

Exploring the Impact of Socioeconomic Factors on Learner Absenteeism in Foundation Phase Classrooms

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Abstract

Learner absenteeism is a serious issue in many Foundation Phase classrooms. This study aimed to explore the impact of socioeconomic factors on learners' absenteeism in Foundation Phase classrooms. The study took place in Mopani District, specifically in Klein Letaba Circuit, South Africa. The study used a qualitative approach. Data were gathered through observations and semi-structured interviews with Foundation Phase teachers. The study targeted all teachers in the Foundation Phase classrooms to explore how difficult living conditions, such as poverty and unemployment, influence whether learners attend school regularly. A sample of 8 teachers was selected from 4 schools. Purposive sampling has been considered the best method to sample teachers in each school. In this study, thematic analysis was used for data collection. The study adopted Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. The findings showed that learners often stay at home due to hunger, poor housing, lack of transportation, and parents who are not involved in their education. Learners have to travel long distances to school and do chores at home. These challenges make it hard for learners to attend school every day, which affects their learning and progress. Based on the findings, the study suggests that schools should offer support, such as feeding programmes, involve families more in school activities, and provide extra help to learners who are affected. Addressing these challenges may improve school attendance and give all learners a better chance to succeed.

Keywords: Foundation Phase; School attendance; Poverty; Socioeconomic; Learner Absenteeism.

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1. Introduction

Education is universally recognised as a fundamental human right and plays a vital role in breaking the cycle of poverty and crime. The Foundation Phase marks a crucial period in learners' educational journey, as it lays the foundation for future learning. This study aimed to explore how socioeconomic conditions affect learner absenteeism in Foundation Phase classrooms within the Klein Letaba Circuit. Absenteeism, driven by these factors, continues to interrupt the teaching and learning process and adversely affects learners' academic progress. In underprivileged communities, absenteeism is often linked to various social and economic challenges. Issues such as poverty, joblessness, hunger, inadequate housing, and lack of reliable transport contribute significantly to learners missing school. Some learners stay at home to care for their siblings while their parents are away for work Reference [10].

Absenteeism has been identified as a concern in this study due to a lack of parental support and involvement. Some parents demonstrate little regard for the importance of education and make no effort to ensure their children attend school. Their disinterest in their children's schooling leads learners to miss out on essential learning time, struggle to keep up academically, and eventually feel disengaged and drop out of school altogether [20]. A deeper insight into how these critical issues influence learner attendance during the Foundation Phase was gained, warning schools and stakeholders to consider school-based strategies and policy measures to address the challenge Reference [11]. This study sought to fill a gap in existing knowledge by exploring the specific influence of social and economic difficulties on absenteeism in the Klein Letaba Circuit. The importance of this study lies in its effort to uncover the root causes and effects of absenteeism in the early grades. The Foundation Phase is essential for developing core academic abilities such as reading, writing, and numeracy. Regular attendance during this phase is crucial; chronic absenteeism can result in long-term setbacks in academic achievement and future success in school [16]. By concentrating on Klein Letaba Circuit, this study filled a gap in the literature, as most previous research has examined absenteeism in broader contexts. The results offered critical insights into the particular struggles rural schools face and helped shape interventions specific to those environments. This study aimed to assist teachers, school leaders, district officials, and policymakers by offering evidence-based guidance for creating strategies to boost school attendance in early grades. Ultimately, the study promoted access to quality education and strives for equal opportunities for all learners, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

2. Literature Review

Learner absenteeism does not just affect the individual learner; it also affects the whole community. Many studies showed that the impact of socioeconomic factors on learners' absenteeism in Foundation Phase classrooms not only affects South Africa but also around the world. This study is based on Urie Bronfenbrenner's Theory [5], which explains how learners develop. It shows that a learner's growth and behaviour start at home, where they interact with family and society, and later at school.

The researcher chose this theory because it clearly shows how things like a family's socioeconomic status, the

school environment, and wider society can influence whether learners attend school. In the Foundation Phase, reasons for missing school include insufficient parental involvement, poverty, food insecurity, and poor school facilities [24]. Using Bronfenbrenner's model allows the study to look beyond just the learner and understand how different systems, family, school, community, and policies contribute to absenteeism patterns, especially in areas like Klein Letaba. It helps identify where interventions can make the biggest difference. While Bronfenbrenner's framework provided a good starting point, the study did not rely on it alone. To get a deeper understanding of why absenteeism keeps happening, the study looked at recent research from different parts of the world, including Africa, South Africa, and international contexts. These studies show that socioeconomic issues like poverty, housing instability, transportation problems, and health challenges play a big role in why learners miss school. For example, in the United States, chronic absenteeism in the Foundation Phase was seen as a sign of potential future academic struggles and dropout risk. Factors such as poverty, unstable housing, lack of transport, and health problems are often at the core of the issue [6].

Schools have tried to address this by implementing attendance-tracking systems and working with families and support agencies. In the United Kingdom, [4] pointed out that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to miss more school because of health issues, less parental involvement, and low motivation. Schools that build strong relationships with families tend to see better attendance. In [2] found that learners in poor areas often skip school because of transport issues, health concerns, and poor school facilities [18]. Overall, these international examples show that poverty, health problems, unstable living situations, and lack of parental support are common reasons for absenteeism. However, most of these studies come from well-resourced countries with strong support systems. This makes it hard to directly apply their findings to rural South Africa, like Klein Letaba, where the challenges and dynamics are quite different.

Many of the same themes come up, especially when looking at African contexts, where infrastructure and social issues often make school attendance challenging. In Kenya, [19] found that learners often skip school because of poverty, child labour, the need to help with household chores, and farm work. Schools also do not have enough basic facilities, like toilets or desks, which puts learners off coming to class. In Nigeria, [1] pointed out that even though primary education is supposed to be free, families still face hidden costs for uniforms, books, and exams, which makes it hard for some learners to stay in school. In Uganda, [15] emphasised long walks, lack of food, and indifferent attitudes from parents as the main reasons why learners often miss school. These studies show that absenteeism is closely linked to wider social and economic problems, especially in rural areas. However, most of

them look at primary education in general, not specifically at the Foundation Phase. Thus, they do not give a clear picture of what it is like for learners in places like Klein Letaba, where factors like social grants, multiple languages, and community schools add more layers of complexity. Research in South Africa says that missing school is a big issue, especially in rural parts where families face ongoing problems such as no transportation, unsafe environments, hunger, and unemployment. Learners in the Foundation Phase rely a lot on adults for support, making them more vulnerable to these issues.

In Klein Letaba, many learners walk long distances to school, often without breakfast or decent shoes, which leads to frequent absences. Although programmes like school feeding schemes and free schooling are meant to help, [7] argue that bigger structural problems like overcrowded classrooms, broken infrastructure, and dirty toilets still make it hard for learners to stay in school. Most studies tend to focus on the broader national picture and forget to address the specific challenges faced by rural communities like Klein Letaba. These practical issues, hunger, lack of parental support, and long walks are real barriers that keep many learners from attending school regularly.

A significant gap regarding absenteeism remains a challenge in South Africa's Foundation Phase, particularly in Klein Letaba circuits. Many previous studies focused on secondary education and failed to explore how poverty, family dynamics, and environmental conditions shape early childhood attendance. This gap justifies the need for this study, which specifically explores the impact of socioeconomic factors on learners' absenteeism in the Foundation Phase from the perspectives of teachers working in these settings. Teachers offer first-hand insights into the daily realities that affect learner attendance and can help identify realistic, context-specific solutions. The following section presents the research methodology used to guide the design, data collection, and analysis of this study.

3. Problem statement

Having learners miss school in the Foundation Phase has become a real concern across South Africa, especially in rural areas like Klein Letaba. Even though there are national policies aimed at encouraging regular attendance and making education more comprehensive, lots of learners still end up missing school quite often. This really hurts their basic learning and can impact how well they do in school eventually. Things like poverty, not having reliable transport, poor school facilities, parents not getting involved enough, and other socioeconomic challenges unique to these rural spots are some of the main reasons why this keeps happening [4]. Surprisingly, even though

the impact of socioeconomic factors on learners' absenteeism in Foundation Phase classrooms is a big issue worldwide and nationally, very few studies have looked specifically at why learners in the Foundation Phase in Klein Letaba are missing school and what that means for their learning. This study aimed to close the gap by exploring what is causing learners to stay away and the consequences, since these issues are deeply tied to their social and economic backgrounds.

4. Research Methodology

To better understand what the participants went through and how they felt about the impact of socioeconomic factors on learners' absenteeism in Foundation Phase classrooms, the researcher used a qualitative research approach. This approach focused on making sense of people's behaviours, feelings, and the contexts they are not in, mainly using information that is not in numbers. It is helpful when trying to get a grip on complicated social stuff. By using this method, the researcher was able to understand how things like a family's socioeconomic status might influence why learners in the Foundation Phase miss school so often [8].

4.1. Research Paradigm

This study used an interpretivism paradigm because it recognises that understanding reality is not fixed; it is shaped by social context, culture, and personal perspectives [22]. This approach was a perfect fit since the research sought to examine how socioeconomic factors influence why learners in the Foundation Phase miss school. Absenteeism is affected by all sorts of things, such as economic struggles, cultural background, and emotional well-being, and interpretivism allowed the research to gather detailed stories and insights directly from the teachers' experiences. By taking this route, the study aimed to examine how teachers notice, interpret, and respond to absenteeism, helping the researcher better understand it in the real-world environment where it occurs.

4.2. Research Approach

The qualitative approach made it much easier to explore the different socioeconomic factors that influence learners' absenteeism. This method focused on revealing meaning, helping us gather insights that truly reflect what happens in real classroom settings. It provided new and valuable perspectives on how socioeconomic and contextual factors affect attendance patterns. It also allowed the researcher to understand Foundation Phase teachers' attitudes, experiences, and thoughts about learners' absences without being held back by strict procedures Reference [13].

4.3. Research Design

In this study, the researcher adopted an exploratory, qualitative approach because it is well-suited to examining how absence from school affects learners' performance, an area that has not been studied much, especially in a rural setting like this [9]. The researcher focused on how different socioeconomic factors contribute to learners missing classes in the Foundation Phase at a few schools in Klein Letaba Circuit. By taking into account the local context and social factors, this approach helped the researcher to understand what is happening in real classroom situations. Using qualitative research seemed to be the best idea because it is all about exploring and collecting detailed stories, and it allowed the researcher to gather meaningful insights from a small group of teachers, which gave a rich picture of the problem.

4.4. Population and Sampling

In this study, all Foundation Phase teachers in Klein Letaba Circuit were included in the study's population. To find individuals who had actual knowledge of the effects of socioeconomic factors that affect learner absenteeism, a non-probability purposive sampling technique was used [9]. Eight participants were invited to participate, including two Foundation Phase teachers from each of the four schools that were specifically chosen within the circuit. These teachers were picked on the basis of their availability and readiness to share insightful viewpoints. The sample size was judged appropriate for qualitative research because gathering comprehensive, specific information is more important than extrapolating from large volumes of data.

4.5. Data Collection Method

In this study, the researcher collected data using semi-structured interviews. This method provided a set of guiding questions while also allowing participants to share more detailed responses in their own words [21]. The interview questions focused on the causes of socioeconomic factors, their impact on teaching and learning, and the strategies teachers use to reduce these effects. To ensure participants felt comfortable and their privacy was protected, interviews were conducted face-to-face at each school in a quiet, private space. With participants' consent, each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded. After the interviews, the researcher carefully listened to the recordings for detailed analysis. Field notes were also taken to capture nonverbal cues and other contextual information that could help interpret the data more accurately.

4.6. Data Analysis

In this study, the researcher used thematic analysis to identify and explore common patterns in qualitative data

Reference [13]. This was done multiple times, using the interview transcripts to get a sense of what was being said. Then, the researcher emphasised key ideas and phrases to develop initial codes. Codes were grouped into broader themes that captured the shared experiences and perspectives of the participants. Overall, this approach helped the study make sense of the data, directly tied to the research goals. Some of the main themes that emerged included socioeconomic challenges, low parental involvement, absences due to health issues, and instructional difficulties.

5. Limitations of the study

This study was conducted within a limited geographical scope, focusing on four schools in the Klein Letaba Circuit and involving eight Foundation Phase teachers who were purposively selected. While this facilitated rich, detailed accounts, the narrow sample restricts the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other contexts, particularly urban or well-resourced settings where the dynamics of absenteeism may differ. The study depended entirely on interview data, capturing teachers' experiences and perceptions. Although qualitative interviews offer deep insight, they are inherently subjective and may be shaped by personal interpretations, selective memory, or professional expectations. The absence of triangulation through methods such as classroom observations, learner attendance records, or parent interviews means that some nuances of absenteeism may not have been fully captured.

Time limitations within the school environment also influenced the depth of data collection. Interviews had to be scheduled within teachers' busy timetables, occasionally limiting opportunities for extended probing or follow-up discussions. This may have constrained the extent to which certain issues were explored. The study concentrated specifically on teacher perspectives, without including parents, learners, and school management. This single-stakeholder focus provides only a partial view of the absenteeism phenomenon. Broader participation could have offered a more comprehensive and multi-layered understanding of the factors contributing to absenteeism. The findings are closely tied to the socio-economic and infrastructural conditions of rural schools in the Klein Letaba Circuit. These contextual realities, such as poverty, limited resources, and underdeveloped infrastructure, may shape absenteeism differently compared to other contexts. As a result, the findings should be interpreted in light of the unique conditions under which the study was conducted. Despite these constraints, the study contributes valuable insights into the complexities surrounding absenteeism in Foundation Phase classrooms and highlights areas that require targeted intervention and further research.

6. Findings

In this section, the researcher shares some of the main takeaways from the study on how socioeconomic factors influence learners' absences in the Foundation Phase classrooms within the Klein Letaba Circuit. The findings offer a real look at everyday life in these rural schools and show that absenteeism is not just a simple problem; it is shaped by a mix of home and school challenges. During the analysis, several interconnected themes have

emerged to explain why learners keep missing school [17]. These themes include both external issues, like those at home, and internal ones related to the school environment. To bring these findings to life and make them more meaningful, the researcher included the voices of the teachers who shared their personal experiences and perspectives throughout this process.

7.Theme 1: Socioeconomic Challenges

Participants pointed out that poverty is a big factor behind learners missing school. Many learners in this area come from families with no steady income, and their parents struggle to afford basic things like food, transportation, or new uniforms. Because of these tough circumstances, learners often stay home when there are no meals at home or when their families cannot pay for them to get to school. These financial problems make it really hard for learners to attend school regularly, especially in Klein Letaba, where financial hardship seems to be the norm [23].

Participant 1 explained, *"Sometimes learners don't come because there is no food at home. They stay at home until the day of school."* Similarly, Participant 3 added, *"If there is no money for transport or if the parents are not working, the child just remains at home."* This theme underscores the strong link between socioeconomic status and school attendance, particularly in Klein Letaba areas where poverty is more severe.

8.Theme 2: Lack of parental involvement

Lack of parental involvement in their children's schooling was another recurring concern raised by participants. Teachers reported that many parents neglect their responsibilities related to education, often keeping learners at home to do household chores or failing to respond to communication from the school regarding absenteeism. This lack of engagement contributes to irregular attendance and reflects deeper socio-economic and cultural challenges affecting families in rural contexts [12]. Participant 4 shared, *"Parents don't attend meetings or follow up when their children miss school. They only come when we threaten to involve social workers."* Participant 6 added, *"Some parents just send children to school when they feel like it. They don't see education as a priority."* This lack of parental commitment makes it difficult for teachers to enforce attendance policies and creates a culture of irregular school participation.

9.Theme 3: Health-related without intervention

Health-related issues have also been identified as a major contributor to socioeconomic factors influencing learner absences. Some learners suffer from chronic ailments, yet their caregivers provide them with little to no medical attention, according to the participants. These medical disorders frequently go untreated because of delayed treatment, which results in prolonged absences from school. The results demonstrate the interplay between caregiver neglect and limited access to healthcare, which hinders regular attendance, especially for vulnerable learners in rural locations [3].

According to Participant 2, *“Some learners are sick most of the time, but the parents do not take them to the clinic. We see them suffer here at school.”* Participant 5 added, *“Malnutrition is a big problem. Some learners are too weak to come to school.”* Emotional and psychological challenges were also highlighted, especially in homes affected by death. These traumas often go unaddressed, yet significantly affect learners’ attendance.

10.Theme 4: Poor infrastructure and uninviting learning environments

Participants also identified inadequate school infrastructure as a key factor that discourages regular attendance. They described conditions such as broken windows, leaking roofs, and overcrowded classrooms, which contribute to an uncomfortable and, at times, unsafe learning environment [14]. These poor physical conditions were said to negatively affect learners’ motivation to attend school consistently, especially during adverse weather conditions or when classrooms become overcrowded. Participant 7 stated, *“When it’s raining, our classrooms leak. Some parents prefer to keep their children at home to avoid the cold and wet environment.”* Participant 3 commented, *“There are not enough toilets, especially for the younger learners. That makes them stay at home.”*

A lack of learning materials and recreational equipment was also seen as discouraging. In some cases, the school environment was described as “uninspiring,” especially for young learners who need stimulation. All participants agreed that absenteeism has a detrimental impact on both learner performance and the teaching process. Frequent absences cause learners to fall behind, making it difficult for them to keep up with the pace of instruction. As a result, teachers often have to slow down or revisit previous lessons, which disrupts the flow of teaching and hinders the timely completion of the curriculum.

11.Recommendations

The study aimed to determine the methods teachers employ to deal with the problem of learner absenteeism in

Foundation Phase classes, as well as the causes and effects of socioeconomic factors. Concerns regarding learners' inconsistent attendance, particularly in under-resourced and remote places like the Klein Letaba Circuit, served as the impetus for the study. Eight Foundation Phase teachers from four different schools participated in semi-structured interviews as part of a qualitative approach to better understand the problem.

Learners struggle to keep up academically and may eventually develop low self-esteem and disengage from school altogether. For teachers, the constant need to catch up with absent learners slows down progress and affects curriculum coverage. Teachers are making efforts to address absenteeism through individual and school-based strategies; however, these efforts are inadequate without systemic support. There is a need for stronger collaboration between schools, parents, and social services to create sustainable solutions.

The study confirmed that socioeconomic factors, which really cause absenteeism in the Foundation Phase, cannot be addressed in isolation. It is embedded in broader structural and social issues that require a holistic and collaborative response. The application of Bronfenbrenner's theories shows that consistent adult support, positive home-school interactions, and stimulating learning environments are essential for regular attendance and early learner development. In light of the findings, several practical recommendations are proposed for various stakeholders involved in early childhood education.

The Department of Education should prioritise improving school infrastructure in rural areas. Schools must be safe, clean, and learner-friendly to encourage regular attendance, especially during extreme weather conditions. Classrooms must be adequately furnished and equipped with learning materials to support effective teaching. The government should consider implementing school transport programmes for rural learners who travel long distances. Reliable transport would reduce absenteeism caused by lack of access and safety concerns, especially for learners in the Foundation Phase. Schools, on the other hand, should strengthen relationships with parents and caregivers through consistent communication and community outreach. Parenting workshops and awareness campaigns could educate families about the importance of regular, early school attendance. Schools may also benefit from establishing parent support groups that meet regularly to discuss learner welfare and promote active involvement.

There is a need for improved collaboration between schools and local health services. School-based health screenings, referrals, and regular visits by mobile clinics can help identify and address health-related causes of absenteeism. This would also promote early intervention for learners with chronic illness, malnutrition, or

psychological distress. Teacher development programmes should include training on managing absenteeism and building positive home-school partnerships. Teachers need ongoing support to deal with the emotional and professional demands caused by high absenteeism rates. Peer support networks and professional development workshops could help educators share strategies and solutions. Lastly, but not least, the policymakers and researchers should continue to monitor absenteeism trends and evaluate the effectiveness of existing interventions. Long-term tracking of absenteeism can inform policies that are responsive and evidence-based.

12. Conclusions

This study explored the underlying causes and impact of learner absenteeism in Foundation Phase classrooms within the Klein Letaba Circuit. Through qualitative data collected from teachers, it was found that socio-economic challenges, lack of parental involvement, health issues, and poor school infrastructure were major contributors to absenteeism. The findings highlight that absenteeism not only disrupts individual learning but also affects classroom progress and overall learner performance. Addressing this issue requires collaborative efforts from teachers, parents, community members, and education authorities to create supportive learning environments that promote regular school attendance.

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To whom it may concern,

RE: CONFIRMATION OF LANGUAGE EDITING

This serves to confirm that I edited a document written by Mathonsi Masingita and Mulovhedzi Shonisani Agnes titled, **Exploring the Impact of Socioeconomic Factors on Learner Absenteeism in Foundation Phase Classrooms.**

The scope of my editing comprised:

- Spelling
- Tense
- Vocabulary
- Punctuation
- Word usage
- Language and sentence structure
- References

If you need any further details, kindly contact me on the details provided above.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kufakunesu Zano", written over a horizontal line.

Kufakunesu Zano

Dr Kufakunesu Zano, PhD (English). A member of the South African Translators' Institute, Ref
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