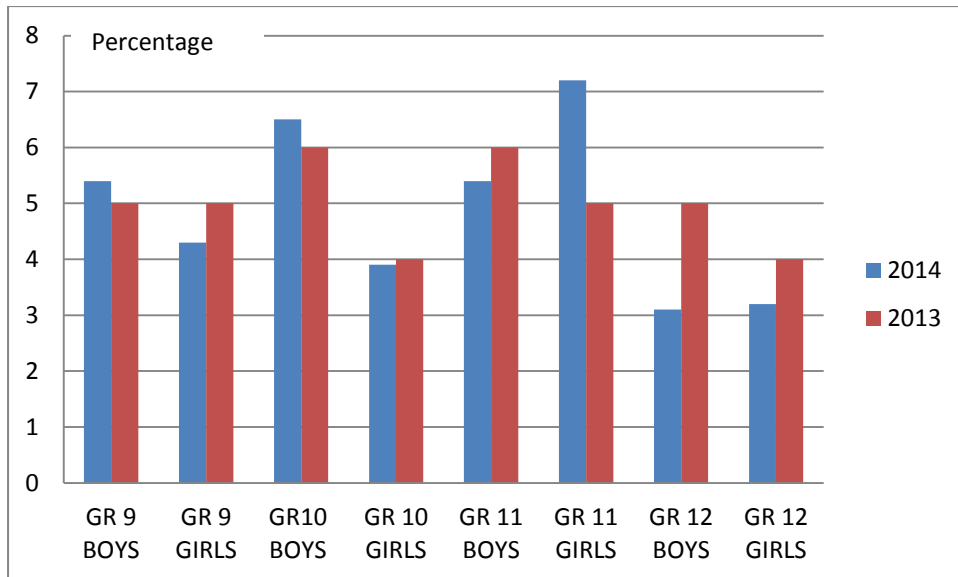
Graph 4.4: Learner absenteeism comparison four quarters 2013 and 2014
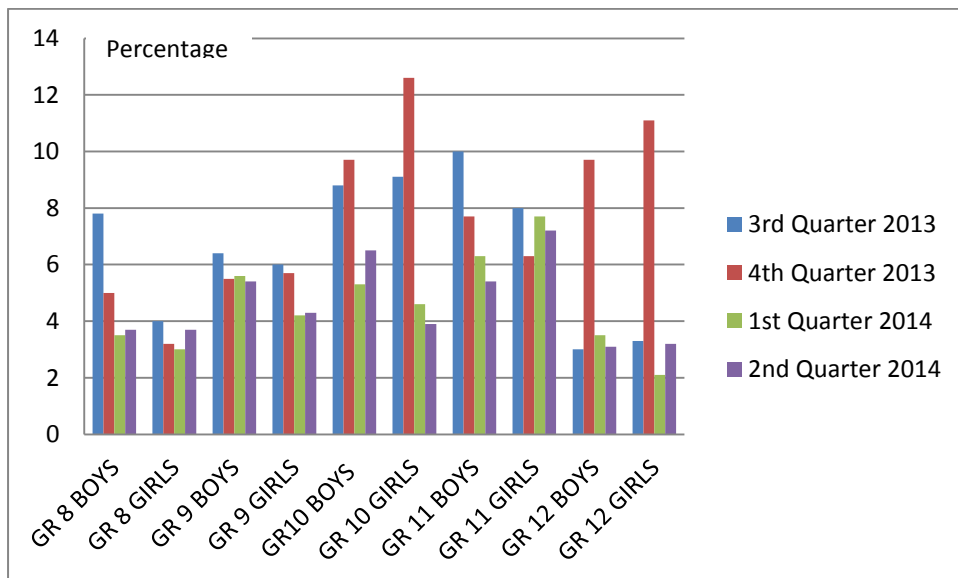
From the above graphs, based on data from the school register for the period 2013-2014, the following deductions could be made:

- Learners attended school more frequently in 2013 than in 2014 depicting a clear decline in school attendance during 2014.

- The fourth quarter of 2013 was categorised by the highest incidence of absenteeism compared to other quarters.

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- During 2013 and 2014, Grade 10 girls showed a greater incidence of absenteeism.
- In general it seemed as if girls were absent from school more often than boys.

As stated previously this seemed to correspond with the claim made by Barnes that of nine million girls aged between 13 and 19 years in South Africa, "*80% of those were missing a week of school every month*..." (Cook,2014). Research has also revealed the majority of less fortunate girls might miss up to 50 days of annual schooling due to the lack of access to adequate sanitary protection (The Imbumba Foundation, 2015).

4.4 How did the school deal with absenteeism?

4.4.1 Official policy of the school – the Code of Conduct

The school had adopted the Code of Conduct for the learners of the school. Each enrolled learner was annually issued with a diary for a specific year which incorporated the school's Code of Conduct. The heads of department in collaboration with members of the SGB and other educators, drafted the said Code of Conduct which formed an integral part of the diary. It speaks for itself that every edition contained the most recent and relevant rules and/or principles as was reworked by all stakeholders, to ensure that an updated version was published on an annual basis. Every learner was obliged to sign an undertaking at the beginning of the year to acknowledge the fact that educators had explained the contents of the Code of Conduct to them and that they undertook to adhere to the provisions thereof. Parents/guardians were then required to countersign the said undertaking (Code of Conduct, 2015).

This document aimed at setting out disciplinary rules which were crucial to school discipline. The Code of Conduct had to be adhered to by all the learners. The Code of Conduct was in line with the spirit and objectives of democracy and partnership within the education environment. It had been adopted by the SGB and in essence this document governed the relationship between learners, educators and related parties. The Code of Conduct prescribed disciplinary measures in instances where

learners made themselves guilty of misconduct. The underlying idea of the Code of Conduct was to regulate school discipline and to enhance quality teaching and learning.   Disciplinary warnings and other corrective measures relating to punishment, especially the more serious forms of misconduct, for example suspension and expulsion, were addressed (Code of Conduct, 2015). The manner in which the school dealt with cases of misconduct was also set out i.e. reporting, investigating and resolving these cases internally and in conjunction with input from the GDE, and were recorded.

The Code of Conduct *inter alia* dealt with the following: the school's vision and mission and general policy relating to authority, conflict management, guidelines for parents/guardians, parents and the school, code of conduct for educators, code of conduct for learners, school policy and school rules, informal school functions, dress code transgressions and general organisational guidelines regarding school discipline (Code of Conduct, 2015).   The section relating to general organisational guidelines regarding school discipline, addressed absenteeism specifically. The Code of Conduct reiterated that: *"Learners should report to school on time every day."* In addition to this provision contemplated in the Code of Conduct additional provisions in line with the SASA govern absenteeism at the case study school (Code of Conduct, 2015: 10-11)

From the outset it was stated that learners were required to report to school timeously on a daily basis. It was specifically mentioned that all learners who arrived late at school had to report to relevant Heads of Department or Deputy Heads of Grades. The Code of Conduct made it very clear that only written consents from parents/guardians would be accepted should learners have to leave the school grounds during school hours. In this regard it was imperative that parents/guardians provided the school with written requests prior to/or on the said day of the learner's absence. The Code of Conduct stipulated that only parents/guardians were allowed to fetch learners from school. Parents/guardians also needed to sign a note at the administrative office and the school might request the parent/guardian to provide proof of identity when fetching the learner.

Should a learner fall seriously ill during school hours, the school would ensure that medical assistance was provided in instances where the parent/guardian could not be reached or was unable to fetch the learner from school. In instances where learners fell ill the school would contact the parent/guardian, depending on the circumstances, to fetch the learner from school. This guideline provided for the fact that learners might not attempt to reach their parents/guardians telephonically and that the school insisted on liaising with parents/guardians.

Learners might only be excused from an exam or a test if they were able to provide a valid medical certificate or another form of evidence relating to severe trauma resulting in absenteeism. Should learners be absent they were required to submit a valid, original letter from their parents/guardians or relevant institution to the educator upon their return to the school. The Code of Conduct emphasised the fact that learners and parent/guardians were encouraged to schedule extra-curricular appointments after school hours, as far as was reasonably possible.

All learners were to be present during class periods unless a learner obtained valid authorisation from a Head of Department ("HOD") or educator in which instances the official school diary had to be signed to record authorisation. The Code of Conduct even governed appointments with the principal, deputy principal, HOD's and/or educators in that it clearly stated that only prior arranged appointments would allow a learner with an opportunity to meet with any one of these.

The Code of Conduct was aligned with the contents of the SASA in that it referred to instances where learners were still compelled to be present at school. In terms of subsection (1) a HOD was entitled to, in instances where a learner hadn't been enrolled and/or hadn't been attending school on a regular basis, look into the reasons for the learner's absence. The HOD could then engage in measures to remedy the learner's absence and to provide the parent/guardian with a written notice that he/she was required to ensure compliance with subsection (1). The Code of Conduct reiterated the provisions of the SASA and other applicable laws in the way absenteeism was dealt with. It clearly drew the parent/guardian's attention to the penalties which could be imposed should a parent/guardian be guilty of non-

compliance. Any parent/guardian negating or lacking compliance with the conditions of subsection (1) as notified in writing by the school, would be guilty of transgression. The result could be imprisonment for no longer than six months or the parent/guardian could be fined, which was seldom enforced. Also, any other person who, without valid motivation, prevented a learner from attending school would be guilty of the said contravention, and if found guilty could be fined or imprisoned for no longer than six months.

4.4.2 Correctional and punitive system

The Code of Conduct endorsed "misconduct" as defined in the SASA. In terms of Section 9(3) misconduct by a learner extended to misconduct on school grounds, irrespective of its occurrence during or after school hours. Misconduct by a learner might also take place during any school activity, whether it took place on or outside school grounds and during or after school hours. Section 9(3)(c) of the SASA listed the following activities as misconduct, namely, any activity while either wearing the school uniform or not, and whether on the school premises or not, which might result in: an activity which might detriment the school's reputation, which may obstruct the proper functioning of the school in all areas, which restricted a school activity in its optimal functioning, which might prevent any person in the exercise of his/her constitutionally enshrined rights to picket, assemble or demonstrate in his/her capacity as member of a community and finally any other activity which a school might prohibit in its code. The Schools Act further distinguished between two types of misconduct in that Schedule 1 to the Act addressed serious misconduct that may lead to suspension of a learner, while Schedule 2 focussed on serious misconduct that might ultimately result in a learner being expelled from school.

The Code of Conduct *in casu* asserts that "*a learner is guilty of serious misconduct if he/she plays truant.*" For purposes of this study truancy was the equivalent of absenteeism. It was therefore clear that absenteeism, in light of the above definition of misconduct in terms of Section 9(3) of the SASA, fell within the realm of an activity which the school might prohibit in its code.

The Code of Conduct divided misbehaviour into three levels. Level 1 referred to less serious but unacceptable behavioural contraventions of the Code of Conduct. Due to the fact that absenteeism was not regarded as a minor contravention of the Code of Conduct, Level 1 contraventions was only explained briefly. A typical example of misconduct which could be classified as a Level 1, was misdemeanours which ranged from the copying of homework from fellow learners, to back chatting by learners in respect of dress code contraventions. Another example would be when learners arrived late for school. The process to be followed in instances where learners might be guilty of Level 1 misconduct were not discussed in full, suffice to say that it was usually preceded by three written warnings. A Form C (Appendix "D") would be completed for all three levels of transgressions.

This form contained information relating to the date, place and nature of the alleged conduct for purposes of identifying the specific incident in order to enable the learner to respond to the allegations contained therein. After completion of the form by the educator, the learner was provided with an opportunity to object to the allegations in writing prior to the signing thereof. The form was then processed by the HOD which his/her discretion, based on the evidence, made the final decision regarding the punitive measure to be enforced.

Transgressions on Level 2 were considered to be of a more serious nature and ranged from acts of assault, immorality, and theft to sexual harassment and absenteeism. It also included repeated Level 1 transgressions i.e. where a learner had repeated Level 1 contraventions thrice. As a result of the fact that absenteeism might fall within the ambit of a Level 2 contravention, the procedure to be followed in this regard, would be addressed. A Form D (Appendix "E") was completed by the HOD, who purported to act as an investigating official, and contained proof of the alleged transgression by the learner. This transgression was directed to the principal for an internal hearing. The HOD acted as a prosecuting functionary. Level 2 appeals against corrective measures could only be lodged with the SGB.

As contemplated above, transgressions on Level 2 included more serious offences than Level 1. A Level 2 transgression included unauthorised absenteeism from school and absence from class without permission. Accordingly, this Level 2

transgression would then result in a hearing by the Disciplinary Committee of the school instigated by a senior educator. Sufficient evidence regarding a learner's absenteeism has to be proved. The information and/or evidence accumulated in a Form C were regarded as the official document for purposes of formulating the alleged contravention.

The principal was informed of the *status quo* by way of a notice after a learner had been summoned to appear at a disciplinary hearing. A Disciplinary Committee would be appointed to hear the claims of serious misconduct wherein the investigating officer acted as the prosecuting functionary. The Disciplinary Committee usually consisted of two persons who were elected from members of senior management or relatively qualified persons. The committee was bound by the following: the principal or deputy principal acted as chair and the remaining member had to be from senior management. No person related to the accused learner or the case in question, could be assigned to the committee.

In order to provide the learner with an opportunity to prepare for the hearing and to investigate the transgression the learner was charged with, a written warning would be served on the learner which would notify him of the hearing. It was imperative that the written warning reached the learner at least two days prior to the hearing. Detailed facts regarding the date, place and a description of the suspected transgression enabled the learner to respond to the accusations. Furthermore, it was informative as to when the hearing was to be held, and advised the learner of his/her rights based on the Code of Conduct. A parent/guardian could assist the learner for the duration of the hearing. If it was not viable or possible for the learner to rely on input from a parent/guardian, the principal could appoint another learner or educator or parent to support the learner in this regard. The accused learner was allowed to make use of an interpreter to overcome language barriers, and evidence was presented under oath or by affirmation according to the law.

During the hearing the chairperson of the Disciplinary Committee questioned the learner about the charges relating to absenteeism after the prosecuting functionary had read the written charge sheet to the learner. Depending on whether the learner denied or plead guilty to the charges of absenteeism, different procedures could be

followed. Should a learner be found not guilty in relation to the charge of absenteeism, the verdict could be made public to the school. Should the learner however, be found guilty as charged corrective measures in line with the Disciplinary Code would be enforced *in lieu* of the verdict.

Should a learner decide to appeal against a verdict, a Form D had to be completed by the learner within 24 hours. A supporting document containing objections to the appeal had to be attached to Form D, and the prosecuting functionary ought to motivate why the appeal should be successful or be dismissed. Subject to any alternative directive of the chairperson, lodging of an appeal would result in a sentence being suspended temporarily. The chairperson of the SGB and the chair of the Disciplinary Committee relied on all documentation for purposes of deciding on an outcome. Within a period of 2 days the principal notified the parent/guardian of the decision.

Level 3 transgressions should be dealt with in accordance with Schedule 1 and Schedule 2 to the SASA. Based on the differentiation of these two schedules discussed above, a decision would be made by the Disciplinary Committee. Repeated transgressions and being guilty of a Level 2 transgression could bring about a Level 3 hearing.

It should be kept in mind that punishment for transgressions in respect of all three levels should always be weighed against the best interest of the learner, which was of paramount importance. What made punishment so difficult was that, even though a corrective measure should be implemented, a learner's right to education had to not be compromised. If a learner had been found guilty of playing truant i.e. being absent from school and in other words not being able to benefit from education, suspension might deprive him/her of one of his/her basic constitutional rights. The underlying principle of punishment should therefore be of a corrective nature, taking all considerations, which might impact on the learner's rights, into account.

In instances where learners had been found guilty of absenteeism, disciplinary measures had been enforced by the principal or the SGB. Measures relating to punishment included suspension from leadership positions, temporary expulsion

from all school activities for up to a period of seven days or transfer by the Department of Education to another school. The principal was responsible for this disciplinary course of action and accordingly liaised with the SGB in this regard. After receipt of this notice from the principal, the chair of the SGB formed a Disciplinary Committee on behalf of the SGB, which was mandated to pass a sentence. A learner had to be given written notice of at least 10 school days prior to the hearing taking place. Sentencing in all aspects followed the procedure as set out in respect of a Level 2 hearing.

Should the only alternative be to expel a learner in accordance with Section (9) (1)(e) of the SASA, the learner would be suspended for a period of seven school days during which the final decision of the provincial head of the Department of Education would be awaited. Within 24 hours of the SGB's decision, the head of department of the Gauteng Department of Education ("GDE") had to be notified in writing of the planned ruling. Consequently, the suspension would be effective immediately, except when the head of department of the GDE orders to the contrary.

With regard to an appeal against measures to be invoked, parents/guardians/legal representatives had to file a written notice within 14 days. It had to contain punctilious grounds for the appeal and had to be directed to the head of department of the Department of Education. Unless the head of department of the GDE directed otherwise, measures handed down by the DC would be postponed pending the final ruling. Within 5 days of receiving the notice, the head of department of the GDE had to be issued with proof of all evidence, record of witnesses and findings of the DC. The prosecutor and DC might act in response by mentioning reasons why the appeal had to be repudiated. A date for an Appeal Hearing was set by the head of department of the GDE within 14 days after receiving the notice. Throughout the period of appeal, the participant i.e. the learner, would only be allowed to speak to the HOD of the GDE. The outcome of the appeal, as examined by the Executive Council of the GDE, could then be unsuccessful or alternatively, the sentence could be reduced. Should the participant then be found not guilty all concerned parties would be informed in writing. However, the verdict by the provincial head of the GDE, regarding expulsion, was final.

In the event of suspension as corrective measure, Section 9(1)(c) prescribed a different procedure to be followed. A written notice of 7 days prior to the hearing was required. In consideration of potential suspension of a learner, parents/guardians/legal representatives were notified of the right to appeal. Appeal against the ruling in respect of corrective measures had to be submitted within 24 hours to the chair of the SGB. Upon receipt of the appeal, sentences passed by the Disciplinary Committee of the SGB were deferred for the moment until a verdict was reached. The chair of the SGB and the Disciplinary Committee were provided with three days upon receipt of the notice of appeal to dismiss the appeal, to pass down a reduced sentence or to settle on the fact that the learner had not been at fault. The verdict of the SGB in this regard, was final.

4.5   Case study

4.5.1 Overview of participants of the case study

The sample included a variety of male and female participants ranging between the ages of 18 to 64 years. Participants included the SMT which consisted of the 2 deputy principals, 5 Heads of Departments and the principal. In addition 7 female educators were interviewed and 1 male member of the SGB. It was to be noted that the school's representative on the SGB had already been interviewed during this case study in his capacity as HOD.

In order to obtain a clear understanding of absenteeism from the learners' perspective, it was decided to interview the president of the Executive Council (prefects) and 3 boys and 7 girls above the age of 18 years, and learners provided their written consent to form part of the study. Due to the fact that some of the learner participants had repeated a school year they were interviewed although they were only in Grade 11. The remaining participants took part in the study because they had already reached the age of 18 years at the time of the interviews.

The objective of the interviews was to preserve spoken responses and to adhere to the validity and credibility. Not a single participant withdrew from the study. The intention was to reveal the personal experiences and perceptions of the participants regarding absenteeism, possible effects and the management thereof.

Interviews were conducted through the English medium even though the majority of interviewees listed Afrikaans as their home language, with the exception of one participant who identified an African language as his/her language of preference.

Participants were interviewed on the school premises in the researcher's classroom. Only one participant had to be interviewed at alternative premises due to load shedding and the fact that the interview had to be recorded.

The interview with the principal was conducted in the privacy of his office. Due to the fact that the principal was required to attend various activities after school, it was decided to utilise the researcher's 2 free periods between 2 breaks in order to conduct the interview without disturbance. All the other remaining interviews were conducted after school hours and lasted for 45 minutes to an hour. Most of the interviews commenced at 14:15 which enabled participants to still attend extra-curricular activities. From a timing perspective it was important to note that interviews were conducted during the third term of 2014. Managing the interviews was an extremely easy task in that all participants arrived on time for interviews and that only one participant had to postpone his/her interview due to unforeseen circumstances.

The participants were relaxed and eager to share their experiences in relation to absenteeism and how it impacted on them individually. Notably some of the answers provided by the participants overlapped and provoked the same frustrations. Occasionally some answers changed the course of the study. Some participants managed to reveal their ideas in a short concise manner and provided direct answers to questions posed. Other participants shared their views through lengthy explanations and elaborated on their viewpoints, partially as a result of English not being their home language.

4.6   Learners' view on absenteeism

4.6.1   Learners' perception about the school and absenteeism

Figure 4.1: Learners' perception about school and absenteeism
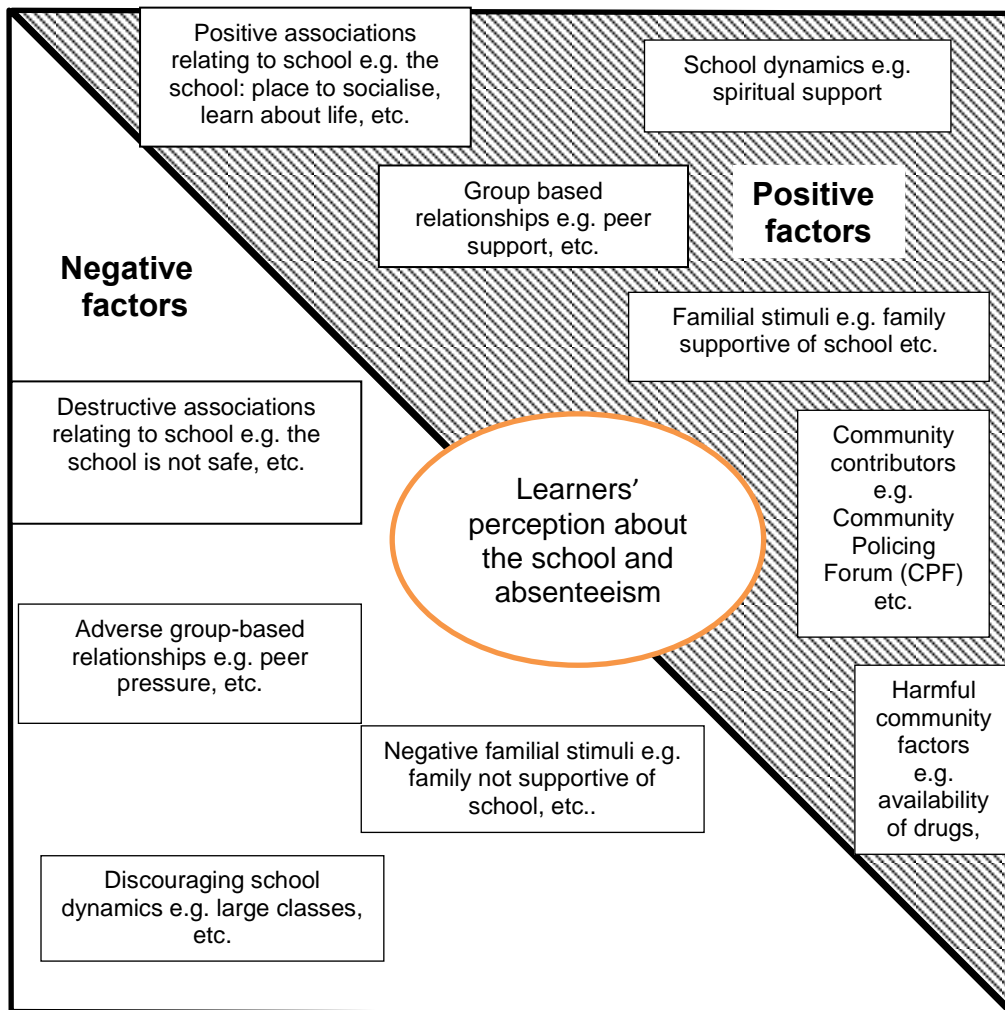
The Figure above is indicative of the manner in which learners perceive the school and community, whether negatively or positively.   Their lives through their own challenges were generally closely related to their perceptions, which will be illustrated below.

4.6.2 Positive influences of the school and its environment on learner attendance:

a) Positive associations relating to school

Only a single participant declared that *"school is perfect the way it is"* (Participant 3)*. "Something to look forward to"* (Respondent 5) without identifying an example, was mentioned by another learner.

Responses to the importance of regular school attendance varied slightly.   The number one response was to socialise and to develop communication skills. Responses were mainly focussed on individual enrichment.

One of the common themes established during the interviews was that the majority of interviewees acknowledged that learning is important because it coached them in self-confidence and prepared them for their future careers. Most responses indicated that schooling had long term advantages. Acquiring knowledge wasn't mentioned often. They were fully aware that regular absence would have numerous consequences on their lives as individuals. Without completing Grade 12 and expanding their education, financial sustainability in future would not be possible. They were therefore cognisant of the fact that a Grade 12 Certificate would empower them to find suitable employment and to finally become financially independent. All the previous grades prepared them for Grade 12 and if they did not attempt to give their best they would struggle in their final year of school. They kept on emphasising that education was just the stepping stone for future endeavours in life. Daily attendance was considered as essential by academic high-fliers. A learner determined his/her own attendance, and it was established that a goal to study at university is motivation enough - the school did not have to lift a finger. They were appreciative of the fact that the bare minimum qualifications obtained would not be sufficient for tomorrow - lifelong learning was vital. *"No one could take away… (your education)"* (Participant 9) and knowledge could be applied in every situation in life. In addition education was seen as empowering as opposed to being labelled as *"nothing in life"* (Participant 9).

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Some learners had an intrinsic driving force which enticed them to attend. "*I've said to myself education is what I need and education is what I will get*" (Participant 9). By attending, some made every effort to *"make it a better day"* (Participant 9*).* Responses indicated that they learned something new every day and they acquired knowledge which was the foundation for their future. It was perceived as *"a good image for one day"* (Participant 6*).* They indicated that learning widened their vocabulary and empowered them to not only help their future offspring but also *"it could bring me somewhere in life"* (Participant 4). As an example they pointed out that a subject like Business Studies prepared them for challenges that they might encounter in running a business one day.

The majority of participants listed their favourite aspect of school attendance as socialising and interacting with friends. One participant also pointed out that *"seeing my favourite educators and learning new stuff everyday"* (Participant 3) motivated learners to attend school. Learners noted that attendance could be increased with social activities which were not related to academic performance, something that appealed to them on a different level. Interestingly, many learners had a need to show their identity by wearing informal clothes instead of a uniform. Relieving some of the stress of school was mentioned by some participants but not how it could be arranged. "Fun" was a buzz word repeated often as many regarded school as tiresome and therefore most of the participants thought that school should be more "fun". Fun in terms of learners' views could be described as taking a break from school work. A few participants claimed that non-academic activities, like a school dance once in a while, or a picnic, even a fete would make school more attractive and fun. Assisting with the general maintenance of the school and the call for grass to be planted were suggestions that could bring fun to school. Subject related excursions or a visit by a motivational speaker in which he/she explained how a certain subject/s could help him/her to become successful in life was cited as it was a real life example of achievement.

Free periods at the end of the school day proved to be a popular response. The reason why free periods were so popular was because the term implied that learners did not have to work during these and could entertain themselves within

boundaries. Small rewards, like a sweet treat when achieving a certain percentage, was also mentioned. One response indicated that educators were only responsible for teaching content, they (educators) were not to be held accountable to prompt learners in changing their mind-set regarding attendance.

Making schools more invitational, pedagogically enriched coupled with fun, could stimulate learners to such an extent that they were inspired to attend school. It was thus a positive strategy to promote school attendance rather than to act in a punitive way which only affected learners negatively. "*To make it a more fun school, to do more fun activities, to have sometimes like maybe on a Friday… a fun day or games or stuff like that which will draw pupils or learners to the school to want to come to school*" (Participant 1).

In line with the above, learners were actually enthusiastic about learning and the way in which new facts were imparted either interested them or not. It would be more interesting for learners to attend school when they could practically apply knowledge instead of being taught theory only. Experiments were regarded as attention-grabbing, functional and just like a picture that spoke a thousand words.

Technology also stimulated interest. With the electronic smart boards learning was more effective and visibility enhanced. Utilising innovative technology could increase productivity and the use of cell phones could improve learning because of global connectivity. "*Um, in the last year our school got smart boards, that were sponsored for us and it actually made it more interesting, because the lessons um got more interesting and you could visually see what the educator is meaning with what they are showing to you*" (Participant 2).

New educators who broke the old patterns proved to be thought-provoking. "*And I think when you like go to a new year and you get new educators that are giving school to you it is also a bit more interesting because you um learn them better like, and you, it's not the same educator that you had last year, it's a new educator*" (Participant 2). In addition, educators should also be more approachable, friendly and helpful and create an enjoyable learning environment. Learners regarded a weekly reward or one allocated once a term as an incentive

to attend school. Those who attend school are of the opinion that they were halfway there and they were looking for improved answers to their queries so that they might comprehend the work in totality. In this regard a pop quiz was regarded as an option to some sort of brush up in respect of class work.

They believed that school was already interesting and there was ample opportunity to learn something about your character every day. *"… you could ask the educator to explain it to you or have a pop quiz in class and make it a lot more interesting…"* (Participant 9).

A learner's favourite subject was motivation enough to attend school, couple that with a good relationship with the educator, and you had a positive learner who did not want to miss one day of school. Tests and exams motivated a learner to attend school as it assessed knowledge and gave the learner an indication of whether he/she was on par. This type of challenge brought out the best in each motivated learner. This showed that educators had the power to persuade learners to pay attention with their hands-on approach. Having regard for the fact that the majority of participants in respect of this section of the research had already attained the age of 18 years, cognisance had to be taken of the fact that some of them had already failed a grade due to *inter alia* absenteeism.

Some learners attempted to exceed their parents' expectations to make them proud of their scholastic performance. They put in maximum effort because they knew their parents would be satisfied with their attempts.

Educators had to encourage learners to work for a certain amount of time in exchange for a short break in between instruction or a double period. Extra classes could concentrate on a specific problem and individual attention. This might prevent other learners, who already understood the work the first time around, from losing interest, or becoming disorderly. They could touch on some of the exam work in a test seeing that revision was essential. Shorter periods would ensure better concentration according to a participant, and it will prevent lessons from becoming uninteresting.

Another option was weekly class tests instead of only one test per term, and educators could pose more individual questions since it would help to identify learners who struggled with content.

Although it might be perceived as negative, learners identified reasons for staying at home which they believed were acceptable from a personal point of view. These included acute sickness or being unable to walk or being hospitalised. They did not want their attendance to cause other learners' health to be in jeopardy, especially in case of a contagious disease. Another response indicated that recovery after an accident or surgery proved to be valid motivations. Learners could suffer from depression as they were weighed down with stress caused by pressure to perform on academic level which prevented them from attending. They did however know that the only valid justification for absence was a doctor's note and they were of the opinion that the principal should be informed of these "valid" reasons.

Another positive association with school was that learners believed that the system employed by the school was effective to a certain degree, as parents were informed of an absence *via* SMS as soon as the school day had officially started. If an identity card had not been registered it had to be in accordance with the absence recorded in the class register. It was suggested that educators set up a meeting with learners to get to the bottom of the problem causing the absence. Educators needed to show real interest in learners, and had to address the problem, not the person, and not *"shout at the learner"* (Participant 8). A positive outlook went a far way, especially regarding education, seeing that it was *"something we all need, not a want"* (Participant 9).

b) Group-based relationships

According to the learner participants attending school brought forth a sense of belonging. When learners were fond of school they were positive, and attended mainly to see their friends whom they inspired to attend school too. For the most, learners befriended other learners who were also interested in school and who influenced them positively. Some friends even challenged each other to see who

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performed better in a test or exam. As a result of this they pushed themselves to their personal best. Participant 7 took pleasure in the fact that he saw his friends every day as he was leaving for university the following year, and he pointed out that he was not sure if he would ever see them again "…*to see my friends each day…"* Because friends make you laugh they help you to escape reality and uplift your spirit, *"they bring joy into your life"* (Participant 4).

Children were very selective as to whom they allowed into their lives. It was proposed that learners sit in groups and have beneficial group discussions as a lot *"can't do that anymore*" (Participant 9) giving the impression that teenagers had a need to identify with other teenagers and to have a sense of belonging to a group. The belief that some other learners felt the same in respect of attending school, *"I'm not the only one that suffers,"* (Participant 6) helped to lessen the feeling of being isolated. Seeing everyone's face at commencement of the school day when the bell rang, and knowing that you were ready for the day, excited some learners.

Friends could also be questioned about the whereabouts of an absentee. Some learners only attended school because absence from school on the day prior to an important sport match could result in them being excluded from the team. Leaving your team in the lurch wasn't something any teenager would consider, and this compelled them to attend.

"I've never had that" (Participant 7) was a frequent response indicative of the fact that friends did not influence each other to skip school. Most learners answered that in all honesty, they were not influenced by their friends to be absent from school also, *"I would never allow that"* (Participant 7). Seeing that being absent on account of personal reasons brought about a whole lot of catching up, a learner could not afford to be absent because of unduly influences from friends.

Participants captured school attendance and the influence of their peers accurately by reflecting that education would initiate suitable conversation with their peers and superiors, and aided them to develop their talents and it helped them to identify their strong points. Without knowing what they were capable of *"your whole life will be a disaster"* (Participant 10).

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c) School dynamics

According to learner participants, educators had the ability to entice learners to attend school. One specific educator was very emphatic towards children who seemed sad and *"she went out of her way"* to help them. In addition all the educators were well-known to the learners. Apart from having qualified and intelligent educators, the school was considered to be a beautiful, neat and tidy school. *"I think the school is a beautiful school"* (Participant 8). This perception was raised by this participant who resided in an informal settlement, within a considerable distance from school, who indicated that "*I travel with a train and eh I wake up like 4 o'clock in the morning when it's still dark and I have to walk a long distance to go to the train station and I'm the only kid in the thing, in the train station so anything is possible".* Racial equity was advocated by the educators of the school. The fact that the school was the only double medium secondary school in town was acknowledged by a few learners. The school *"is a very nice place to be"* (Participant 6).

Educators had to encourage learners to work hard for a stipulated time period in exchange for a short break in between consecutive lessons. Extra classes could focus on a specific problematic area and learners could receive individual attention. This might prevent other learners from losing interest or for the class to become disorderly. Shorter periods seemed to be a precautionary measure for learners who might lose interest and weekly class tests as opposed to quarterly tests were proposed.

Most responses indicated that the school was in general a safe environment since it's difficult to enter the school without being detected. Only if *"there is a war or something"* safety might be at risk. The principal warns parents about safety risks in advance. Safety is ensured because security cameras are installed all over the school grounds. *"I think school is as safe as the children make it"* (Participant 7). The principal is mindful about the safety of every learner. *"I know I am in good hands"* (Participant 7). Even though some learners walk to school it is regarded as safe. Once they've entered the school gates they experience a sense of security in view of the fact that the deputy principal is

always on the school grounds from very early in the morning. Most learners do not feel threatened in any way. "…*I walk to school, I feel safe when I walk to school and when I enter the school gates I feel surrounded with safety as well as there are personnel who offer help…"* (Participant 9).

One Grade 12 learner highlighted that according to policy, a learner won't be permitted to write the final matric exam if they have been absent for more than 10 days. This measure prevented Grade 12 learners from being absent. One learner was knowledgeable on the topic of effective measures and said that a Level 2 hearing and a few detentions was *"not that bad"* in case you get caught. The general opinion was that *"nothing will stop kids from taking chances"*, the final result would be permanent expulsion. *"No, mam"*, was a popular response. Most learners were certain that there is no policy in place relating to absenteeism, and since the school had many gates on each side which were always open it was an open invitation for some to leave prematurely. Conversely, Participant 10 acknowledged roll call and the turn stile were mentioned as *"a lot of measures are keeping you in school"* (Participant 10).

Suggestions to improve attendance included improvement of the parking facilities for learners with cars. Even though it was open for debate, interviewees were of the opinion that subjects which did not prepare them for university were regarded as a waste of time and should be replaced with subjects which might enrich their lives, whether or not they pursued tertiary education.

d) Familial stimuli

Learner participants confirmed that parents/guardians needed to emphasise the importance of school attendance. It should be conveyed to learners as early as enrolment in primary school because these patterns and attitudes were developed at a very young age. One learner observed that preventative measures could be an alternative that could ensure attendance. No specifics were given about the measures, but it was emphasised that once learners entered high school it was too late to address the problem as patterns were already habitual. Parents/guardians needed to point out that *"knowledge is power"* (Participant 8).

It seemed as if some parents were pro-active in helping their children to look at ways to reduce the school work or make it easier. One participant revealed that *"my mother would actually try and help me (laughs) and sit with me"* (Participant 2). Some parents motivated their children by emphasising what the future held once they had matriculated, *"they support me through everything, that's what actually helps me"* (Participant 3). Some parents used extreme case scenarios and told their children that it was difficult to find employment nowadays. *"They try to help me where they can"* (Participant 5) although some of these parents did not even complete basic education. Conversely, *"by taking them to places where kids don't have what they have"* (Participant 4*)* could help children to appreciate what they have. Parents/guardians had to emphasise the reward that would be reaped as many parents did not attend university, but wanted their children to have the opportunity they never had.

Learners attempted not to disappoint their parents. This was another driving force seeing that parents/guardians did not ask much *"the least I can do in turn is a good education"* (Participant 9). It was a child's responsibility to attend school daily to show appreciation. Participants stated that parents/guardians had to show interest in their child's school work. They could help to plan and draft a balanced schedule enabling the child to spend enough time studying or completing homework, which included some time for leisure. *"They can sit down with the children, be more involved in the schoolwork"* (Participant 3). If all else failed they could appoint a tutor. Open communication and approachability was key in the relationship between parents/guardians and educators. Skilful inspiration and praise from parents worked wonders. Parents needed to commit and check up on their children regularly. Parents were invited to meet learners halfway since they knew where their children came from, historically speaking.

Parents/guardians should facilitate goal-setting and help their children to realise their dreams with regard to what they wanted to become one day. Also, skills had to be instilled so that learners could show gratitude for what adults did for them. Children had to realise that you had to work hard to achieve anything in life since nothing falls in your lap.

It was evident that parents/guardians' mind-set regarding education had either a positive or negative snowball effect on their children. When parents/guardians focussed on the end result they trained their children to become skilled in delayed gratification.

Learners were motivated to perform better when they knew there was something in store for them. *"If you do something good you receive something back"* (Participant 3*).* They were eager to negotiate rewards in exchange for academic achievement. The negotiations relating to rewards created something learners could look forward to, for example some form of entertainment. Cash rewards were also regarded as positive incentives. Parents/guardians discussed possible awards with learners which equalled performance by learners. One participant indicated she was motivated to study because *"they promised me a university life"* (Participant 2). When they achieved a specific percentage/average they got something they desired in return.

Some of the participants' parents/guardians had a Grade 12 level of education, while a few of the parents/guardians held a professional level qualification such as mechanical engineer, engineer, dental assistant, etc. Some attended university or the Tshwane University of Technology. One mother matriculated and worked as a branch manager at First National Bank for several years, but she resigned to become a stay at home mom. Although one father did not formally complete his schooling, he enrolled at a college by the end of Grade 10 and started working for the Electricity Supply Commission (South Africa) ("ESCOM"). He became a successful entrepreneur and owns several businesses today.

From personal experience one learner mentioned that a school day should start off with a healthy breakfast as it provided enough energy for the day ahead. When parents/guardians facilitated healthy eating, energy was released which supported learning. Learners expected their parents/guardians to say goodbye to them in a caring manner when they dropped them off at school. Participant 9 indicated that a phrase like *"Have a nice day"* made a child experience a sense of security and that he/she was cared for.

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Not a single participant mentioned/indicated that responsibilities at home brought about absence. Their household tasks were completed before or after school. Most learners indicated that their parents valued education and that their responsibilities therefore did not interfere with school. *"No, I don't have anything like that"* (Participant 4) and *"not me, no."* (Participant 4) were responses in relation to a query in respect of their household chores. Responsibilities were limited to i.e. taking care of pets. The general feeling was that parents consider schooling to be important and did not allow other responsibilities to deter children's educational development.

Nearly all learners indicated that they were safely dropped by their mothers, or rode with their bicycle, or had their own car as transportation to school. Most learners stayed between 2 and 5 kilometres from school, or only a few blocks from school. Some stayed as close as only 200 m from the school. A single learner stayed 15 minutes away from school and walked to school on her own or with her brother.

A good number of participants completed homework or prepared for tests/exams in a quiet, isolated room, being a bedroom or study room with little or no distractions, but with essential furnishings conducive/supportive to learning at home. The door of the room was closed to ensure no interruption. Some learners made use of a notice board reserved for academic purposes only, and one listed having a water purifier for refreshment. In some instances a computer was on hand and a dictionary too. Most of the participant learners were in an environment which was conducive to learning. One participant worked *"on my porch in the sun, there is a desk and everything"* (Participant 5). On hot days some participants studied outdoors. Another learner also studied at a dining room table which was blocked off from the rest of the house. There did not seem to be disruption or anything that might distract the learner from studying. It was peaceful and quiet and enabled the learner to study or complete homework for at least 2 – 3 hours uninterrupted. Some parents went through a lot of trouble to make learning possible and even bought a new writing desk to enable a learner to study in his room.

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e) Community factors that could impact on learner absenteeism

Learner participants thought that the community in general was considered to be helpful - *"the people here have helped me grow spiritually"* (Participant 7). Residents were considered to be down to earth people, typical of the countryside and also regarded as friendly. The community was regarded as close-knit and caring.

The Community Policing Forum (CPF) was visible and involved in attempting to reduce crime. It was mentioned that any challenge in this regard could be conquered, without a doubt. The police were active in trying to secure safety in town by joining forces with the CPF.

Although the community was regarded as *"…a poor community but despite the fact that it's a poor community…"* some hard workers accomplished their goals and become famous rugby players or qualified as doctors. A learner commented that the community should get involved whenever they see learners during school hours and needed to contact the school immediately, which clearly indicated that learners relied on the community's involvement. In the words of Participant 7: "*So um I think the, if the community could work together um by that I mean if, if anybody see a child or a high school learner walking on a street during school hours I think the school must be contacted.*"

4.6.3   Negative influences on learners and school attendance:

a) Negative aspects related to school

Personal reasons averred by learners as valid justifications for absence, included alcoholism, psychological issues, lacking confidence or feeling unloved. These reasons mainly had a negative undertone. Absence was also blamed on indifference and lacking motivation or *"you don't like school, you don't want to be there in the first place*" (Participant 2). Some learners also *"don't have that will to be at school or to learn"* (Participant 3). Sometimes learners stayed at home for trivial reasons like *"I'm a little bit irritated today"* (Participant 7).

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A handful of participants acknowledged idleness as an excuse for absence. Another interesting reason was the fear of being bullied. Some learners also required time-out from school and the endless activities. They escaped from the stressful environment not considering the consequences and only focusing on instant gratification.

"They underperform because they don't want to study, and they complain about all the work" (Participant 3). Learners were unprepared for formal tests and exams as they thought paying attention in class was sufficient. Learners were under the mistaken impression that little effort would result in good marks. In preparing for assessment, they only read through the prescribed work. They did not actually study the subject matter or revise the content which suggested that they hadn't mastered the practice of studying, or they lacked certain skills. Learners *"simply don't study"* (Participant 9) and therefore their marks were not good. Learners are under a false impression that they could get away with this.

Some learners were satisfied with only passing the subject, and had no drive to improve. They did not aspire for more in life. Therefore they were limited in their choice of subjects. They were stuck with the *"boring subjects"* (Participant 9) in which they had no interest, and this impacted negatively on their already below average performance.

Some learners did not aspire to be successful and they were unable to determine future goals, and were fixed on the present only. They lacked skills to plan for tomorrow and immediate satisfaction was more important than delayed gratification. A learner suggested that there should be a distinction between top performers and those guilty of indolence. This would increase performance as all distractions were eliminated, also permitting individual interaction with educators. Transgression during instruction time should be punished with attending school in the evening when all the troublemakers were then grouped together.

Learner participants expressed the opinion that limiting rules would bring about more freedom which would make school feel less like a jail. They thought that the implementation of rules adversely affected them as interviewees indicated

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that learners might become rebellious and break rules because they were restricted. "*So the children feels (sic) like if they're in a jail or something…*" (Participant 5).

As soon as the school did more for the kids they would start to return the favour. *"They stay up too late - they either watch TV or play games,"* (Participant 7) consequently they were too tired to concentrate on their school work and they failed to keep up. Often these absentees did not keep up with their homework and fell behind. The work in their books was not up-to-date. Some learners were only interested in attending parties and being popular. They did not want to be labelled as nerds who were only interested in school work. School work was therefore neglected because learners focussed more on social activities. Participant 4 mentioned that there wasn't much to do - when a learner refused to work *"nothing is going to help"*, motivation had to come from within. The picture painted by the learner participant was typical of the Generation Z and their tendency to follow hedonistic desires rather than to commit themselves to school work.

Times had changed and adaptability was obligatory. Learners of today were part of generation Z, and they were influenced by our government on so many levels. It was very easy to follow a bad example when expectations were too high. A learner's attitude largely determined if he/she wanted to be assisted or not. Some learners just accepted defeat when subject content seemed too difficult. A number of learners did not ask for help and just presumed that no one would help them. Also, school wasn't interesting or even a priority to a number of learners therefore they did not take school work seriously, and sometimes even failed a grade. Some learners lacked passion and did not have an inner drive to be successful. *"I don't like it",* (Participant 6)*.* This was a single participant's excuse for not attending school.   Even though generation Z was not thoroughly discussed in this study we did know that they were technologically connected via WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. Whilst communication through these mediums was preferred they could appear to be socially withdrawn, apathetic and not involved in school.

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At times learners from poverty stricken households pretended that they had it all together but they actually hid behind a smile. Paying attention to school work was considered difficult because their minds wandered to concerns like what they were going to eat after school or what they were going to wear. *"Sometimes you think too much as a child"* (Participant 8) there was a constant milling over of thoughts. Learners suffered from a lot of stress and educators seemed to be unaware of it.

The following emerged from interviews. They were aware that long-term absence affected them as it impacted negatively on their ability to acquire knowledge and understanding regarding preparation for tests/exams. Participants who regularly absented themselves from school were left to the own resources to catch up on work that they had missed out on. They lost confidence because they could not keep up with those who attended regularly. Absentees failed to benefit from the background of a new subject matter. The tendency to be absent eventually became a habit which could bring about dismissal as the absenteeism had developed into a Level 2 serious misconduct. This pattern was hard to break.

Learners realise that they could escape responsibility when they were absent without being detained. Non-attendance might result in lacking social skills in the place of work one day. Most of the participants acknowledged that foolish choices in school negatively affect you once you had matriculated. Also *"you lose faith"* (Participant 7) when there was no academic progress in a subject especially if you had fallen behind. These attitudes and/or lack of confidence permeated their perception of attending school.

Learners got caught up in a negative cycle which was difficult to break once they had been absent. An absentee sacrificed his/her right to education when he/she did not attend school. *"To get, um the basic education and to get the matric if you get your matric, you can go outside to the grownup world, and you can get a good job because education is everything"* (Participant 3).

If learners did not have the necessary work to study for an exam, they were already subjected to failure.   This was a never ending struggle as everything increased over night. You might be questioned on work you had not completed in a test or exam. The possibility existed *"…to fail matric if you don't attend school every day…"* (Participant 7).

b) Adverse group-based relationships

Some learners did not have a sense of belonging, they experienced a feeling of rejection, and they did not feel accepted by the majority of learners in the school. Some learners just did not fit in, whether they were answering questions or airing opinions.

Participant 7 indicated that *"…I can almost say staying at home is the new fashion today…"* Absence was considered by some as a new fashion trend and it was popular not to attend school. Also a group of learners would plan to be absent and then they all hung out on a specific day. Learners became emotional over disputes with their friends, and to avoid conflict they rather stayed at home as this emotional turmoil distracted their attention from school work. Participant 1 believed that *"…most problems are with learners who have friends and fight with them so they are emotional, they don't want to see the person or something like that…".* It followed that friends/peers generally influenced non-attendance when there was unresolved conflict. Sometimes learners coerced their friends to skip school and get together at a friend's house to watch television, eat a lot and engage in drinking.   Going to the public swimming pool was an alternative since learners were confident that they would not get caught. Participant 5 confirmed that *"…we won't go to school let's go to the swimming pool for instance or we could just watch a movie at home or just don't go to school, nothing is gonna happen…"* They were convinced that they would not get in trouble as absenteeism went unnoticed most of the time. Learners were not afraid to take risks.

c) Discouraging school dynamics

Various responses suggested that school was perceived as a jail. In the words of Participant 5: *"So the children feels (sic) like if they're in a jail or something…"*

Learners experienced elevated stress levels due to homework and the pressure to participate in extra-curricular activities and this intensify the levels of stress. Anxiousness, caused by school work and extra-curricular activities, further inhibit performance. A school day was filled to the brim, *"too little hours in the day"* (Participant 5) as well as failure to plan ahead, were constant challenges experienced by a number of participants.

The size of the classrooms was regarded as not spacious enough. Some of the participants were of the opinion that classrooms were not clean and tidy *"…the classrooms must be bigger eh it must be neater…"* (Participant 6). Seeing that this was overlooked and everything was in disarray, learning was compromised. Dirty restrooms filled with smoke were also regarded as a negative connotation to school. Participant 2 expressed dismay because "…*other learners smoke inside there…"*

Unfortunately, a specific learner's car was vandalised by fellow learners while he was writing exam, leaving permanent damage to the body of the car. Jealousy was the motive behind the damage. Even though participants placed a high premium on security measures at school, they strongly believed that their privacy should not be compromised. *"They can um increase our privacy at school like the cameras in front of the bathrooms…"* (Participant 5).

It was alleged that drugs were sold on the school property. Bullying and being categorized as less privileged, once again featured as further causes of absenteeism. A general feeling of negativity about being at school and learning and adhering to disciplinary measures were also noted. Participant 7 emphasised that *"At one time there was alleged that there were drugs sold on the school grounds…".*

Interestingly it was mentioned that the relationship/animosity between educators and learners was inclined to cause a dislike in school. Likewise, some learners passed judgement and belittled others.

They agreed that educators continued with a specific topic and it was as if the absentees could not catch up on lost schooling. Also *"a million lessons that you have lost"* could not be caught up easily (Participant 8). Some educators were more focussed on attendance because of pressure from the department. Certain educators favoured popular learners and treated them differently. Other educators were considered to be too strict and were accused of unfair treatment. Consequently, some learners felt detached and inept to connect with educators; they felt *"more comfortable in their own homes"* (Participant 5). Educators had unrealistic expectations as they were unaware of the different backgrounds learners came from. School was not regarded as a "*happy environment"* (Participant 5) thus not a learner friendly environment and the use of colour could improve the status. Educators could *"spice it up a bit"* (Participant 5) referring to the way they imparted content and communicated instructions. The use of colour in class was not only appealing but also stimulating to the brain, and classes without colour weren't conducive to education. *"…they can just light it up like your class it's full of colours it stimulates the brain"* (Participant 5).

Hardly any learners had enough confidence to admit they struggled in front of 30 learners in a class. Participant 7 said that: *"most of the children are too shy to ask the educator in front of their friends…"* An educator should be able to identify those learners, and help them individually during class or at a suitable time.

Educators demotivate learners when their frustration is evident during instruction, and they are perceived as unapproachable and not user-friendly. The way in which ignorant educators' conduct teaching influences the attending of class. Learners feel as though they are punished when educators take out their emotions on the class, *"I think the educator plays a big role, it's not the subject, it's the educator"* (Participant 2). Some educators are unskilled in explaining work until it is comprehended or *"they don't explain it so well"* (Participant 5). Subject matter should be whipped up as this would keep learners interested.

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Most participants claimed that monotony was a reason for absence. Revision, although, was regarded as important but one topic shouldn't continue over days as it becomes difficult to concentrate on the same thing. An educator's body language speaks volumes, also how they react to a greeting. Sometimes educators ignore a greeting, or when they reply they are rude. To greet someone *"takes no effort"* (Participant 9).

An additional cited reason was the fact that learners got a vast amount of work to study, but not sufficient time to prepare. As a result they left out some of the important work. Factors which distracted learners easily were: a car racing at a high speed in front of the school, a friend who diverted attention, extremely hot days or a cell phone. Learners became absent-minded when the same routine was followed every day and *"things get a bit boring"* (Participant 5). Some new approach could kindle their fire.

Long school hours, and double periods, especially at the end of the day, *"it's impossible for any person to pay attention for that long"* (Participant 2) made it difficult for learners to concentrate without a short break. Sickness impeded paying attention. The "buzz" on Monday mornings after a weekend complicated paying attention, and the noise and excitement on Fridays, before weekends, too. Due to disruptive learners learning became problematic, and at times impossible. In the event of a day not starting off well, concentration was impaired, and pain could also divert attention.

The turn stiles made the school safe as no one could enter the school without a security card. Unfortunately, this system was supported by electricity. When the power went off a few years ago, a mentally unstable person gained entrance to the school grounds and created some havoc. The turn stiles were not popular as it closes off as soon as the school day started and only reopened at the end of the school day. Parents/guardians were notified of their child's absence before 8 o'clock in the morning. Another possible threat to safety was when there was a strike, or when tyres were burnt, or bricks were thrown or buildings were set alight.

There should be a variety of activities learners could participate in to cater for the array of interests, not only sport. For instance, there could be a music room for those with musical talents where they could practise during break or after school.

Due to the fact that interviewees enjoyed school breaks so much, breaks were in general too short and they *"only have time to eat (your) bread"* (Participant 7) Furthermore, detention and period letters, which were to be signed after each period, as punitive measure, were not very popular. From a timeline perspective, long school hours along with disrespect towards educators and fellow learners created animosity. The inability of some educators to discipline learners was frowned upon. Although not every learner had aspirations to set off to university, it was believed that these individuals should not take advantage and disrupt discipline or the learning process in class, as this affected all the other learners negatively.

A participant indicated that he was subjected to racism, and this experience affected him on a personal level. Fellow learners were singled out in this regard but educators were not accused of racism. A subject like science wasn't regarded as a popular subject but in the end all the sacrifice would be worth it. Diverse personalities of learners caused conflict, as well as their way of behaving in class and their approach to learning.

d) Negative familial stimuli

Responsibilities at home, like taking care of a sick parent/guardian, could prevent learner attendance. Sexual abuse was mentioned as a deterrent of performance and/or attendance *"…Maybe the house they live in has problems in there um abuse, sexual abuse…"* (Participant 6). Trauma and death were also mentioned as reasons for absence. Domestic problems which might have an effect on non-attendance were strained relationships between parents/guardians, underlying aggression or divorce, or once again death of a family member. *"…divorce is a very big factor…"* (Participant 10). Learners seemed to be ashamed of domestic problems and tried to hide these from fellow learners and educators. Physical or emotional abuse and financial constraints which impacted on transport prevented

learners from attending school *"for example when somebody gets abused at home and let's say for instance they, they were hit by their father…"* (Participant 7).

Sometimes the main breadwinner did not earn enough to provide in all the needs of family members, hence learners sometimes had to step in for a parent/guardian. Some participants held parents/guardians responsible for frequent absenteeism of their children because they were uninvolved and were unaware of the whereabouts of their children during or after school hours. Underperformance was possibly a reaction to parents' lack of concern, perhaps a cry for attention. Some parents left early or returned late in the evening leaving the learners to their own devices. One dad was not bothered with his child's school attendance. He was only concerned with good marks. This statement was ambiguous because how could a child achieve good marks without attending school? Also, parents/guardians had to point out that retention was to be expected when a learner's attendance was compromised. Reflection on history acknowledged how hard parents/guardians had fought to ensure the right to basic education for all. In being absent learners did not honour this important sacrifice.

It was suggested that some children manipulated their parents into allowing them to stay at home by faking illness. Some learners deceived their parents and after being dropped at school sneaked off to a friend's house for the day where they engaged in activities like drinking or smoking marijuana in a field. The general feeling was that learners were not concerned about themselves or their futures, they were used to their parents justifying their mistakes, and were under the impression that their parents would always act like this.

In contrast to what some participants revealed during interviews, some portrayed a different understanding of household dynamics which depicted a more negative picture. Due to the diversity of participants a contrasting opinion was held that some parents were self-centred and only concerned about their own welfare. Participant 6 was of the opinion that some parents/guardians don't seem to care

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"because they already have a house and children" and did not show any interest in their child's future. It was possible that parents were distracted by their own responsibilities, but children experienced this as a lack of interest and rejection. Children sometimes accepted being a failure because of constant affirmation from their parents, their self-image was scarred and this prevented them from achievement. Favouritism sometimes impacted negatively on a learner as parents focussed their attention on some of the siblings only. This directly influences their performance as they felt left out. Being compared to siblings was also unacceptable and harmful to a child's self-esteem which in turn affected attendance because that was how they got attention.

Some parents did not value education and regarded it as a waste of money. When learners only attended school to please their parents, they were not motivated to perform to the best of their ability as school was seen as a millstone. In some instances only one child in a family performed above standard which might cause some conflict of interest in the family circle. Also, this single child who excelled on academic level was sometimes under a lot of pressure to perform even better. The parents expected this child to make up for other siblings who did not perform according to their expectations. This could result in them performing even worse. In cases where parents did not expect much children seemed to meet those expectations too.

Some learners opted for prostitution as an *"easy way out"* (Participant 8). Pregnancy was another consideration while other parents forced their children to find employment to support the family income. On a personal account it was indicated that breakfast played an integral part in how a learner started off his/her day. Without breakfast it was impossible to concentrate, this could affect attendance. Participant 6 suggested that school should start *"a little bit later than 7 o'clock"*. Some learners left home very early in the morning, which left no time for breakfast and they started their day on an empty stomach. The unfortunate ones only ate for the first time late in the afternoon when they arrived back home. It was averred that a feeding scheme at school could relieve this deprivation.

One participant indicated that he was the only child in the house which he shared with his grandparents and all responsibilities befell him, like cooking and cleaning. His parents were divorced and he resided with his grandparents. Therefore he depended on himself for motivation as there wasn't any other adult interested in taking up their responsibilities. *"My only motivation is me, to be honest"* (Participant 8). Subsequently he did not have any time for homework which in the long run had an effect on his daily attendance. This same learner travelled by train and he had to change trains. He travelled 30 minutes to and from school. Thus, there were unrealistic expectations from the school regarding this specific learner's academic performance. Participant 8 had a *"big responsibility"* since both parents left for work early in the morning. She had to make sure that everything was well-ordered and breakfast dishes had been cleaned up before leaving for school. She was also responsible for her younger brother and these responsibilities sometime prevented her from attending school. At times there was too much to do and then she only had fifteen minutes left to prepare for school, which wasn't enough, and consequently she stayed at home. Participant 8 indicated that some parents/guardians did not motivate their children, *"they don't really, mam"*. Nonetheless, when learners did not perform well they were not allowed to socialise over the weekend. Poor performance equalled penalty.

As mentioned previously not all parents/guardians completed their formal schooling. *"The year after she got her grade 11, she had to work to care for her brothers and sisters"* (Participant 3). In some instance both parents completed Grade 11, one mother left school in Grade 10, and another father left school for the army in Grade 9. One father only attained Grade 8 and then left school to qualify as a chef. Conversely, some parents were too lenient and allowed their children to stay at home for no apparent reason. Some learners even informed their parents beforehand that they were not going to attend school which was then approved. Learners manipulated their parents to a certain extent and some organised absence beforehand *"…before the day of school they plan it and then the next day um they all go to, to one of the children's houses where the parents work all day…"* (Participant 7).

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Some households did not make provision for an environment that was suitable for learning. For instance, the only available table was in the dining room close to the lounge and the ever-present noise from the TV from the sitting room which resulted in constant distraction, *"…there are noises mam like the TV…"* (Participant 6). A single participant completed homework at a desk at a train station awaiting the train, where it was extremely noisy as commuters came and went. It was always unsafe for him being a child surrounded by adults, someone attempted to steal his cell phone once. Apart from the safety hazard it was impossible to study under such circumstances.

Any form of conflict on the subject of relationships influenced teenagers negatively on an emotional level. Also not having a proper school uniform could affect non-attendance as a learner was singled out. When parents/guardians chased their children away, or because of violence, they sometimes had to seek refuge at a friend's house because they had nowhere else to stay. Endless hostility between parents/guardians prevented learners from concentrating on school work. Another factor was neglect, either physically or emotionally.

e) Negative community influences

The town in which the case study school was situated offered limited entertainment for the youth which might prompt them to engage in harmful activities. In order to retain the attention of the youth, the town had to *"be better for the youth"*, (Participant 5) hinting at more entertainment and emphasising a lack of opportunities. Furthermore, drugs like weed, was readily available in town and most of the participants were aware that being in possession of drugs followed a Level 3 hearing. Unfortunately, the community seemed to be uninvolved. Additionally, residents *"don't think much about themselves"* (Participant 1).

Also, choices in schools were limited seeing that it was a small town with a single parallel medium school and only one English secondary school. Seasons posed a further challenge, especially winter, was regarded as a very cold time in the region thus impacting on attendance due to a variety of reasons. In the words of Participant 3: *"The challenges is (sic) the winter it is very cold and then the summer is very hot…"*

Participant 5 stayed 2 kilometres out of town and reported that *"it's never safe to go to school"*, as danger lurked on the road. Similarly, another participant travelled to school by train, he woke up at 4 o'clock in the morning, when it was still dark, and had to walk a long distance to the train station, alone. Every travel was unsafe as he was exposed to dodgy adults who commuted, and he stated that, *"I am the only kid"* (Participant 8).

4.6.4   Summary of learner participants' interviews

From the above information gathered during interviews with learners it was ascertained that these learners could be divided into three categories. The first group of learners displayed a positive attitude towards school and seemed to thrive on the support of their parents/guardians. These parents/guardians tried their utmost best to create circumstances which were conducive to learning. Secondly, another group perceived school as a negative. The parents/guardians of this group appeared to be uninvolved and detached from the learners and their progress at school. These learners tended to struggle academically and were not motivated to attend school. In the final instance the third group of learners was characterised by a combination of negativity and positivity towards school. They had limited support from parents/guardians but they might be enthusiastic about school in some instances.

4.7   The principal's views on absenteeism

From the interview conducted with the principal, a number of themes relating to absenteeism could be identified. These themes are illustrated in Figure 4.6 on page 130.

4.7.1 Milestones achieved despite financial constraints and impact on absenteeism

The principal of the case study school had been employed in this capacity for the past four years. He emphasised the fact that discipline was the core of the school's functioning which he had endorsed. From a financial point of view he managed to fence the sport grounds of the school which posed a safety risk to learners and educators prior to finalisation. What made this project so remarkable was that he

had to approach sponsors to become involved. He even approached and managed to convince the South African Lottery to assist financially. In light of the fact that limited financial resources were available to the case study school he endeavoured to maintain the school building and school grounds, which had been an extremely difficult task because of the dilapidated state of the building and surrounding areas.

Figure 4.2:   The principal's elucidation in respect of absenteeism
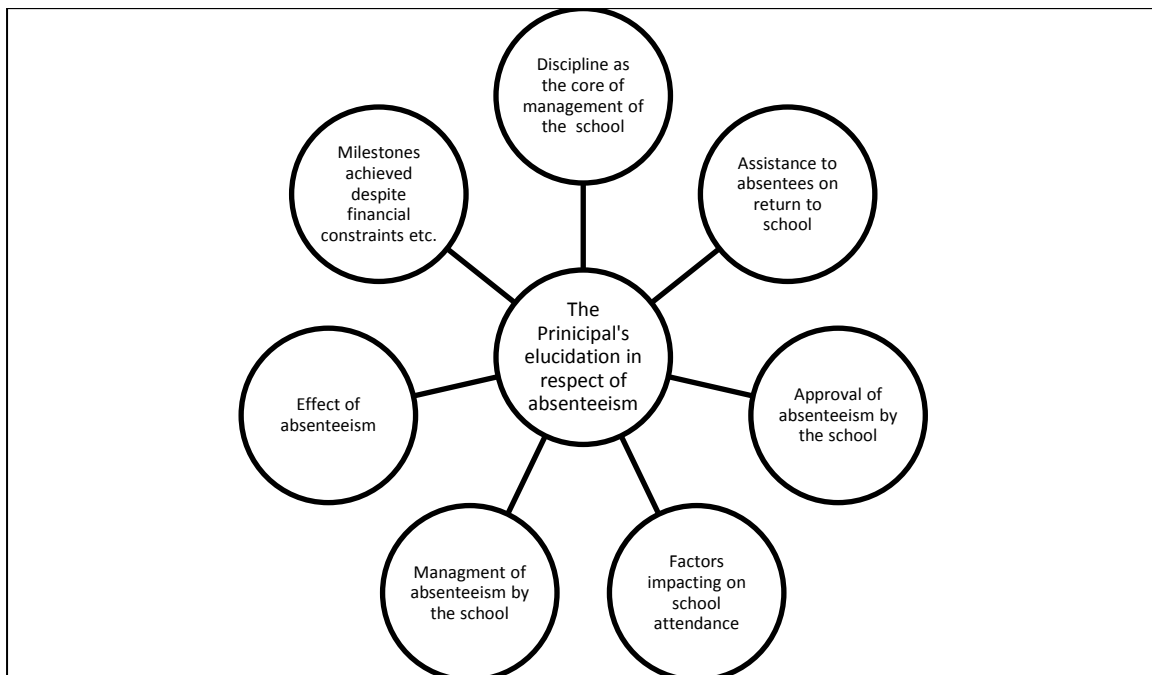
In an attempt to *inter alia* curb absenteeism he realised that the installation of turn stiles was imperative. This measure not only ensured that access to and from the school grounds were regulated with access cards, but also enhanced the general safety and security precautions at school in that no unauthorised visitors could gain access to the school.

Without hesitating he singled out the lack of financial resources as the greatest challenge in effectively running the school. Due to the fact that a lot of the learners' parents/guardians were not in a position to meet their financial obligations towards the school, the school could not raise sufficient funds to meet its financial responsibilities. The principal said that the learners found it difficult to get to school on a daily basis, especially those learners who travelled from townships and/or rural

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areas. It went without saying that learners who made use of minibus taxis were often late for school. As a general remark the principal expressed concern as a result of learners who failed or omitted to do homework.

4.7.2 Discipline at the core of management of the school

In the interview with the principal he emphasised that discipline at school was the most important factor, besides sufficient financial support, in managing the school. In this regard he was of the opinion that should learners be absent from school this would result in them falling behind. He appreciated the fact that it was almost an impossible task to request learners to attend doctor's appointments and/or funerals after school. He reiterated the fact that where humans were involved there would always be challenges and therefore not everything could be governed in a perfect manner. He believed that, in his experience, parents/guardians were not honest with regard to the reasons for absenteeism – they deceived the school by not providing truthful reasons for their child's absence.

4.7.3 Assistance to absentees on their return to school

From a remedial point of view the school always aimed at assisting absentees in catching up and supporting them. He was, however of the opinion that this was only workable in the event of valid reasons of absence. Should teenage girls returned to school after giving birth, there was a responsibility on the school to assist these learners in becoming familiar with lost school work. In general the school attempted to accommodate absentees on their return by providing them with copies of the work to be done or hand outs in order to assist them to catch up. In some instances fellow learners lent their workbooks to absentees to ensure outstanding work was completed sufficiently. Unfortunately no formal policy in this regard had been implemented to date that could set out the procedure to be followed in the event of absentees returning to school.

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4.7.4 Approval of absenteeism by the school

Should learners be obliged to attend appointments at a doctor or a dentist or should they be prompted to attend a funeral, the school would support the learner in these instances. Arriving late at school, where learners depended on public transport, also seemed to be acceptable as learners could not be held responsible for the fact that a taxi driver would not depart in the event of insufficient passengers. A learner could not be punished if a taxi driver did not drive fast enough or was involved in an accident. Teenage pregnancy also fell within the category of authorised absenteeism: *"…if she goes into labour she will not be here."* Even though the principal was asked about learners who suffer from HIV/AIDS, no information was obtained and it was not possible to ascertain whether some of the learner absenteeism could be due to HIV/AIDS.

4.7.5 Factors impacting on school attendance

Climate changes impacted on school attendance, according to the principal. Even though he wasn't in a position to provide statistical evidence, he was convinced that learners were more absent from school during winter as a result of flu and/or colds. With regard to public holidays he indicated that there might be a trend relating to absenteeism. He suggested that should a school holiday fall on a Thursday, learners might be absent on the following Friday. Likewise, should parents/guardians intend on extending a long weekend learners might even be absent on a Monday following the long weekend.

Regarding the process to be followed in instances of absenteeism, whether authorised or not, parents/guardians were required to write a letter to the school informing the relevant educator of the reason for absenteeism. Should learners want to leave earlier they were compelled to obtain written authorisation from every subject educator. They were also required to get instructions in respect of homework to be completed so they did not fall behind.

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4.7.6 Management of absenteeism by the school

The principal was confident that the manner in which absenteeism was dealt with was effective in curbing the trend. The school gates closed automatically at 7:20 in the mornings and it was common cause that the gates reopened at 13:55 in the afternoon. He was proud of the fact that this measure (initiated by him) then enabled the school and responsible personnel to make a printout of daily attendance. "…*And with the turn styles its locked down immediately, eh if you don't have a access card you cannot come in, so in that case eh, we managed to get the learners to come to school…*" Absentees were therefore identified immediately and certain patterns of absenteeism were captured. It must be stated however that some learners might have forgotten their access cards at home and a second method to record attendance was then completing the class register which made provision for instances where learners couldn't locate their access cards. The principal defined the daily class register as "…*attendance register eh, eh actually it's a, it's a, a compiled list of so many learners were absent for the month…*"

Additionally the school sent text messages to parents/guardians when learners did not attend school. The principal confirmed that "…*the parents get an 'SMS' early in the morning, stating just stating are you aware that your child is not at, at school…*" Sadly enough some parents/guardians then contended that these messages were forwarded to an incorrect cellular phone number or they were just not interested. In 99% of the instances though, parents/guardians contacted the school without delay, stating reasons for absence and undertook to provide the school with the necessary proof. Communication in this format was not printed and placed in the learner's profile due to the fact that it was a bundle SMS. The data was however accessible on the secretary's computer and monthly trends could be monitored.

Heads of Grades liaised with homeroom educators once attendance lists had been printed. In cooperation with (homeroom educators), the Heads of Grades confirmed attendance or not. The Heads of Grades handed the final lists to the secretary, who, in turn, handed these lists to the accounts official who was responsible for sending text messages to parents/guardians. In addition, Heads of Grades, or the deputy principals were responsible for contacting parents/guardians of absentees.

The SGB hadn't been involved in formal disciplinary hearings relating to absenteeism due to reasons stated above. Their involvement would however be prudent in deciding which disciplinary action had to be taken i.e. community service, suspended sentence or detention. Input from their side would only be required in relation to a Level 3 hearing as Level 2 hearings were conducted by the Heads of Grades, educators, and parents/guardians attending the hearing. In essence the SGB would only be involved in the event of chronic absenteeism. The SMT which consisted of the principal, the 2 deputy principals and the 5 Heads of Departments, was the point of departure for discussing matters relating to absenteeism.

Absenteeism might lead to a snowball effect. The principal asserted that learners fell behind with work, which was the main problem. Should a learner be absent for a test or an examination, another test had to be compiled for assessment purposes on the day on which the learner returned to school. But, in most instances, learners were too ill to study, hence writing of a test or examination on the date of return, was impossible and impractical. This caused additional paperwork for educators as they needed to cater for absentees. Consequently, the absentee was prejudiced because of constant absence.

The principal stated that in his opinion absenteeism did not affect other learners. He claimed that should a learner be absent from school, the learner's desk would be empty and that was the only consequence facing other learners. He did mention that should an absentee be provided with an opportunity to write the exact same test/examination which had been written by fellow learners, other learners might consider the situation to be unfair. Class averages were therefore affected. He found it difficult to elaborate on the impact of absenteeism on the school in general. He pointed out that absentees may harm the school on a reputational level should they be involved in e.g. vandalism outside the school premises during/after school hours.

Should learners be frequently absent from school parents/guardians had to be contacted without avail. Parents/guardians needed to understand the impact of absenteeism and the school attempted to encourage parents/guardians to become

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involved in solving this problem. Similarly, parents/guardians were informed of the possible outcome of non-attendance i.e. failing a grade.

Although the principal has never been involved in a formal hearing with regard to a learner's absenteeism, he had met with parents/guardians of frequent absentees. "…*No, not a, a formal hearing, eh a disciplinary hearing anyway, but, but a definite eh meeting with the parents eh to find out why, he is or she is frequently absent…*" He emphasised the principles contained in the Code of Conduct, which set out the procedure to be followed in this regard. Even though he wasn't able to distinguish between the different levels of disciplinary hearings, he was fully aware of the fact that the provisions of the Code of Conduct could be invoked.

In light of the above, he indicated, even though he hadn't been involved in a hearing of this nature personally, that offenders might be subjected to community service: community service might consist of gardening activities, removal of rubbish and/or painting duties at/on the school premises on Friday afternoons. Depending on the severity of the absenteeism a maximum of 20 hours community service could be imposed. He also acknowledged the fact that the community service could be suspended for 5 or 7 days. Should the community service be suspended permanently, it could result in the learner being suspended from school. The school furnished the Gauteng East District with a monthly attendance register which obviously highlighted absences. A copy of this register was readily available from the principal's secretary and the principal noted that this attendance register related to absences for learners as well as educators.

It was quite interesting that the principal was of the opinion that the absenteeism of educators, although not to a large extent, could impact on learners' attendance in that he believed that educators were responsible for setting an example to attend school. *"…if you get to see a educator being absent 2, 3 days in a week…"*

4.7.7 Effect of absenteeism

The principal concluded that it was extremely important to curb absenteeism at an early stage, failing which, learners in the long term would not be able to attend work

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on a regular basis due to trends installed during early years. He indicated that one should be cognisant of the fact that "…*if you do not act on absenteeism you send a child eh into the working world…*" It was imperative to convey this message to parents/guardians to ensure that they were cognisant of the fact that reliable learners became reliable employees. He emphasised the fact that regular attendance would, in the long term, ensure a trustworthy relationship with a prospective employer in future.

Figure 4.3: Educators' understanding of absenteeism

Educators' understanding of absenteeism

Challenges faced by educators in the teaching environment
- Parent/Guardian's attitude towards achievements
- Educators' shortcomings and administrative burdens
- Societal input
- Financial constraints
- Absence of discipline
- Learner Absenteeism
- General

Management of absenteeism
- Recording of absenteeism
- Comparison of different types of absenteeism and various outcomes
- Impact of learner absenteeism on fellow learners, educators and the school in general
- Factors contributing to absenteeism, events observed and curing thereof
- Miscellaneous issues relating to absenteeism and the manner in which the school assists absentees on their return

4.7.8 Summary of insights obtained from principal

In light of the above, the principal was of the opinion that although absenteeism was rife it was managed efficiently. One of the milestones he had achieved in curbing absenteeism was the implementation of a turn stile system. "…*the turn styles was … motivated by two eh, problems the one was eh, learners that just jumped the fence and go home and or do not come to school eh, as they say in Afrikaans "stokkiesdraaiers" so that was the one reason. And the other reason was for the safety of the learners…*" He placed a lot of emphasis on the fact that only the absentee was solely affected by absenteeism and that the consequences over a period of time were severe.

4.8 Educators' understanding of absenteeism (See Figure 4.7 on page 134)

4.8.1 Challenges faced by educators in the teaching environment

a) Parent/Guardian's attitude towards achievement

Educators were generally of the opinion that parents/guardians who were not actively involved in their children's school careers could lead to situations where learners refrained from attending school regularly. Participant 11 indicated that "…*absenteeism of parents, they do not care whether the children's homework is done or what their marks is (sic) like…*" It seemed as if uninvolved parents/guardians were then surprised when attainment did not meet their set expectations. Accordingly, major discrepancies existed between results achieved by learners and results expected by parents/guardians. Parents/guardians would blame educators should they not be satisfied with learners' results. But unfortunately, as Participant 16 indicated, parents/guardians were responsible: "*Bad parenting in some cases, because parents allow the children to stay at home…*" They did not seem to take responsibility for assisting and/or overseeing homework and to ensure that their children prepared for tests and/or exams timeously. Some parents/guardians were not even able to meet their own expectations and were therefore prone to negativity. A learner's lack of enthusiasm towards the future therefore stemmed from the gloomy and unrealistic circumstances imposed by parents/guardians. Parents/guardians furthermore gave the impression that they were not interested in school activities.

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b)   Educators' shortcomings and administrative burdens

One participant averred that qualified, well-equipped staff members were one of the greatest challenges, implying that colleagues were not up to standard in order to fulfil their teaching obligations and to provide assistance in general. This participant seemed to focus on the fact that learners should always be the main focus of every educator.

Some of the educators believed that there were not sufficient guidelines as to what was expected of them completing the syllabus was an enormous challenge. This situation prompted a lot of them to approach their daily tasks on a trial and error basis. There seemed to be insufficient support from management. Educators believed that administration and paperwork were preventing them from actual teaching. Due to time limits educators struggled to complete all tasks timeously. Participant 12 summarised this situation effectively by stating that: "*Starting with school administration, when I started it was extremely difficult because I wasn't given any guidance, any guidelines, any physical evidence that I could use…*" Educators were further burdened by having to make provision for conducting lessons in both Afrikaans and English.

c)   Societal impact

The ever changing society and imminent changes associated therewith was seen as a challenge. Participant 18 averred "…*the changing society and all the (eh) changes dealing with the, this, the learners…*" Educators, parents/guardians and learners did not always strive towards the same goals. The respective parties had different values, spoke different languages and believed in diverse things which might all impact on educational objectives. All these challenges had to be kept in mind whilst inspiring learners to achieve their best. Even the eruption of violence in the townships impacted on learners which in turn might well affect attendance.

d)   Financial constraints

"…*I think the (eh) most prominent one is eh finances…*" this view expressed by Participant 20 was indicative of the fact that financial constraints were experienced on a first-hand basis in class. Some learners did not have breakfast prior to coming to school and this could be an indication of insufficient income in a specific home. Inadequate nutrition could impact on a learner's ability to pay attention during instruction time.   From a practical point of view Mathematics seemed to be an expensive subject and not all learners owned scientific calculators, the costs of which were in the region of R300 as was illustrated by Participant 11. *"Also, financial is, mathematics is quite an expensive subject, the calculators is (sic) just under R300".*   One of the participants indicated that although resources were limited, learners without calculators were accommodated with spare ones during instruction time. Unfortunately these learners' results were influenced by the fact that they were not well versed in the process of using a scientific calculator as they could not practise at home. Educators in charge of workshops also seemed dismayed by insufficient funds which prevented them from running these properly.

e)   Absence of discipline

Discipline remained a constant challenge and learners disobeyed basic rules. It was the educators' perception that general discipline at the school accordingly lacked and that learners tended to think that they could basically get away with everything. They had self- discipline deficiencies and seemed to lack a sense of responsibility. "*discipline is not what it was when I was at school as well um some of the children don't have the um … um… respect*" (Participant 21*).* Learners insisted on being spoon fed and did not seem to grasp the idea that subjects like Mathematics required constant practise. In addition, learners were not self-motivated which made it extremely difficult for educators to motivate them.   It was noted that learners constantly talked during instruction time. Closely linked to discipline, was respect for all cultures. Participant 16 specifically mentioned that, from her personal experience, the race of an educator could be an impediment in that learners reacted differently to her during instruction time as a result of her race.   In her own words "…*I'm a coloured educator in a predominantly white school…*"

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f)   **Learner absenteeism**

The fact that the same learners were frequently absent posed additional challenges to educators. Educators were of the opinion that absentees made it impossible for educators to finalise a specific topic relating to a subject. "*Uhm, it is definitely a challenge in terms of the same learners who are often absent, it is not absenteeism in general, but you get those that are constantly absent and that is a challenge*" (Participant 12).

g)   **General barriers**

Participant 21 was of the opinion that learners were not up to standard on an intellectual level and that it was therefore difficult to explain basic principles to them: "*…the children are not up to standard uhm and that makes my task very, uhm more difficult…*" It was perceived as a challenge to convince a learner of the importance of studying and to simultaneously instil enjoyment for a specific subject.

4.8.2 Management of absenteeism

a)   **Recording of absenteeism**

The individual homeroom educators were solely responsible for the daily checking and completion of the class register at commencement of the school day in order to record physical presence. "*The class educator, the register educator, we check the register and sign it on a daily basis*" (Participant 11). The respective delegates of the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) of each register class were not involved in this process at all. Upon completion of the class register the document was sent to the Head of Grade who submitted it to the secretary for capturing purposes. This system also catered for learners who arrived late at school.

At this stage, and should educators become aware of certain patterns of absenteeism, the Heads of Grades were required to make telephonic contact with parents/guardians of absentees and could even elect to forward an electronic text message to parents/guardians. The automatic electronic text messages were sent

on a daily basis. It followed that parents/guardians were sometimes not even aware of the fact that their children were not attending school had it not been for the school informing them "…*and often the parents are not aware of the absenteeism, they drop them at school in their school uniforms, but they never get through the school gates*…" (Participant 12). But, attempts to reach parents/guardians telephonically could only be successful if correct phone numbers of parents/guardians were registered on the school's data base.

Participant 23, who had been employed with the case study school for the past 14 years, indicated that the police used to assist the school in previous years by fetching absentees from wherever they were and returning them to school. "*And um I know earlier years, this year it did not happen so often, but we are even allowed to let, you know to inform the police with the parents' permission and um in the past they fetched pupils from other children's houses…*" Safety of the child was regarded as of paramount importance. It was difficult to ascertain why this process was no longer followed. Nowadays, educators felt that "*…it's a struggle really, because you can only do so much*" (Participant 13).

Educators seemed to be aware of the fact that they were expected to assess attendance during every period subsequent to register period, but indicated that it was not done consistently.   The reason for this validation was to address absenteeism emanating from a specific period. Some educators confirmed that it was easy to validate attendance during subject periods in accordance with printed class lists, Participant 23 specifically valued the importance of these class lists in that "*you have your hands on the absentees every day.*" It was however mentioned by some that this could be a waste of precious teaching time.

Subsequent to absence a learner was required to liaise with the Head of Grade upon returning and to submit a letter from the parents/guardians confirming the reasons for absence. Participant 14 confirmed procedure to be followed: "…*learner should bring a letter um to tell or to say why they were absent and the letter must be written um by the parents…*" Subject educators then receive a copy of this letter. The idea of the letter was also to keep educators updated in respect of the circumstances leading to absenteeism. It was highlighted that there were still some loopholes in respect of this system.

Educators completed the class register and compared this to the data obtained from the turn stiles access card system, in terms of which learners were required to swipe their access cards, in order to address any discrepancies. Educators seemed to believe that learners were capable of jeopardising both these systems.

With regard to documenting evidence relating to absenteeism educators were uncertain of whether compiled data were readily available and/or being archived by the school for future use. Participant 15 said that: "…*I'm not sure about recording and about the communication but I know they send out SMS's but I think they might have then a record of that if they sent it…*"

Some educators were under the impression that the school kept record of phone calls to parents/guardians in instances of absenteeism, whilst others were not able to confirm if hard copies of telephone calls, text messages or communication with parents/guardians were stored. Some educators did however reveal that interviews with parents/guardians in respect of absenteeism are filed accordingly. One of the educators pointed out that Level 2 hearings were recorded and captured for future reference. These records might include voice recordings and/or compilation of Minutes of Meetings. Participant 23 mentioned that due to the fact that she recorded the date, time and outcome of an interview with a parent/guardian of an absentee, she received positive feedback from the parent/guardian. She attempted to not only inform the parent/guardian of the absenteeism, but also endeavoured to address the root of the problem. This was important in light of the fact that not all educators were certain if parents/guardian of absentees ever provide the school with feedback regarding the absenteeism.

b)   Comparison of different types of absenteeism and various outcomes

Educators regarded illness and hospitalisation as valid reasons for absenteeism as well as unforeseen circumstances at home. Urgent family matters, for example a funeral, were classified as valid reasons for absence, also absence *in lieu* of religious commitments and/or trauma experienced. Additional reasons for valid absenteeism included *"violence, lack of transport, strikes and funds"* (Participant 24).

Participant 20's response indicated that some parents/guardians kept their children at home to work when their labourers did not pitch for work "*when parents keep (the) child at home to work because the workers did not pitch.*" However, absenteeism had to be validated by a parent/guardian in written format. It appeared as if educators were in a position to verify the authenticity of these confirmations. Should it appear that these letters were not signed by parents/guardians, educators could insist on investigation of matters incidental thereto. This was an attempt to ensure that the system was not manipulated.

There was even a notion that a dentist appointment should not be categorised as valid and that medical appointments should not be for the duration of an entire school day. Interestingly enough the educators emphasised the importance of communication between themselves. They believed that open communication channels could assist them in becoming aware of valid reasons for absenteeism.

The interviewees seemed to record truancy quite accurately. Participant 12 said that: "*I record their attendance every period, every lesson hour, throughout the day.*" Should a learner be absent thrice the status was escalated. Some of the interviewees relied on the subject educators to bring truancy to their attention. Educators seemed to be unaware of the outcome in cases of invalid absences, save to mention that they were familiar with the fact that it constituted an irregular step. They were mindful of the fact that the GDE was concerned about frequent learner attendance. One of the educators touched on the applicability of a Level 2 hearing. In this regard learners were obliged to submit a slip signed by the Head of Grade reflecting the underlying reason for absence. One of the participants suggested that even though she did not record truancy, she still sent a text message to absentees informing them of homework. Invalid absence could lead to *inter alia* detention and/or other forms of punishment. Self-imposed long weekends, commencing on Fridays or ending a Monday were seen as examples of invalid absence. Participant 23 explained as follows: *"I think those two trends the Monday and the Friday, and it's not all of them, some of them will be absent on a Monday continuously but will be there on a Friday…"*

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c) Impact of learner absenteeism on fellow learners, educators and the school in general

"Learners lose a lot of work and fall behind on the syllabus. They become frustrated…" Should learners therefore not attend school, they fell behind with their work as indicated by Participant 17. Learners' general development was impeded and they did not acquire the necessary skills. Frequent absentees became frustrated because they could not keep up with the work which could then lead to other disciplinary problems in class. They had no interaction with their peers and missed out on discussions relating to a specific subject. "*If learners are continuously absent, this great opportunity for development in various aspects gets lost, for instance development of interaction with peers…*" (Participant 17). Absentees affected attendees in that they caused a reduction in the average of the year end results. A number of learners considered school as a safe place because their circumstances at home were problematic, as summarised by Participant 21: *"I find that it's um households that are (eh) struggling financially and um there's some, normally some um emotional issues as well…"* If they were absent they lost out on the care and secure environment the school provided as there was no support at home. Unfortunately regular absentees were labelled e.g. as regular absentees on a Friday, and this could prompt them to act according to the expectation.

As a result of absenteeism, absentees almost never developed their full potential. Due to constant absenteeism they were unable to excel on academic level and unfortunately they could never attain distinctions in line with their intellectual ability. Participant 14 confirmed that *"… their academic achievement is not going to be eh, eh up to standard."* Absentees and their parents/guardians were unaware of what was happening at school as they did not get correspondence in the form of circulars etc. Absentees got estranged from their friends and they were discarded from their peer groups. On an emotional level, learners felt incompetent after absence. Absentees were still required to pay their school fees.

It was reiterated by Participant 11, 17 and 21 that a subject like Mathematics was a contentious issue in that learners who fell behind eventually lost track completely, which prompted them to be absent on a regular basis. The impact of absence on a learner in this regard was severe in that they could be compelled to change from pure Mathematics to Mathematical Literacy.

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Even attendees became demotivated as they believed that absentees *"got away"* with being absent. They were under the impression that absence was condoned as absentees did not suffer from real consequences. Absenteeism was already problematic but the problem escalated when it was not addressed. Participant 18 emphasised the dealing with absenteeism on an immediate basis. *"…we can't ignore it, some schools ignore the problem (eh) and then it will for sure escalate, so you need to deal with it on a regular basis, every day."* When work was repeated to accommodate absentees, attendees' concentration seemed to wander since they were already acquainted with the work. There were, however, contrasting opinions that daily school attenders were not influenced by absentees since they had a routine of attendance and good discipline and were therefore not affected. The effect on the attendees could also be positive because of fewer learners in class and these learners could get more attention from the educator.

Staff members became discouraged as absentees performed worse than they were supposed to during assessment. Participant 12 illustrated the snowball effect: "*Uhm, tests are missed, assignments are missed. So, it just … makes us negative."* Work could only be explained once absentees returned to school and it was difficult to break this bad habit. Absentees did not adhere to discipline and they left educators frustrated as it remained the duty of the educator to assist them. Educators believed that the onus was on absentees to catch up with work, and that educators were obliged to carry on with the work. Participant 12 wished that all absentees could reveal the following attitude on their return: "*I was absent on these days. What work did I miss - will you please assist me to catch it up?"* Sometimes it was impossible to continue with new work since a learner hadn't mastered previous work. Because of their absence they did not understand the work and asked questions which made it difficult to teach new content. Most educators carried on with the class work and once instruction was completed absentees were called to their desk to have worked that had been missed out on explained. Absentees had to be put on track again and some educators insisted on learners providing them with written proof of completed work in workbooks, which required additional input from educators.

The consequences of absenteeism had to be pointed out in order to minimise the occurrence in future. If the educators or the school turned a blind eye it formed a negative pattern. A learner had to be punished based on the severity of the transgression, for example, if a learner skipped school for 5 hours he/she had to be punished accordingly. If a system was in place it prevented learners from absenteeism because they knew that the consequences would be dire.

Regular absence affected the school's academic performance in general and also an individual's achievement. Especially the Top 10 academic learners were frustrated, because they were aware of the fact that the syllabus had to be completed timeously and absentees could affect their attainment adversely. "*They also get frustrated especially with the, the kids who are like the top 10 learners and they understand we have a long syllabus we have to get through the work, they want to do well, they want to get through the work, they will also get frustrated…*" (Participant 19). The school aimed at a 100% pass rate which was jeopardised by absence.

Absenteeism had an effect on the administration of the school and it lead to an increase in paperwork. It also added to the workload of responsible persons as they had to check up on and find absentees and this resulted in "…*a lot of extra work…*" (Participant 12).

d)   Factors contributing to absenteeism, trends observed and curbing thereof

There was a general notion that learners were unable to cope with the pressure of schoolwork and were prompted to rather stay at home. Accordingly, they did not address the real issue, fell behind with work and allowed the real problem to escalate. As stated so many times, learners had a lack drive, they had no self-motivation or vision for the future. "*I still think that is because of lack of motivation they don't have drive…" (Participant 17).*

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They shirked away from their responsibility and they were conditioned in such a way that absenteeism was not regarded as unacceptable. Participant 18 averred that: "…*the real reason they can't deal with the issues in the school and they can't cope with their school work so especially we experience it on a Monday and as well as on a Friday…*" Educators regarded Thursday as a "lazy day" and Fridays were considered as a favourite day for absence. "…*learners that are um absent on a Friday or a Monday, sometimes both days so they just um form a long weekend…*" (Participant 14). Even a day after a public holiday was sometimes regarded as a popular day for non-attendance. Absence was also influenced by days set aside for fund raising. When learners wore casual clothes to school they had to pay for this privilege. Many then tend to stay home because they could not afford it or they felt embarrassed because they did not have the financial means to wear the latest fashion. Learners who suffered from problematic finances stayed away until the day their parents/guardians' salaries were paid because they could not afford transport. Some learners stay away at the end of the month or until payday. Bullying could also influence learners to stay away from school for fear of victimisation or humiliation. During winter there was an increase in absenteeism due to illness and when there isn't a normal academic program followed at school.

Events like photo day seemed to be a reason for learners to stay away because they were disinterested. "…*look inferior with whatever clothes they have, would rather stay at home. And when we have a photo day and some kids know they not going to be on photos they will stay away…*" (Participant 19). The same principle applied to athletics try outs at the beginning of the year. It was important to note that if a learner was absent on a Friday he/she was not permitted to partake in sporting activities on the Saturday, following the absence. This strategy was only curbing the trend during certain seasons, as learners felt guilty when letting their teams down. Towards commencement of the exams, while educators were preparing learners accordingly upon completion of the syllabus, learners were also absent, pretending to also prepare. Contrariwise learners who were generally absent actually attended fun days as was mentioned by Participant 23 "*maybe there's something on at school or there's a reason that they don't have to come to school for a specific hour or two and those pupils who are generally not coming to school, they are here.*" Those who were absent on religious holidays informed the educators in advance and made sure

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they did not miss the work that was covered. Having said that, some learners travelled to Durban or Mecca outside schedules school holidays for extended periods.

It was imperative that all the educators followed the prescribed steps in curbing absenteeism. Serious cases were discussed in the staff room to ensure that all the educators worked together in attempts to limit absenteeism. Parents/guardians sometimes allowed the habit to take root because they could not manage their own children but expected the school to take full responsibility.

Some educators felt that the punishment for absenteeism was not stringent enough because absentees still got away with it and conversely some educators were not applying the principles and therefore the system was failing. Participant 13 hadn't seen any improvement in four years, in fact, the matter had intensified "*in the four years I've been here, to me the matter has gotten (sic) worse it hasn't improved.*" The school stressed the importance of attendance but that was as far as it went, this attempt was not really successful and the absences weren't really reduced.

There seemed to be a difference in the manner in which educators dealt with absenteeism. One educator averred that management of absenteeism was more effective in certain grades. Educators seemed to deal almost unsympathetically with Grade 12 absentees as opposed to Grade 8's. With regard to gender, female learners seemed to be dealt with in a more caring manner. I got the impression that educators who had been with the school, or in a teaching profession for a long period, had the expertise to know when learners were manipulating the system and when there were valid reasons for absence. "*…they um know the ways to, to jeopardise the system…*" (Participant 14).

The impact of absenteeism could not be underestimated. It became problematic when the management thereof was not effective. Strategies had to be in place and the matter had to be taken seriously.

e) Miscellaneous issues relating to absenteeism and the manner in which the school assists absentees on their return

It was disheartening to know that some parents/guardians did not have the opportunity to attend school but their own children did not make use of this opportunity, and wasted their school fees just because they did not feel like coming to school.

Should a learner be absent parents/guardians could arrange for educators to send the homework to the office where it could be collected. Learners could also arrange for extra classes to catch up on missed work. In instances where tests were missed these learners had to make an arrangement with the educator to write the test. Educators were required to spend break in class to assist absentees or stay after school to help them catch up which resulted in educators being negative. Despite the input from educators, regular absence was every educator's worst nightmare because *"…we have to schedule extra classes for them…"* (Participant 14). Normally absentees did not get up to date with their school work. There were conflicting views regarding the way in which educators dealt with lost school work on absentees' return. Some deemed it necessary to repeat the work in class, to the dismay of other learners, whereas others regarded it as disruptive to other learners and therefore elected to explain work to absentees during extra classes.

One educator remarked that it was a joy to teach a smaller class because every child could be reached. Conversely it is disconcerting because one felt sorry for those who missed out on an opportunity to learn. "…*you feel sorry for those who are missing out on an opportunity to basically have a future…"* (Participant 13). The school cared about each learner and attempted to ensure that each learner attended school and attain Grade 12. In light of the fact that educators acted *in loco parentis*, there was a great responsibility on them not to be absent and to focus on education of learners as this could impact on attendance of learners. Participant 15 said: *"…we are in loco parentis…"*

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4.8.3 Summary of educators' perception of absenteeism

The major challenges experienced by educators seemed to be a combination of an overload of administrative duties, lack of learner discipline and self-motivation from within which all resulted in educators feeling demotivated. Attendance and achievement, in their opinion, seemed to correlate to a large extent. They all endeavoured to manage absenteeism in their unique manner however frustrating that might be. It seemed as though they were cognisant of the importance of curbing absenteeism timeously due to its far reaching consequences. It must be stated however that a general applicable policy hadn't been implemented properly.

4.9 SGB representative's view in relation to absenteeism

One of the main limitations of the research was the fact that attempts to interact with members of the SGB were unsuccessful, although the administrative spokesperson liaised telephonically with the SGB on several occasions. She endeavoured to schedule meetings with the respective members, but in the final instance only the then chairperson of the SGB was willing to be questioned at the school premises. Transition from old to newly elected members, further complicated attempts to schedule meetings in that the newly elected members first had to attend training sessions to become familiar with their duties and/or responsibilities. It appeared that the members evaded requests from the secretary to participate in the research and that they failed and/or refused to return telephonic messages.

Questions posed to the then chairperson also revealed his interpretation from a legal perspective due to the fact that he was a member of the legal profession. Even though he had a busy schedule he offered to be interviewed at school during one of his lunch breaks.

4.9.1 The SGB member's view on parental detachment set against the educators' involvement

He proposed that the main ingredient for purposes of combatting absenteeism was anchored in parental involvement. However as a result of parents' detachment, a can of worms had been opened. In his opinion it was difficult to attempt to guide parents in how they should fulfil their duties because of the fact that they might sometimes

already be set in their ways. These parents/guardians tended not to care for their children and allowed them to roam freely. He concluded that they acted in contradiction to the provisions of Section 18 of the Children's Act, No. 38 of 2005 which stipulated that parents/guardians were obliged to care for their children. Interestingly enough he seemed to have a sympathetic approach towards single parent/guardian households. In his opinion these single parents/guardians, characterised by improper family dynamics, tried their best to provide for their children. They were necessitated to work in order to provide an income and sometimes their children are left to their own devices while they were at work. These learners were often neglected and might be absent from school.

In his experience he had been involved in situations where children in need of care had been removed from their parents/guardians as a result of a lack of involvement. He referred to Section 150 of the Children's Act, No. 38 of 2005 which stated that a child was in need of care and protection when the child became involved in behaviour which a parent/guardian could not manage. He believed that this subsection could be extended to truancy and ill-discipline at school.

For this reason he believed that educators played an important role in creating an environment which was conducive to learning. He contended that the teaching environment should benefit learners and no child should be allowed to slip through the cracks by not attending school frequently. Parents/guardians were required to assist educators in this regard. He even touched on the fact that educators should go the extra mile in order to understand each learner's background. He indicated that in putting these measures in place, borderline cases would be addressed.

In his opinion the teaching profession was regarded as one of the cornerstones in preventing absenteeism. He argued that as a result of parents'/guardians' indifference, an educator's role as *in loco parentis* became vital.

4.9.2 The SGB member's view on Legislation and policies regulating absenteeism

People tend to approached rules and regulations from a no tolerance perspective. The chairperson emphasised the fact that the Code of Conduct needed to make provision for changing circumstances. He claimed that the Code of Conduct had to be a living document which had to be capable of implementation. This was regarded as a very important comment as he had been personally involved in a concerted team effort to develop the Code of Conduct. He was fully aware of the far reaching implications of social media and for this reason he averred that the Code of Conduct and accompanying measures had to keep abreast of time. Proper revision of the Code of Conduct was therefore imperative.

It goes without saying that legislation dealing with absenteeism i.e. the School's Act etc. had to be considered in formulating policies.

4.9.3 The view of the SGB member regarding the responsibility of the SGB concerning absenteeism

At the outset it must be stated that the chairperson did not regard absenteeism experienced by the case study school as a major problem as he hadn't been involved in hearings relating thereto, "…*it is not a big problem…*" He indicated that based on the fact that he did not have access to "empirical data" he wasn't able to comment on certain trends relating to absenteeism as he hadn't been involved in research relating to this phenomenon. He could therefore not comment on the degree of severity or the lack thereof, during certain seasons of the year.

Only a repetition of a Level 2 offence, as discussed earlier, would result in a Level 3 hearing, which would be tried before a SGB Disciplinary Committee. From his personal experience these hearings did not occur frequently and he concluded that he hadn't been involved in same. He vaguely remembered an incident where a learner had been suspended after a Level 3 hearing, but this matter related to abuse of dagga. It was stressed that the main responsibility in dealing with absenteeism lay with the SMT which was responsible for consulting with parents/guardians in

matters relating to absenteeism. The focus remained on the parents/guardians in an attempt to resolve these matters and he believed that "…*you can try and teach and instruct the parents into parental guidance…*"

In his view, absenteeism was classified as either valid or invalid. He stated that valid reasons related to death or sickness. He emphasised the importance of parents/guardians in advising the school in this regard, but sometimes "…*the parent doesn't care and isn't involved*…" With regard to invalid absence he made use of examples where parents/guardians weren't involved and were condoning their children's behaviour by allowing them to engage in activities like fishing and hosting parties during school hours.

Even though he hadn't been involved in disciplinary hearings relating to absenteeism on a frequent basis, and as a lawyer, he quoted some of the important provisions envisaged in the Policy on Learner Attendance which had been published on 4 May 2010. In essence a principal, in cooperation with the SMT and the SGB, was responsible for establishing an ethos of punctual and consistent attendance. The fact that a principal and educators were required to be concerned about each learner's personal circumstances, tied in with his initial comment that educators acted *in loco parentis* ("*In loco parentis, you have the responsibility of the parent* ") and that they had to notify all stakeholders of factors impacting on learners' attendance.

He was well aware of the fact that the SGB had to be actively involved in the attendance rate of learners. The SGB was even entitled to request a report from the principal on a quarterly basis to assess and discuss certain trends at a specific meeting.

4.9.4 The SGB member's view on the impact of absenteeism on various parties

He sketched a very negative picture for absentees – they engaged in illegal activities such as the abuse of drugs and/or alcohol whilst they were absent from school. These activities further culminated in more serious issues like a flawed school record

and/or unsatisfactory academic achievement as was illustrated herein: "…*many times they do something illegal, they obtain some liquor, or drugs and they use it at their home, when parents are not in home, more serious issues, their whole school record is of such a nature, he is not going to pass…*"

Should absentees not be disciplined they became brazen and fellow learners could be encouraged to follow in their footsteps which created a negative culture. He still believed that absenteeism had a minimal indirect impact on the school in general but he did however mention that the number of absentees could increase, should the issue not be dealt with efficiently. *"As soon as you get a learner who gets away with absenteeism…, (he/she) gets brazen and who brags…"*

4.9.5 Summary of SGB member's notion regarding absenteeism

Due to his profession he provided his input from a pure legal perspective. He touched on additional subjects which other participants did not mention as a result of his employment within the legal profession. It was important to note that schools had to adhere to legislation and/or principles relating to absenteeism in their pursuit of reducing the occurrence of absenteeism.

4.10 Conclusion

There were various reasons why learners seemed to be absent from school. Based on the interviews conducted, the main distinction for absence remained between authorised and unauthorised absenteeism. Even though some participants did not agree on the classification of absenteeism, it was quite easy to slot a specific form of absenteeism under these two distinctions. The educators seem to believe that absenteeism was not a problematic issue but interviews revealed the contrary.

The principal, SGB, educators and parents/guardians had to all be involved as stakeholders in attempts to curb the phenomenon. Their constant commitment in preventing absenteeism had to not be underestimated. It appeared as though the way in which all role players dealt with absenteeism was not implemented on a consistent level. There seemed to be a few grey areas in the management of

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absenteeism and procedures to deal with the issue by all interested parties. Furthermore, it was obvious that there wasn't a specific program in place for educators to deal with absentees on their return to school. The way in which remedial work was to be done had to be refined.

In Chapter 1, I postulated the possibility of the Broken Windows Theory by explaining the phenomenon of learner absenteeism and the possible increase in respect thereof. In this chapter I presented the data gathered from the different stakeholders involved in the school. From the data presented, I noticed certain cues that may support the Broken Window Theory. In Chapter 5 I will address this again by representing a possible case in support of this theory.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1   Introduction

This chapter is a concise summary of findings in relation to the main research question and sub questions.   It therefore portrays key outcomes and recommendations for future endeavours. In this chapter I attempt to indicate how participants responded to the main research question, namely, the manner in which a school dealt with the different manifestations of absenteeism on a daily basis, as well as challenges experienced in this regard. The sub questions supported findings in respect of possible trends, consequences and approaches followed in curbing absenteeism. Through the lens of an interpretivist, the research accordingly aimed at exploration of lessons deducted from the data. This chapter includes an abridged version of each chapter.

5.2   Research questions posed

5.2.1 How do the school principal and the SMT manage learner absenteeism in a secondary school?

The above research question guided my investigation into the management of absenteeism *in casu*.   Learner absenteeism was governed by the school principal, by means of an electronic turn stile system. This system was initiated by the principal on commencement of his employment at the school. In addition to the electronic turn stile system, which recorded learners' attendance, individual home room teachers were tasked with completion of the respective class registers on a daily basis. This process was largely overseen by educators and the SMT. The school principal became actively involved only at a later stage and only in severe cases of absenteeism.

The above measures were deployed to record absenteeism on a daily basis. The duly completed class registers were forwarded to the administrative personnel who compared data obtained from the electronic card system with absences recorded in the class register in order to identify discrepancies. The principal was at all aware of the *status quo* at all times.

Should the data obtained from the electronic card system not correspond with the information reflected in the class register, it would follow that either a mistake had occurred on the administrative side during capturing or that a learner was in fact absent from school. If it then became evident that a learner was absent, an SMS was sent to the parents/guardians to inform them of the learner's absence. The HOD and assigned Head of Grade would then telephonically liaise with parents/guardians in order to address the absence.

The principal indicated that during his four years of employment at the school, he had never been involved in a formal Level 3 disciplinary hearing (the most severe form of hearing) relating to learner absenteeism. He had, however, scheduled meetings with parents/guardians of frequent absentees in attempts to deal with the problem underlying absenteeism. It seemed that problems relating to absenteeism were dealt with by the SMT prior to escalation to the principal. The mere fact that the principal was not aware of Level 3 disciplinary hearings in this regard was by no means an indication that absenteeism isn't a serious concern. Absenteeism was mainly addressed at a Level 2 disciplinary hearing. The fact that absenteeism was addressed at this level indicated that absenteeism was problematic, causing a snowball effect. In most instances, when absenteeism persisted, it resulted in a learner failing a grade even though some sort of intervention had taken place at the initial occurrence.

5.2.2 Sub questions:

a) What is the incidence of learner absenteeism at school specifically in terms of possible trends? (E.g. absenteeism on a specific day)

The SGB member was not able to provide input in respect of possible trends relating to absenteeism. The principal and educators however, agreed that public holidays definitely impacted on absenteeism. Should a school holiday occur on a Thursday,

learners were more prone to be absent on the following Friday. The same applied to long weekends when learners were absent on a Monday following a long weekend. Educators labelled Thursday as a *"lazy"* day and deemed Fridays as the most popular day for being absent. However, it was interesting to note that frequent absentees almost always attended fun days hosted by the school. The fourth term was characterised by a significant increase in absences. Interestingly, more girls were absent than boys, and Gr 10 girls had the highest incidence of absences.

Throughout the interviews, respondents indicated that casual days often lead to nonattendance. The reason for absence was that learners felt inferior if they were not be in a position to wear fashionable clothing on casual days as a result of limited financial means. They were inclined to feel excluded from the group when they were unable to dress accordingly and therefore opted to rather stay home. Even payment of parents/guardians' salaries towards the end of a month influenced attendance. Learners with limited financial resources could not afford transport to and from school at the end of a month and would decide to stay.

Disinterest towards school activities, like photo day and athletic trials at commencement of a new school year, were also reasons why learners tended to stay away from school. The fact that learners, who were absent from school on a Friday, were prevented from taking part in sporting activities on a Saturday, was also be regarded as trend. Seasonal trends were visible during winter when learners were more likely to be absent as a result of flu and/or colds.

It goes without saying that days set aside for religious practises also lead to more absences. However, it must be stated that parents/guardians who intended to attend these religious days during school days informed the school timeously and endeavoured to ensure that their children caught up in respect of lost school work.

b) **What are the challenges absenteeism pose with regard to managing of the school, both at classroom level and in general?**

The importance of involvement of parents/guardians in their children's school careers cannot be underestimated. There was a general notion by educators that parents/guardians were not actively involved in their children's school affairs. There seemed to be a lack of responsibility by parents/guardians in assisting children with

homework and/or preparations for examinations or tests. Furthermore, parents/guardians were susceptible to negativity towards attendance and academic performance in instances where they also had struggled academically during their own school careers.

Educators experienced that they were already burdened with excessive administrative duties and paper work which prevented them from teaching effectively. Time constraints also impeded timeous completion of tasks and they experienced insufficient support from management. They were further frustrated in that they were required to teach in an environment where not all stakeholders had the same values and/or beliefs. People spoke different languages and all these challenges impacted on educational objectives.

In light of the abovementioned challenges, financial constraints also impacted on educators within the teaching environment. Effective instruction time was compromised by insufficient financial resources. Learners did not always have the equipment required for becoming familiar with a subject like Mathematics. When learners did not possess calculators educators needed to implement innovative ways to accommodate learners without these calculators. In addition, educators were required to teach learners who hadn't been provided with proper nutrition prior to commencement of the school day. Educators were also constantly confronted with learners who lacked the necessary self-motivation and who disobeyed basic rules. The fact that general discipline at the school was lacking remained a problem.

Where learners were absent from school frequently, educators were burdened with additional challenges. Educators expressed that it was almost impossible to finalise work relating to a subject when there were constant absences. In general, educators struggled to convey the importance of studying and in explaining basic principles to learners.

c) **What are the consequences of repetitive absence?**

Absenteeism affected learners on so many levels. On an intellectual level learners fell behind with school work. It became difficult to keep up with school work as absentees had already missed out on explanations from educators and class discussions and therefore continued to struggle academically.

Not only absentees, but also educators became discouraged. Absentees experienced difficulty to achieve academically and they were uninformed about school happenings. On a social level they became isolated to some extent. Emotionally they were also ill equipped and felt incompetent. It often happened that absentees disrupted a class upon their return which impacted on the ability of an educator to teach efficiently. Regular attendees were also adversely affected.

As stated above, it was impractical for an educator to resume with new topics when learners did not have pre-knowledge in respect of a certain topic. Accordingly, absentees posed questions, upon their return, which other learners had already mastered. This process therefore leads to stagnation instead of progress, as an educator was prevented from imparting new content. In this regard educators were further strained because they were required to repeat work to absentees in order to ensure that all learners were on the same page. Educators regarded this process as a double workload as they were necessitated to cater for the repetition of work for absentees on a daily basis.

In general the school's reputation and the performance of individual learners were affected by absence. Not only did absence influence the 100% pass rate of a certain grade and the school in general, but grade averages were also affected negatively. This also resulted in the Academic Top 10 learners becoming frustrated as they were subjected to constant repetition of work instead of being subjected to additional intellectual stimulation by exploring new avenues during instruction time. These Academic Top 10 learners could, however, fulfil a mentorship role in reintegrating absentees (Malcolm *et al.*, 2003:46).

d) Which approaches are followed to curb absenteeism?

It was generally perceived that punishment for absenteeism was not severe enough. Educators did not apply the same approach consistently. Absentees therefore got away with truant behaviour and as a result the system was failing. It is, however, important to note that a uniform policy in respect of absenteeism did not exist. It seemed as if educators act individually on absenteeism in accordance with his/her own interpretation and discretion of what was considered as correct in the circumstances.

Only one educator mentioned that she attempted to get to the root of the absenteeism during her conversations with parents/guardians of an absentee. She reiterated that she endeavoured to understand the underlying reason for absenteeism. Accordingly she was able to determine how to approach a certain occurrence of absenteeism.

The mere fact that learners considered absenteeism to be a fashion trend also illustrated that the fundamental reasons for absenteeism were not addressed by the school, hence making it almost impossible for the school to approach the problem informingly.

5.2.3 What lessons have been learned from managing learner absenteeism?

The main distinction between authorised and unauthorised absenteeism was discussed in Chapter 1 (Figure 1.1). Figure 1.1 clearly demonstrated that a further differentiation was to be made between valid and invalid absenteeism. I am of the opinion that valid unauthorised absenteeism should receive special attention in schools as this form of absenteeism is omitted in policies relating to learner absenteeism.

Even though the principal was of the opinion that absenteeism was managed effectively, the general perception was that the converse actually applied. First of all, a standardised policy with regard to the management of absenteeism, hadn't been developed even though elements thereof were addressed in the Code of Conduct. In the second instance educators did not follow the same approach in respect of an absentee returning to school. All of this was evident in the conflicting manner in which educators seemed to assist absentees on their return to school to familiarise themselves with contents of missed school work. Some of them were of the opinion that the *onus* was on the absentee to liaise with educators upon return to school to catch up with work or to schedule appointments with educators. On the other hand, some believed that it was the educator's responsibility to ensure that absentees were assisted with opportunities to catch up with lost work. Closely related to this obligation seemed to be the provision of hard copies of and/or hand-outs relating to the respective subjects.

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It is also noteworthy that attendance impacted on achievement. As a result of absenteeism, learners were more inclined to fail a specific subject and/or grade as they hadn't been subjected to comprehensive explanations by educators and/or they had not been able to participate in class discussions. The general theme heralded by educators, as was evident from interviews conducted in Chapter 4, was also that absentees lacked self-motivation which also impacted on proper academic achievement. The snowball effect of absenteeism continued indefinitely when intervention did not occur at an early stage. The general notion was that absentees basically get away unscathed in that the consequences for not being present were not far-reaching and extensive enough. The school did not impose measures for absenteeism consistently.

5.2.4 Lens utilised for this study and findings

Interpretivism was at the core of the lens utilised for this study. Participants were able to express their meanings in relation to absenteeism, its different forms of appearance and the management thereof.

5.3 Elements of the Broken Windows Theory

It has been reiterated previously that the Broken Window Theory was of limited application in South Africa. It is however, important to note that the basic principles of this theory were useful guidelines in the sphere of absenteeism. The physical appearance of the school building, which included but was not limited to the classrooms and administrative building, was extremely important. This visual impression impacted negatively on attendance where the school buildings were not maintained on a regular and proper basis (Wilson & Kellinger, 1982:6). The underlying message suggested that when a broken window was not repaired, the school did not deem maintenance important. Likewise, if absence was not addressed the problem escalated and learners were under the impression that attendance was not a priority on the school's agenda. It was therefore important that the school took cognisance of the manner in which maintenance of the school building was managed.

Through the eyes of the participants it was found that there was still a general perception by learners that the broken window theory thrived. Learners were of the opinion that educators did not display genuine interest in them and/or their affairs. They lacked motivation and their apathy towards school was illustrated by the fact that they stayed away from school for insignificant reasons. The learners' comments suggested that the school did not succeed in conveying a message that the wellbeing of each and every learner was vital to the school. Other elements of the broken window theory were apparent from the belief of attendees that absentees remained intact as there were no definite consequences equated with absence. This resulted in attendees becoming discouraged to attend school as they became disengaged.

A fragmented illusion was also perceived through the learners' discernment with the size of the classroom. In their opinion, classrooms were small and neglected and they equated school with jail. They remarked that the school omitted to keep the school clean and tidy and the message was communicated that the school had limited interest in them.

5.4   Generation Z's sense of belonging

Chapter 4 made reference to the fact that Generation Z was online for extensive periods of time as they are very dependent on technology. They seemed to have an emotional connection with the digital world (Singh, n.d:4). From the research it became apparent that learners were, however, desirous to experience a sense of cohesion at school even though technology played such an important role in their lives. Generation Z was naturally inclined to liaise with their peers on a social level and to be connected online despite demands on an academic level.

In light of the above it goes without saying that these learners reflected a strong need to form part of a group. Therefore group-based relationship was a powerful instrument to create a platform for group cohesion. The school's role in this regard was pertinent in that the school could use this opportunity to nurture its learners' yearning for a sense of belonging. If monitored correctly by the school, the development of such a group based culture could lead to reduced absence.

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The reason for this suggestion is that it ties in with feedback from participants obtained in Chapter 4. Learners revealed that because of the visibility of the Deputy principal on the school grounds from 6 o'clock in the morning, they perceived the school as a safe haven. Interaction with friends was also regarded as an important reason to attend school.

5.5   The importance of parental/guardian engagement

Malcolm *et al.* (2003:39) concluded that the assistance and/or support from parents/guardians impacted on a learner's attendance whether it was directly or indirectly. It was a well-known fact that parental involvement played a vital role in a child's school attendance and consequential success (Smink & Reimer, 2005:9). From the interviews it was evident that parents/guardians attempted to create an environment conducive to learning. Homework was completed and preparation for tests/exams was done in an environment conducive for this purpose. Parents/guardians endeavoured to provide learners with equipment and/or surroundings which smoothed the process of learning. Learners contemplated that a quiet, peaceful study area enabled them to focus and prepare accordingly without disturbance.

There was a general notion that parents/guardians of absentees still wanted their children to achieve adequately on an academic level. They were eager to provide their children with opportunities to engage in tertiary education. I therefore believe that parents/guardians should be made aware of the correlation between attendance and achievement (Malcolm *et al.*, 2003:45).

Engagement by learners, families and the community to curb absenteeism was also supported by Sheldon & Epstein (2002:317). They preferred to focus on activities enhancing positive engagement as opposed to measures which penalised learners for being absent. In essence, they suggested an approach which encouraged continuous attendance as a long term goal. All stakeholders should therefore constantly engage in manners to increase attendance as this was not a temporary objective. It was therefore pertinent that all role players were required to remain involved in reducing absenteeism as this issue could never disappear permanently.

From the research I could ascertain that learners relied, to a large extent, on their parents/guardians and the community to support them, hence, continuous commitment was required. Kim & Page (2012:876) emphasised the importance of intervention by parents/guardians in the primary school phase to ensure behaviour that would not result in absenteeism.

Against the backdrop of child-headed households within the South African context of HIV/AIDS, the policy in relation to the management of absenteeism was further challenged. It is a well-known fact that academic attainment is influenced by death of one or both parents/guardians. Orphans who had lost a mother/guardian were adversely affected on different levels which included cognitive, physical and emotional growth (Case & Arlington, 2006:419-420). I suggest that the community becomes involved in these instances where parents/guardians are absent and this must always be kept in mind when policies to curb absenteeism are developed and refined. Schools should also not omit to involve extended family members and/or the community in addressing the problem of absenteeism.

5.6   After school opportunities for absentees

A well-formulated program, to be followed on a weekly basis, should be developed to make provision for learners who have lost instruction time due to absence. The details of such a program should be incorporated in a separate policy which specifically deals with absenteeism as suggested previously. The intention with this program would be to enable learners to receive guidance in respect of missed class work and to provide them with an opportunity to ask questions in order to fully comprehend the work. During this time educators could explain the contents of hand-outs for specific subjects to absentees so that absentees could know how to approach homework exercises and/or formal assignments.

In light of the group-based association which learners yearn for, I am of the opinion that the Top 10 academic learners should be involved during these sessions. In this way the negative association with after school activities may be negated if learners assist educators with the process of bringing absentees up to speed. On the one hand the Top 10 academic learners could revise on outcomes already achieved. On

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the other hand absentees wouldn't experience further isolation as a result of absence. Educators could also benefit from these sessions in that they could monitor the group work and could also cater for individual sessions within sessions.

5.7   Intervention strategies

Previous chapters have indicated that insignificant attendance patterns should be addressed at an early stage to prevent repetition. It is imperative to break the cycle of non-attendance to ensure that it has not been rooted should learners proceed to the next grade (Smink & Reimer, 2005:1). Problematic absenteeism originated in the primary school. Should it not be addressed appropriately during the initial phases, it had the potential to escalate to secondary school. A lack of intervention at an early stage made it almost impossible for stakeholders to remedy the problem comprehensively once the pattern of absence had been imbedded. In the final instance, should absenteeism not be attended to effectively on secondary school level, it could easily result in eventual dropout from school. It had already been established in this research that learners were prone to stay home for insignificant reasons. In my view it is important to introduce a system which encourages a daily routine to attend school thus establishing a habit of attendance (Kearney *et al.,* 2001:4).

Depending on the individual differences of absentees, it might be fruitful to engage in individual sessions with absentees in order to neutralise the effect of absenteeism. This approach will, to a large extent, depend on the capacity of educators to accommodate these absentees (Smink & Reimer, 2005:19).

Hocking (2008:35) regarded attendance certificates for exemplary attendance as another intervention strategy to encourage attendance. This incentive could become valuable for specifically learners who did not excel academically or in the cultural and/or sporting sphere at school. Regular attendees could still remain positive about school activities if they were rewarded for attendance. Malcolm *et al.* (2003:53) reinforced the importance grade competitions to enhance attendance. Should a specific grade or class be the best attenders they should receive a reward of some sort. Even individual awards like badges, vouchers or sweets proved to be successful incentives for attendance.

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It has been mentioned previously that all stakeholders should have a combined vision relating to attendance. Educators and parents/guardians should continuously communicate in endeavours to convey the importance of attendance to learners. I agree with the Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development that principals are required to communicate with parents/guardians in respect of attendance. It should be clear that certain consequences are associated with non-attendance and that the school sets certain expectations for attendance (Virginia Department of Education, 2005:1). Communication forms the basis of and leads to enhancement of relationships between learners and educators, as stated by Epstein & Sheldon, 2002:309) in Smink & Reimer (2005:5). I cannot stress the importance of communication enough. Also, the community is required to be alerted to absenteeism (Smink & Reimer 2005:6). Due to the fact that the case study school was situated in a small town, community members were sometimes familiar with some of the learners and they should be approached to liaise with the school as soon as they become aware of truant behaviour. I am of the opinion that the CPF could also play a vital role in exposing absentees from their hiding places during their daily patrols in town. The involvement of the community may, accordingly, also minimise the rate of absenteeism if they are conditioned to assist schools. As stated by Richmond (2015:3) in relation to absenteeism: *"This is a community problem, and not just a school problem."*

MacNeil and Maclin (2005:1) in Weeks (2012:7) stated that it was very important to create a culture of learning in a school. Such a culture lead to a partaking by educators, parents/guardians and learners in respect of shared opinions, ethics, philosophies and mind-sets. In essence I believe that the establishment of such a culture by a school might impact on attendance and that learners will realise the importance of learning by attending. Likewise, Newsome (2008:23-24) stated that sufficient programs and supporting models were in place in an attempt to prevent and intervene timeously with regard to a risk factor like absenteeism which might impede on learning. Even Creemers & Kyriakides (2009:294-294) emphasised the importance of a change in policy in instances where absenteeism was rife.

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Another intervention strategy which had been employed with great success was where parents/guardians were contacted telephonically or visited at home in instances where learners had a certain number of absences. These measures were aimed at reducing the incidence of absence (Smink & Reimer 2005:6). At this stage personalised home visits were not being administered by the case study school and I therefore recommend that this approach be followed. In line with a finding by Malcolm *et al.* (2003:46) I propose that schools make telephonic calls to parents/guardians on the first day of absence. Dedicated educators should be assigned for this task (Malcolm *et al.*, 2003:46)

5.8   Recommendations

Open communication channels between primary and secondary schools are imperative in identifying chronic truants as these patterns are well-established by the time they enter secondary school. Based on this it is recommended that Grade 7 educators compile a confidential list of habitual absentees to be forwarded, by the relevant principal of the primary school, to the SMT of the secondary school where these Grade 7s will be enrolled as Grade 8s. Although the information is to be dealt with in a confidential manner, it will enable the SMT to become familiar with alleged absentees at the commencement of the school year and to ensure that intervention takes place at an early stage. As soon as the problem manifests, the school will be equipped to deal with it immediately. From a practical point of view educators should be alerted to record habitual absenteeism in each learner's personal profile. Should a learner then enrol at any other school during the currency of his/her school career, the historical data may easily be retrieved.

Malcolm *et al.* (2003:46) suggested that even though schools might employ electronic registration systems to monitor attendance it might be useful to undertake unexpected bunking sweeps as an additional measure to curb unauthorised absenteeism. I suggest random sweeps once or twice a week by different educators at different times during the school day in order to identify those learners who skip classes. This measure will make learners aware of the fact that the school is actively pursuing patterns of any absence.

A program should be developed by the SMT to cater for absentees who are required to catch up on lost school work in respect of every learning area. This program will be carved out on a weekly basis and will mandate educators to set aside certain days on which absentees will be assisted. These classes will commence prior to after school activities, such as participation in sport and cultural activities and the idea should be that these classes should enjoy preference.

Class registers should be duly completed during these classes and should an absentee fail and/or refuse to attend these interventions, the SMT should liaise with parents/guardians without delay. As stated above, mentors and educators should be specifically involved during these classes.

I accordingly suggest that the Academic Top 10 learners in each grade should be actively involved, but on an *ad hoc* basis, to act as mentors for these learners. In this way absentees will still experience group cohesion while being assisted by fellow learners. Ultimately, educators will still oversee and regulate these classes. This will provide an opportunity for the Academic Top 10 learners to revise their own work and educators will be afforded with an opportunity for individualised attention to an absentee's needs. This strategy will be applicable for homework, formal assignments and tests in respect of what absentees have missed out on. At the outset is must be stated that the basic program developed should be adapted continuously to make provision for exams missed and other extraordinary circumstances like pregnancies. At all times the SMT should communicate progress and/or loopholes in respect of this program to the principal.

It seems to me that absenteeism is only addressed on the surface. The school might liaise with parents/guardians to inform them of problematic attendance but the cause of absence which might result in persistent absence is not always addressed. I propose that the Head of Grade and Deputy Head of Grade implement house visits to ascertain the real cause of absence. These visits will enable the Head of Grade and the Deputy Head of Grade to formulate individualised intervention programs for each and every manifestation of absenteeism. This personalised approach will be more effective than a generalised one. These tailor made approaches will enhance communication with parents/guardians and all interested parties can become more involved.

In order to address the problem of absenteeism holistically, I suggest that all schools in the vicinity of the case study school join forces. Even if representatives of the respective SMT's can only meet once a term, it can be valuable to exchange certain trends relating to absenteeism and the manner in which it is managed. Interaction between primary and secondary schools might even point to a certain family in which a trend of absenteeism is evident which will educators to address the problem proactively. These sessions will provide principals of schools with insight into management of the problem. This idea conforms with averments that the whole community should be involved in curbing absenteeism. A nominated representative should in turn liaise with the chairperson of the CPF to ensure effective communication with the remainder of the community in respect of the problem.

Due to the fact that the case study school was situated in a small town and as a result of the fact that participants indicated that the town was characterised by individuals who cared for each other I recommend the following: should some of the absentees be inclined to stay away from school due to insufficient funds and incidental transport problems the community should be involved. All schools, as mentioned above, should formulate a well-structured program which will provide these learners with an opportunity to attend school by providing transport to and from school. Whether they involve charity organisations and or sponsors are irrelevant. The bottom line is, that they should not allow transport to form a barrier in a child's constitutionally enshrined right to education.

I've already indicated that management of absenteeism can only be done effectively if the inherent reason for absenteeism is addressed. Educators are not trained psychologists even though they show empathy towards learners. I think it could be quite helpful if counsellors or social workers avail themselves, without remuneration, once or twice a week to assist learners on an emotional level. This will allow learners with an opportunity to disclose information to an objective person should learners be hesitant or ashamed to reveal this information to educators. In this regard I propose that certain classrooms are allocated for this purpose so that learners may approach independent professionals in a confidential manner. These sessions could be scheduled while the rest of the school is attending assembly on a Monday morning. Administration of these sessions could be regulated by the SMT in conjunction with a dedicated administrative staff member.

In my research it has been established that absenteeism burdens educators with an additional workload. Not only are educators required to repeat class work to absentees, they are also obliged to mark homework, assignments and/or tests of absentees. Absences impact negatively on an educator's planning in that they can never anticipate when learners may be absent. Upon return of an absentee, educators are immediately required to explain, mark and attend to absentees' needs in respect of lost school work. It goes without saying that all these aspects establish a negative stigma associated with absenteeism.

Although the SASA stipulates that a learners is regarded to be present at school should he/she be present at the time of completion of the daily class register at commencement of the school day, I propose the following: any school policy, relating to absenteeism, should be drafted in such a manner that learners who were not present during register period are still being afforded with an opportunity to be regarded as *'present'* if they fall within the ambit of what is defined as authorised, valid absence. It goes without saying that they will be recorded as present upon their return to school even though they were not present during register period.

In the final instance, I recommend that principals endeavour to convert educators' attitudes towards absenteeism into a positive morale. In the same manner in which attendees are rewarded, educators should also be recognised. In other words, should educators in an extraordinary manner endeavour to establish a culture of learning amongst absentees, they should be rewarded accordingly. The type of reward might differ from school to school but in essence educators should be aware of the important role they play in ensuring that an absentee catches up and attends school. A change in the attitude of educators towards absenteeism could bring a whole new dimension in that a reward would serve as an incentive for repetition of work after school hours.

5.9   Conclusion

Throughout my research I have endeavoured to place emphasis on the fact that the occurrence of absenteeism is a general phenomenon of which the degree of intensity differs from school to school. Absenteeism poses many challenges due to its diverse nature. I am of the opinion that management and educators should approach all aspects thereof from a moral point of view.   Such an approach should however not deviate from clear principles which are to be contained in a proper policy addressing authorised as well as unauthorised absenteeism. Such a policy should not aim to further burden educators with an additional workload and it should also not demotivate absentees further. The system should also not be of such a nature that it could enable truants and/or learners who skip school to manipulate the policy to their own advantage. During the drafting process all stakeholders should carefully consider the primary objective of the policy. The intention of the policy should be weighed against the best interests of the child which is the right to basic education.

Chronic absenteeism might be an early indicator of further complications which an absentee might experience in future endeavours (Newsome, 2008:34).

It is indeed not simplistic to increase school attendance (Sheppard, 2010:484). An approach in terms of which non-attendance is legally sanctioned is not advisable. The underlying issues at the root of absenteeism should be explored first. One of the ways in which absentees deals with their problems is to be absent from school. Unfortunately, it seems as if the basis of the problem is then never addressed should the school not intervene timeously.

I honestly believe that the problem of absenteeism is more far reaching than research can capture effectively.   Absenteeism should in the final instance be managed on an *ad hoc* basis which makes provision for individual circumstance of each and every absentee. General corrective measures implemented by schools might provide a framework for dealing with absenteeism. From a moral perspective, a comprehensive management program should, at all times, be adapted to make

provisions for exceptions to the rule. The aim of a specific punitive measure should never be directed towards further demotivation of an absentee but to rectify habitual behaviour and to support an absentee in comprehending missed school work.

As was stated in the introduction to Chapter 1 it is of paramount importance that a car is serviced on a regular basis to ensure optimal functioning and to address possible defects timeously. Absenteeism should be managed in the same way to ensure that shortcomings in policy documents are addressed and updated should the need arise. Such a hands-on approach guarantees early intervention in order to prevent chronic absenteeism from snowballing into a myriad of negative eventualities and possible drop out from school.

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Appendix A: GDE Research Approval Letter

GAUTENG PROVINCE
Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

For administrative use:
Reference no: D2014/256

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	**27 September 2014**
Validity of Research Approval:	**10 February to 3 October 2014**
Name of Researcher:	Otto L.
Address of Researcher:	P.O. Box 924
	Heidelberg
	1438
Telephone Number:	016 341 5380 / 082 329 3865
Email address:	lizeotto@live.com
Research Topic:	**Exploring the management of learner absenteeism: a case study of a secondary school in Nigel**
Number and type of schools:	**ONE Secondary School**
District/s/HO	**Ekurhuleni South**

Re: *Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research*

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

2013/09/30

1

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Knowledge Management and Research
9th Floor, 111 Commissioner Street, Johannesburg, 2001
P.O. Box 7710, Johannesburg, 2000 Tel: (011) 355 0506
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1. The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s concerned must be presented with a copy of this letter that would indicate that the said researcher/s has/have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.

2. The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s must be approached separately, and in writing, for permission to involve District/Head Office Officials in the project.

3. A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the school principal and the chairperson of the School Governing Body (SGB) that would indicate that the researcher/s have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.

4. A letter / document that outlines the purpose of the research and the anticipated outcomes of such research must be made available to the principals, SGBs and District/Head Office Senior Managers of the schools and districts/offices concerned, respectively.

5. The Researcher will make every effort obtain the goodwill and co-operation of all the GDE officials, principals, and chairpersons of the SGBs, teachers and learners involved. Persons who offer their co-operation will not receive additional remuneration from the Department while those that opt not to participate will not be penalised in any way.

6. Research may only be conducted after school hours so that the normal school programme is not interrupted. The Principal (if at a school) and/or Director (if at a district/head office) must be consulted about an appropriate time when the researcher/s may carry out their research at the sites that they manage.

7. Research may only commence from the second week of February and must be concluded before the beginning of the last quarter of the academic year. If incomplete, an amended Research Approval letter may be requested to conduct research in the following year.

8. Items 6 and 7 will not apply to any research effort being undertaken on behalf of the GDE. Such research will have been commissioned and be paid for by the Gauteng Department of Education.

9. It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain written parental consent of all learners that are expected to participate in the study.

10. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.

11. The names of the GDE officials, schools, principals, parents, teachers and learners that participate in the study may not appear in the research report without the written consent of each of these individuals and/or organisations.

12. On completion of the study the researcher/s must supply the Director: Knowledge Management & Research with one Hard Cover bound and an electronic copy of the research.

13. The researcher may be expected to provide short presentations on the purpose, findings and recommendations of his/her research to both GDE officials and the schools concerned.

14. Should the researcher have been involved with research at a school and/or a district/head office level, the Director concerned must also be supplied with a brief summary of the purpose, findings and recommendations of the research study.

The Gauteng Department of Education wishes you well in this important undertaking and looks forward to examining the findings of your research study.

Kind regards

Dr David Makhado
Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

DATE: 2013/09/20

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Making education a societal priority

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Appendix B: SGB Letter of consent

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Faculty of Education
Education Management and Policy Studies

29 September 2014

Dear [~~Principal/SGB/SMT/SRC~~ member]

RESEARCH INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF LEARNER ABSENTEEISM

I am currently enrolled as a student at the University of Pretoria, studying towards the M.Ed in Education Management in the Faculty of Education. As part of the degree I am involved with a research project into the management of learner absenteeism in schools. Research previously undertaken into learner absenteeism suggests that between 5% and 15% of learners are absent from schools on a daily basis. Such a rate of learner absenteeism is a serious concern and the focus of my research is on how schools manage learner absenteeism. Research also indicated that the trends regarding learner absenteeism differs significantly between provinces and rural and urban schools and that there are numerous factors related to absenteeism.

The purpose of my research is to investigate how urban schools in Gauteng experience and manage learner absenteeism. A multiple case study design will be followed with the aim of gaining greater understanding of the management challenges faced by secondary schools as they encounter and deal with learner absenteeism. Secondary schools in Nigel district pose particular challenges to school attendance that are often not the same as experienced by schools in townships or other urban areas. This is something that has not been investigated as most research tends to be more generic and quantitative in nature. The insights gained through my research may assist other schools to better understand learner absenteeism and to design effective strategies to manage and deal with the problem.

You have been selected as a possible participant in the research I would therefore like to request your consent to participate in the research. Should you agree to take part in the research, I will arrange an interview with you in respect of the above topic. You need to know that the interview will take place at a time and venue convenient to you; the interview will not conflict or interfere with your school activities and/or teaching time; and the duration of the interview will not be more than sixty (60) minutes.

Education Management and Policy Studies   Tel: 0124202842   Email: jan.nieuwenhuis@up.ac.za
University of Pretoria   Fax: 0124203581   www.up.ac.za
Pretoria 0020 South Africa   Enquiries: Prof Jan Nieuwenhuis

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The interview will be audio taped and transcribed for analytical purposes. Participation is voluntary and you need not participate in this research if you do not wish to do so. Should you decide to take part in the research and later on change your mind, you are more than willing to withdraw at any stage.

I need to adhere to very strict ethical considerations and therefore your identity will be protected. Only my supervisor and I will be aware of your real name. Your school will not be identified and I will solely utilise the information for academic purposes. The data I collect will be locked up for safety and confidentiality purposes and apart from myself, only my supervisor will be able to access the information. As a final safeguard, the material will, at completion of my studies, be stored at the University of Pretoria (EMPS).

If you agree to take part in this research, please complete the attached consent form. Kindly contact my supervisor or myself in the event of any further queries herein at the contact details listed below.

Yours sincerely

Lize Otto
Cell number: 082 329 3865
E-mail:lizeotto@live.com

Prof FJ Nieuwenhuis
Supervisor
Department of Education Management

G. Rocher
082 76 776 30
gllnrocher@gmail.com.

Appendix C: Consent Form

Consent form

I,_____ (Name and Surname), agree / do not agree
(Delete which is not applicable) to take part in the research project titled: **Exploring the management of learner absenteeism: a case study of urban secondary schools.**
I understand that I will be interviewed in respect of this topic for a period not exceeding one hour at a venue and time that will suit me; that the interview will not interfere with my teaching time or school activities and that the interview will be audio taped.

I understand that the researcher subscribes to the following principles:

- *Voluntary participation* in research i.e. as a participant I may withdraw from the research at any stage;
- *Informed consent* in that I must at all times be fully informed of the research process and purposes, and must give consent to my participation in the research;
- *Safety in participation* which guarantees that human respondents should be protected at all times;
- *Privacy* which means that confidentiality and anonymity of human respondents should be protected at all times.
- *Trust* which implies that human respondents will not be respondent to any acts of deception or betrayal in the research process or its published outcomes.

SIGNATURE: _____

  DATE:_____

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Appendix D: Form C

FORM C   **HOëRSKOOL**   LEVEL 1
T R A N S G R E S S I O N / R E S U L T S
SECTION A

NAME OF LEARNER .... GR............ CLAS ....
LEARNING AREA / SUBJECT...
NAME OF EDUCATOR ....

DETAILS OF NEGLECT / RESULTS / TRANSGRESSION

1   INSTRUCTION GIVEN ....
....
....
....

2   NATURE OF NEGLECT / RESULTS / TRANSGRESSION ....
....
....
....
....

3   DATE OF NEGLECT/RESULTS/TRANSGRESSION ....
COMMENT/S FROM LEARNER...
....
....
....

PUNITIVE MEASURES/CORRECTIVE MEASURES (EDUCATOR)..........................
....
....
....
....

COMMENT/S/RECOMMENDATION FROM PARENTS...
....
....
....

REQUEST TO APPEAL   YES / NO (Delete not applicable)
DATE OF IMPLEMENTATION OF PUNITIVE/CORRECTIVE MEASURES.......................

SIGNATURE - EDUCATOR .... PARENT........................... LEARNER ....
DATE ....

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Appendix E: Form D

VORM D   HOëRSKOOL   VLAK 2

OORTREDING

NAAM VAN LEERDER .... GR.......... KLAS ....

LEERAREA / VAK ....

NAAM VAN OPVOEDER ....

1   AARD VAN OPDRAG..
....
....
....

2   AARD VAN OORTREDING...
....
....
....
....

3   DATUM VAN OORTREDING ....
KOMMENTAAR VAN LEERDER ....
....
....
....

AANBEVELING T O V STRAFMAATREëL/REGSTELLENDE AKSIE (GRAADHOOF)
....
....
....
....

KOMMENTAAR / AANBEVELING VAN OUER................................
....
....
....

HANDTEKENING:
GRAADHOOF .... OUER............................ LEERDER ....

DATUM ....

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