

# Contributing factors to unexcused teacher absenteeism in Adult and Community Education and Training centres

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## Abstract

This study aimed to explore factors that contribute to unexcused teacher absenteeism in Adult Community Education and Training (ACET) centres in Johannesburg, South Africa. This study employed an exploratory qualitative design to investigate the underlying causes of unexcused teacher absenteeism. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis, enabling triangulation and depth of insight. The sample included nine participants, centre managers and teachers from three purposively selected ACET centres. The small sample size of nine participants, all from one area (Johannesburg), limits the generalisability of the findings to other contexts. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. Ethical protocols were strictly followed, including informed consent, verbal explanation of study procedures, and adherence to the Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013 to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Findings revealed that absenteeism is influenced by a combination of personal (e.g., alcoholism, illness, family responsibilities), socio-economic, and institutional factors. Weak monitoring systems and insufficient support from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) further exacerbated the issue. The study recommends continuous professional development for centre managers in leadership and conflict resolution, as well as targeted workshops to familiarise educators with leave policies and consequences of non-compliance.

**Keywords:** *adult learning centre, centre manager, contribution, leave policy, management team*

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## 1. Introduction

Globally, approximately 14% of adults lack basic literacy skills in reading and writing (UNESCO, 2020). To address this challenge and advance educational development, Adult Community Education and Training (ACET) centres play a pivotal role by providing individuals with opportunities to acquire foundational literacy, numeracy, and practical skills that enhance employability and overall quality of life. As Giovetti (2022) notes, expanding access to education is essential for alleviating poverty, particularly in under-resourced rural areas and densely populated townships. ACET programmes are therefore designed not only to promote literacy but also to equip unemployed youth and adults with practical competencies that improve their employment prospects (Tawiah & Quan-Baffour, 2021). However, the effective delivery of these programmes is often constrained by a range of challenges. Chombo (2014) identifies inadequate funding, limited resources, and teacher absenteeism as critical obstacles facing many ACET centres. Among these, teacher absenteeism is especially detrimental, as it directly compromises educational quality. Ameen et al. (2018) argue that persistent teacher absenteeism negatively impacts learner performance, while Umair (2025) observes that it impedes the overall delivery of educational services globally. Within the South African context, ACET centres depend on sustained interaction among teachers, learners, and local communities. Unjustified teacher absences disrupt this interaction, undermining both teaching and learning processes.

A study conducted in the United States highlights that educator absenteeism is a significant challenge within public schools, with one in three educators missing more than ten days of school annually (Greg, 2013). According to the first-ever data compiled by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights in 2012, absenteeism rates are even more concerning in certain states, where up to half of educators miss more than ten days during a typical 180-day school year. This trend emphasizes the widespread nature of the issue and its potential impact on the quality of education. In South Africa, educator absenteeism remains a persistent and deeply concerning issue, with significant implications for educational outcomes. According to Mbiza (2019), approximately 10% of educators fail to report for duty daily, resulting in over 135,000 students being left without instruction an outcome that poses severe long-term consequences for learner achievement. Similarly, Msosa (2020) estimates that between 10% and 12% of educators are absent from work each day, translating to roughly 39,000 teachers. These figures highlight the scale of the problem and suggest systemic

inefficiencies in managing attendance across the education sector. Obiero et al. (2017) extend this concern beyond national boundaries, noting that educator absenteeism is a global phenomenon with adverse effects on both teaching quality and learner outcomes.

Msosa (2020) further underscores that South Africa records the highest rates of educator absenteeism in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, placing additional strain on school management teams. Centre managers, who are tasked with addressing this challenge, face varying levels of success depending on contextual and institutional support. The impact of persistent absenteeism is not only academic, it demoralises committed educators and disrupts the rhythm of teaching and learning. Notably, provinces such as Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal, and the Western Cape reported the highest rates of educator absenteeism between 2011 and 2017, while the North-West Province reported the lowest (Msosa, 2020). Although these statistics are derived from traditional schooling environments, they provide valuable insights into the broader patterns of educator absenteeism and help inform understanding within alternative education contexts such as ACET centres.

Despite the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) clearly established standards regarding educator attendance, absenteeism remains a persistent and disruptive issue within ACET centres (Tshekedi, 2022). This ongoing challenge highlights a significant gap between policy and implementation, further aggravated by the insufficient management capacities of centre managers. Naidoo (2017) supports this assertion, noting that many learning centre managers lack the requisite leadership and management competencies necessary for effective oversight. The implications of educator absenteeism extend beyond mere administrative disruption it undermines teaching quality and adversely affects learner outcomes.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to offer evidence-based insights into the complex dynamics of lecturer absenteeism within adult education contexts. Its findings will be particularly relevant to key stakeholders, including the DHET, Community Education and Training Colleges (CETCs), policymakers, and centre managers, who are well-positioned to implement targeted strategies to mitigate the issue. While much of the existing literature has concentrated on teacher absenteeism in primary and secondary schools within the public and private sectors (Malatji, 2022), limited scholarly attention has been given to absenteeism within ACET centres specifically. This study seeks to address that gap by exploring the underlying factors contributing to unexcused teacher absenteeism in ACET centres located

within the Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality. The main objective of the study is to investigate the factors contributing to unexcused teacher absenteeism in ACET centres and to propose contextually appropriate strategies for addressing this issue. The findings provide critical insights into the structural, behavioural, and institutional dimensions of absenteeism, thus informing more effective and sustainable management interventions.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. Conceptualizing and Contextualizing of Factors Contributing to Unexcused Teacher Absenteeism*

*Economic factors.* Lee et al. (2015) argue that the structure of teacher compensation, including contractual arrangements and professional hierarchies, can influence teacher absenteeism in Adult Community Education and Training (ACET) centres. Numerous studies have underscored the significance of salary-related concerns as a major determinant of low teacher motivation and absenteeism (Evans & Yuan, 2018). In particular, inadequate remuneration emerges as a key factor undermining teacher morale. Tshekedi (2022) asserts that monetary incentives such as overtime payments may serve as effective motivators, encouraging consistent attendance. Mageni (2017) further highlights the financial burden of transportation as a significant contributor to absenteeism, especially in ACET contexts where teachers often reside far from their workstations and incur high daily travel costs. Absenteeism tends to increase in the days leading up to salary disbursement. Teachers in rural settings frequently experience logistical difficulties, with transportation remaining a dominant challenge.

*Community related factors.* Netswere and Nealer (2020) emphasize that violent community protests pose a significant threat to the functioning of educational institutions, particularly impacting educators. During such protests, disruptions often extend to key stakeholders within the community; for instance, teachers and learners are frequently unable to access learning centres due to road blockades. A notable example occurred in 2022 when certain teachers were obstructed from overseeing Grade 12 examinations, and learners in some Gauteng Province centres were unable to sit for their final-year assessments (Kanjani, 2022). Similarly, McCain (2023) reports that protesting residents in parts of Gauteng actively barred teachers from reaching their workplaces, thereby interrupting teaching and learning activities.

**Personal factors.** Bennell et al. (2002) assert that the loss of a family member, particularly a mother, represents a profound emotional disruption, given the traditional association of mothers with care and emotional stability. Such bereavements significantly contribute to teacher absenteeism in ACET centres, as affected educators may be absent for five to seven working days to manage family responsibilities, thereby reducing effective instructional time. In recognition of this, teachers are entitled to family responsibility leave (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011). Furthermore, Badubi (2017) identifies HIV/AIDS as a critical factor contributing to teacher absenteeism, as educators are often required to provide care for afflicted family members, further straining their capacity to maintain regular attendance.

Al-fudail and Mellar (2018) contend that teachers, like all employees, have personal needs that occasionally require private attention, which may lead them to be absent from work without prior notification to supervisors. In some instances, the standard leave provisions may prove insufficient for addressing urgent personal matters, prompting some educators to stay away from work without offering valid justifications. This pattern of unplanned absenteeism reflects a broader challenge in managing teacher attendance. Maceke (2022) adds that, in the context of ACET, some teachers provide reasons for their absence that centre managers or supervisors often find unconvincing or lacking in credibility.

One of the most frequently cited work-related complaints among teachers is stress, with many scholars identifying excessive workload as a primary source of such stress (Al-fudail & Mellar, 2018). Badubi (2017) identifies stress as a significant contributor to teacher absenteeism, noting that educators often choose to remain at home to recover from physical and emotional exhaustion. Shridevi and Hebbar (2021) elaborate on specific stressors that impact teachers, including overcrowded classrooms, poorly disciplined learners, excessive administrative tasks, lack of parental involvement, unsafe working conditions, inadequate resources, and low learner academic performance. Collectively, these stressors compromise teachers' well-being and directly influence their attendance patterns.

**Organisational/managerial factors.** Gold and Roth (2013) emphasize the importance of a positive professional working relationship in reducing teachers' anxiety levels, noting that high stress and emotional exhaustion may ultimately lead to increased absenteeism. Complementing this view, UNESCO (2022) asserts that centre managers who demonstrate effective leadership and foster respectful, supportive interactions with staff can significantly

mitigate teacher absenteeism within their institutions. Conversely, Singh et al. (2016) highlight that in environments where absenteeism becomes culturally normalized, such as in some ACET centres, employees often begin to view sick leave as an entitlement rather than a contingency, leading to its routine misuse.

There is a scarcity of literature on teacher absenteeism within ACET centres. Most existing studies have predominantly focused on teacher absenteeism in the Basic Education sector. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by exploring the factors contributing to teacher absenteeism in ACET and to contribute to the development of a new body of knowledge within the South African context.

## ***2.2. Theoretical Framework***

This study applied Christopher Hood's (1998) Cultural Theory of Public Management Styles as a critical lens to explore the persistent and complex issue of unexcused teacher absenteeism in ACET centres within the Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality. Hood's framework is particularly apt for analysing management challenges in public institutions, as it illuminates how varied cultural assumptions shape administrative behaviours, decision-making processes, and responses to organisational dysfunction. This framework was not only used for conceptual framing but also actively guided the study's research design, data collection, and analysis. In the context of ACET centres already characterised by resource constraints, fluctuating staff commitment, and high learner needs, the framework offers a multifaceted approach to understanding and addressing absenteeism through its four distinct public management styles: hierarchist, egalitarian, individualist, and fatalist.

Hood's framework rests on the understanding that public organisations are not homogenous entities; instead, they reflect differentiated institutional cultures, operational challenges, and governance models. This theoretical grounding is especially relevant for the adult education sector, where localised challenges such as a lack of accountability, unclear institutional mandates, and inconsistent policy enforcement often inhibit effective leadership and performance. In this regard, the flexibility of Hood's typology allows CMTs to tailor their management strategies in ways that reflect their organisational realities and leadership capacities. Naidoo (2017) reinforces this view, arguing that Hood's Cultural Theory offers a diagnostic and strategic toolkit for public managers attempting to mediate behavioural problems such as absenteeism in adult learning contexts.

Each of Hood's management styles represents a distinct orientation towards organisational control and regulatory practice, providing a range of responses to the issue of unexcused absenteeism:

*The Hierarchist approach.* Rooted in bureaucracy and formal authority, this model assumes that order and compliance emerge from structured rules, clear chains of command, and systematic enforcement. In ACET centres, this approach would entail consistent communication of attendance expectations, the regular monitoring of staff presence, and the application of disciplinary protocols. However, the effectiveness of this approach is contingent on managerial capacity and institutional consistency. A critical limitation lies in its vulnerability to procedural manipulation educators familiar with the system may find ways to circumvent rules, thereby neutralising its intended control function.

*The Egalitarian approach.* This style is predicated on shared values, participatory governance, and collective accountability. By promoting teamwork, collaboration, and mutual responsibility, egalitarian management has the potential to foster a cohesive professional culture and reduce absenteeism through peer-driven norms. However, its effectiveness is contingent on high levels of trust and commitment among staff. In environments where accountability mechanisms are weak or unevenly applied, this approach can unintentionally enable absenteeism by diluting individual responsibility within a collective ethos.

*The Individualist approach.* Focusing on autonomy, innovation, and personal incentive, this approach aligns well with educators who are intrinsically motivated but require institutional flexibility. For ACET centres, the challenge is to ensure that individual goals align with organisational imperatives. CMTs must adopt strategic interventions such as performance-based recognition and professional development opportunities to incentivize attendance and engagement. Yet, without oversight, this model risks promoting individualism at the expense of collective cohesion and consistency.

*The Fatalist approach.* Defined by passivity, unpredictability, and limited institutional control, this approach is symptomatic of dysfunctional organisational cultures where rules exist but are not enforced. In such contexts, absenteeism is not merely tolerated, it is embedded in the institutional fabric. While no organisation consciously adopts fatalism, it can emerge through neglect, weak leadership, or systemic disillusionment. A fatalistic culture signals a crisis of legitimacy in management and underscores the urgent need for restructured accountability systems.

In designing the study, Hood's theory informed the development of interview protocols and document analysis criteria. Questions posed to participants (including Centre Management Teams and educators) were crafted to uncover patterns of administrative behaviour, perceptions of institutional accountability, and management responses to absenteeism. For instance, prompts explored the extent to which formal rules (hierarchist), collaborative practices (egalitarian), personal responsibility (individualist), or disengagement (fatalist) were present in their organisational contexts.

During data analysis, the theory was employed as a categorising and interpretive tool, enabling the researcher to code responses and documentary evidence under the four public management styles. Each participant's account of absenteeism was examined through this lens to detect the underlying cultural assumptions and institutional practices shaping their experiences. This facilitated a deeper understanding of how different management cultures manifest in practice and affect teacher behaviour and accountability.

Findings revealed varied applications of Hood's styles across centres. For example, some centres adopted hierarchical mechanisms, such as warning letters and attendance registers, while others leaned towards egalitarian methods, encouraging peer discussions and collective action. In contrast, fatalistic attitudes were evident in cases where absenteeism was normalised due to managerial disempowerment or lack of enforcement mechanisms. This analytical use of Hood's framework allowed the study to go beyond surface-level descriptions and unpack the institutional logics influencing absenteeism.

The study's application of Hood's framework revealed that unexcused absenteeism is not solely a behavioural problem but a symptom of deeper institutional pathologies. More importantly, the analysis underscored that no single cultural approach is sufficient in isolation; rather, a hybridised strategy drawing selectively from each of the four orientations may offer a more resilient and context-sensitive response. For example, combining hierarchical enforcement with egalitarian consultation could enhance both compliance and morale.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Research Design***

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. Creswell (2014) defines a research approach as a research plan and method that follows from general thoughts of comprehensive methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The rationale for employing a

qualitative research approach was to enable the researchers to directly get data from the participants. The researchers get close to the issue to be investigated and comprehend the study's phenomena.

This study adopted descriptive phenomenological research design. This research design was selected due to its ability in exploring the lived experience of the participants. In the context of this study, the lived experience of centres managers and educators were explored. This study used an interpretive paradigm. Aspers and Corte (2019) point out that an interpretive paradigm aims to make sense of as well as to interpret the phenomenon in their natural settings. The interpretive paradigm assisted in understanding factors that contribute to unexcused teacher absenteeism, from the perspective of the participants in ACET centres. This paradigm was crucial in this study, as it prioritized the voices of those embedded in the ACET system. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews and documents analysis within each center to gather multiple sources of evidence, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of the study.

The qualitative approach, specifically the use of semi-structured interviews and document analysis, enabled the collection of rich, in-depth data that captured the lived experiences of centre managers and educators. These methods provided meaningful insights into the factors contributing to unexcused teacher absenteeism in ACET centres, thereby effectively addressing the research question.

### ***3.2. Participants of the Study***

Participants in this study comprised three (3) centre managers and six (6) educators, two from each of the three selected ACET centres. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on their relevance to the study's aim. Centre managers were selected due to their leadership and administrative roles, including managing teacher attendance, enforcing institutional policies, and overseeing daily operations. Only managers with at least one year of leadership experience at the same centre were included to ensure familiarity with staff attendance patterns. Educators were chosen because they are both directly affected by and contribute to absenteeism trends. Those with a minimum of one year of teaching experience were invited to participate to ensure they could reflect meaningfully on attendance issues. All participants voluntarily consented to take part, understood the purpose of the study, and were not offered monetary compensation. This purposive selection strategy enabled the researchers

to engage with individuals possessing first-hand knowledge and experience of unexcused teacher absenteeism in ACET centres, ensuring rich, context-specific data.

**Table 1**

*Description of the participants*

Centre	Pseudonym	Position	Gender	Experience
A	CM-A	Centre Manager	Male	3 years
	CA-T1	Teacher	Male	6 years
	CA-T2	Teacher	Male	5 years
B	CM-B	Centre Manager	Male	10 years
	CB-T1	Teacher	Female	14 years
	CB-T2	Teacher	Male	1 year
C	CM-C	Centre Manager	Male	6 years
	CC-T1	Teacher	Female	7 years
	CC-T2	Teacher	Female	10 years

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify participants who could provide rich and relevant data to address the research question. This approach enabled the researchers to select individuals with direct experience and insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Participation in the study was inclusive, with no discrimination based on race or gender. The following criteria guided the selection of participants: (1) Centre managers with a minimum of one year of managerial experience at the same Adult Community Education and Training (ACET) centre; (2) Educators with at least one year of teaching experience at the same centre; (3) Individuals who understood the purpose of the study, were informed that there would be no monetary compensation, and voluntarily consented to participate. This selection ensured that all participants had sufficient contextual knowledge to contribute meaningfully to the research.

### ***3.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process***

Multiple qualitative data collection techniques were considered to ensure methodological rigor, as recommended by Al Arfaj and Solaiman (2022), who advocate for the use of interviews and document analysis in qualitative research. In this study, two data collection instruments were employed: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The use of these methods enhanced the credibility and depth of the findings by allowing for

triangulation and a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Semi-structured interviews offered the flexibility to probe emerging themes and seek clarity from participants' responses. For document analysis, time books and leave policy files from the three selected ACET centres were reviewed. A total of three-time books and three leave policy documents were analysed, yielding critical insights into attendance patterns and institutional leave practices. This contributed significantly to understanding the underlying factors associated with unexcused teacher absenteeism.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data collected in this study, following the procedures outlined by Lester et al. (2020). This approach enabled the identification of recurring patterns and meaningful categories from both interview transcripts and institutional documents. Interview transcripts were read multiple times to ensure familiarity, after which initial codes such as family commitment, alcoholism, and non-conducive environment were generated. These codes were then grouped into broader themes including: (1) Personal and health-related factors, (2) Poor working conditions and inequitable workload, and (3) Structural and infrastructural barriers. Document analysis was conducted on three time books and three leave policy files using thematic content analysis. Specific codes such as unrecorded leave, inconsistent application of policy, and lack of follow-up were extracted from these documents. These codes were then aligned with and used to support the themes developed from the interview data, thereby reinforcing the credibility and depth of the findings through triangulation.

**Table 2**

*Themes derived from codes*

Theme	Description	Code
Theme 1: Personal and health-related factors	Family responsibilities taking priority over work	Family commitment
	Substance abuse negatively impacting attendance	Alcoholism
Theme 2: Socio-economic causes of teachers' absenteeism	Pay day leisure and extended weekends	skip class
Theme 3: Institutional causes of teacher absenteeism	Shared space issues where ACET staff can't access classrooms	Host schools' conflict
	Staff take advantage of weak structures to justify absence	Absence exploitation

### ***3.5. Research Ethics***

The researchers obtained an ethical clearance certificate from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) at the College of Education at the University of South Africa (UNISA) before asking permission to conduct research from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). The permission from the Department of Higher Education and Training enabled the researchers to approach ACET centres and potential participants under the Johannesburg metropolitan municipality for their consent to participate. Ethical considerations in this study were taken into account. The researchers issued consent letters that contain all research procedures and processes to all prospective participants through centre management teams and informed them what the study is all about. Participants were made aware by the researchers that they are at liberty to withdraw their consent at any time they may feel doing so without a penalty. The researchers made sure that participants were not exposed to any possible harm during the research process. Anonymity was ensured by making sure that interview notes, audio recordings, and gathered data were not linked to any participants.

## **4. Findings**

This section presents the findings from centres managers and educators views and documents analysis from the centres concerning factors that contributing factors to unexcused teacher absenteeism in ACET centres in the Johannesburg Metropolitan area, South Africa. Three themes in this analysis emerged namely personal and health-related factors, Poor working conditions and inequitable workload and Structural and infrastructure barriers.

### ***Theme 1: Personal and Health-Related Factors***

#### ***Sub-theme 1: Leave patterns and trends***

Teachers' absenteeism at ACET centres is primarily driven by illness-related issues and family responsibility leave, as reflected in both interview data and document analysis. These two types of leave are most commonly used by lecturers, with certain leave patterns and trends becoming apparent across different centres.

Centre managers noted that the two most common reasons for teachers' absenteeism were sick leave and family responsibility leave. CM A explained: *"Yes, usually it's family responsibility and sick leave. Those are the two types that we usually experience. However, there are times of exams when people also take study leaves as well, because it's also catered*

for in the policy.” CM B reinforced this, stating: *“The common one would be the normal sick leave, followed by family responsibility.”*

A more specific focus on sick leave was provided by CM C: *“More culprits here is the sick leave. You know with the sick leave, the policy says if you are sick for one day, you don't need a doctor's sick note. So, you cannot tell if that person is sick or not. Teachers are aware that one day off does not need a sick note. This pattern is common to few lecturers.”*

Teachers echoed similar experiences in their responses. CA-L1 mentioned: *“On my side, I take a sick leave. Sometimes I do take one-day sick. But when it is more than two days, I come with the proof from the doctor. That is the one that I normally take. Other lecturers usually take the same leave, sick leave. Even if it is a one-day leave, we do fill in the leave forms.”* This comment emphasizes that while some lecturers follow the procedure for longer absences, short-term sick leave remains prevalent.

Other teachers also confirmed the prevalence of sick leave and family responsibility leave. CB-L2 stated: *“It is sick leave and family responsibility leave.”* Similarly, CC-T2 highlighted: *“Sick leave, some lecturers take maternity and the family responsibilities leaves.”*

Teacher absenteeism was primarily caused by sick leave and family responsibility leave, with other types of absence being far less common, according to interview data validated by document analysis. Since there is no verification procedure in place, there is a significant risk of abuse and increased absenteeism, which makes the policy permitting short-term sick leave without paperwork vulnerable to exploitation. Teaching may be disrupted, student performance may suffer, and colleagues who have to cover for missing teachers may have to put in more effort, which could have an adverse effect on their own performance. Further contributing to absence dynamics, is the use of family responsibility leave, even if it is usually utilised for personal or family emergencies.

Trends in absenteeism varied between centres, with some centres experiencing more absenteeism during specific periods, such as exam times. One centre, for example, showed a marked increase in the use of "other leaves" in the later months of the year. This shift implies that absenteeism is influenced by a complex interplay of personal, familial, and institutional factors.

### ***Sub-theme 2: Health and personal issues***

Teacher absenteeism in CLCs centres is significantly influenced by a combination of health-related and personal issues, as reported by participants. These causes range from chronic

health problems, including sickness and emergencies, to personal issues such as alcoholism, fatigue from understaffing, and family responsibilities.

CM A highlighted that alcoholism is a prominent cause of absenteeism, stating: *“Right, thanks. There are two main causes of this absenteeism. What I've noticed, number one, is alcoholism. For a couple of times, I had about three teachers who were requesting to be referred to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) for help. So, I've done that. I don't know what stage they are in, but alcoholism is the main cause and fatigue as well because you'll realise that this centre has a smaller number of lecturers.”* This comment points to alcoholism as an ongoing issue affecting some lecturers, with interventions being sought, although the outcomes of these referrals remain unclear. Fatigue due to understaffing is also mentioned, suggesting that the workload in smaller centres may exacerbate absenteeism.

CM C echoed similar concerns, noting that both illness and family commitments are the leading causes of absenteeism: *“Okay. Thank you for allowing me to be part of your research study and about the question there are various reasons. Some are valid reasons; some are not valid reasons. The main reasons that contribute to unexcused teacher absenteeism are illness and family commitment, so these are the main reasons that lead to unexcused teacher absenteeism.”*

It appears from the findings that both valid and invalid reasons can have an impact on teacher absenteeism. The participant does, however, mostly blame illness and family obligations for unexcused absences, suggesting that these personal challenges frequently cause educators to skip work without permission. This viewpoint might suggest that teachers take unexcused leave because of unforeseen personal challenges, but it doesn't specifically address whether job conditions, institutional factors, or policies play a role in absenteeism. The statement *“some are valid reasons; some are not valid reasons”* implies that although certain absences are acceptable, others may be inappropriate or even dubious.

Teachers themselves reported a range of reasons for their absences. CA-L1 mentioned that some teachers fail to report their absences due to technical issues like lack of airtime or data: *“What I can say is that most of those teachers who became absent without reporting will give us the reason that they were running short of airtime or data. That is why they did not report. Those are the reasons they give.”* This indicates that communication barriers, such as limited access to mobile data, might contribute to unreported absenteeism.

Other participants pointed to personal reasons or family emergencies as contributing factors. For example, CC-L1 highlighted alcoholism and personal issues as common reasons for absenteeism: *“One of the reasons is alcoholism and at some points personal reasons.”* CA-S1 noted that teachers often communicate their absences due to emergencies like illness via WhatsApp: *“Okay, some lecturers do inform us via WhatsApp that they won't be coming to school because maybe they have emergencies such as having flu or maybe they have personal reasons.”*

Some teachers were believed to be absent due to personal struggles, although the exact reasons were unclear. CB-S1 stated: *“No, I don't know. But I think maybe they have certain problems that contribute to them not coming in, I think. But we think there might be other problems.”* Similarly, CB-S2 noted that personal reasons, such as taking care of a sick child, were frequent justifications for absence: *“It depends on the teachers, the teacher may have a sick child, sometimes personal reasons maybe the teacher is sick and sometimes they attend to their child's school.”*

CC-S1 shared frustration, suggesting that some teacher may be absent without valid reasons, stating: *“Maybe one or two reasons, maybe that they got sick, maybe, or they had family emergencies, but sometimes I feel like teachers just absent themselves just because they want to. We think sometimes they are missing.”* This reflects a concern that some teachers may be taking advantage of personal circumstances to justify unexplained absences.

Overall, the findings suggest that teacher absenteeism in ACET centres is influenced by a complex interplay of health issues, personal challenges, and family commitments. Alcoholism and fatigue due to understaffing stand out as key concerns, while illness, family emergencies, and lack of communication infrastructure also contribute to the absenteeism patterns. The role of personal responsibility and accountability in managing absenteeism remains a point of contention, as some teachers are believed to exploit their personal situations, leading to unexplained or unreported absences. The need for better planning and communication systems is clear, as these could mitigate the impact of personal and health-related absenteeism.

## ***Theme 2: Socio-Economic Causes of Teachers' Absenteeism***

### ***Sub-theme 1: Pay day leisure and extended weekends***

A recurring pattern of teacher absenteeism at Community Learning Centres emerges, especially on Mondays, Fridays, and around payday, as indicated by interviews and document analysis. This absenteeism is attributed to various socio-economic factors such as personal responsibilities, social events, and the desire for post-weekend relaxation.

Centre managers (CMs) consistently report that Mondays and paydays are particularly problematic. CM A mentions, *“On Mondays and especially if we have a long weekend... but that's what I've experienced since I came into the office. Also, on paydays. That one, I don't know how we can address it, but on paydays, people, not everyone, but some, are usually absent.”*

The findings imply that specific days, especially Mondays, long weekends, and paydays, have higher absenteeism rates. The participant suggests that since he began working at the office, these trends have been noticeable. The participants admit that not all teachers are absent on pay days, but there is a pattern of some teachers not turning up for work. The participant's lack of clarity over how to handle the matter further suggests that it might be a chronic or deeply rooted issue.

CM B highlights, *“The paydays of the month. It's where you can see that teachers could be missing... They're excited because they've got the money. These are not the same people every time, today is this one, the next is the other. My thinking is that lecturers are well-informed... they won't make it consistent because they know the outcome could be hurting them.”* The statement identifies a trend of teacher absences around payday, implying that some lecturers decide to skip class because they are excited about getting paid. However, different teachers take turns being absent, thus the same people do not always display this absenteeism. CM B further suggests that teachers avoid making their absences predictable since they understand the possible repercussions of chronic absences. This claim illustrates how financial considerations affect attendance trends and raises the possibility that teachers are purposefully avoiding disciplinary action.

Similarly, CM C observes that absenteeism peaks *“Monday and the 15th of every month, which is their payday. On the first day of the week, which is Monday. They will be having reasons saying I went to the bank.”* This statement suggests that Mondays and the 15th,

which correspond with payday, are when teacher absenteeism peaks. Many lecturers blame their absenteeism on bank visits, implying that attendance was disrupted by payday.

Teachers also confirm this trend. For example, CC-L1 states, “*It is common on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Also, in June because of examinations. I think lecturers are absent on Fridays due to personal problems.*” Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays are the days when lecturer absenteeism is most common, according to the findings. June month also sees a rise in absenteeism, most likely as a result of test season. The participant also makes the speculation that lecturers might be more absent on Fridays due to personal matters. This suggests that both individual circumstances and institutional elements (such as exams) may have an impact on absenteeism trends.

CB-L1 remarks, “*Especially Mondays. And then the week after the payday, they don’t come. Also, Friday’s teachers don’t come. And then during payday, the whole week... More than five teachers may be absent on the indicated days. And to be honest, it discourages us as new teachers. I’m thinking of going to TVET or basic education.*” The statement highlights attention to the frequent absences of teachers, particularly on Mondays, Fridays, and during payday week, which interfere with teaching and learning, and discourage new lecturers. The participant, who is fed up with the current situation, thinks about switching from AET to TVET or basic education. This raises concerns around attendance control and employee morale in Community Learning Centres.

The cyclical nature of this absenteeism creates a predictable pattern, undermining the learning environment. The widespread absenteeism on Mondays and Fridays, compounded by the extra absenteeism surrounding paydays, reflects a broader socio-economic reality where teachers may prioritise personal and social activities over professional responsibilities. These findings point to weak systems of monitoring and accountability in the centres, leading to reduced instructional quality. Interestingly, even though absenteeism is often excused as a personal issue, its consistency and impact on both teaching and student motivation suggest systemic challenges.

### ***Theme 3: Institutional Causes of Teacher Absenteeism***

#### ***Sub-theme 1: Unsupportive working environment***

The findings reveal that teacher absenteeism in Community Learning Centres is intricately linked to an unsupportive working environment, which manifests in excessive

workloads, poor infrastructure, and unfair working conditions. These institutional challenges negatively impact lecturers' motivation, morale, and overall commitment to their duties.

CM A highlighted the issue of understaffing, stating: *“We need more teachers in our centre so that they can share the amount of work that we are faced with. So, we are kind of like overloading others. Yes, that's the complaint that I'm getting all the time. Fatigue is another main cause because they are being overworked. Last year when we closed in December, I decided to call a meeting just to see how we can help those who feel overworked.”*

While the centre manager's decision to call a meeting indicates an awareness of the problem and a proactive attempt to address concerns, short-term fixes may not be sufficient to address the long-term issues posed by understaffing without structural interventions like hiring more lecturers. The centre manager's statement highlights the significant impact of understaffing on both workload distribution and teacher well-being. Lack of teachers results in an unequal division of responsibilities, forcing existing staff to take on excessive workloads. Overloading teachers with work causes fatigue and diminished morale, which may contribute to reduced effectiveness in teaching and a higher likelihood of absenteeism.

Infrastructure challenges were also identified as a major factor contributing to absenteeism. CM B explained: *“The reasons could be different. One would be that we are using host schools. Since we are using host schools, sometimes when we come, we find that the classrooms that we are using are still occupied. Sometimes learners are still busy in the classes. So, for that reason, teachers sometimes lose the energy to be always on time. If that thing goes for a long time without being attended to by our superiors, I'd say the main reason would be the lack of infrastructure. So, teachers take advantage of the fact that the regulations are not that tight. So, they can just abscond.”*

This problem has a variety of causes. The fact that centres operate inside host schools is one significant element. Teaching and learning time is frequently disturbed by these circumstances, and teachers become less motivated to attend to their work. The participant further pointed out that inadequate infrastructure may be the root cause of these issues if they continue without management's action. Additionally, some teachers take advantage of the lax enforcement of policies, which allows them to skip class without facing consequences.

Unfair working conditions further exacerbate teacher dissatisfaction. CB-L2 pointed out the disparity in teaching hours among staff, remarking: *“Most of the time, in terms of my reflection, first things first, the working conditions are not conducive for the teacher. But also,*

*our hours are not the same, like others have three (3) hours, six (6) hours, and others have eight (8) hours. So obviously, that is also discouraging. And one should be honest the system is not fair. So, your hours are not the same. Most of the people who get eight (8) hours are our supervisors.”*

This statement highlights how unhappy teachers are with their working conditions and how unjust they think the workload distribution is. The teachers are worried that the workplace is unsuitable for teaching could be a sign of problems like low institutional support, a lack of resources, or inadequate facilities. They also highlight differences in working hours, pointing out that some teachers put in three, six, or eight hours a day, and they imply that managers are more likely to be given more hours. The arrangement may advantage individuals in higher positions, which could cause animosity among lecturers with fewer hours. This unequal allocation is perceived as demoralising and unfair.

The findings suggest that absenteeism is also facilitated by weak enforcement of regulations. CM B noted that the lack of stringent policies allows teachers to abscond without facing significant consequences: *“Teachers take advantage that the regulations are not that tight. So, they can just abscond.”* This lax regulatory environment compounds the problem, as it undermines accountability and encourages absenteeism.

Institutional factors like excessive workloads, poor infrastructure, unjust working conditions, and lax enforcement of regulations are the main causes of teacher absenteeism in CLCs. The heavy schedule, which includes administrative responsibilities, makes it challenging for lecturers to regularly attend classes. Additionally, insufficient infrastructure and a lack of necessary resources result in an ineffective learning environment that deters teachers from regularly attending. Teachers’ dedication to their jobs is further undermined by unfair distribution of working hours, working conditions, such as inadequate support and unfavourable working surroundings. By permitting absences to continue unnoticed, lax enforcement of attendance rules makes the issue worse.

### ***Themes derived from documents reviewed***

Accessing documents posed no significant challenges for the researchers, as most ACET centres had designated office spaces for document storage. The researchers successfully obtained and analysed key documents, including time books and leave policy files from the three selected centres. These documents proved essential to the study, offering valuable

insights into teacher attendance patterns and the monitoring practices employed by centre managers.

**Time book.** In all three ACET centres, the time book was appropriately maintained in the administration office to allow easy access for both educators and non-teaching staff. It was made readily available to ensure that punctual staff were not disadvantaged when signing in. In one centre, the time book was removed at 8:30 AM, requiring late arrivals to report to the centre manager before signing in an effort to enforce punctuality. In contrast, the other two centres did not remove the time book, permitting educators to sign in upon arrival without any form of oversight. Furthermore, none of the observed ACET centres-maintained registers to track late arrivals or early departures. According to the centre managers, this practice reflects the distinct operational approach of the ACET sector, which differs from that of mainstream public and private schools.

**Leave policy files.** The document analysis findings further support these views, revealing that all three centres have secure administrative offices where important documents, such as leave policy files, are safely stored. Some teachers consistently adhere to the standard procedure of completing leave forms, showing a commitment to policy compliance. However, there are those teachers who may struggle to complete the forms on time, which could be due to the perception of administrative tasks as less urgent compared to teaching duties.

**Table 3**

*Monthly absenteeism per centre by type of leave (February–May 2024)*

Month	Centre	Sickness	Family Responsibility	Study Leave	Other Leaves	Total
February	A	3	3	–	–	6
	B	2	1	–	–	2
	C	4	3	–	–	7
March	A	2	4	–	–	6
	B	2	–	–	–	2
	C	3	3	–	–	6
April	A	4	2	–	–	6
	B	2	–	–	3	5
	C	3	4	–	–	7
May	A	2	2	–	–	4
	B	3	2	–	3	8
	C	2	3	–	–	5

Table 3 shows teacher absenteeism from February to May 2024, based on official records, revealing distinct patterns across the three ACET centres. Absenteeism was primarily attributed to sickness and family responsibility leave, though notable variations emerged over time and between centres. In February, Centre C recorded the highest number of absences (7), largely due to sickness (4) and family responsibilities (3). Centre A followed with 6 absences, while Centre B reported the lowest, with only 2 cases. This trend persisted into March, with Centre A and Centre C each recording 6 absences, again primarily related to sickness and family responsibilities. Centre B maintained its low absenteeism rate with 2 cases. By April, however, Centre B experienced a noticeable increase in absenteeism, rising to 5 cases, including 3 categorised as “other leaves” a marked shift from previous months. Centre A remained stable with 6 absences, while Centre C continued to report the highest number at 7.

The increase in non-sickness-related absences in Centre B aligns with broader literature, which highlight emerging trends in unclassified or ambiguous leave. In May, Centre B reported the highest absenteeism across all centres, totalling 8 absences, driven by increases in both sickness (3) and “other leaves” (3). Meanwhile, Centre A saw a decline to its lowest absenteeism (4), and Centre C recorded a slight decrease to 5. Overall, the data illustrates that while absenteeism was a recurring issue across all centres, Centre B demonstrated a progressive upward trend, particularly in non-sickness-related absences, suggesting possible systemic or contextual factors at play.

The findings effectively addressed the research question, which explored the factors contributing to unexcused teacher absenteeism in ACET centres in Johannesburg, South Africa.

## **5. Discussion**

The study revealed that unexcused teacher absenteeism in ACET centres is shaped by a constellation of interconnected factors, broadly categorized into personal, socio-economic, and institutional factors. These factors do not operate in isolation; rather, they intersect in ways that cumulatively impact educators’ ability to consistently fulfill their professional obligations (Smit, 2020). A critical examination of the findings supported by literature demonstrates how these multifaceted challenges contribute to the persistence of absenteeism in ACET contexts. Health-related issues, particularly illness, emerged as a dominant personal factor driving absenteeism. Findings from the interview and document analysis reported that both chronic

conditions and acute illnesses frequently result in unplanned absences, disrupting teaching and undermining the consistency required in adult education environments. This is consistent with broader research by García Carrizosa and De Witte (2024), who identify illness as a primary driver of teacher absenteeism globally. One centre manager (CM-A) underscored that poor health is a recurrent and often unavoidable cause of absenteeism among educators. Importantly, the adult education context magnifies the consequences of such absences, as adult learners often rely heavily on structured, stable interactions with educators for motivation and continuity in their learning trajectories. Frequent teacher absences contribute to disrupted instruction, overburdened colleagues, and declining morale creating a compounding cycle that may worsen absenteeism and further strain already limited resources (García Carrizosa & De Witte, 2024).

While illness is largely unavoidable, the findings also point to the need for more responsive institutional frameworks. Blazek et al. (2025) argue for the implementation of supportive workplace policies that accommodate health-related absences while fostering educator well-being and retention. In line with this, the current study calls for flexible leave policies and structured wellness programmes as mechanisms to mitigate the educational impact of teacher health challenges, particularly within under-resourced ACET centres. In addition to illness, the study identified alcoholism as another critical personal factor affecting attendance. Several participants noted that some educators were actively seeking assistance for alcohol dependence, indicating a level of awareness and concern within the ACET system. This aligns with Tetrault et al. (2020), who contend that educators experiencing substance abuse often struggle to maintain regular attendance and effective engagement with learners. Alcoholism not only affects the educator's capacity to teach but also undermines the credibility and functioning of the centre. In adult education settings where learners often face their own socio-economic vulnerabilities, educator stability and role-modelling are particularly crucial.

The findings of this study emanating from document analysis show family commitments as a central factor influencing unexcused teacher absenteeism in ACET centres. Teachers frequently face the challenge of reconciling personal obligations with professional responsibilities, with family-related demands emerging as the most cited reason for absenteeism. As Ferguson et al. (2022) argue, educators with caregiving responsibilities, whether for children or elderly relatives, are particularly vulnerable to attendance disruptions due to the competing nature of their duties. This reinforces the study's evidence that family-

related responsibilities significantly interfere with teachers' ability to maintain consistent attendance in ACET centres.

Childcare responsibilities, in particular, emerged as a salient issue, illustrating the tension between the professional demands of teaching and the personal duties of parenting. Pugu and Mwila (2023) confirm this dual burden, noting that teachers with young children are more likely to experience work disruptions, particularly during emergencies such as a child's illness or urgent school matters. These situations often necessitate immediate attention, leading teachers to prioritise familial responsibilities over their roles in the classroom resulting in unexcused absences that are nonetheless rooted in legitimate concerns.

The implications of such absenteeism extend beyond the individual educator. Under-resourced ACET centres typically lack the financial and logistical capacity to employ substitute teachers. Consequently, the responsibility of covering for absent colleagues often falls on the remaining staff. This additional burden can foster resentment and fatigue, eroding morale and undermining collaboration among educators (Travers, 2017). In environments already strained by limited resources, this dynamic compounds existing challenges and threatens the stability necessary for delivering quality adult education.

The study also brings to light the complexity of unexcused absenteeism, particularly the distinction between genuine emergencies and perceived lack of justification. Magoola and Beinomugisha (2024) highlight that unpredictable family crises such as medical emergencies or urgent domestic issues frequently result in sudden absenteeism, making it difficult for centre managers to plan effectively or maintain instructional continuity. These findings point to the need for flexible and empathetic attendance policies that recognize the nuanced realities of educators' personal lives. Furthermore, the study acknowledges the often-invisible nature of certain absenteeism triggers. Teachers may struggle with private or undisclosed issues ranging from job dissatisfaction to external stressors that are not readily communicated to management or peers. Cheng and Zhang (2018) argue that such concealed factors obscure the root causes of absenteeism, complicating any institutional efforts to intervene or support the educators effectively. This lack of transparency presents a significant barrier to developing informed and sustainable strategies for attendance management in ACET contexts.

The study reveals fatigue as a pervasive and significant contributor to unexcused teacher absenteeism, largely driven by excessive workloads and systemic understaffing. CM-A's observation that "fatigue is another main cause because they are being overworked"

reflects the broader institutional failure to equitably distribute teaching responsibilities due to a shortage of educators. This aligns with Safiye et al. (2023), who argues that adult education teachers frequently experience heightened fatigue, given the unique demands of managing diverse learner needs and assuming multiple instructional and administrative roles. When compounded with emotional exhaustion, these pressures often result in burnout a critical driver of absenteeism noted by both Safiye et al. (2023) and Magoola and Beinomugisha (2024).

Structural challenges, such as insufficient staffing and low compensation, further intensify fatigue-related absenteeism. The findings reveal that many educators hold dual jobs teaching in private schools during the day and in ACET centres in the evening. This pattern significantly contributes to teachers' physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion (Maceke, 2022; Pentang, 2022). This dual employment is often a necessity rather than a choice, driven by the inadequacy of salaries in the ACET sector. The consequences are profound: fatigued educators are less capable of delivering consistent, high-quality instruction, and their irregular attendance disrupts the learning continuity essential for adult learners.

The study also highlights glaring economic disparities that exacerbate absenteeism. Educators earning lower wages report difficulty affording basic necessities such as airtime or data to inform their centres of unexpected absences. This reflects the broader context of financial precarity within which many ACET educators operate. Compensation is tied to working hours, which vary significantly between teachers, some work up to eight hours, while others are allotted only three resulting in stark wage inequalities and deepening dissatisfaction. Such conditions not only demotivate teachers but also breed perceptions of unfairness, which further erode professional commitment.

The implications of these findings resonate with Land (2021), who asserts that a lack of job security and equitable compensation leads educators to seek more stable employment elsewhere. Brookings (2023) similarly points to the role of financial strain and inconsistent working conditions in driving high teacher turnover across education sectors. In the context of ACET centres, these dynamics compound institutional fragility, weakening efforts to retain experienced educators and sustain program quality. Addressing fatigue-related absenteeism, therefore, requires structural reforms that ensure fair workload distribution, equitable compensation, and improved employment conditions to support both teacher well-being and learner success.

Overall, these findings reveal the importance of viewing unexcused absenteeism through a nuanced lens that recognizes both individual vulnerabilities and systemic inadequacies. Illness and substance abuse, while personal in origin, are deeply embedded in broader institutional contexts that either exacerbate or mitigate their impact. A comprehensive response must therefore involve both supportive health policies and proactive managerial interventions aimed at early detection, support, and accountability.

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of its methodological limitations, particularly the small sample size and the fact that all participants were drawn from a single location (Johannesburg), which limits the generalisability of the results to other contexts. Future research should consider employing mixed methods approaches and include a larger, more diverse sample from multiple locations beyond Johannesburg. In conclusion, Hood's Cultural Theory enabled a nuanced interrogation of how institutional culture, management practices, and educator behaviour interact in the context of ACET. By foregrounding the need for flexible and context-responsive leadership, the framework challenges one-size-fits-all approaches and promotes strategic adaptability. If thoughtfully applied and supported by coherent policy frameworks, this model offers both explanatory and practical value in reducing factors that contributing to absenteeism in ACET that are highlighted in this study and improving the overall quality of adult education provision in South Africa.

## **6. Conclusion**

The findings revealed several factors contributing to unexcused teacher absenteeism in Adult Community Education and Training (ACET) centres in the Johannesburg Metropolitan area, South Africa. Over the weekends, some ACET teachers consume alcohol, which affects their ability to wake up and prepare for class on Monday. Additionally, teachers in the ACET sector do not receive sufficient recognition, and their salaries are lower compared to teachers in basic education, leading to demotivation and absenteeism. This study recommends that the Department of Higher Education in South Africa improve working conditions and salary scales in the ACET sector. Teachers in the ACET sector should receive adequate pay to help them achieve financial stability. In addition, this study recommends the continuous professional development of managers, particularly in leadership and conflict resolution, and the introduction of targeted workshops to familiarise educators with existing leave policies and the

implications of unexcused absences. Potential areas for future research include exploring mental health support and retention strategies used in ACET to mitigate absenteeism, with comparative analyses to practices in the Basic Education sector in South Africa. The policy implications of this study highlight the need for restructuring attendance monitoring systems in ACET to improve tracking of educator attendance. Additionally, ACET centres should implement health support programmes to provide assistance to educators facing health-related or personal challenges.

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This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by University of South Africa. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearance(s) by University of South Africa.

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