

Teacher! Teacher! Where are you?
**An investigation of primary school learners' perceptions of educator
absenteeism.**

by

P.K. Moodley

STUDENT NO: 209530183

**A mini-dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the degree of Master of Education(Educational Psychology) in the School
of Educational Studies, Faculty of Education, Edgewood Campus,
University of KwaZulu Natal**

March 2011

DECLARATION

I , P.K.Moodley, do hereby declare that this mini-dissertation, which is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Education in Educational Psychology to the School of Educational Studies, Faculty of Education, Edgewood Campus, University of KwaZulu Natal, is my own work in design and execution and has not been previously submitted by me for a degree at any other university, and that all sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of a complete reference.

P.K. Moodley

Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the following individuals for their support, guidance and co-operation during the course of this research study

- 1) Firstly to God almighty for making this dream a reality.
- 2) To my loving wife Prabashanie, for all her support and encouragement.
- 3) To my sons Lushen, Kevalen and Derushen for all the help with the technical aspects of this research study.
- 4) To my colleague Shakti Ramson for his generosity in assisting with the editing.
- 5) To the methodology lecturers at UKZN, particularly Dr. Nyna Amin, for her wonderful ideas and confidence shown in her students.
- 6) My supervisor Mr. Henry Muribwathoho.
- 7) My colleague Neera Laban for her assistance in keeping me informed of the administrative requirements.
- 8) The KZN Department of Education for granting permission to undertake this research study.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to:

My dearest Dad, Koogathassan Moodley, a retired school principal and dedicated educationalist, who set me on this educational journey. It is largely through his efforts, support and encouragement that this research study has become a reality.

Dad, this piece of work is dedicated to you as a token of my appreciation for all that you have done for me.

ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate primary school learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism. This study, which was located at a government primary school in the suburb of Kloof in the Ethekeweni region, KwaZulu –Natal, attempted to answer the following key research questions: *What are primary school learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism and, how do they perceive educator absenteeism to be impacting on their holistic development in the classroom.* A qualitative case study within the interpretivist paradigm which this study uses, was regarded an appropriate methodology to provide narrative accounts of children's opinions, understandings, attitudes and perceptions of their world.

Two data collection instruments, namely the focus group interview and the close-ended, were used. The questionnaire was used to enhance the representivity of the study by involving a larger sample of the target group. A pilot study of the focus group interview was done to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of the research questions, and to enhance the validity of the research. The learners' responses guided the compilation of the close-ended questionnaire. Focus group interviews were conducted with each of the four Grade Six classes in the school which formed the target population of this study, and the questionnaire was randomly issued to fifteen (15) learners from each of the four Grade Six classes giving a total of 60 learners.

Using the thematic analysis; and frequency counts the data suggests that learners perceive that educator absenteeism impacts negatively on learner development in the classroom with regards to issues such as learner interest and motivation, learner behaviour, learner-educator relationships, educator support and encouragement and classroom climate. The findings in this study concurred with other research studies, both qualitative and quantitative, in which more specific aspects of educator absence were investigated.

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations were made: firstly, that learners must be meaningfully and constructively occupied during the so-called "free periods", when the regular classroom educator is absent; secondly, a

pool of qualified substitute educators to be established, to fill in for absentee educators so that the teaching and learning process is not disrupted and thirdly, the department of education should revisit its absentee and leave policy so as to apply stricter measures concerning educator absence in an effort to make educators more accountable for their attendance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Contents	Page
Title Page	1
Declaration	2
Acknowledgments	3
Dedication	4
Abstract	5
Table of Contents	7

CHAPTER 1:

Introduction: Context, Objectives and Overview

1.1	Introduction	12
1.2	Motivation for the study	13
1.3	Focus and Purpose of the study	14
1.4	Objectives of the study	15
1.5	Critical Questions	15
1.6.	Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks used in this study	15
1.7	Research Methodology	16
	1.7.1. The Research Design	16
	1.7.2. The Research Process	16
	1.7.2.1. The Research Context and Site	17
	1.7.2.2. The Data Collection Instruments	18
	1.7.2.3. Population	20
	1.7.2.4. Sampling	21
	1.7.2.5. The Pilot Study	22

1.8. Reliability and Validity	22
1.9. Ethical Considerations	23
1.10. Methods of Data Analysis	24
1.11. Overview of the study	25

CHAPTER 2:

Literature Review and Theoretical Orientation: The Impact of Educator Absenteeism on Learners' Holistic Development.

2.1. Introduction	27
2.2. A Review of the literature:	27
2.2.1. The impact of educator absenteeism on the cognitive development of the learner.	
(a) Learner attitude and motivation	30
(b) Learner Performance	33
2.2.2. The impact of educator absenteeism on the social development of the learner.	
(a) Learner discipline and classroom behaviours	36
(b) Learner-Educator relationships	38
(c) Learner engagement and participation	40
(d) Classroom climate	42
2.2.3. The impact of educator absenteeism on the emotional development of the learner.	
(a) Educator Support	45
(b) Belongingness	48

2.3 Conceptual Framework	49
2.4. Theoretical Framework:	50
2.4.1. The ecosystemic theory of Bronfenbrenner	50
2.4.2. The humanistic theory	52
2.4.3. Bandura's social learning theory	53
2.5. Conclusion	53

CHAPTER 3

Research Methodology

3.1. Introduction	55
3.2. Research Design	55
3.3. Data collection instruments	58
3.3.1. The Focus Group Interview	59
3.3.1.1. Definition	59
3.3.1.2. Advantages of the focus group interview	60
3.3.1.3. Disadvantages of the focus group interview	61
3.3.2. The Questionnaire	62
3.3.2.1. Advantages of the questionnaire	63
3.3.2.2. Disadvantages of the questionnaire	64
3.4. Selection of the participants and sampling techniques	64
3.5. Research procedure and data collection	69
3.6. Data analysis	70
3.7. Ethical considerations	74
3.8. Issues of reliability and validity in the study	75
3.9. Limitations of the study	77
3.10. Conclusion	78

CHAPTER 4

Data Analysis and Interpretation

4.1 Introduction	79
4.2. Analysis of the data	79
4.2.1. Learner's perceptions of educator absenteeism.	80
4.2.2. Learner's perceptions of the impact of educator absenteeism on their cognitive (academic) development in the classroom:	81
4.2.2.1. Attitude and motivation	81
4.2.2.2.. Learner performance	83
4.2.3. Learner's perceptions of the impact of educator absenteeism on their social development in the classroom.	85
4.2.3.1. Learner discipline and classroom behaviour	85
4.2.3.2. Learner-educator relationship	87
4.2.3.3. Classroom climate	88
4.2.3.4. Learner engagement and learner participation	89
4.2.4. Learner's perceptions of the impact of educator absenteeism on their emotional development in the classroom.	91
4.2.4.1. Educator support	91
4.2.4.2. Belongingness	92
4.3. Conclusion	94

CHAPTER 5

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Introduction	95
5.2. Overview of the findings:	96
5.2.1. What are learner's perceptions of educator absenteeism?	96
5.2.2. How do learners perceive educator absenteeism to be impacting on their o holistic development (i.e. the cognitive (academic), social and emotional development) in the classroom?	97

5.3. Recommendations	100
5.4. Recommendations for future research	103
5.5. Conclusion	103

Bibliography	105
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Appendices:

Appendix 1	Letter to the Department of Education requesting permission
Appendix 2	Letter to the school principal
Appendix 3	Letter of informed consent to parents
Appendix 4	Letter of declaration to withdraw from the study
Appendix 5	Letter approving ethical clearance
Appendix 6	Letter granting full approval
Appendix 7	Focus group interview schedule
Appendix 8	The close-ended questionnaire

CHAPTER ONE:

Introduction: Context, Objectives and Overview

1.1 Introduction

Although numerous studies about educator absenteeism exist (Norton, 1998), research on educator absenteeism has focused mostly on the causes of educator absenteeism while some quantitative studies have focused specifically on the effects of educator absenteeism on learner achievement (Mkhwanazi, 1998).

According to Norton (1998), research thus far on educator absenteeism is somewhat disappointing because many of the important questions facing school leaders today have not been addressed. One such example is assessing the impact of educator absenteeism on the cognitive, emotional and social development of the learner in the classroom. This makes the need for quality research efforts in the area of educator absenteeism and its impact on learner development of paramount importance. This research study aims to address one aspect of these potential research foci namely, learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism and how they perceive this absence of the educator from the classroom to be impacting on their holistic development. For the purpose of this research study, "holistic" encapsulates cognitive (academic), social and emotional development and will be referred to as such during the course of this study.

Cognitive development refers to academic issues relating to the school curriculum. Themes that fall into this category are learner attitude, learner motivation and learner performance. According to Bamber (1979) if educators are not there to teach, then learners cannot learn. According to Ehrenberg, Ehrenberg, Rees & Ehrenberg (1991) educators motivate their learners through example. Regarding learner performance Bruno (2002) cited in Jacobs and Kritsonis (2007), those learners subjected to frequently absent educators eventually lose their desire to learn severely impacting on their performance.

The social development of learners involves discipline and general classroom behaviours; the relationship that learners share with their educators; learner participation and the creation of a classroom climate that promotes teaching and learning. Woods (1990) stresses the point that learners look up to their educators as role-models while according to Jacobson (1989) learners modeling the behaviour of educators with poor attendance and a lack of interest tended to display like behaviour.

The development and maintenance of positive relationships with learners is critical to the teaching and learning situation (Hughes, Cavell & Wilson, 2001). Educator attendance affects learner connectedness to the classroom.

Hallinan (2008) concluded that educators largely influence learners' attraction and attachment to school by the kinds of experiences they create for their learners.

The emotional development of the learner is associated with the perception of the support that they receive from their educators and their sense of belonging. These emotional constructs are influential in a learners' emotional development. According to Stornes, Bru and Idsoe (2008) educator support refers to how learners perceive the extent to which educators are interested in learners' well-being, their needs and development opportunities. Belongingness is conceptualized as educator support, availability and acceptance, and which is crucial to success at school (Van Ryzin, Gravely & Roseth, 2009).

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1.2 Motivation for the study

As a head of department and currently the acting deputy principal of a primary school, this study was influenced by a personal interest seeing as one of my main duties is the arrangement of relief teaching. I therefore wanted to investigate how learners perceived educator absenteeism and to what extent they perceive it to be impacting on their academic, emotional and social development in the classroom.

According to White (2004) schools that provide a stable and structured environment, warm, nurturing and supportive educators will see greater academic and social achievement by those learners. Given this research claim, I wished to investigate the perception of learners on the impact of educator absence.

1.3 Focus and purpose of the study

The main focus and purpose of this research study was to investigate learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism and how they saw it impacting on their holistic development in the context of the classroom. Since they are directly affected, this study aimed at giving voice to these learners. This study also sought to make the relevant authorities aware of the consequences of this dilemma, most importantly the threat to the delivery of quality education to the nation.

A qualitative study on learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism and its perceived impact on the holistic development of the learner in the classroom can provide groundwork for further research to be undertaken which may be more specific, quantitative and hypothesis generating depending on the findings of this research study. Holistic development focuses on the cognitive (academic), affective (emotional), social, moral and behavioural development of the learner. The social and emotional development of learners has a bearing on how they engage in the classroom and other school activities which impacts on their overall performance. It is important to note that schools are not only institutions of learning, but provide continuity and stability for children, of which many have little in their lives. Educators serve in offering consistency in schools and in communities, and they impart messages of stability and societal well-being (Whitehead, 2009).

It is hoped that the findings of this study will create impetus for the educational authorities to pay serious attention to the problem of educator absenteeism at schools so that effective structures can be put into place to curb what is proving to be a threat to the quality of teaching and learning in South African schools.

Furthermore, it is hoped that the findings from this research study will provide groundwork for further research in this area which may be more specific and hypothesis generating.

1.4 Objectives of the study

This research study aimed to:

- (1) Establish primary school learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism.
- (2) Establish primary school learners' perceptions of how educator absenteeism is impacting on their holistic development in the classroom.

To fulfil these aims, critical research questions were developed.

1.5 Critical Questions

1.5.1. What are primary school learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism?

1.5.2. How do primary school learners perceive educator absenteeism to be impacting on their holistic development in the classroom?

Responses to these questions were gathered from the participants during the focus group interview and the close – ended questionnaire. The responses gleaned from the focus group interview were used in the design of the questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire being to increase the representivity and validity of this study

The responses to the first critical question provided an insight into learners perceptions on the possible reasons for and the causes of educator absenteeism, whilst the second question extracted information on learners' narratives on how they see absentee educators to be impacting on their cognitive (academic), social and emotional development in the classroom.

1.6 Conceptual and Theoretical frameworks

In this section, the concepts and theories that informed and directed this research study are described. These aspects will be dealt with in greater detail in chapter two which reviews the literature relevant to this research topic.

The important concepts used in this study and which relate directly to the topic of this research study include the following: (a) learner performance (b) learner attitude and motivation (c) learner-educator relationships; (d) belongingness; (e) learner engagement and participation; (f) classroom climate and (g) educator support.

The important theories that underpinned this research study are: (a) Bronfenbrenner's Ecosystemic Theory. According to Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (1997) the ecosystemic theory emphasizes the connection between the individual's psychological development and the social context and the systems within which this occurs. Considering that the school is a system and that learner development is influenced by significant others of whom educators are important, makes this theory relevant in this study.

(b) The Humanistic Theory. This theory relates to a learners' social and emotional development. The relevance of this theory to my study is in highlighting the need for supportive and caring classrooms in promoting learner development.

(c) Bandura's Social Learning Theory. This theory emphasizes that learner development is influenced largely by the principles of imitation, modeling and reinforcement (Omrod, 1999). The important issue here pertains to the message absentee educators send to their learners.

These theories underpin my exploration of the phenomenon of educator absenteeism and will be discussed in greater detail in section 2.4 of this dissertation.

1.7 Research Methodology:

1.7.1. The Research Design:

In this section, the methods used to answer the critical questions of the study are described. This research study employed a qualitative study within the interpretivist paradigm as the interpretivist paradigm is relevant to the understanding of how people perceive their world (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

The descriptive case study was preferred as descriptive case studies provide narrative accounts and in this research study, it provides data on learners'

perceptions of educator absenteeism and how they see it to be impacting on their cognitive, social and emotional development in the classroom. A qualitative case study approach allows a reader to understand people's perceptions, understanding and interpretations of their world (Sithole, 2007). Furthermore, case studies give examples of real people in real situations and also provide an understanding of social phenomena within single or small numbers of settings that are natural. In this research study the focus is on the classroom which will be the naturally occurring setting.

Hitchcock & Hughes (1995) suggest that the case study approach is valuable when the researcher has little or no control over the events. Case studies focus on analyses rather than statistics and they result in the development of theories which can help researchers understand similar cases, phenomena or situations (Cohen et al. 2007).

Case studies have been recommended as a method on the basis that they gather the unique characters of people and groups of people through the ability to provide detailed holistic data (Bloor & Wood, 2001).

1.7.2. The Research Process:

The important components of the research process in the course of my data production were the context and site, the pilot study, the sampling of the participants and the data collection instruments.

1.7.2.1. The Research Context And Site:

(a) The School

The school is a government school situated in the Kranskloof ward in the Ethekweni region. Although the school is situated in a suburb, it serves learners from neighbouring African townships and informal settlements. The school has a staff complement of 35 members.

(b) The Learners

The school has an enrolment of approximately 1260 learners of whom 80 % are of African descent. The researcher in his interactions with the learners discovered that a large number of these learners come from disadvantaged backgrounds and many of them are brought up by single parents, their grandmothers or even come from child – headed households.

The participants for the focus group interview were randomly selected from volunteers from each of the four grade six classes that formed the target group for this research study. Participants (15) from each class were randomly selected from the four grade six classes to answer the questionnaire. Those learners who participated in the focus group interview were excluded from the questionnaire as their inputs were already made. Also of significance is that the design of the questionnaire was guided by the responses gleaned from the focus group interviews.

1.7.2.2. The Data Collection Instruments:

The instruments used in gathering the data in this research study were the focus group interview and the close-ended questionnaire. According to Watts and Ebbutt (1987) as cited in Cohen et al. (2007) group interviewing or focus groups is one technique within the methodology of interviewing that has proven to be popular as a means of collecting data in educational research. This type of interview generates a wider range of responses than with individual interviews. They are also quicker, hence time-saving. Focus group interviews can also bring together people with different opinions or represent different collectivities (Morgan, 1998).

Focus group interviews are particularly useful when interviewing children. This approach allows the researcher to understand the world of children through their own eyes rather than through the lens of the adult. Being interviewed in a group can also be less intimidating for the learners when compared to the individual interview. Open-ended questions are recommended in this type of interview as it promotes interaction and not simply giving answers to individual questions (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996).

Cohen et al. (2007) recommend the use of a high-status child as the interviewer with a group of children. They argue that the participants will interact more freely and it is from this free interaction of the group that data emerge. The insights yielded might not otherwise have emerged in a straightforward interview. However as desirable as this arrangement is, the validity of the study can be compromised if the interviewer does not possess the necessary skills required to carry out successful interviews. For this reason and for the purpose of this study, the researcher decided to facilitate the focus group interviews personally. All fears that the learners may have had were allayed at the commencement of the interview when the researcher emphasized the anonymity and confidentiality clauses.

The participants' responses were voice recorded rather than video-recorded as this would assist in eliminating fears of identification and victimization thereby enhancing the honesty of responses by the participants. All the other necessary issues of ethics were taken care of prior to the commencement of the study.

The researcher decided to use the close-ended questionnaire in this research study. This close-ended questionnaire was used to answer the second research question and also as a means to enhance the validity and representivity of this research study seeing that the focus group interview has long been criticized for its lack of representivity (Vaughn et al.1996).

Questionnaires are widely used in educational research in obtaining information about current conditions and practices and to investigate attitudes, opinions and perceptions (Mitchell & Jolley, 2007). The use of close-ended questions compensated for the lack of advanced writing skills of primary school learners, especially since many are second language speakers and it also ensured that the responses of the participants were relevant to the purpose of the study (Sibaya, 1992). The use of a questionnaire also enables the researcher to gather data from a larger sample within a shorter space of time. A larger sample increases the representivity of the study (Bloor & Wood, 2001).

1.7.2.3.. Population:

There is debate regarding the number and characteristics of the participants of the focus group. Krueger (1994) advocates the use of a homogenous group i.e. respondents who share similar characteristics and further recommends that participants should not be familiar with each other so that more honest, spontaneous and a wider range of responses will be encouraged. However, Kitzinger (1994) on the other hand motivates for the use of acquaintances. His reason for this is that they will be able to relate to each other's comments, they will be able to challenge each other and they will not be shy to express what and how they feel. In this study the possibility existed that the focus groups may have compromised acquaintances seeing that the target population was all the grade six learners of one particular school. Furthermore Kitzinger (1994) cited another disadvantage of acquaintances being their tendency to agree out of friendship thus compromising impartiality. According to Krueger (1994) the use of acquaintances tends to disadvantage the responses in the focus group interview because of the tendencies of the participants to agree with their colleagues out of friendship and therefore may not be impartial. My observations during the interview somewhat tended to concur with Krueger.

For the purpose of this research study the present Grade Sixes formed the target population, seeing that the researcher had observed that they were exposed to many absentee educators in Grades Four and Five of the previous two years. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, the researcher asked for volunteers to participate in the focus group interview. There were two reasons for this decision. Firstly, due to the sensitivity of the topic some learners may be reluctant to participate fearing victimization and if forced to participate may negatively impact on the outcomes and secondly, this arrangement will ensure that the participants who do participate will be eager to respond to the questions and this will contribute to the success of the study. This concurs with Krueger (1994) who believes that rich data can only be generated if individuals in the group are prepared to engage fully in the discussion.

However, in this study there was not an overwhelming number of volunteers but the numbers fell within the recommended number. Those who did volunteer were enthusiastic and participated in the discussion albeit some more actively than others.

1.7.2.4. Sampling

When conducting focus group interviews, extreme care needs to be exercised with sampling. Sampling is a major key to the success of the focus group interview (Krueger, 1994). Ideally, every participant must possess particular characteristics required and must be representative of the target population. Morgan (1998) suggests between four and twelve people in a group. Fewer than four may jeopardize the valuable group dynamics, while more than twelve may make the group unwieldy. Krueger and Casey (2000) on the other hand suggest between six and eight participants as smaller groups show greater potential. Furthermore this number is manageable and large enough to gain different perspectives and small enough not to become chaotic or fragmented. He also recommends that the group consists of relative strangers rather than friends so as to eliminate the possibility of participants colluding in their responses.

In keeping with the research focus of this study, only learners who had been subjected to frequently absent educators (two or more days per week) or for long periods of time (periods of thirty or more consecutive days in a term), formed the target population. This is an example of purposeful sampling. The possibility exists with purposeful sampling that the participants may not be representative of the target population. The current Grade Six learners of this school fell into this category as they had been subjected to not one but a number of absentee educators whilst in Grades Four and Five of their previous years.

Seeing that this particular study involved two methods of data collection, two different sampling procedures were used. For the focus group interview purposeful, non-probability sampling was used because only those who volunteered were considered. From the group of volunteers random sampling was to be used to arrive at the desired number of participants which in this research study was between four and eight participants. However this was not necessary as the number of volunteers for each class was between four and eight participants. A separate focus group interview was held with each of the four Grade Six classes in the research site. The reasons for holding separate interviews were to keep the number of participants manageable and also to get responses from a class perspective.

For the purpose of administering the questionnaire, convenience and random sampling was used. Cohen et al. (2007) refer to convenience sampling as opportunity sampling in which the researcher chooses the sample from those whom s/he has easy access to. In this study those who participated in the focus group were excluded from the population from which the sample for the questionnaire was drawn. The reason for this was that they had already made their inputs during the focus group interviews. A random sample of 60, a maximum of 15 learners from each of the four Grade Six classes, was chosen from the target population to participate in answering the questionnaire.

1.7.2.5. The Pilot Study

The volunteers from the first class (Grade 6B) were used as the pilot study. Since there were only five volunteers and this fell within the desired number of between four and eight participants, no sampling technique was necessary. The group that was used for the pilot study comprised one 12 year old African male and three 11 year old and one 12 year old African female. The purpose of the pilot study was to get a feel of the responses, to evaluate the validity of the research questions and to use the responses gleaned from the interview to guide the design of the second data collection instrument, the questionnaire. Once the necessary changes were made to the interview schedule, the volunteers from each of the three remaining classes participated in separate interviews, class wise. Once again as the number of volunteers fell within the desired number of between four and eight participants, no further sampling technique was necessary.

The responses gathered from this pilot study were used to guide the formation of the questions in designing the questionnaire. This questionnaire was then issued to a random sample of the four Grade Six classes. As mentioned earlier, the participants in the focus group interview were excluded from participation in the questionnaire. This was done in an effort to address the issues of representivity and reliability of the case study as a research technique.

1.8 Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity refers to judging the quality of the research design. There is a relationship between validity and reliability, but the one does not necessarily guarantee the other. The reliability of a study refers to the consistency of the results of similar studies in different research sites (Mitchell & Jolley, 2007). Single case studies have been criticized for its lack of reliability in that the findings from one particular research site may not necessarily concur with similar research studies in other research sites.

Furthermore, in the case of focus group interviews, the views of those included in the study may not necessarily represent the views of those who were not included in the study (Krueger, 1994). The researcher attempted to overcome this problem by using the questionnaire as an additional data collection instrument. The close-ended questionnaire aimed to increase the representivity in this study by getting more learners involved in this study.

Validity refers to a study measuring what it intends to measure (Mitchell & Jolley, 2007). In the case of this research study, the researcher made use of two data collection instruments to enhance the validity and representivity of the study. The focus group interview was used to answer the first research question and the close-ended questionnaire was used to provide answers to the second research question. The questions in the questionnaire were based on the learners responses gleaned from the focus group interview. This enhanced the validity of the study as the questions were relevant to the focus of the study seeing that they were guided by the learners' responses from the focus group interview.

1.9 Ethical Considerations

There are ethical and other considerations that are particularly important when conducting qualitative research studies on children's' subjective experiences in natural contexts. In these qualitative studies the learners themselves report or re-live their experiences and these need to be considered throughout the research process (Morrow and Richards, 1996).

Informed consent is an important issue when dealing with ethical issues. The parents and participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their written

permission was obtained prior to the commencement of the interviews. Written permission was also sought from the Department of Education and its legal representative in the school, which in this case was the school principal.

Every effort was made to ensure that the interviews were conducted in an appropriate, non-stressful and non-threatening manner and in which the participants were treated with every respect.

Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without fear of victimization. To this end Appendix 4, the letter of declaration to withdraw from the study was issued to the parents of the participants. It was also emphasized that participation was voluntary and no learner was coerced into participating.

Due to the nature of the topic, the possibility did exist that learners could be reluctant to talk freely for the fear of victimization. To address this, the interviewer emphasized the anonymity of the participants and the confidentiality of the data gathered. The purpose of the study, who will benefit from this research study and who will have access to the data was also outlined to them.

1.10 Methods of Data Analysis

Qualitative research, in particular focus group interviews provide large amounts of rich data. According to Robson (1993), the main aim of analyzing data is to reduce large amounts of data into smaller units called categories and themes. Yin (1989) points out that data analysis consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating or otherwise recombining the evidence in order to address the initial goal of the research.

The framework analysis as described by Ritchie and Spencer (1994) was used in analyzing the data generated by the focus group interviews. This thematic approach allows themes to develop both from the research question and from the narratives of the research participants. Data analysis involves the researcher familiarizing himself with the evidence, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and then interpreting (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994).

Once the data from the focus group interviews were gathered, the audio-taped evidence was firstly transcribed before being reviewed, coded and then organized into categories and themes to facilitate meanings and interpretations. According to Schumacher and McMillan (1993) cited in Mathonsi (2005) coding is the process of breaking up the data into parts using a classification system.

The responses to the questionnaire were analyzed using frequency count. Frequency count involves transforming the written information into numbers and percentages by counting the number of respondents who give a specific answer (Tuckman, 1998). This data was then presented in the form of frequency distribution tables. Based on the patterns that emerged, conclusions were drawn.

1.11 Overview of the study

In Chapter One, the researcher described the aims and purpose of the study, the research design and research methodology of the research study as well as who the respondents were and how they were selected, a description of the data collection instruments and how the data was collected and the justification for the choice of the data collection instruments, information on the study's reliability and validity issues, and how the data was analyzed.

Chapter Two describes the review of the literature pertaining to the phenomenon of educator absenteeism. The literature review was compiled by referencing theses, journal articles and books on educator absenteeism and its impact on the teaching and learning process. Various concepts were identified as being associated with a learner's cognitive (academic), social and emotional development. Through the literature review, these concepts were elaborated upon together with how educator absenteeism impacts on these aspects which are crucial to the learners holistic development. This chapter also presented literature on the different theories that underpinned this research study.

In Chapter Three the design and methodology of this research study is outlined. A qualitative case study was chosen to provide answers to the critical questions of the study i.e. to investigate primary school learners perceptions of educator absenteeism

and their perceptions of the impact of educator absenteeism on their holistic development in the classroom.. In addressing the limitations of the case study as a research design, the researcher decided to use two data collection instruments namely, the focus group interview and a close-ended questionnaire. This chapter also outlined the research process and the sampling techniques that were used in this study.

Chapter Four presents the techniques used in the analysis of the data and the findings of this qualitative study. A comprehensive analysis of the data was carried out and a discussion of the findings was presented with reference to the literature review.

Chapter Five concludes the research study by suggesting recommendations to assist in addressing the problem areas identified in this research study as well as providing recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review and Theoretical Orientation - The Impact of Educator Absenteeism on Learners' Holistic Development.

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to investigate learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism and how they see it to be impacting on their holistic development in the classroom, and also to provide perspective to the problem and develop key recommendations that may contribute to an improvement in educator attendance. The reasons for educator absenteeism do not fall within the scope of this study. Through the review of the literature and the analysis of the data gathered from the respondents using the focus group interview and the questionnaire, this research study attempted to provide answers to the critical questions that guided this study.

This literature review cannot be considered to be exhaustive but it does highlight a number of important and influential issues pertinent to this planned research activity. It is intuitively expected that educator absenteeism does compromise the quality of how learners experience the teaching and learning process (Bowers, 2001).

2.2 A Review of related literature

According to Norton (1998), the problem of educator absenteeism is becoming an increasing concern among South African education administrators. He found that 71% of school administrators reported educator absenteeism as one of the leading problems facing them. According to Khedama (2005), educator absenteeism is a major threat to the quality and efficiency of educational experiences in many developing countries, South Africa being one of them.

An article in a local newspaper, *The Cape Times* (Jones, 11 August 2010,) quoted the Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, as saying:

Any absence of a teacher from school for whatever reason has a negative impact on learning and teaching due to lost instructional time. It is the extent of the absence however which could give an indication of the impact on learning and teaching. (p.6)

According to Chapman (1994) poor educational quality has serious repercussions for its recipients' development as high educator absenteeism in particular contributes to a decline in standards of learning and teaching at schools. This concurs with Mkhwanazi's (1998) study on the effects of educator absenteeism in KwaZulu Natal secondary schools in which he concluded that educator absenteeism has costly implications for effective functioning, productivity and also for relationships among people.

The analysis and results of Mkhwanazi's (1998, p.103) study yielded the following information:

- (a) Educators are expected to demonstrate desired behaviour in order that the learners may emulate their behaviour in learning new beliefs, values and attitudes. Absentee educators are poor role-models for their learners.
- (b) When educators are absent, no positive or constructive learning experiences take place. This affects the learner-educator relationship in terms of trust and respect.
- (c) Absentee educators may experience difficulty in managing their classes resulting in serious and disruptive behaviours developing. This is supported by Blandford (1998) cited in Khedama (2005)) who says that when an educator is absent from school, a lack of discipline amongst learners results and this negatively impacts on overall academic performance. This can inhibit learning, as valuable teaching time can be lost in trying to establish proper control. Absentee educators do not inculcate a sense of purpose and an atmosphere of mutual caring due to a lack of reinforcement of positive behaviours and attitudes.

(d) Absentee educators do little for fostering good learner -educator relationships and creating a conducive learning climate.

Research on educator absenteeism has thus far focused on (a) who is it that stays away and the frequency of their absences, (b) reasons for educator absenteeism; (c) the impact of educator absenteeism on learner performance and (d) how the school climate impacts on the absence of employees (Norton, 1998). The lack of sufficient research on the consequences of educator absenteeism is unfortunate in the light of its damaging impact on learners' academic growth and other areas of their development.

According to Kunjunjukutty (2006, p.22) "there is a critical point at which educator absenteeism begins to inhibit learner learning". Studies in several school systems indicate that learning is negatively affected by the frequency and the length of educator absences. This is such because prolonged periods of educator absences impact negatively on learner motivation and also because educators are expected to be role models to their learners in their quest to acquire new beliefs, values and attitudes implying that learners very often model the behaviours of their educators. Quite often, learners emulate the behaviour patterns of their educators (Mkhwanazi, 1998).

Chapman (1994, p32) highlighted the following consequences of educator absenteeism:

- (a) The loss of instructional time for learners which impacts on overall learner achievement.
- (b) Educator absenteeism contributing to higher incidences of learner absenteeism, and
- (c) Poor educator attendance results in poor quality instruction and guidance.

It is therefore important that educators attend school regularly in order to maximize opportunities for learner development.

2.2.1. The impact of educator absenteeism on the cognitive development of the learner in the classroom:

(a) Educator absenteeism and its impact on learner attitude and motivation

Mkhwanazi's (1998) findings in his study on the effects of educator absenteeism on secondary school learners in KZN established a link between educator absenteeism and learner academic performance. He concluded that absent educators deny learners learning opportunities. The absence of the class educator results in learners becoming demotivated and subsequently losing interest in school. This is further compounded when these absentee educators do not fulfil the needs of their learners in that work programmes are not completed and dates for completion and submission of tasks are not honoured. This causes learners to start developing negative attitudes towards the educator and the learning area. Learners begin to lose respect for those educators who are repeatedly absent and this affects their relationship with these educators and their interest and desire to learn (Mkhwanazi, 1998). This idea is corroborated by Jones (2010) who said that the greater the length of the instructional time lost, the more negative the impact on the teaching and learning process given that the educator may experience difficulty in making up for lost instruction time and may thus not complete the curriculum. This may then result in the educator rushing through the work and not doing justice in fulfilling the individual needs of the learner.

Motivation, which refers to the interest displayed by the individual learner in work programmes, is linked to cognitive development and has a direct link to learner achievement. According to Stornes et al. (2008), a sound motivational climate in school classrooms is an important pre-requisite for learning. The results from their study on the relationship between the classroom social structure and motivational climate concluded that educator involvement and support are vital in establishing and maintaining a positive motivational climate. However, most research on motivation thus far has focused on the individual perspective and has tended to neglect or ignore the influence of the classroom environment on individual motivation (Elliot, McGregor and Gable, 1999). The literature indicates a causal link between

educator absence and a decline in learner performance. According to Bamber (1979) If the educator is not there to teach, learners cannot learn causing them to become demotivated and lose interest in schooling.

Educator presence in the classroom is crucial to learner motivation and their desire to learn. According to Bamber (1979) absentee educators disrupt the learning programme resulting in reduced academic progress for learners, motivation lags and causing learners to develop a lackadaisical attitude about their own attendance. Hubbell (2008) looked at the detrimental consequences that educator absences have on a school's education mission and on learner's learning. Although different studies have arrived at distinct conclusions, most current research indicates an inverse relationship between educator attendance and learners learning (Hubbell, 2008). The main idea is that learners in a classroom ultimately lose their desire to learn when the regular educator is frequently absent. This point is further supported by Bruno (2002) cited in Jacobs and Kritsonis (2007) who adds that when this is the case, learners connection to the classroom is negatively affected and by Deci and Ryan (1985) as cited in Stornes et al. (2008) who used the Self-Determination Theory to focus on the importance of educator involvement and support as significant aspects of the social structure of the classroom impacting on motivation.

On the issue of the impact of educator absenteeism on learner motivation, Mkhwanazi's (1998, p.106) study concluded the following:

(a) The incompleteness of work programmes and the dishonouring of due dates cause learners to adopt negative attitudes towards the educator and/or learning areas and this has a negative impact on their motivation to learn.

(b) These absentee educators are not respected by their learners and this loss of respect for the educator impacts negatively on the learners interest in the work done by that educator.

(c) Educator absenteeism impacts negatively on learner motivation. Frequent absence by the educator is seen by the learners as a lack of commitment and motivation on the part of the educator. Learners being impressionable and motivated by the behaviour of their educators soon begin to emulate the behaviour of their educators.

(d) Classroom management, learner interest, learner attendance, learner

participation, classroom discipline and learner-educator relationships are some of the areas that are negatively affected by educator absenteeism.

The greater the frequency of absence of the class educator, the weaker the learner-educator bond and this may subsequently cause learner absence (Jacobson,1989). .Ehrenberg et al. (1991) state that that learners who absent themselves frequently from school, disadvantage themselves academically. Frequent absence by the educator may reduce a learner's desire to attend school and this could result in higher learner absentee rates. A study by Khedama (2005) concluded that effective education is negatively influenced by high rates of educator absenteeism as it can cause a lack of discipline, low morale and negative attitudes amongst learners. However, data from the US Bureau of Labour Statistics (1996) in Norton (1998) revealed that only 1.6% of all educators believed that their absences from the classroom presented a serious barrier to student achievement.

Educator absenteeism has a negative effect on learner motivation, seeing that educators motivate their learners through example (Ehrenberg et al. 1991). A lack of motivation and enthusiasm on the part of the educator may soon spread to the learners in that frequently absent educators negatively affect the assessment of learners' tasks. This failure to honour the completion of tasks and the honouring of due date's influence the amount of effort the learner will put into subsequent tasks. Chapman (1994) warns that poor educational quality can have serious negative effects on the development of the learners. This argument is supported by Chaudhury, Hammer, Kremer, Muralidharan and Rogers (2004) who stated that learners experience successful education when they are exposed to a learning environment which is of a high quality. A high quality learning environment is not possible when class educators are frequently absent as this usually results in a discontinuity of sequential learning and also because quite often substitute educators are ill-prepared or learners are subjected to over-large, double – upped classes or no classes at all.

According to Teasley (2004), cited in Ivatts (2010) regular absenteeism by educators is an implicit statement to their learners that the educator does not care much about their education or believe in them as worthwhile individuals.

(b) Educator absenteeism and learner performance

Studies by Jacobs and Kritsonis (2007) and Miller et al. (2008) in which they analysed educator and learner absenteeism in urban schools concluded that educator absenteeism affects learner achievement. Bruno (2002) as cited in Jacobs and Kritsonis (2007) stress those learners subjected to frequently absent educators eventually lose their desire to learn thus impacting on their achievement.

According to Woods and Montagno (1997), the learning model of education in the U.S. is characterized by learner-educator interaction. The absence by either the learner or educator results in a violation of one of the models assumptions. Literature reviews of educator absenteeism highlights the financial costs of educator absences and subsequently strategies are put into place to reduce absenteeism. Few reviews, however, focused on the effects of educator absences on learner achievement.

The following are some of the findings of the study by Woods and Montagno (1997) that was carried out to fill this gap on the effects of educator absenteeism on learner development and performance.

- (a) Vast amounts of contact time between educator and learner is lost when the educator is absent.
- (b) Their findings support the assumption that learner development is negatively affected due to frequent educator absenteeism.
- (c) The role of the educator in the classroom cannot be taken for granted, and
- (d) The effect of educator absenteeism on the learners' academic development is the one cost that school administrators tend to largely ignore.

An article by Miller, Murnane and Willet (2008) focused on the impact of educator absences on learner achievement. They provided numerous reasons as to why productivity is adversely affected as a result of educator absences, one of them being that educator absences may affect learner achievement through the disruption in the flow of events in the classroom and because of its negative impact on the formation and maintaining of meaningful relationships. In this study, which was

conducted in the USA, Miller *et al.* (2008), showed the damaging effect of educator absenteeism on learner achievement by revealing that ten days of educator absenteeism reduced student achievement in fourth grade mathematics by 3,3 of a standard deviation

Over the last two decades research studies have concentrated on establishing a causal link between educator absence and learners' levels of attainment. According to Ehrenberg *et al.* (1991), earlier studies on educator absenteeism did not concur with recent research findings on the link between educator absenteeism an learner test performances. However more recently we find that the situation is somewhat different. Studies by Uehara in (1995) and (1999) as cited in Ivatts (2010) concluded that educator absenteeism, among other factors, placed Pacific students at risk of school failure. The latter study showed that educator absenteeism has a negative correlation with learner outcomes. This data is supported by the study conducted by Chaudhury *et al.* (2004) in Bangladesh in which it was revealed that educator absenteeism had a negative impact on primary level English language test scores.

Darling-Hammond (1995) established that achievement scores of American students were linked to the quality and quantity of instructional time. The time that was lost through educator absence caused learner academic and emotional growth to either slow down or completely halt. A study by Occhino (1987) cited in Polo (2009) concluded that elementary and middle school learners depend on their educators for both physical and psychological support as a means of providing emotional order and social structure during the teaching and learning process. According to Lewis (1981), learner achievement scores showed a decline when educator absences accumulated to over thirteen (13) days during a school year. Leake and Leake (1995) requested urban school districts to look into the link between learner failure and the frequency of educator absence. This plea is supported by St. Michel (1995) who says that educators cannot offer maximum instruction if they are not present in the classroom seeing that the effectiveness of the educator depends to a large extent on his/her stability as a classroom instructor.

The importance of the attendance of the regular educator on learner development and achievement is highlighted in a study by Damle (2009). He investigated the effect of substitute educators on learner achievement. Substitute educators are those educators who fill in for absent educators. He concluded that despite substitute educators assisting in minimizing the disruptive impact on learning as a result of the absence of the regular educator, they do face many challenges which prejudice their effectiveness in the classroom, some of which are inadequate or no lesson plans, insufficient contact time with learners and insufficient experience in managing classrooms. While they are able to keep learners busy, they accomplish very little in productive learning experiences.

The findings in Damle's (2009) study is corroborated by Woods and Montagno (1997) who concluded that substitute educators cannot compensate fully for the disruptions in the normal educational processes caused by educator absenteeism because they are less effective when compared to the regular classroom educator.

A study by Patterson (2006) examined the opinions and attitudes of learners and educators regarding substitute educators. The study concluded that while the regular educators felt that the substitute educators followed the lesson plan, they had doubts regarding the substitute educators ability to present the content or in maintaining a satisfactory level of classroom discipline.

Some of the themes found in the literature concerning educator absenteeism, substitute educators and learner achievement emphasized that the regular, qualified educator is important and that their absence from the classroom does have a negative impact on learner performance (Damle, 2009).

Woods and Montagno (1997) investigated the relationship between educator absenteeism and learner achievement. They concluded that learners with educators who displayed higher incidences of absenteeism, showed smaller growth. This study also revealed that those learners whose educators displayed low incidences of absence, had a positive gain on learner percentile rankings whilst those learners with educators who were absent frequently experienced a decline in their percentile rankings. It is thus clear that when the regular educator is absent from the

classroom, learner achievement is negatively affected. These research studies add support to the general belief that educator absenteeism does impact negatively on learner achievement.

2.2.2. The impact of educator absenteeism on the social development of the learner in the classroom.

(a) Learner discipline and classroom behaviours

Ehrenberg *et. al.* (1991) in their study on the effects of educator absenteeism, argue that learners who look up to their educators as role-models were negatively influenced by educators who regarded absenteeism as their right. This finding is strengthened by Woods (1990) who asserts that when the educator, who is perceived as a role-model, does not show up the learners lose direction, motivation and security. The performance of learners depends to a large extent on their educators being in the classroom and displaying positive behaviours towards their learners as quite often learners tend to emulate their educators. Jacobson (1989) found that learners who modelled behaviour of educators who had poor attendance and a lack of interest in their teaching duties, tended to display like behaviour.

Repeated absences by the regular classroom educator may have serious consequences for learner discipline in the classroom. Often, in the absence of the educator, learners are bullied and intimidated in the classroom. This occurs for two reasons viz. as a result of boredom and because of a lack of adequate and effective supervision (Konu, Lintonen & Rimpela, 2002). According to Konu *et al.*(2002), substitute educators quite often do not command the same respect as that of the regular class educator. Fighting and disruptions become the main focus of attention in the classroom and the need to concentrate on academic achievement vanishes. This is corroborated by Mkhwanazi (1998) who concluded that because learners are not given meaningful activities to keep them occupied, they resort to these types of activities to keep themselves occupied.

A literature review on educator absenteeism conducted by the Roma Education Fund (Ivatts, 2010), focuses on the potentially damaging effects of educator absenteeism on the education of school going learners and highlights research evidence related to issues that are considered serious consequences of educator absenteeism. Many of the studies scrutinized for this review confidently claimed links between teacher absenteeism and learner attendance levels. Bray (2003) cited in Ivatts (2010) concluded that educator absenteeism induced learner absenteeism. In a study by Chaudhury *et al.* (2004) it was claimed that a 10% increase in educator absenteeism resulted in a 1.8% decrease in learner attendance. Another study by Ehrenberg *et al.* (1991) concluded that lower educator absences would lead to less learner absenteeism. Educators are viewed as role-models by the learners they teach and thus influence learners' perceptions about what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. According to Uehara (1999) cited in Ivatts (2010) chronic educator absenteeism sends a message that school attendance is not important. Researchers who conducted quantitative analysis up to a decade earlier concluded that lower educator absenteeism would lead to less learner absenteeism (Ehrenberg *et al.* 1991).

Mkhwanazi's (1998) study also paid attention to, amongst other things, the learning environment, motivation and discipline. The author highlights that educator absenteeism affects the learning environment in that their frequent absence from the class damages their credibility because learners begin to distrust these absentee educators and view them as being unreliable and irresponsible. This may then affect the learner-educator relationship which is an important component of the teaching-learning process. Secondly, learners' behaviour in the classroom depends on rules and a joint effort between educator and learners. The enforcing of rules is significant in facilitating a conducive learning atmosphere in the classroom. However, frequently absent educators are unable to effectively and consistently enforce these rules thereby leading to a breakdown of discipline in the classroom. Effective teaching and learning takes place in orderly classrooms and not in disorderly and chaotic classrooms (Mkhwanazi, 1998).

(b) Learner-educator relationships

According to Woods (1990), most studies on educator absenteeism posit that absentee educators were not able to establish an academic connection with their learners. When educators are frequently absent, the stimulation of the learner is negatively affected. The educator's role in achieving effective classroom management cannot be overemphasised. The younger the learner, the more they turn to their educators for guidance and direction. The development and maintenance of positive relationships with learners is critical to the teaching and learning situation. It is well documented that the quality of the learner's relationships with their educators in primary grades has significant implications for the learner's academic and behavioural adjustment (Hughes, Cavell & Wilson, 2001). Jacobs and Kritsonis (2007), in their study, concluded that as a result of educator absenteeism, learners do not feel connected to the classroom.

Cruickshank (1995) as cited in Mkhwanazi (1998)), state that through encouragement and support, an educator assists his learners to achieve success regardless of the difficulties and challenges along the way. Sound educator-learner relationships help build within learners resilience which empowers them to overcome adversities and promote the effectiveness of the learning process. Encouragement can motivate learners with tasks that they initially may be reluctant to perform or those tasks that are often a source of frustration. Encouragement stimulates the efforts and the capacity of the individual learner by giving them confidence, hope and strength to continue or renew their efforts to learn (Mkhwanazi, 1998). According to Suldo, Friedrich, White, Falmer, Minnich and Michalowski (2009) positive learner-educator relationships exist when learners feel respected, supported and valued by their educators and this emotional support characterized by love, care and trust influences learner social skills, academic competence and engagement. Hughes et al. (2001) concluded that supportive learner-educator relationships assist in developing within the learner positive social relations. Learners who do not possess developed positive social relations are vulnerable acts of violence and/or substance abuse.

According to Zsolnai (2002) educator absenteeism adversely affects the following aspects of social competence viz. co-cooperativeness, perseverance and attitudes. These in turn have a significant influence on motivation, academic achievement, attitudes to learning areas and learning, self-concept and self-esteem. This is supported by Chan (2000), who sees the classroom environment as playing a significant role in influencing a learner's self-esteem.

Many studies, according to Liu and Wang (2008), concur that how learners perceive the school environment particularly regarding their relationships with educators are related to their academic self-concept. Educator support and acceptance results in learners evaluating themselves positively resulting in higher self-concept. Chang, McBride-Chang, Stewart and Au (2003) believe that teacher warmth positively correlates to both the general self-concept and the academic self-concept. A study by Sanders (1996) cited in Liu and Wang (2008) also established a positive correlation between learners' perceptions of educator support and their academic self-concept. However, on the downside to this finding, not much is known about the strength of this relationship for learners of different ability streams.

The traditional and basic model for educating learners in school is built on a learners interaction with his/her educator (Kunjunjukutty, 2006). Douglas (1991) suggested that emotional behaviour is learnt through the learner modelling the educator. Educators are frequently used as role- models by their learners and therefore educator absenteeism may thus be emulated by their learners which will then result in poor learner attendance.

The development of positive personal relationships with their learners is important in the teaching and learning process in that it enhances learner-educator interaction in terms of trust and support. The learner becomes aware that s/he can look up to the educator for support. When educators are absent, this negatively affects the learner-educator relationship in terms of respect and trust. According to Hallinan (2008), the Social Psychological Theory suggests that stable and positive learner-educator relationships are essential for the healthy socio-emotional development of the learner. Educator absenteeism unfortunately quite often prejudices the formation of stable and positive learner-educator relationships in that absentee educators

contribute very little towards creating a positive learning environment as during their absence no positive learning experiences take place (Mkhwanazi, 1998)). Educators are expected by their employers and learners to demonstrate desirable forms of behaviour which learners themselves can model in their quest for self-realization and holistic development.

When the educator, who serves as the learners' role-model, is absent, learners begin to lose direction, motivation and the sense of security (Woods, 1990). As role-models, educators do not only affect learners' academic achievement but they also impact on learner behaviour. As the literature elaborates, because of the frequency and intensity of an educator's interaction with his/her learners, educators are idolised and become individuals that learners look up to. Just as parents can have negative effects on their children by exposing them to inappropriate behaviour, educators too can negatively affect learners through their absenteeism (Darling-Hammond, 1995).

Jacobson's (1989) findings were supported by Ehrenberg et. al. (1991) in that it was found that learners who modelled the behaviour of educators with poor attendance and a lack of interest were negatively affected in that they too started to stay away, or by losing a desire to learn as they began to view school as being unimportant. The effective holistic development of learners depends to a large extent on educators being in the classroom and displaying a positive attitude towards their learners. According to Hines (1996) as cited in Polo (2009), educators who are positive, directly influence learner behaviour and learner development. The theme that is prevalent here is that absentee educators cannot establish a powerful connection with their learners and the necessary stimulation from the learners educators is absent (Woods, 1990).

(c) Learner engagement and participation

According to Ames (1992), within the framework of the achievement goal theory, it is assumed that learners motivation is influenced by their individual personal dispositions and beliefs and also by the classroom environment. Based on research reviewed by Turner and Patrick (2004), it is evident that learners are most willing to

participate in classrooms in which educators are enthusiastic about learning and where educators were academically and emotionally supportive of their learners.

Learners' success in school depends on the extent to which they engage adaptively in classroom learning tasks and recent research studies indicate that the classroom plays a significant role in learner engagement and participation. However, the study that did test this, considered only the academic aspects of the classroom (Church, Elliot & Gable, 2001). According to Ryan and Patrick (2001), the classroom social climate relates to learner motivation, achievement behaviours and engagement and their study strongly supports that the classroom social environment is crucial to learner engagement and participation. According to Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004), engagement refers to behavioural engagement incorporating co-operative participation, conformity to classroom rules and routines, persistence, effort and self-directedness

Contemporary theories on academic motivation and pupil engagement, highlight social relatedness at school as a key concept. According to Anderman and Anderman (1999) learners experiencing a sense of belonging and enjoying supportive relationships with educators and classmates are motivated to participate actively and appropriately in classroom activities thereby affirming that educator support and sound educator-learner relationships are social factors influencing motivation and learner engagement in the classroom. Research by Hamre and Pianta (2001) suggests that a learner's social relatedness in the primary grades influences the establishment of patterns of school engagement and motivation which have long term consequences for their future academic motivation and achievement. Hughes et al. (2001) suggest that the quality of the learner's relationships with their educators in the primary grades have important implications for their academic and behavioural adjustment in subsequent years.

Learners who enjoy close supportive relationship with their educators are more likely to engage more fully in that they work harder, persevere in the face of difficulties, accept educator direction, attend more to the teacher and cope better with stress (Fredricks et al., 2004). Factors affecting learner participation and engagement are the kinds of environment that exists in the classroom, educator supports for

participation and the learner's motivation to learn (Turner and Patrick, 2004). Educator absenteeism is associated with negative patterns of classroom participation i.e. failure to follow classroom rules, unaccepting of educator's authority and learners developing a sense of defiance (Fredricks *et. al.* 2004).

The results from a study conducted by Turner and Patrick (2004) which focused on studying educators and learners in classrooms to better understand the complexity of the interactions between them in supporting learning and other related beliefs and behaviours, suggest that learner participation is malleable instead of stable and emphasizes the role of the educator in supporting and/or undermining the development of learner work habits. Good, regular educators are associated with positive work habits and good achievement. Good work habits, grow from the quality of the interaction between educator and learner.

Classroom participation is a work habit that contributes to learning as well as providing evidence of learner motivation to learn. According to Turner and Patrick (2004) participation in learning activities is valuable for the following reasons:

- (1) It gives learners the opportunities to learn, discover new knowledge and to improve their sense of reasoning; and
- (2) it gives educators an insight into learner's thinking, it gives educators the opportunity to diagnose learning problems and to evaluate learner progress thereby making it possible to provide an opportunity for educators to give affective and cognitive supports for learner understanding. Educators who are frequently absent deprive their learners of these opportunities as a result of a lack of instructional time.

This subsequently forces them into hurrying through the content of the curriculum, thus compromising the quality of the teaching and learning process.

(d) Classroom climate

Classroom climate refers to the conduciveness of the classroom environment to the teaching and learning process. According to Crotty (2002) classroom climate refers to the type of environment that the school and educators create for their learners. A positive classroom climate is characterized by a safe environment, in which

learners are nurtured and intellectually stimulated so as to maximize their learning in realising their potential. Misbehaviour by most learners is a result of the failure of educators and the school to address their academic, social and emotional needs by not creating an appropriate environment which facilitates the teaching and learning process. The type of relationship the educator shares with his/her learners also falls within the scope of classroom climate (Crotty, 2002). This argument is supported by Hallinan (2008) whose study on learner attachment to school concluded that educators largely influence learners attachment and attraction to school by the kinds of experiences they create for their learners. Learners who perceive that their educators care about them and respect them are more attracted to school.

A learner's liking for school is important for the teaching and learning process. The relationship that exists between liking school and effective development sees those learners who like school, having higher academic achievement and lower incidences of disciplinary problems, absenteeism, truancy and dropping out of school than those learners who dislike school (Hallinan, 2008). Furthermore, it was claimed by Hallinan (2008) that learners who school, engage more actively and fully in classroom activities thereby fostering their social development in areas of establishing friendships, learning respect and engaging positively in co-operative behaviours.

Liu and Wang's (2008) study on the effect of classroom climate on learners academic self-concept focused on learners relationship with their educators. They analysed a sub-scale that assessed learners perceptions of the amount of help and concern that their educators direct to them and the extent to which their educators trust them and are interested in them. Their study revealed that classroom climate was a dominant predictor of learners academic self-concept.

Studies by (Ireson and Hallinan, 2005) and (Sanders, 1996) cited in Liu and Wang (2008) concur that learners' perceptions of their school environment such as the classroom climate and their relationships with their educators are related to their academic self-concept in that a conducive classroom climate positively correlates with learners general self-concept. Sanders (1996) as cited in Liu and Wang (2008) also established a positive relationship between learners' perceptions of educator support and their academic self-concept.

It is extremely important that learners understand that the educator is truly interested in them and in teaching them (Crotty, 2002). According to Patrick, Ryan and Kaplan (2007), the classroom greatly influences the development of the learners' social competence. This concurs with Bandura's Social Learning Theory which highlights an educator's relationship with his/her learners as being significant in the development of a learners social behaviour. Their study supports the premise that learners' perceptions of their social environment, in this case the classroom, affects their academic and social beliefs about themselves which in turn affects their behavioural and cognitive participation and achievement. Stornes et al. (2008) view the classroom as a social place in which learners learn and work in social interaction with their educators and peers and how they perceive the classroom in terms of social interaction and relationships is linked to their motivation and engagement. Arends (1994) as cited in Mkhwanazi (1998)) claims that the learning environment is represented by the overall climate and structure of the classroom and this influences how learners respond to and engage in learning tasks.

The Achievement Goal Theory (Ames, 1992) claims that a learner's motivation to learn is not only influenced by the individual learner's personal disposition and beliefs but also by the classroom climate. The classroom climate communicates meanings and purposes seeing that how learners perceive the classroom environment, influences the extent to which they participate in the classroom. Based on the research reviewed, it is evident that learners will be most willing to participate in classrooms in which the educator expresses enthusiasm about learning and provides the necessary academic and emotional support to their learners.

In examining the factors associated with learner's general subjective well-being, Konu et al. (2002) focused on the School Well-being Model which looked at the loving and caring aspects as part of learner social relationships. This model focused on the school, classroom climate and educator-learner relationships as being significant parts of the learners' social world. Konu et al. (2002) link a high subjective well-being with positive learner development. In the context of my research study, one can conclude through a review of the literature that educator absenteeism does impact negatively on learners general subjective well-being with particular reference

to classroom climate and learner-educator relationships

2.2.3. The impact of educator absenteeism on the emotional development of the learner in the classroom

(a) Educator Support

This concept is linked to the emotional development of the learner. Educator support refers to learners' perceptions that their educators care about them and are interested in helping them. According to Stornes *et al.* (2008) educator involvement and support is indicated by the extent to which educators are interested in their learners' well-being, their needs and development opportunities. Educators who provide the necessary emotional support build close relationships with their learners and directly influence their learners' performance and that learners who feel emotionally supported by their educators are more likely to enjoy learning and are more motivated to succeed (Stornes et al. 2008).

Educator support is associated with encouragement of student interest, positive emotional support and social collaboration (Turner & Patrick, 2004). This educator support satisfies the learner's emotional needs that are likely to influence their participation and engagement in teaching and learning activities (Turner & Patrick, 2004). It has become evident through the review of the literature that educator absenteeism can be detrimental to the learner-educator relationship seeing that learners are impressionable and look up to their educators as role-models. This is consistent with and supported by Bandura's social learning theory which emphasises the principles of imitation, modelling and reinforcement.

According to a research study conducted by Suldo *et al.*(2009) which looked at aspects of educator support that are linked to learner subjective well-being, it concluded that there is definitely a link between educator support and learners' social and emotional well-being. The social and emotional well-being of a learner impacts positively on their development in the classroom as the educator serves as an important source of support and guidance and is paramount to a learner's success at school.

According to Whitehead (2009, p.242) *educator absenteeism can be regarded as a form of abandonment or a lack of support*. More recent research studies on learner performance have begun to look at the effects of the classroom environment on motivation. Educators do have control over the kind of classroom environment they create for and with their learners. This supports the premise that educators can and do influence the development of learner's work habits through encouragement and support. Educators caring for learners are important for their subjective well-being. Studies by Turner and Patrick (2004) and Marks (2000) support the premise that educator support and the formation of sound learner-educator relationships are associated with emotional well-being and a sense of belonging. A review of the literature (Marks, 2000) reveals that support from educators was found to promote higher levels of motivation, engagement, academic achievement and prosocial behaviour. This view is supported by Eccles and Roeser (1999) who affirm that supportive educators are linked to motivation, interest in school, prosocial behaviours and academic achievement.

According to Crotty (2002) an educator's attitude is important and has serious implications for learning in the classroom. The more enthusiasm and commitment displayed by the educator, the greater the motivation for the learners' to learn. This positive rapport between educator and learner is not only crucial to academics but also to classroom discipline. It is important for educators to gain learners respect as this respect is reciprocal. If learners perceive that an educator is not interested in them and does not respect them, then the educator will not be able to teach them effectively. This is supported by Hallinan's (2008) research study which focused on the ways in which educators affect learners feelings towards school. The findings concluded that the extent of educators social and emotional support for their learners significantly influence learners liking for and attraction to school. Educators who show their support for their learners by caring about them and respecting them, satisfy their learners emotional needs and this increases their attachment to and liking for school.

Of the few studies that have examined the consequences of learners feelings about school for academic and behavioural outcomes, many have lacked conceptual clarity. However, studies by Jonson, Crosnoe and Elder (2001) who defined attraction to school as an affective state and learner engagement as a set of behaviours and Smerdon (2002) who viewed feelings of belongingness as a sentiment and commitment to schoolwork as a behavioural outcome.

Since attachment to school has been shown to affect learners academic performance, identifying the characteristics of educators that have a positive effect on learner's feelings about school is one way to increase learners achievement. Studies by Ladd, Buhs and Seid (2000), Dombusch (2001), Muller (2001) and Ekstrom et al. (1996) cited in Hallinan (2008) showed that a liking for school promotes classroom participation and contributes to increased test scores by improving academic and behavioural performances.

This research study by Hallinan (2008), amongst other things, aimed at identifying educator factors that increases a learner's feelings about school. Educators are influential in shaping learners experiences in school through both verbal and non-verbal interactions. The amount of social and emotional support that educators give to their learners influences their attraction to school. This interaction is significant in shaping how learners feel about themselves. If learners feel ignored, devalued or disrespected by their educators, they are likely to react negatively whilst if they perceive their educators to have regard for them and show an interest in their welfare, they will react positively (Stronge, 2002). The important question here is what message are frequently absent educators sending to their learners?

The results of the study by Hallinan (2008) on learner attachment to school highlight the importance of the social-emotional support provided by educators in shaping learners feelings about school, found that the amount of educator support influenced learners' attachment to school. By providing the necessary social and emotional support to their learners, educators increase learners' liking for school, and this has positive consequences for learners' academic and social outcomes.

General research on effective teaching shows that educators who are concerned about their learners successfully motivate their learners to learn (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). When learners perceive their educators to be unfair to them, show them disrespect, violates norms and their rights, this then has a detrimental effect on their motivation to learn. Frequent absences by the class educator can and may seem to fit into one of these categories. In light of the above it can thus be deduced that a straightforward relationship exists between educator support and learners attachment to school.

A study conducted by Patrick, Ryan and Kaplan (2007) investigated the link between the classroom social environment (i.e. educator support and mutual respect) and learners' engagement in the classroom. This study provided strong data showing that the classroom social environment when characterized by learners' feelings of a sense of emotional support and encouragement from their educators, are more likely to engage more fully and confidently.

According to Felner (1985) as cited in Patrick et al. (2007) an educator's emotional support is positively related to a learner's academic self-concept. When learners perceive academic and emotional support and respect in the classroom, their confidence levels increase and this promotes greater levels of engagement amongst the learners. The findings of this study add to the growing evidence that the nature and the quality of the learner-educator relationship as perceived by the learners are strongly associated with their motivation and engagement. This provides support for the premise that learners' perceptions of their social environment, in this case the classroom, influences their academic and social beliefs about themselves which then impacts on their behavioural and cognitive engagement in class and then on their overall achievement.

(b) Belongingness

This is an emotional construct and is conceptualised as educator support, availability and acceptance which are seen to be critical to success at school (Van Ryzin, Gravely & Roseth, 2009). Learners who experience a sense of belonging at school

and enjoy supportive relationships with their educators are motivated to learn. Educator absenteeism compromises this educational support and availability and in most cases this lack of support impacts negatively on learner's development.

Learners have a need to be accepted and loved. This improves their confidence levels and improves the learning environment by promoting sound learner-educator relationships (Mkhwanazi, 1998). This is supported by Eccles and Roeser (1999), who link supportive educators positively to learner motivation, engagement interest in school, prosocial behaviour and academic achievement. In the case of frequently absent educators, their lack of quality of support and availability is most likely to impact negatively on learner development. According to Anderman and Anderman (1999), learners experiencing a sense of belonging at school and enjoying supportive relationships with their educators, are motivated to participate actively and appropriately in the life of the classroom thereby enhancing their development. According to Van Ryzin, et al. (2009) The Self Determination Theory highlights the importance of belongingness to academic achievement. This theory posits a model in which belongingness influences participation and academic and social outcomes.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

It must be emphasized that this study is a qualitative case study investigating primary school learners' perceptions and does not involve quantitative data analysis. The concepts that follow under 2.3.1 have been identified in the literature to be most likely associated with learner holistic development i.e. learners' cognitive, social and emotional development in the classroom.

2.3.1. Holistic Development:

A review of the literature highlighted the following concepts viz. cognitive, social and emotional which are associated with a learner's holistic development in the classroom, and placed in perspective the impact of educator absenteeism on these aspects of a learners' development in the classroom.

2.3.1.1. The impact of educator absenteeism on the cognitive (academic) development of the learner in the classroom. The concepts relevant to the cognitive development for the purpose of this study are:

- (a) Learner attitude and learner motivation
- (b) Learner performance

2.3.1.2. The impact of educator absenteeism on the social development of the learner in the classroom. The concepts relevant to the social development of the learner in the classroom for the purpose of this study are:

- (a) Learner discipline and classroom behaviour
- (b) Learner-educator relationships
- (c) Learner engagement and participation
- (d) Classroom climate

2.3.1.3. The impact of educator absenteeism on the emotional development of the learner in the classroom. The concepts relevant to emotional development for the purpose of this study are:

- (a) Educator support
- (b) Belongingness

2.4 Theoretical Frameworks

The following are the theoretical frameworks gathered from a review of the literature that informed and guided this research study.

2.4.1`. The Ecosystemic Theory of Bronfenbrenner:

According to Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (1997) the ecosystemic theory emphasizes a connection between the individual's psychological development and the social context and the systems within which this occurs. A change in one part of the system is seen to affect the other systems. The development of the school going child reflects the influence of a number of environmental systems, of which the school is one such system. According to Barath (2006), educators play an important role in motivating learners in the classroom and that their regular presence in the classroom is essential for quality teaching and learning to take place.

The systems identified in this theory are (a) Microsystems, (b) Mesosystems, (c) Exosystems and (d) Macrosystems (Santrock, 2007). The relevance of this theory to my research study is shown by the influence that an educator exerts on his learners cognitive, social and emotional development in the classroom. Molnar and Linqvist (1989) argue that the classroom is part of the micro system of the ecosystem and is influenced by interaction, thoughts, attitudes and behaviour of the people interacting within this subsystem. This reaffirms the importance and influence of the educator in the teaching and learning process and learner development.

The ecosystemic perspective is particularly significant for understanding the holistic development of the learner (Tyler, 1992). Learning cannot be seen in isolation but together with the influence of other related factors in the classroom environment such as educator support, learner-educator relationships, learner engagement and learner participation to name but a few. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic theory it becomes clear that relationships play a crucial role in human development. According to Rutter and Maughan (2002) educators exert a great influence on their learner's development in the context of the classroom.

This is confirmed by Molnar and Lindquist (1989) who state that from an ecosystemic perspective, problems in the classroom are prevented if the interpersonal interactions between the role-players are characterized by consultation and co-operation which will ensure that effective teaching and learning takes place. Absent educators create an imbalance in the classroom's ecosystem and this may have adverse effects on the teaching and learning process and learner development.

In order to understand the whole, which for the purpose of my study is learner holistic development, one has to look at the parts i.e. those aspects that are associated with learner development and how they can retard or promote development. The relevance of the Systems Theory to this study is the development of an understanding of schools and classrooms and the interactional relationships within them (Donald et al. 1997). The use of this theory in my research study finds justification in that learning takes place in a social context and that the different role-players influence and are influenced by each other. Frequently absent educators do

impact on the classroom as a social context by negatively affecting learner-educator relationships and the classroom climate. According to Donald et al. (1997) how we feel, behave and develop as people is linked to our environmental social structures, forces and relationships.

2.4.2. The Humanistic Theory:

Hamachek (1987) as cited in Eggen and Kauchak (1997) claims that learner-educator relationship and classroom climate are two essential elements of the teaching and learning process that are consistent with the Humanistic Theory. By being supportive and caring, educators show that they respect individual learners and their emotional well-being and personal growth. The Humanists, furthermore, focus on the learners need for respect, belonging, recognition and self-worth, all of which are important components of psychological well-being which is shown to play a significant role in learners' social and emotional development. There is evidence in the literature that supports the significance of a positive classroom climate in learning and in motivating the learner to learn (Eggen and Kauchak, 1997). According to the Humanists, absentee educators inhibit the creation of supportive and caring classrooms thereby impacting negatively on learner cognitive, social and emotional development.

The relevance of the Humanist Theory to my research study is in highlighting the need for supportive and caring classrooms as important contributors to the teaching and learning process and secondly to emphasize the importance of educator attendance in promoting learner development. According to Eggen and Kauchak (1997) learners perceive caring and supportive educators to care about their emotional well-being and this promotes their social development in the classroom. According to Elliot, Kratochwill, Littlefield, Cook and Tavers (2000), the Humanistic Theory also focuses on belonging, the need to be loved and the need for acceptance. These are important factors in the teaching and learning process as they encourage the development of self-worth. This feeling of self-worth develops within the individual a strong sense of self-confidence which influences how the individual engages in the learning process. The Humanistic Theory has implications for educators in that educators must take cognizance of the needs of the learners and attempt to fulfil these needs in the best possible way so as to maximize learner

development. Educator absenteeism can have a negative impact on learners developing positive self-concepts about themselves.

2.4.3. Bandura's Social Learning Theory:

Bandura's social learning theory emphasises that learning is a social act and is influenced largely by the principles of imitation, modelling and reinforcement (Omrod, 1999). Consistent with this theory is learners looking up to their educators as role-models and quite often what the educator does, is right. The question frequently asked regarding educator absenteeism is what message are these absentee educators sending to their learners and what example are they setting? Learners' perceptions of absentee educators influence their acquisition of beliefs and attitudes.

It is important to see how these theories tie up with the research focus of this study. My research study aims to investigate learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism and how it impacts on learner's cognitive, social and emotional development in the classroom. An absentee educator is not in the classroom to teach, hence no proper learning and teaching takes place in that prescribed time resulting in a disturbance of the normal flow of events. Going back to the systems theory within the ecosystemic perspective, the fact that teaching and learning takes place in a social context and that the different role-players are influenced by each other is highlighted. Aspects such as learner-educator relationships and the classroom climate are negatively affected by educator absenteeism.

In the context of Bandura's Social Learning Theory, absentee educators do not provide good role-models for their learners to emulate and their frequent absence from the classroom may have a negative influence on their learners' perceptions of them and even their own attendance (Jacobson, 1989).

2.5 Conclusion

It can be deduced from the review of the literature that educator absenteeism does have a damaging impact on learners' levels of attainment and it can be argued that it also has serious consequences for the personal, moral and social development of learners (Ivatts, 2010).

Learners often look up to their educators as role-models and this supports the view that educators play a major role in shaping learners' experiences in school and are thus influential in the learners' cognitive, social and emotional development in the classroom.

The next chapter presents the research design and methodology that was used in this research study.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.

3.1 Introduction

The research design and methodology of a study encompasses issues relating to the research approach, the population, the sampling techniques used, the data collection instruments used, issues of reliability and validity, ethical considerations, collection and analysis of data and limitations of the research study (Mouton, 2007).

In answering the critical questions that guided this research study, namely: to investigate primary school learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism and how they perceive it to be impacting on their holistic development in the classroom, the researcher embarked on a phenomenological, qualitative case study within the interpretivist paradigm because according to Roberts (2004), phenomenological studies focus on peoples' first hand experiences from their perspective.

The key research questions guiding this research study are as follows:

- (1) What are primary school learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism?**
- (2) How do primary school learners perceive educator absenteeism to be impacting on their holistic development in the classroom?**

In gathering data to answer these research questions, the researcher used the focus group interview and a close-ended questionnaire as data collection instruments.

3.2 Research Design

Consistent with the aim of this study, the researcher decided that a single case study would be the most appropriate in realizing the objectives of this research study. Bloor and Wood (2001) define a case study as:

“A strategy of research that aims to understand social phenomena within a single or small number of naturally occurring settings. The purpose may be to provide description through a detailed

example or to generate or test particular theories.”

(Bloor and Wood, 2001, p27).

Qualitative studies that fall within the interpretivist paradigm allow one to understand how individuals or groups of individuals perceive the world in which they live (Cohen, et al. 2007). Case studies are often associated with ethnography, in which the purpose is to interpret and describe social groups in their natural settings by using a number of qualitative techniques over a period of time (Bloor and Wood, 2001). According to Henning (2004) case studies can be used to establish cause and effect, and one of their strengths is that in their quest to understand people's perceptions of events, they observe the participants in the real context.

Case studies can be either **exploratory** in which they serve as a pilot study to other studies or research questions or **descriptive** in which narrative accounts of people's experiences are provided or **explanatory** in which theories are tested (Yin, 2003). In the course of this research study the descriptive case study was used as they provided narrative accounts shedding light on learners' opinions, attitudes and perceptions of how they perceive, understand and interpret their worlds (Sithole, 2007).

Despite case studies being stereotyped as a weak method (Yin, 2003), they are used extensively in the field of social science research. There is however common concern that case studies provide little basis for scientific generalization and that they lack rigour. A lack of rigor indicates sloppiness on the part of the investigator, unsystematic procedures or in allowing equivocal evidence or biased views to impact on the direction of the findings and conclusions (Yin, 2003). According to Yin (2003), bias can also enter other forms of research strategies but in the case of case studies they may be more frequently encountered and less frequently overcome.

However, there is debate over whether a case study is a methodological choice Simmons (1996) cited in Bloor and Wood (2001) or an object that is studied Stake (1995). According to Simmons (1996) case studies can be recommended as a method because they capture the unique characters of people by generating holistic data. Other forms of criticisms often levelled against case studies are subjectivity, a lack of scientific rigour and generalizability. However supporters of this method claim that case studies provide information on the meaning of social and human

activity which will not be possible by other methods such as questionnaire or surveys (Bloor and Wood, 2001). To address the issue of a lack of generalizability of case studies multiple data collection methods, a process known as methodological triangulation can be used (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Methodological triangulation increases the quality of the study by enhancing the reliability and validity of the study. According to Hakim (2000), by using multiple sources of evidence the case study becomes one of the most powerful research designs. Triangulation increases understanding of the case study and adds to the credibility of the descriptions and interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Yin (2003) points out that the case study method produces results that can be seen as generalizable to theoretical perspectives and not to populations and those general conclusions drawn from case studies can be achieved by making theoretical inferences through comparative analysis. Lincoln and Guba (1989) cited in Bloor and Wood (2001) view case studies as providing a rich description that cannot be separated from the life sciences.

Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) suggest that the case study approach is appropriate when the researcher has little or no control over events and /or where the research site is too complex for survey or experimental research. Another advantage of a case study is its easy accessibility to the participants and easy identification of the research sample since I am on site. However, Creswell (2002), advocates that it may not always be in the researchers best interest to study research sites in where the researcher is already an active participant, as this can influence the outcome by raising expectations from the participants.

In general, case studies are the preferred strategy when “how’ and “why” questions are being asked and when the focus falls on a contemporary phenomenon involving real –life contexts. In this regard the advantage of case studies is that there are two main sources of evidence, direct observation of the events being studied and interviews of the persons involved in the events (Yin, 2003).

This research study is a qualitative study and according to Hakim (2000), the great strength of qualitative research is the validity of the data gathered because individuals are interviewed in sufficient detail for the results to be seen as a true and believable reflection of their views and experiences. However the reliability of a case study can be questionable because of the small numbers of respondents in a

particular site and this cannot be taken as being representative of the population.. The reliability and validity issues of this study will be further elaborated upon later in this section.

3.3 Data collection instruments

A major strength of data collection in a case study is the opportunity to use different methods of data collection (Yin, 2003). This use of multiple sources of data collection in case studies allows the investigation to address broader ranges of attitudinal and behavioural issues. Case studies that use multiple sources of evidence produce results with better overall quality than those studies that relied on single sources of evidence (Yin, 2003). This is supported by Hakim (2000) who asserts that the use of multiple sources of data collection makes the case study one of the most powerful research designs.

In this study the researcher chose two methods of data collection viz. the focus group interview and the close-ended questionnaire as the principal data collection instruments. According to Yin (2003), one of the most important sources of case study information is the interview. The focus group interview was chosen as the research study aimed at investigating learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism. To address the issue of learners' perceptions of the impact of educator absenteeism on their holistic development in the classroom, the researcher used the closed-ended questionnaire. The focus group interview ensured that the research questions and the data gathered gave some insight into the personal experiences and interests of those who have been affected. The initial focus group interview was used as a pilot study to evaluate and fine-tune the questions in the interview schedule where necessary. The learners' responses gathered during the focus group interviews were used to guide the design of the close-ended questionnaire which was used to increase representivity in this study by involving a larger sample of the target population.

The purpose for the use of the questionnaire in this study was to address the shortcomings that are generally associated with the focus group interview, viz. lack of representivity, lack of generalizability and issues of validity and reliability. Thus the use of the questionnaire in this study added to the data production and addressed the issues of generalizability and representivity as a larger sample was accessible

than that of the focus group interview. According to McMillan and Schumacher (1993) cited in Mathonsi (2005), the reliability and validity of the data can be considerably increased through the use of a well designed questionnaire.

3.3.1. THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS.

3.3.1.1. Definition:

The definition by Anderson (1996, p.200) captures all of the essential characteristics of the focus group interview.

“A focus group is a carefully planned and moderated informal discussion where one person’s ideas bounce off another’s creating a chain reaction of informative dialogue. Its purpose is to address a specific topic, in depth, in a comfortable environment to elicit a wide range of opinions, attitudes, feelings or perceptions from a group of individuals who share common experience relative to the dimension under study. The product of a focus group is a unique form of qualitative information which brings understanding about how people react to an experience or product.”

It is thus obvious that focus group research being a form of qualitative method generates rich, descriptive data in a small format from participants. According to Brodigan (1992) cited in Vaughn et al. (1996), focus groups are useful in exploratory research when not much is known about the topic or when used as a first step to assist more ambitious research efforts.

According to Vaughn et al. (1996), the phenomenological approach is one of the basic approaches of research and this is perhaps the most common approach to focus group interviewing. Vaughn et al. (1996) outline the purpose of focus groups as gaining an understanding of everyday knowledge and the perceptions of specific sub-groups with particular emphasis on their experiences, attitudes, assumptions, perceptions and interests.

Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) concur with the definitions of Anderson (1996) and Vaughn et al. (1996) and further add that if the purpose of the research is to gain an insight into a particular issue, focus group interviews provide relatively natural, relaxed and secure settings in which participants are encouraged to share freely both positive and negative comments.

.3.3.1.2. Advantages of the focus group interview.

The focus group interview does present many advantages. These advantages can be considerably strengthened once the shortcomings that are generally associated with the focus group interview are overcome. The researcher decided to use the focus group interview for the purpose of this research study because it is an effective and economical instrument of data collection. They are flexible and versatile and they have the potential to generate a large amount of rich data in a relatively short space of time from the people that are most directly involved. They can be used alone or in conjunction with other quantitative or qualitative methods to bring about greater depths of understanding (Vaughn *et al.* 1996).

Focus groups are particularly suited to collecting data on sensitive and delicate social issues. Furthermore focus group interviews allow for the kind of interaction that may not necessarily be effective in other kinds of interviews in which the interviewees may be less intimidated and more enthusiastic in a group setting. Focus group interviews have the potential to generate detailed information about personal and group feelings, perceptions and opinions. (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003).

The results of focus group interviews can be presented in uncomplicated ways using lay terminology that can be supported by quotations from the participants (Rabiee, 2004).

The data yielded during focus group interviews may reflect more accurately people's genuine thoughts and feelings about a phenomenon unlike individual interviews where the respondents may feel forced to answer even if they do not have an opinion. (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

The researcher also decided to use the focus group interview as a means of developing the second data collection instrument, namely the questionnaire. According to Vaughn *et al.* (1996), focus group interviews are beneficial in developing questionnaires and surveys and furthermore they assist in fine-tuning qualitative and quantitative research designs.

3.3.1.3. Disadvantages of the focus group interview.

However a researcher must be aware of some of the shortcomings that have been associated with the focus group interview as a data collection instrument.

One of the main disadvantages of the focus group interview is the possibility of a dominant group member influencing proceedings and/or individuals reluctance to speak out as individuals thereby resulting in a group response whilst individual beliefs and views are not expressed. According to Hines (2000), these need to be minimised in focus group interviews in order that they become more effective.

According to Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003), the greatest strength of focus groups viz. their group dynamics and interactions can also sometimes be the source of their greatest weakness. It is thus extremely important that the necessary precautions are exercised so as to address these issues that may jeopardize the effectiveness of the focus group interview as a data collection instrument. They provide the following areas of concern.

(a) The findings that emerge may not necessarily be the opinions or ideas of an individual participant. The statements made by the individual might possibly have been influenced by the thoughts and views of the group as a whole. The participants may respond in ways so as to please his/her colleagues and not want to be different from the general consensus. This is referred to as “groupthink” (Vaughn et al. 1996).

(b) Participants may choose not to divulge certain information in a group setting (Kritzing, 1994).

(c) “Leader effect”. Participants are influenced by the opinions of the leader or other dominant individuals (Krueger, 1994).

(d) Lack of representivity. Responses of the participants in the interview are likely not to be the same as the responses of those who were not part of the interview (Kritzing, 1994).

3.3.2. THE QUESTIONNAIRE:

In this research study, a close-ended questionnaire was also used for the purposes of enhancing the findings and to compensate for the shortcomings generally associated with focus group interviews. This idea of using more than one data collection instrument, called methodical triangulation, is supported by Denzin and Lincoln (2003) who maintains that this increases the quality of the case study investigation. Hakim (2000) says that the use of multiple sources of evidence makes the case study one of the most powerful research designs.

Questionnaires are widely used in educational research in obtaining information about current conditions and practices and to investigate attitudes, opinions and perceptions and all of this within a shorter space of time. (Cohen et al. 2007). The use of this instrument enabled the researcher to gather data from a larger sample within a shorter space of time. Seeing that the design of the questionnaire was informed by the participants' responses during the focus group interview and that the writing skills of primary school learners are not of an advanced level as for many of them English is a second language, the researcher opted for the use of a close-ended questionnaire.

Sibaya (1992) offered the following advantages of close-ended questions.

- (a) They are easy to standardise.
- (b) They are easy to administer, they are quick and analysis is relatively inexpensive.
- (c) The responses of the participants are relevant to the purpose of the study, thereby increasing the study's validity
- (d) There is greater uniformity in responses on what is being asked.

However, Sibaya (1992) also highlights the following as shortcomings associated with close-ended questions.

- (a) They may force answers to issues about which the respondent may not have opinions.
- (b) The alternatives given may not necessarily be an adequate representation of how the participant actually feels.

Borg and Gall (1989) as well as Bless and Higson-Smith (2000) offer the following recommendations when designing an effective questionnaire:

(a) Questions must be concise and simple, and must mean the same to all participants.

(b) Too general or too vague questions could give rise to different interpretations. These ambiguous questions must be avoided at all costs. Ensure that Items are specific as these will elicit accurate responses. Negative items and double-barrelled items must be avoided as they can negatively influence the accuracy of one's thoughts. Double-barrelled items are those items which require respondents to respond to two separate ideas with a single answer.

(c) Use language that is in keeping with level of the participants so that the participants have a good understanding of the items and know precisely what is expected of them.

(d) Leading and biased questions must be avoided.

3.3.2.1. Advantages of the questionnaire:

Bless and Higson-Smith (2000) provides the following as some of the advantages of the questionnaire:

(a) Written questionnaires prevent interviewer bias because according to Bless and Higson-Smith (2000), questionnaires do not involve direct personal contact with the respondents.

(b) Questionnaires permit anonymity and confidentiality.

(c) Respondents are given sufficient time to consider answers before responding.

(d) A larger sample of the target population can be reached thereby the representivity of the study.

(e) Questionnaires provide greater uniformity in terms of analysis than do interviews.

3.3.2.2. Disadvantages of the questionnaire:

- (a) Questionnaires do not allow for as much flexibility as do interviews. They do not provide the opportunity for probing or for clarification of items. This may thus result in participants responses being based entirely on misinterpretations or misunderstandings (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000).
- (b) The possibility exists that the participant may enlist the assistance of someone else in which case the responses do not represent the respondent's own view, perception or opinion (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000).
- (c) Questionnaires are always problematic regarding the return rate and the issue of incomplete forms (Cohen et al. 2007).
- (d) The success of the questionnaire depends on the co-operation of the participants, their willingness and their motivation to divulge their perceptions of reality. In order to be successful, the respondents must co-operate, they must be willing and motivated to divulge their perceptions of reality (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003).

3.4 Selection of participants and sampling techniques used in the study

According to Krueger (1994) sampling is strategic to the success of the focus group interview. A sample, which is a subset or a portion of the total population, is a representation of the whole. Each and every participant of the total population must be the bearer of the particular characteristic being researched. In keeping with the research focus of this study, only learners who had been subjected to educators who absented themselves frequently(two or more days per week) or for longer periods of time (periods of thirty or more consecutive days in a term), became eligible to participate in this study i.e. they formed the target population. This is an example of purposeful sampling (Krueger, 1994). For the purpose of this research study the present Grade Six learners in the research site formed the target population. A focus group interview was held with each of the four Grade Six classes of the school seeing that these learners have been subjected to the same frequently absent educators in Grades Four and Five of the previous two years and to also get responses from a class perspective. Furthermore feedback received would be relevant to that particular class unit.

The first class 6B was used as the pilot study and the data received from this class was also analysed together with the responses received from Grades 6A, 6B and 6C as part of the study. The researcher asked for volunteers to participate in the focus group interviews because of the sensitive nature of the study and on the recommendation of Krueger (1994) who believes the production of rich data is enhanced if the participants in the group are enthusiastic to engage fully and freely in the discussion. Random sampling was to be used if the number of volunteers per class exceeded the desired number of participants. However this was not necessary as the number of volunteers fell within the recommended number of participants for the focus group interview. Four learners volunteered in Grade 6A, six learners volunteered in Grade 6C and six learners volunteered in Grade 6D. A total of 21 learners from the four Grade six classes participated in the focus group interviews and this number included those from Grade 6B which was regarded as the pilot study.

Since this particular study involved more than one method of data collection, different sampling procedures were necessary. For the focus group interviews purposeful, non-probability sampling was used because only those who were willing to participate were considered. The researcher therefore asked for volunteers from the target group. No participant was forced or coerced into participating in the interviews. Seeing that the volunteers per class (6A- 4; 6B- 5; 6C- 6 and 6D- 6) made up the desired number of between four and twelve participants, all volunteers took part in the focus group interviews. According to Morgan (1998) between four and twelve participants are recommended for a focus group interview because fewer than four may jeopardize the valuable group dynamics, whilst more than twelve may make the group unwieldy. However, Krueger and Casey (2000) suggest between six and eight participants as smaller groups show greater potential, are manageable and do not become disorderly or fragmented but large enough to gain a variety of perspectives.

For the purpose of this research study the researcher decided to conduct four separate focus group interviews, with a sample drawn from the volunteers in each of the four Grade Six Classes of the target population. The first group of volunteers from Grade 6B was used as the pilot study as it was the first interview conducted. However, although regarded as the pilot, the data gathered was also included for the

purpose of data analysis. The purpose of the pilot study was to refine the instrument where necessary thereby enhancing the validity of the study and secondly to guide the design of the close-ended questionnaire that was issued to a larger sample of the target population to address one of the criticisms of the focus group interview, namely its lack of representivity. Regarding the close-ended questionnaire the researcher used the process of random selection ie. every third learner in register order. The fifteen selected participants from each of the four Grade Six classes were given consent forms requesting permission from their parents/guardians prior to the exercise being undertaken. Altogether 60 learners were given the questionnaire to complete.

There is debate surrounding who should make up the participants of a focus group. Krueger (1994) recommends the use of a homogenous group i.e. respondents who share similar characteristics. He further states that participants should not be familiar to each other as this will encourage more honest, spontaneous and a wider range of responses. However, Kitzinger (1994) on the other hand recommends the use of acquaintances. His motivation for this is that they could relate to each other's comments, they will be able to challenge each other and they will not be shy to express their views. Seeing that the research site was one particular school, it was possible that the participants were in all probability familiar with each other.

For the purpose of administering the questionnaire, convenience and random sampling was used. Convenience sampling is also known as opportunity sampling where the researcher chooses the sample from those whom s/he has easy access to. (Mitchell & Jolley, 2007). In this study those who participated in the focus group were excluded from participation in the questionnaire. A random sample of 60 participants (15 each from each of the four Grade Six Classes) was chosen from the target population.

The following tables (Table A and Table B) present the biographical information of the participants for both the focus group interviews and the questionnaire respectively.

THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW:

<u>TABLE A:</u>					
<u>GRADE:</u>	6A	6B	6C	6D	
<u>AGE :</u>					
11 yrs	2	3	4	1	
12 yrs	1	2	2	5	
13yrs	–	–	–	1	
TOTAL:	3	5	6	7	(21)
<u>RACE :</u>					
African	1	5	6	7	
Indian	1	–	–	–	
Coloured	1	–	–	–	
TOTAL:	3	5	6	7	
<u>GENDER :</u>					
Male	1	1	4	3	
Female	2	4	2	4	
TOTAL:	3	5	6	7	

(B) THE QUESTIONNAIRE:

TABLE B:

There was no piloting of the questionnaire since the design of the questions in the questionnaire was influenced and guided by the responses of the participants in the pilot focus group interview.

<u>GRADE</u> :	6A	6B	6C	6D	
<u>AGE</u> :					
11 yrs	5	4	8	7	
12 yrs	7	9	5	7	
13 yrs	3	1	2	1	
14 yrs	–	1	–	–	
TOTAL	15	15	15	15	(60)
<u>RACE</u> :					
African	13	10	13	11	
Indian	2	4	1	3	
Coloured	–	1	1	1	
TOTAL	15	15	15	15	
<u>GENDER:</u>					
Male	5	8	8	8	
Female	10	7	7	7	
TOTAL	15	15	15	15	

3.5 Research Procedure and Data collection instruments

The first interview was held with Grade 6B. This interview was regarded as the pilot study in that it gave the researcher an indication of the effectiveness of the interview questions and also to assess if any difficulties existed in answering these questions. Fortunately the learners managed the questions satisfactorily and therefore no changes were deemed necessary. This interview session was held during the learners' free periods (when the regular educator was absent) in my office on the school premises. It lasted 55 minutes and the sample comprised five (5) participants.

The details of the other three interview sessions are as follows. Each class was interviewed separately. All interviews were held during the learners' free periods in my office. Grade 6A was the second class to be interviewed. Four learners participated. This interview session lasted 35 minutes. The third class to be interviewed was Grade 6D. This sample comprised six participants and the interview session lasted 45 minutes. The last class to be interviewed was Grade 6C. Six learners participated in the interview session and this session lasted 40 minutes.

The researcher decided to facilitate the interview, seeing that the success of the focus group interview depends to a large extent on the skills and personal attributes of the interviewer (Vaughn et al., 1996). Furthermore shortcomings associated with the focus group interview can be minimized by using a competent moderator. A skilled facilitator can effectively address issues such as members dominating the proceedings and reluctance of participants to engage.

The researcher opted for the use of an audio-tape instead of the video recorder to record the discussion as this mechanism would promote anonymity of the participants and will allay fears of identification and resultant victimization. This may encourage participants to respond more freely and honestly.

The second data collection viz. the questionnaire was guided in design by the responses received during the focus group interviews. The questionnaire comprised all close-ended questions. This was done to compensate for the lack of proper writing skills amongst primary school learners, especially English second language speakers, as this can affect the validity of the study. The purpose of using the questionnaire was to increase representation in the study. It must be remembered

that one of the major criticisms of the focus group interview is its lack of representivity as the responses of the participants are not necessarily seen as sharing the views of the wider population (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003).

Once all the relevant data had been gathered, it was analysed and interpreted. The relevant findings are discussed in the next chapter.

3.6 Data analysis

Qualitative research, in particular focus group interviews, has the potential to generate large amounts of data. According to Robson (1993), the main aim of data analysis is to reduce the large amounts of data into smaller manageable units called themes and categories.

Yin (1989) outlines the different stages in analysing data viz. examining, categorizing, tabulating or otherwise recombining the evidence in order to address the initial goal of the research.

The data from the focus group interview was analysed using the framework analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). The focus here was on the thematic approach i.e. allowing themes to develop both from the research questions and from the narratives of the research participants. Overall, data analysis involved the researcher familiarising himself with the evidence, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and then interpretation.

Lederman (1990) as cited in Vaughn et al.(1996, p.104) identified the following analytic approaches that could be used for data analysis:

- (a) Summarize the data into statements that express only the main ideas of the interview.
- (b) Code these main ideas into categories.
- (c) Put similar categories into themes.
- (d) Use quotes from the participants during the interview to support or reject the main ideas or categories that were established.

There are several methods for analysing and reporting the findings from focus group interviews but this depends on the purpose of the interview. However in most cases the data from the focus group interview is firstly transcribed and then coded. The interpretation of data from focus group interviews can sometimes be problematic as it does not identify issues such as the strength of feelings and other non-verbal responses such as intonations, facial expressions, body language and frequency of participation (Vaughn et al., 1996).

According to Znaniecki (1934) cited in Cohen et al. (2007), analytic induction is in contrast to the statistical methods of analysing data. Analytic induction involves the scanning of data to generate themes and categories of the phenomena and then summaries are drawn based on the examination of the data.

The purpose of the data analysis influences the way in which the analysis is written up i.e. whether to describe or interpret (Maxwell, 2005). In the case of case studies, the analysis is most suitably written up as descriptive narratives which are influenced by the number of data sets and the respondents from whom the data has been collected. Content analysis is one of the two main forms of qualitative data analysis. According to Weber (1990) as cited in Cohen et al. (2007) this refers to the process by which many words of texts are classified and put into a reduced number of categories by coding, categorizing, comparing and concluding. According to Maree (2007), content analysis is both an inductive and iterative process in which the researcher searches for similarities and differences in the data collected which either corroborates or disconfirms theory.

Creswell (2008, p245) highlights six steps that a researcher must follow when making sense of the data as answers to the key research questions.

Step One: The data must be prepared and organized for analysis. This is done through transcribing the data gleaned from the focus group interview. Transcribing is the process of converting verbal audio taped recordings into written text messages..

Step Two: Exploring and coding the database. The researcher must get a general feel of the data as a whole. This is referred to as exploratory analysis. The written

texts must then be segmented and labelled according to descriptions and broader themes. This is referred to as coding.

Step Three: The codes in Step 2 must be used to build themes. Themes are an aggregation of like codes to form a major idea and usually consist of no more than two to four words.

Step Four: Representing and reporting the findings follows the coding and analysis of the data. This is done through the construction of narratives in which the researcher summarizes in detail the findings in response to the research questions.

Step Five: Qualitative research is interpretive research. Here we make sense of the data in relation to the research questions that guided this research study.

Step Six: The findings have to be validated. Some of the techniques used to validate the accuracy and credibility of data analysis are methodological triangulation, member checks and auditing. This step focuses on the trustworthiness of the study. Trustworthiness is appropriate to qualitative studies whilst reliability and validity are often associated with quantitative studies (Maxwell, 2005).

Qualitative data analysis is ongoing and iterative (i.e. non-linear), implying that they are intertwined and not separate. According to Maree (2007), the goal in data analysis is to summarize what you have heard in terms of common words, phrases, themes or patterns that would aid your understanding and interpretation of what is emerging.

It is important that the data analysis strategy used must be appropriate to the research design and approach. In this study, the data was analysed using content analysis, which is considered appropriate for focus group interviews, surveys and questionnaires. Through this method, the message content is identified and summarized (Maree, 2007).

In this research study an inductive model was used to analyse the data generated from the focus group interview. The inductive model moves from specific or detailed data to the more general codes and themes by focusing on the language used by the participants and looking for units of information that lend themselves to themes or findings (Vaughn et al. 1996).The audio-taped evidence was initially transcribed.

Thereafter it was reviewed, coded and then organized into categories and themes to facilitate meanings and interpretations.

For the purposes of this study, the data gathered from the focus group interview were broken up into categories: Similar and/or related categories then formed themes. The following categories were identified.

- (a) Learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism;
- (b) Learners' perceptions of the impact of educator absenteeism on their cognitive development in the classroom;
- (c) Learners' perceptions of the impact of educator absenteeism on their social development in the classroom and
- (d) Learners' perceptions of the impact of educator absenteeism on their emotional development in the classroom.

These categories are relevant to the focus of this research study which is on the impact of educator absence on the holistic development of the learner in the classroom. A review of the literature identified the various concepts that are associated with the cognitive, social and emotional development of the learner and this research study proceeded along these lines.

The data gathered through the questionnaire was analysed using the frequency count. According to Tuckman (1998), frequency count involves the process of presenting information gathered from the questionnaires into numbers or by indicating in quantitative form the number of respondents who gave responses to particular items.

This data was then recorded in frequency distribution tables and conclusions were made based on the patterns that emerged. The numbers were then expressed in percentage form which made the interpretation of the findings easier. The findings were then discussed in relation to the literature that was reviewed in Chapter Two.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

There are ethical and other considerations that are generally relevant to qualitative research of children's subjective experiences in natural contexts and the researcher needs to take cognisance of these throughout the research process (Morrow and Richards, 1996).

According to Butler (2000) there are key principles that underpin an ethical approach to research. These include: respect for learners, equity, and non-discrimination, avoiding harm and distress, privacy and confidentiality and protecting the weak.

For the purposes of this study, the following relevant ethical issues were addressed by the researcher prior to and during the research process.

- (a) Informed consent: parents and participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their written permission was obtained prior to the commencement of the interview and the completion of the questionnaire. According to Harker (2000), informed consent is not a off event but a continuous process where participants have the opportunity to withdraw at any stage, either temporarily or permanently. A declaration to withdraw was issued to the parents of the participants prior to the commencement of the interviews.
- (b) Permission was sought from the relevant stakeholders *viz.* the Department of Education and the principal of the school in which the research was undertaken.
- (c) The participants and their parents were informed in writing that participation was voluntary and not obligatory and that neither they nor their parents would be victimized in any way due to non-participation or withdrawal (Cree, Kay & Tisdall, 2002).
- (d) The researcher emphasized anonymity and confidentiality relating to participation and data collection. The participants were informed of the possible consequences of the research study, who will benefit from the research and who will have access to the data. Their names will not be mentioned in the interviews (first letters of the names will be used), names

were not required on the questionnaire and no names were mentioned in the writing of the final reports.

- (e) The interview was conducted in an appropriate, safe, conducive, non-stressful and non-threatening manner ensuring that the participants were comfortable and treated with the necessary respect at all times.
- (f) Participants were thoroughly briefed on the research procedure and the instruments that were used to collect the data. They were given the opportunity to seek clarification on any concern that they may have prior to the commencement of any activity.
- (g) The questionnaires were completed anonymously and none of the respondents' responses could be traced to any particular individual. This ensured the confidentiality of the individual's responses.

3.8 Issues of reliability and validity in this study

Reliability and validity are relevant in judging the quality of the research design. Although there is a relationship between validity and reliability, the one does not necessarily guarantee the other (Mitchell & Jolley, 2007). Case studies have long been criticised for their lack of generalizability seeing that what is applicable to one site may not necessarily be the same for another site (Creswell, 2002). Furthermore, the views of those included in the sample for the focus group interview may not necessarily be the same as the views of those who were not included in the study. However efforts can be made to address and minimize these issues in a research study. An example of one of these efforts is the use of more than one data collection instrument, a term referred to as methodological triangulation (Yin, 2003).

According to Neuman (2000) reliability and validity are central issues in all educational research because of the indirect observation of measurements. Neumann (2000), further states that validity in its simplest form is "true" or "correct". Validity, according to Borg and Gall (1989), is the degree to which a test is able to achieve certain aims. According to Neuman (2000) validity looks at the extent to which a measuring instrument actually satisfies the purpose for which it was constructed.

Hakim (2000) states that one of the great strengths of qualitative research lies in the validity of the data obtained. Seeing that individuals are interviewed in sufficient detail, it is safe for the results to be taken as a true, correct, complete and believable report of their views and experiences but Hakim (2000) does however attest to a shortcoming in the external validity of the study whereby the small number of respondents participating in the interview cannot be taken as being representative of the target population.

The use of more than one data collection instrument (methodological triangulation) in this study enhanced the validity of the study. Patton (1990), states that studies using only one method of data collection, are more likely to be vulnerable to errors associated with that particular method than studies using multiple methods because the different types of data gathered provide cross-data validity checks. The validity of this research study was enhanced by the researcher using the responses from the pilot focus group interview to refine the questions in the interview schedule and in designing the questions used in the questionnaire. Asking the right questions in the least ambiguous way is critical to the validity of a questionnaire (Borg & Gall, 1989).

A study is said to have good validity, when after interpreting the data, there is an element of sureness with which the researcher can draw his conclusions and the researcher is convinced that this particular design did measure to a large extent what it was designed for. (Hakim, 2000).

When examining the validity of a study, Hakim (2000) focuses on the three types of validity that need to be considered viz. construct validity, internal validity and external validity.

(a) Construct validity: the establishing of correct operational measures for the specific concepts being studied. In this study the concepts that were used are: classroom climate, learner participation and engagement, motivation, educator-learner relationships and educator support.. The questionnaire used in the study categorized and measured these concepts.

(b) Internal validity: this is applicable to exploratory case studies that establish a causal relationship. The interference of other factors in this relationship threatens the internal validity of a study. However internal validity is addressed

in the analysis of the data through, for example, pattern matching. In my study the intelligence level of the learner can be a threat to the internal validity of this research study.

- (c) External validity: this relates to the extent to which a study's findings can be generalised beyond the immediate case study. Critics state that single case studies offer a poor basis for generalising, but according to Yin (2003), case studies don't always rely on statistical generalisations but also analytical generalisations where results are generalised to some broader theory. In my study I used two data collection instruments in an effort to increase the external validity of the findings.

Reliability refers to consistency and dependability of the results of a study. With all being equal, later investigations should arrive at more or less the same or a near approximation of the findings and conclusions (Yin, 2003). The goal of reliability is therefore to minimise the errors and biases in a study. In this research study the issue of reliability was addressed by methodological triangulation i.e. the use of more than one source of evidence. The use of the questionnaire in this study increased representivity as a wider sample of the target population was involved.

3.9 Limitations of the study

The following are some of the limitations that have been identified within this research study:

3.9.1. Due to the nature of the topic, participants in the focus groups may be reluctant to speak freely for the fear of victimisation thereby prejudicing honesty and richness and detail of the responses. To address this, the following were done:

- (a) The researcher emphasised anonymity and confidentiality.
- (b) The interview was audio taped and not videotaped so as to allay fears of identification.
- (c) The researcher explained the purpose of the study and for what purposes the data will be used.

3.9.2. Focus group interviews have been criticized for the lack of representivity amongst the participants (Vaughn, et al.1996) in that there may exist a lack of

diversity within the sample. To address this potential shortcoming in the study, the researcher used a close-ended questionnaire as an additional data collection instrument which was distributed to a larger sample of the target population. This it was hoped will make this research study more representative and thus enhance its validity.

3.9.3. It is possible that participants would be more willing to disclose information in a questionnaire than in an interview. However the writing skills of the grade six learners, particularly with the majority being English second language speakers, are not of an advanced nature and this can possibly compromise the accuracy and richness of the data collected. For this reason the researcher used a close-ended questionnaire where the participants were required to say whether they agreed with, disagreed with or chose to adopt a neutral stance to each of the given statements.

3.9.4. As with single case studies, the results are not generalisable to the greater population. The data generated from this site may not necessarily be the same for other research sites and the conclusions drawn in this research site may not necessarily concur with the findings of similar studies in other research sites.

3.9.5. With case studies and its qualitative nature there is greater possibility of researcher subjectivity and bias. Being of a qualitative nature, single case studies are vulnerable to researcher subjectivity and bias. In an attempt to neutralize this, the researcher made use of the questionnaire as an additional data collection instrument.

3.10 Conclusion

In this chapter the research design and research methodology of this research study was described. The nature of the respondents, how they were selected, a description of the data collection instruments and the justification for the choice of these instruments and the data collection procedure was discussed. I also explained the issues of validity and reliability of this research study. In the next chapter the techniques used to analyse the data and an interpretation of the findings will be presented

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION AND RESEARCH FINDINGS.

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis and interpretation of the data gathered and the conclusions drawn in this qualitative study, which investigated primary school learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism and how they see it to be impacting on their cognitive, social and emotional development in the classroom..

4.2 Analysis of the data

The data emanating from the focus group interview was analysed through content analysis which is also known as the thematic approach. The thematic approach focuses on the use of categories and themes and to establish links with other research studies conducted on the effects of educator absenteeism.

Categories were identified during the analysis of the data. Similar and/or related categories were then combined to form themes.

The themes identified in this study are.

4. 2.1. learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism,

4.2.2. learners' perceptions of the impact of educator absenteeism on their cognitive (academic) development in the classroom,

4.2.3. learners' perceptions of the impact of educator absenteeism on their social development in the classroom, and

4.2.4. learners' perceptions of the impact of educator absenteeism on their emotional development in the classroom.

According to Hughes et al. (2001) one of the common responses to the consequences of educator absenteeism on learners is a decline in learner performance and behaviour. Mkhwanazi (1998) in his study highlighted that the

learning environment, motivation to learn, learner attendance, educator-learner relationship and learner discipline as some of the aspects that are affected by educator absenteeism.

The study by Khedama (2005), investigated the influence of educator absenteeism on effective education and concluded that the quality of education is seriously compromised as a result of high rates of educator absenteeism. According to Khedama (2005), aspects such as a lack of discipline, low morale and negative attitudes are the main effects of educator absenteeism on effective education.

4.2.1. Learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism:

The interviewees were in agreement that not all educators stayed away regularly, but however certain educators were chronic absentees. This leads one to believe that in the context of this study, it is not the school climate as indicated by Norton (1998) that contributes to the problem of educator absenteeism but rather the individuals themselves.

The following were some of the reasons given by the learners as to why they think that these educators stay away as often as they do:

- (a) Ill-health, stress and other personal factors*
- (b) Have another job so that they can supplement their income.*
- (c) Burnout i.e. they are tired of teaching or have lost passion for the job.*
- (d) Poor discipline and a lack of respect on the part of the learners towards their educators.*
- (e) Learners are not interested in their work*

The reasons given above by the learners concur somewhat with the findings of previous studies. Kunjunjukutty (2006), cited the following as some of the reasons for educator absenteeism: (a) low morale; (b) low job satisfaction; (c) high stress levels. Khedama (2005) in his study highlighted ill-discipline amongst learners as a result of and a possible cause of educator absenteeism.

On the other hand, when learners were asked why they thought that the other educators attended school regularly, their responses varied.

- (a) *They want the learners to get a good education and want them to be successful.*
- (b) *They care about learners.*
- (c) *They want the learners to attend school regularly.*

According to Ivatts (2010), a link exists between educator absenteeism and learner attendance in that educator attendance influences learner attendance. A study by Bray (2003) cited in Ivatts (2010) concluded that educator absenteeism induced learner absenteeism. According to Uehara (1999) as cited in Ivatts (2010) chronic educator absenteeism is perceived by learners that school attendance is not important. Bamber (1979) also supports this assertion that learners who are exposed to chronic educator absenteeism, tend to adopt a lackadaisical attitude about their own attendance. However the responses of the learners in the questionnaire did not concur with the findings of Uehara (1999) , Bray (2003) as cited in Ivatts (2010) and Bamber (1979). Only 16.6% of the respondents in the questionnaire agreed that they sometimes stay away because their educators stay away.

4.2.2. Learners' perceptions of the impact of educator absenteeism on their cognitive (academic) development in the classroom:

The themes that were identified as being relevant to this category for the purpose of this research study are:

4.2.2.1. The impact of educator absenteeism on learners' attitude and motivation

4.2.2.2. The impact of educator absenteeism on learner performance

4.2.2.1. The impact of educator absenteeism on learners' attitude and motivation:

The analysed data revealed that learners begin to dislike and lose interest in the subject when the educator's attendance is irregular. This point that educator absenteeism impacts negatively on learner motivation and attitude was strengthened

by the following responses by some of the interviewees during the focus group interviews:

“if my teacher does not come to school, why should I?”

“I just feel like taking days off and just staying at home because the teacher is not there to teach”.

One of the many reasons provided by the interviewees is that absentee educators tend not to honour assessment due dates and test dates and this causes learners not to take their work seriously. This concurs with Kunjunjukutty (2006, p.22), when he stated that “there is a critical point at which educator absenteeism begins to inhibit learner learning”. Kunjunjukutty (2006) attributed this to the extent that educator absence reduces learner motivation. This is further supported by Bamber (1979) who stated that if the educator is not present to teach, then learners are denied learning opportunities causing them to become demotivated and to lose interest in school. According to Bamber (1979), educator attendance in the classroom is crucial to learner motivation and their will to learn.

The response of one of the learners in the focus group interview supported the points mentioned above:

“we make the sacrifice to learn, but when we come to school the teacher is absent”

According to 61% of the respondents to the questionnaire, frequently absent educators do cause learners to lose interest. Regarding respondents responses to the questionnaire on the influence of absentee educators on the amount of effort that learners put into their work, half of the respondents (50%) agreed that absent educators do negatively influence the amount of effort they put into their work and how seriously they take their work. This suggests an inverse relationship between educator attendance and learner effort i.e. the higher the incidence of educator absenteeism, the lower the learner effort and the lower the incidence of educator absenteeism, the greater the learner effort. Jacobson’s (1989) study concluded that educator absenteeism and poor learner attitude inhibits learner academic growth.

According to Teasley (2004) cited in Ivatts (2010), poor attendance by educators is an implication to learners that absentee educators do not care much about their

learner's education or believe in them as worthwhile individuals. Educators motivate their learners through example and their lack of enthusiasm and commitment soon spreads through to their learners. The learners' responses in Section C (no. 3) and Section B (no. 6) provide support for the literature. Regarding the perception that absentee educators don't care about their learners, 33% of the respondents agreed. With reference to absent educators not being perceived as good role-models by their learners, 52% of the respondents agreed. Studies by Mkhwanazi (1998), Crotty (2002), Jacobson (1989) and Ehrenberg et al. (1991) concluded that learners very often model the behaviour of their educators. These studies by Ehrenberg *et al.* (1991) and Jacobson (1989) also concur with the Social Learning Theory of Bandura, which emphasises that the social learning of learners is most influenced by imitation, modelling and reinforcement. The following response by a learner highlights this point:

“educators tell learners they are doing wrong when they stay away, but they are doing something wrong”.

Learners perceive that absentee educators do affect their attitude and performance as shown by the following comment by one of the participants::

“ the teacher has to come to school to get better marks. The educators who stay away affect our attitude and we do badly”.

The comment concurs with Teasley (2004) cited in Ivatts (2010) who stated that regular absenteeism by educators is an implication to their learners that their educator does not care much about their education or believe in them as worthwhile individuals.

4.2.2.2. The impact of educator absenteeism on learner performance:

According to the participants, educator absenteeism impacts on their performance in that the educator's absenteeism contributes to them getting low marks and experiencing failure or some form of anxiety of failure. Other effects of educator absenteeism on learner performance included learners being ill-prepared for tests and exams, and absentee educators rushing through the work to make up for lost time thereby jeopardising the quality of teaching and learning. This concurs with Jones (2010) who stated that the longer the duration of the absence by the educator,

the more difficult it becomes for the educator to make up for the lost instructional time. This point is supported by St. Michel (1995) who stated that educators who are not in the classroom cannot maximize instruction.

The findings of these studies can be linked to the findings of my research study. This is clearly shown by the following responses from the participants during the focus group interview:

“we just get notes, notes and more notes.”

“absentee educators do not give us proper direction and do not prepare us well for tests”.

“notes alone are not enough”.

“ they don’t explain how and why, just do the work”.

Mkhwanazi (1998) in his study, concluded that educator absenteeism resulted in learners being ill-prepared for tests and examinations and absentee educators rushing through the work to make up for the lost time due to absence, thereby comprising the quality of teaching and learning. This concurs with the findings of this research study as indicated above.

The following response from one of the interviewees concurs with Mkhwanazi’s (1998) findings that learners overall interest and desire to learn is negatively affected by educators who frequently absent themselves from school and that of Bamber (1979) who says when an educator is not there to teach, then the learner cannot learn causing them to become demotivated and losing interest in school.

“It’s hard to get up, but I make the sacrifice expecting the teacher to be at school. When I get to school the teacher is absent. I feel terrible because we are not going to do any work”.

With reference to the difference that educator attendance could make on learner performance (Item 1 of Section A of the questionnaire), 60% of the respondents agreed that if absentee educators attended school more regularly their performance in their learning areas will improve. With regard to the effect of teacher absenteeism on preparation for tests and examinations, 45% of the respondents agreed that educator absenteeism impacted negatively on their preparation for tests and examinations, whilst 38% of the respondents disagreed and 16.6% of the

respondents remained neutral. Regarding the issue of educators rushing through their work to make up for the time lost due to their absences, 55% of the respondents agreed that absentee educators rush through their work to make up for the days lost due to their absence. Only 8.3% of the respondents disagreed. A large percentage of the respondents (36.6%) chose to remain neutral. A neutral stance could indicate that the respondents did not want to commit themselves or possibly some of the teachers who attend school regularly, do the same. This comparison could have caused some confusion on the part of the learners, thereby prompting a neutral response.

4.2.3. Learners' perceptions of the impact of educator absenteeism on their social development in the classroom:

The themes identified as being relevant to this category are.

4.2.3.1. Learner discipline and classroom behaviour,

4.2.3.2. Learner-educator relationship,

4.2.3.3. Classroom climate and

4.2.3.4. Learner engagement and participation.

4.2.3.1. Learner discipline and classroom behaviour:

An analysis of the data revealed that educator absenteeism does contribute to poor discipline amongst the learners and that this poor discipline eventually impacts negatively on learner achievement. A response from one of the participants in the focus group interview summed up this aspect very well:

“children are suffering and behaviour suffers as well when educators are absent frequently”.

Another interviewee remarked:

“even the good children get bad”

“behaviour is bad when the teacher is not there”

This concurs with the conclusions made by Fredricks et al. (2004) that educator absenteeism encourages negative patterns of classroom behaviours regarding the failure to follow classroom rules, learners becoming unaccepting of educators authority and learners becoming defiant.

According to the responses given by the learners during the focus group interview, when educators are absent, the behaviour of the learners worsens. Some of the reasons given by the learners for this include: (a) they are bored and therefore get up to mischief, (b) the relief educator just sits and does nothing, (c) nothing constructive is done during these so called free periods. As a result of this boredom, lack of adequate supervision and the absence of any meaningful and constructive activities, learner discipline suffers. This finding is supported by Blandford (1998) cited in Khedama (2005), who concluded that when educators are absent from school there is ill-discipline amongst learners which in turn negatively affects the learning environment and the learners' overall academic performance.

The following responses received from the interviewees during the focus group interview relate to the impact of educator absenteeism on learner discipline and classroom behaviour.

“we don't have work so just make noise or walk around getting up to mischief”

“we run around the class and just waste time because there is nothing to do”

“because there is no work to do, we start doing bad things and get into trouble”.

The majority of the responses in the questionnaire concur with the literature review and the responses of the learners in the focus group interview. Concerning learners tending to ignore classroom rules and misbehaving when the educator is absent from the classroom, an overwhelming 76.6% agreed that this is the case, whilst only 5% disagreed. This concurs with one of the responses in the focus group interview when one learner stated: *“even the good children get bad”*. Focusing on learner behaviour in the classes of absentee educators as compared to their behaviour in the classes of teachers who attend school regularly, 50% of the respondents agreed that learners behave better in the classes of educators whose attendance is regular

than they do in the classes of those educators who are frequently absent. A large percentage (33%) of the respondents chose to remain neutral. A possible explanation for this may be that learners also behave badly in the classes of those educators who attend school regularly suggesting that there may be a general breakdown in learner discipline in schools. This may be worthwhile looking at as a future research prospect.

4.2.3.2. Learner – educator relationship.

Of significance in this theme is the issue of the educator being a role-model to the learners s/he teaches and the existence of the element of reciprocal trust. According to the data gathered and analysed, the findings concurred with the findings of Mkhwanazi's (1998) study in which learners perceive these absentee educators as being unreliable, irresponsible and begin to distrust them. The analysis of the data revealed that 53.3% of the respondents agreed to share a better relationship with those educators who attend school regularly when compared with those educators who are frequently absent. This finding is supported by Ehrenberg et al. (1991), who concluded that learners model their educator's behaviour and that learners who modelled behaviour of educators with poor attendance and a lack of interest, were negatively affected. However, on the issue of learners sometimes staying away because their educators stay away, the responses of the learners did not concur with the literature as only 16.6% agreed that they sometimes stay away because their educators stay away, whilst an overwhelming 70% disagreed. This does not corroborate with the findings of Bamber (1979) and Ivatts (2010) who identified a positive link between educator absenteeism and learner attendance.

Learners look up to their educators as role-models and educators motivate their learners through setting good example (Mkhwanazi, 1998). The following responses received during the focus group interview attests to this:

“These educators who stay away are setting a very bad example for children who want to become teachers”.

‘teachers tell the children they are doing something wrong when they stay away, but they are doing something wrong’.

This is strongly supported by participants' responses in the questionnaire where 60% of the respondents agreed that frequently absent educators do not set good role-models for their learners. Some of the participants in the focus group interview felt that absentee educators were irresponsible and setting a poor example to their learners. This is supported by the following responses from the learners during the focus group interview.

“ when the child comes to school, but the teacher is absent it is okay, but when the child stays away and the teacher comes then when the child comes back the teacher asks why s/he did not come to school and then hits him/her”.

This response concurs with the findings of Mkhwanazi (1998) when he concluded that the behaviours demonstrated by educators influence learners in their quest for development and self-realization. This is also supported by Hines (1996) as cited in Polo (2009) that an educator who displays positive behaviours directly influence learner behaviour and development.

4.2.3.3. Classroom climate.

An analysis of the data of the focus group interview revealed that educator absenteeism does impact negatively on the classroom climate. The following responses from the learners during the focus group interview support this.

“I get angry when I get low marks. I begin to hate the teacher”.

“ when the absent teacher comes back, I find it difficult to concentrate”.

“ behaviour is bad when the teacher is not there”.

“ educators who are absent affect our attitude”.

An analysis of the data in the questionnaire confirms that educator absenteeism does impact negatively on the classroom climate which ultimately impacts on learner performance and development. This finding is based on 60% of the respondents agreeing that educator attendance affected learner performance, and 62% of the respondents agreeing that frequently absent educators caused them to lose interest in their work. Furthermore 50% of the respondents agreed that educator attendance

influenced how much effort they put into their work. This concludes that educator absence from the classroom impacts negatively on the classroom climate and subsequently on learner development.

The following responses during the focus group interview support the above finding.

“we don’t have work , so just make noise or walk around getting up to mischief”

“we run around the class and just waste time because there is nothing to do”

4.2.3.4.. Learner engagement and participation:

This aspect deals with behavioural engagement namely co-operative participation, conformity to classroom rules and routines, persistence and effort. According to Fredricks et al. (2004), educator absenteeism results in negative patterns of classroom participation, where some learners fail to follow classroom rules, they do not accept the educator’s authority and tend to develop a sense of defiance.

An analysis of the focus group data confirmed the deductions made by Fredricks et al.(2004) regarding the influence of educator absenteeism on learners developing negative patterns of behaviour. The following extracts from the focus group interviews supports that educator absenteeism does impact negatively on learner behaviours, learner engagement and learner participation.

“educators stay away. We don’t perform well, not interested in her and her work”.

“those educators that come, we respect them and listen to them and do what they ask”.

“I like the subject, but when the teacher is absent , now I don’t like the subject”..

“we work hard to do the project but when it is time to mark, the teacher is absent. We feel let down”

An analysis of the data in the questionnaire relating to this theme of how absentee educator’s impact on the learners will and motivation to learn showed that 61.6% of the respondents agreed that absentee educators cause learners to lose interest in those learning areas taught by the frequently absent educators and this affects learner engagement and participation. This corroborates with Patrick and Turner (2004) who concluded that learners enjoying supportive relationships with their

educators showed more engagement by working harder and persevering in the face of difficulties.

Regarding the impact of absentee educators on how much effort learners put into their work and how seriously they take their work, 50% of the respondents agreed that absentee educators do affect the amount of effort they put into their work. Only 15% of the respondents disagreed, whilst 35% chose to remain neutral. Regarding how seriously learners take their work, some 48.5% of the respondents agreed that there is a positive influence of educator attendance on how seriously learners take their work, while 21.6% disagreed and 30% chose to remain neutral.

According to Hallinan (2008), it is important that educators make school attractive to learners. Learners who display a liking for school tend to have higher academic achievement and lower incidences of disciplinary problems than those who display a dislike for school. According to the data during the focus group interview, absent educators do not help in making school attractive for learners, The conclusion drawn in this regard is that learners adopt a negative attitude towards frequently absent educators and/or the learning area and do not look forward to coming to school. The following responses from some of the interviewees support these assertions.

“I do the work, but the teacher is not there to mark it. I hate the teacher and talk bad about the teacher”.

“I just feel like taking days off and just staying at home because the teacher is not there to teach”.

“I want to leave school because I lose interest”.

The above responses reiterates the important role played by educators in shaping learners experiences at school and making school attractive for learners.

If learners feel ignored, devalued and disrespected by educators, they are likely to react negatively whilst if they perceive their educators to have regard for them and show an interest in their welfare, they will react positively (Hallinan, 2008). This is supported by the responses of the learners during the focus group interviews.

“we work hard to do the project but when it is time to mark, the teacher is absent. We feel let down”

“we disrespect those educators who stay away often because we lose out and perform poorly”.

“absentee teachers are not being responsible”.

‘educators must care about the children and not themselves’.

‘because we are black, they are taking advantage. We need to be treated equally’.

The data generated in the focus group interview concurred with Hallinan’s (2008) study on the importance of the socio-emotional support in shaping learners feelings about school. This point is supported by the following responses during the focus group interview.

“ I feel like taking a transfer card, it is no use being in the school”.

“ I hate these educators. People say we must not hate, but I can’t help it because these educators are taking advantage of us”.

4.2.4. Learner’s perceptions of how educator absenteeism impacts on their emotional development in the classroom:

The themes identified in this category are.

4.2.4.1. Educator support

4.2.4.2. Belongingness.

4.2.4.1. Educator support.

Some of the responses from the focus group interview support that learners perceptions of support from their educators influence their engagement in classroom activities.

“lose out and we respect those educators who come to school regularly and listen to them and do what they ask”. “we disrespect those educators who stay away often because we perform poorly”. “absentee educators are not being responsible”.

These responses are consistent with Whitehead's (2009) findings in her study that educator absenteeism can be viewed as "a sense of abandonment or a lack of support" (p 242).

The responses by the learners to items 5 and 6 of Section C of the questionnaire dealing with educator support are consistent with the responses of the learners in the focus group interview above. Item 5 looked at learners' perceptions that absentee educators do not provide learners with good support while item 6 looked at learners' perceptions that they cannot count on the help of absentee educators. Both items produced identical responses where 55% of the respondents agreed that this was their perception. This point is further supported by learners' responses during the focus group interview.

"absentee educators do not give us proper direction and do not prepare us well for tests".

"notes alone are not enough"

" don't explain how and why, just do the work" ..

The response to item 2 of Section C of the questionnaire regarding learners becoming angry and developing feelings of hatred towards absentee educators did not provide conclusive evidence as only 25% of the respondents agreed with this statement. Regarding item 4 of Section C of the questionnaire pertaining to learner perception that they share a better relationship with those educators who attend school regularly than with those who are frequently absent, 53% of the respondents agreed that this was their perception.

4.2.4.2. Belongingness.

According to Marks (2000) belongingness is an emotional construct which is conceptualized as educator support, availability and acceptance. Marks (2000) and Eccles and Roeser (1999) concluded that good support by educators and a feeling of acceptance by the learners is positively linked to higher levels of motivation, engagement, academic achievement and prosocial behaviour.

Learner responses to the questions in the focus group interview and the questionnaire corroborate this information, revealing that educator absenteeism negatively affects learner behaviour, interest in school and academic achievement. According to 55% of the respondents in the questionnaire, absentee educators do not provide learners with good support when compared with those educators who attend school regularly. Similarly 55% of the respondents agreed that they cannot count on the help of absentee educators.

According to Van Ryzin et al. (2009) The Self-Determination Theory emphasizes the importance of belongingness to academic achievement. According to this theory, learners need to be accepted and loved as these are important for confidence building. Learners' perceptions of absentee educators follow similar lines of thought in that they see these educators to be selfish and perceive them not to care about the welfare of the learners they teach. Approximately 38% of the respondents agreed that when their educators stay away, they feel that these educators don't care about them. The conclusions drawn from these items however do not provide conclusive evidence to support the literature. Regarding item 1 of section C of the questionnaire, 70% agreed that they experience a feeling of disappointment when their educators do not come to school. This corroborates with 68% of the respondents who disagreed that they are happy when their educators stay away. This confirms that learners view educator absenteeism as lost learning opportunities.

However, the following responses from the focus group interview support the literature that educator absenteeism impacts negatively on learner development in the classroom.

“educators must care about the children and not themselves. They are getting paid but are not doing their job”.

“because we are black, they are taking advantage. We need to be treated equally.”

“it is unfair to us learners This because we are losing out on work while they are getting paid”.

4.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, the data generated by the focus group interviews and the questionnaire were analysed, interpreted and discussed in collaboration with similar research studies through a review of the literature. The analysis of the data revealed that many of the learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism concurred with the findings of other research studies in that educator absenteeism is perceived by the learners to impact negatively on their cognitive, social and emotional development in the classroom.

The next chapter will conclude this research study and provide recommendations for implementation or for future research studies based on the findings of this chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

A vast amount of research studies Mkhwanazi (1998); Ivatts (2010); Ehrenberg et al. (1991) and Jacobson (1989) support the idea that educator absenteeism impacts negatively upon learners' academic, social and emotional development. This study sought to investigate learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism and how they perceive this to impact on their cognitive, social and emotional development in the classroom. This study was conducted at a primary school in the Kranskloof ward of the Ethekeweni Region of KwaZulu Natal.

In Chapter One the rationale for this study was described. This study was prompted by the researcher's observations of what occurs in the periods when the regular class educator is away. The researcher also considered it important in this investigation to give voice to the learners themselves, regarding their perceptions of educator absenteeism.

Chapter Two reviewed the literature regarding this phenomenon of educator absenteeism. The literature review was compiled after referencing theses, journal articles and books on educator absenteeism and related issues. Various concepts were identified as being associated with learners' cognitive (academic), social and emotional development and these were elaborated upon during the course of this research study. This chapter also described the theoretical framework that underpinned this research study.

Chapter Three outlined the research design and research methodology of this study. The researcher decided to use a qualitative case study to address the critical questions of this research study, i.e. to investigate primary school learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism and how they perceive it to be impacting on their holistic development in the classroom i.e. their cognitive (academic), social and emotional development. In an effort to address the limitations of the case study as a research technique and to improve on the reliability and validity of the study, two data collection instruments were used, viz. the focus group interview and a close-

ended questionnaire. The participants for the focus group interview comprised volunteers from each of the four grade six classes that formed the target group for this research study. Since the number of volunteers fell within the recommended range, no further sampling was necessary. The participants for the questionnaire (15 from each of the four grade six classes) were randomly selected. Those learners who participated in the focus group interview were excluded from the sample for the questionnaire as their inputs were already made. Of significance is that the design of the questions in the questionnaire was guided by the responses during the focus group interview.

Chapter Four presented the techniques used for the analysis of the data gathered and a discussion of the findings with reference to the literature review.

Chapter Five provides emerging insights, recommendations and conclusions that were derived from the data generated and methodological approaches used in this study.

5.2 Overview of the findings

A summary of the main findings in answering the key research questions of this research study follows:

5.2.1. What are primary school learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism?

Although the focus of this research study was not on the reasons or causes for educator absenteeism, the following were some of the reasons given by the participants during the focus group interview as to why they think that educators stay away frequently from school.

- (a) **Personal Factors:** Here learners cited factors such as ill-health, burnout, having lost passion for their job, doing other jobs to supplement their income thereby neglecting their commitment to teach.
- (b) **Poor learner discipline and attitude towards work:** Some learners are of the opinion that the learners themselves are to blame for educators staying away frequently. They attribute this to poor learner discipline, disrespect and work apathy, where the majority of learners show little or no interest in their

work. This in turn can cause educators to lose enthusiasm and motivation, thereby resulting in increased educator absenteeism.

5.2.2. How do primary school learners perceive educator absenteeism to be impacting on their holistic development in the classroom?

According to the respondents, educator absenteeism affects their development in the classroom in many ways, some of which are:

(a) Insufficient amounts of work are covered: When educators are absent frequently the lost time affects the volume of work that is covered and when these absentee educators return, they rush through the work without explaining the how's and why's. It can thus be concluded that educator absenteeism impacts negatively on the quality of teaching and learning thereby impacting negatively on overall learner performance. This is corroborated by Jones (2010) who states that the greater the length of the instructional time lost, the more negative the impact on the teaching and learning process given that the educator may experience difficulty in making up for lost instruction time and may thus not complete the curriculum. This may then result in the educator rushing through the work thereby compromising fulfilling the needs of the learner. Chapman (1994), cites high educator absenteeism as a threat to educational quality as it contributes to a decline in the standards of teaching and learning in schools. The findings of a study conducted by Woods and Montagno (1997) support this point in that they concluded that educator absenteeism results in the loss of substantial amounts of learner-educator contact time and that this impacts negatively on learner development. According to Bamber (1979), if the educator is not there to teach, learners cannot learn.

(b) Frequently absent educators contribute to behavioural and other discipline problems in the classroom. According to Konu et al.(2002), repeated absences by the regular classroom educator may have serious consequences for learner discipline in the classroom. A study by Patterson (2006), concluded that the substitute educators' ability to present the content

or in maintaining a satisfactory level of classroom discipline is questionable. This finding is supported by Woods and Montagno (1997) who also concluded that substitute educators were found to be less effective than the regular class educator and thus they cannot compensate for regular educators who are absent.

The origins of these discipline problems are twofold. Firstly, because nothing constructive is done in the periods that the regular class educator is away, learners get bored and out of this boredom they get up to mischief. Mkhwanazi (1998), in his study concluded that because learners are not meaningfully occupied, they tend to resort to undesirable activities to keep themselves occupied.

Secondly, the classroom climate is negatively affected when the regular educator is frequently absent. A learner's behaviour in the classroom depends on rules and a joint effort between educator and learner. The enforcing of rules is significant in facilitating an environment that is conducive to teaching and learning. Frequently absent educators are unable to effectively and consistently enforce these rules thereby leading to a breakdown in discipline (Mkhwanazi, 1998). The conclusions drawn in a study by Fredricks et al. (2004) concur that educator absenteeism encourages negative patterns of classroom behaviours in that learners fail to follow classroom rules, they become unaccepting of educators authority and subsequently become defiant.

(c) Learner respect for educators is influenced by educator attendance:

Learners tend to respect those educators who attend school regularly and disrespect those educators who absent themselves frequently as they perceive them to be selfish and irresponsible. They also perceive these absentee educators to be robbing them of a good education and not caring about their learners and their learners' future.

(d) Absentee educators can negatively influence learner attendance:

The responses in the focus group interview did not concur with the responses by the majority of participants in the questionnaire. It can thus be deduced from this study that it is inconclusive that absentee educators negatively influence learner attendance.

(e) Absentee educators cause learners to lose interest in their work:

Learners are not adequately prepared for tests and examinations as they are robbed of proper direction and guidance. These absentee educators do not honour due dates for assessments and this influences the amount of interest and effort the learners put into future tasks. Absentee educators cause learners to lose interest in their work, to adopt negative attitudes towards school and to perform poorly at school even sometimes resulting in them experiencing failure.

(f) Frequently absent educators are perceived by learners as poor role models:

Ehrenberg et al. (1991) determined that learners who look up to their educators as role-models were negatively influenced by those educators who regarded absenteeism as their right. According to Woods (1990), learners begin to lose direction, motivation and a sense of security when the educator, whom they perceive as role models, failed to show up for class. This is supported by Jacobson (1989), who found that learners who modelled behaviour of educators who had poor attendance and a lack of interest in their teaching duties, tended to display like behaviour. According to Crotty (2002), educators who displayed enthusiasm and commitment inculcated within learners a desire to learn. Mkhwanazi (1998), concluded that an educator's behaviour influences his learners' behaviour in terms of beliefs, values and attitudes.

(g) Educator support and sound learner-educator relationships are important for a learner's holistic development:

According to Woods (1990), absentee educators are unable to establish academic connections with their learners and this affects the development and maintenance of positive learner-educator relationships. This is corroborated by Hallinan's (2008) view that educator absenteeism affects the learner-educator relationship in terms of respect and trust. Cruickshank (1995) as cited in Mkhwanazi (1998) posits educator encouragement and support as being pivotal in learner development and success as it helps learners to develop resilience and empowers them to overcome adversities. According to Zsolnai (2002), educator support and acceptance results in a higher self-concept of a learner. This concurs with what Suldo et al. (2009) said about the importance

of positive learner-educator relationships in the teaching and learning process. When a positive learner-educator relationship exists, learners feel respected supported and valued by their educators. According to Eccles and Roeser (1999), supportive educators are linked to learner motivation, engagement interest in school, prosocial behaviour and academic achievement whilst unsupportive educators can impact negatively on classroom management, learner participation, classroom discipline and positive learner-educator relationships.

5.3 Recommendations

The researcher recommends the following to address the negative impact of educator absenteeism on learner development.

5.3.1. Keep learners meaningfully occupied: Given the response that learners are unengaged during the periods that the learning area teacher is absent, and that the resultant boredom causes learners to lose interest in their work, get up to mischief and present other forms of disciplinary problems, it is imperative that learners are kept meaningfully occupied during these so called “free periods”. One of two options is available to school managers viz. devise a policy outlining the responsibilities of relief educators within the school system or for the Department of Education to create a pool of qualified substitute educators to fill in for frequently absent educators. In this way learners are not deprived of learning experiences in the event of their educators being absent. Studies by Damle (2009), Woods and Montagno (1997) and Patterson (2006) did however highlight the negative impact of substitute educators during the teaching and learning process.

5.3.2. Leave Policy: The Department of Education needs to revisit its leave and absentee policy to the extent that the principle of “*no work no pay*” applies, like that in industry. According to Woods and Montagno (1997), feasible policy changes could reduce rates of absence among educators. According to Scott, Markham and Taylor (1987) cited in Jacobs and Kritsonis (2007), a good attendance policy must include a progressive discipline clause. By this it is intended that employees must receive punishment that fit the severity of the offences or for repeated violations. These must be outlined in the institution’s code of conduct policy. The aim here is to shape the

employees behaviour and to make them accountable for the consequences of their actions.

The influence of existing personnel leave and absentee policies on educator absences has been the focus of research as well. Ehrenberg et al. (1991), considered how leave provisions in educator contracts actually encourage educator absence. The results of this study concluded that the larger the number of leave days permitted by the school district, the higher the number of leave days that were taken. School districts must develop clear guidelines regarding educator attendance. This must include measures to deal with excessive absenteeism (Norton, 1998).

5.3.3. To restore the culture of learning: School managers must make sure that a good culture of learning and teaching exists in the school and that good disciplinary measures are in place so that the learners behave appropriately and in accordance with the school's code of conduct policy. Learners must show an interest in learning and most importantly they must accord the educators the necessary respect. Research question one did elicit responses from learners that a lack of interest in work and a lack of respect shown by learners for educators as being one of the reasons for educators staying away. Schools need to develop strategic plans to become better equipped to deal with excessive teacher absences. School leaders must be more proactive and implement aggressive plans of action to improve staff morale by improving the working conditions at school and motivating the staff through teamwork (Jacobs and Kritsonis, 2007).

5.3.4. The use of incentives: Evidence in the literature suggests that incentive programmes, in certain cases, can lead to an improvement in educator attendance (Norton, 1998). These incentive programmes motivate educators by adding some form of value, appreciation and recognition to what many educators see to be an otherwise thankless job. In the article by Jacobs and Kritsonis (2007), it is mentioned that recognition of work done motivates employees to increase their output and commitment.

According to Jacobs and Kritsonis (2007), the awarding of monetary incentives assists in resolving the problem of educator absenteeism. In one such programme the district held parties for all educators with full attendance and various prizes were

given away, including a brand new vehicle. This district doubled its number of educators with perfect attendance.

Through the literature it has been revealed that numerous programmes have been implemented in an attempt to reduce the rate of educator absenteeism (Norton, 1998). The incentive programmes in parts of the United States produced a significant one-year improvement from 7.2 days of absence in the previous year to 5.3 days the following year (Norton, 1998). This plan involved educators being able to claim one share worth \$57,16 for each absence less than seven days a year. However, according to Jacobson, cited in Norton (1998), this plan was viewed by the educator unions to be creating competition which contributed to an unhealthy climate and this resulted in this attendance incentive plan being subsequently dropped.

Another incentive programme that proved to be popular was the existence of “*buyback*” provisions of unused sick leave days. There was a decrease in the annual number of leave days taken by members of staff (Ehrenberg et al., 1991). This practice of buying back unused sick leave is sure to discourage abuses by educators as there is monetary reward at the end.

Nevertheless, despite the criticisms of incentive programmes, this is an option worth considering. With further refinements and tweaking, incentive programmes can become a potent possibility in curbing educator absenteeism. School districts must pilot incentive programmes and evaluate their impact on educator morale and the rate of educator absenteeism (Norton, 1998).

5.3.5. Make use of support programmes: Employee assistance programmes (EAP) must be established in school districts to address serious cases of educator absenteeism. These programmes can take the form of personal counselling (Norton, 1998). School leaders must introduce support measures that improve the work climate and working conditions for employees. According to Norton (1998), a poor work climate can lead to excessive absences by the employees. Examples of such support measures can include provisions for airing of grievances, workshops on dealing with learner discipline and feedback on work performances (Norton, 1998). These workshops will empower educators with the necessary coping skills to be better equipped to deal with challenges and crises.

5.4 Recommendations for further research

The following possibilities for future research were identified:

5.4.1. Research studies that look into ways to improve educator attendance.

5.4.2. Quantitative research studies that possibly determine causal links between educator absenteeism and its impact on specific aspects of learner cognitive, social and emotional development in the classroom.

5.4.3. Research studies that focus on the school climate as a cause of educator absenteeism. These studies must identify problem factors, research them and then provide recommendations in addressing these problem factors.

5.4.4. Research studies that investigate the link between departmental leave and absentee policy measures and increased levels of educator absenteeism.

5.4.5. Research studies that look into personal individual factors that cause educators to absent themselves frequently from their places of work.

5.4.6. Factors that influence learners respecting or disrespecting their educators in schools today.

5.5 Conclusion

This research study investigated primary school learners' perceptions of educator absenteeism and how they perceive this to be impacting on their cognitive, social and emotional development in the classroom.

The findings in this study in the main concurred with the review of the literature that educator absenteeism does impact negatively on the cognitive, social and emotional development of the learner in the classroom.

Various recommendations were presented that looked at possibilities of curbing educator absenteeism in schools, thereby ensuring that a sound culture of teaching and learning exists in these institutions of learning.

This study also provided some groundwork for further quality research, which could either be qualitative or quantitative, on the effects of educator absenteeism on specific aspects of learner development in the classroom.

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