

Truancy in primary learners: Its mitigation through school and community in Eswatini

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Abstract

Social Capital Theory underpins this study, exploring how school and community factors mitigate truancy among primary school learners in the Manzini Region of Eswatini. It emphasizes the role of networks, trust, and relationships in promoting collective action, making it a suitable lens for examining collaboration among schools, families, and communities. This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and document analysis to explore school- and community-level factors influencing truancy. It included 10 principals, 10 teachers, 10 students, and 10 parents. Regarding school-based factors, the study revealed that strong teacher–student relationships significantly reduce absenteeism. Participants emphasized that learners are more engaged and consistent in attendance when they feel supported by empathetic, caring, and approachable teachers. In contrast, limited pastoral care, weak teacher–learner communication, and insufficient attention to learners’ socio-emotional needs were associated with disengagement and irregular attendance. These findings underscore the importance of strengthening teacher capacity in pastoral care and fostering supportive classroom environments as critical school-level interventions. In relation to community and cultural factors, socioeconomic challenges such as poverty, child-headed households, and lack of transportation were identified as major contributors to truancy. Participants noted that learners from vulnerable households often assume additional responsibilities that interfere with regular school attendance. However, active parental involvement and strong community leadership were found to mitigate these risks. Overall, when parents and community leaders reinforce the value of education and consistently monitor attendance, learners are more likely to attend school regularly.

Keywords: *school absenteeism, primary education, school–community collaboration, attendance intervention*

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1. Introduction

Truancy, defined as chronic absenteeism without valid or documented justification, remains a significant educational challenge with far-reaching implications. It undermines students' academic achievement, contributes to school dropout, and hinders broader societal goals such as community development and national progress (Lamb et al., 2020; Miller, 2023). In Eswatini's Manzini Region, a socio-economically diverse area, persistent truancy among primary school learners poses a serious threat to foundational education. Early interventions at the primary level are especially critical, as consistent school attendance during these formative years sets the stage for lifelong learning, social integration, and economic participation. Research underscores the pivotal role of early childhood programs and parental involvement in shaping attendance patterns, as younger learners rely heavily on caregivers to ensure school participation (Kethineni et al., 2021).

Numerous school-based and social determinants contribute to truancy. Educational factors include low academic performance, inadequate educational support, and undertrained teachers (López et al., 2021). Social and environmental influences such as peer pressure, family instability, and access to informal labour markets further exacerbate absenteeism (Cerdà-Navarro et al., 2024;). These dynamics underscore the multifaceted nature of truancy and the need for both school- and community-level interventions to mitigate it effectively. Despite growing international literature on truancy, much of the evidence is derived from high-income contexts and tends to emphasize individual risk factors, disciplinary frameworks, or macro-level socioeconomic determinants. There is limited empirical evidence examining how school-based and community-embedded relational dynamics interact to shape attendance in low-resource, sub-Saharan primary school contexts, such as Eswatini (Cerdà-Navarro et al., 2024).

Although truancy and absenteeism are sometimes used interchangeably, they differ in nuance. Absenteeism refers to any form of student absence, whereas truancy specifically denotes unexcused or unauthorized absences. Chronic truancy is thus a more severe subset of absenteeism, often signaling disengagement from school and underlying social or psychological issues. Mitigating truancy, especially in primary education, is crucial not only for individual learners' academic trajectories but also for improving teaching and learning. High truancy rates disrupt classroom dynamics, lower overall performance, and demoralize teachers, making it challenging to deliver consistent instruction and maintain inclusive learning environments.

In the Manzini region, existing studies have largely documented the prevalence of absenteeism but have not systematically examined the interplay among school climate, parental involvement, community structures, and cultural expectations in mitigating truancy at the primary level. This represents a significant empirical gap in understanding context-specific drivers and solutions.

Grounded in Social Capital Theory, which emphasizes the value of networks, trust, and collaborative relationships, this study explores how schools and communities in the Manzini Region contribute to reducing truancy. The theory offers a relevant framework for understanding how strong social ties among teachers, learners, parents, and community leaders can foster a supportive ecosystem that promotes regular school attendance. While social capital theory has been widely applied in studies of community development and secondary education, its application to truancy in primary schools in sub-Saharan Africa remains under-examined. Therefore, this study extends the theory by interrogating how bonding, bridging, and linking social capital operate within rural and urban primary school settings to influence attendance behaviours.

By identifying effective practices at both the institutional and grassroots levels, the study aims to inform practical strategies to address this persistent challenge in Eswatini's education system. It explored how school-based and community factors help mitigate truancy among primary school learners in the Manzini Region of Eswatini. By addressing these empirical and theoretical gaps, the study seeks to move beyond deficit-oriented explanations of truancy and to develop contextually grounded, relationally informed strategies to strengthen attendance in Eswatini's primary education system. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What school-based factors influence truancy among primary school learners in the Manzini Region?
2. How do community and cultural factors contribute to truancy among primary school learners?
3. What collaborative school-community strategies are used to mitigate truancy in primary schools?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by Social Capital Theory, which emphasizes the value of social networks, trust, and reciprocal relationships in fostering cooperation and positive social behaviours within communities and institutions. Rooted in the foundational work of Bourdieu (1986) and later expanded by Putnam (1995), the theory has evolved to recognize three key dimensions: bonding social capital (strong ties within close-knit groups), bridging social capital (connections across diverse social groups), and linking social capital (vertical ties to institutions and authority structures) (Tsounis & Xanthopoulou, 2024). In the context of education, social capital plays a crucial role in creating supportive environments that promote student engagement, reduce absenteeism, and improve attendance through collaborative partnerships between schools, families, and communities.

The contemporary interpretation of Putnam (1995) conceptualizes social capital as a collective resource that strengthens civic engagement, mutual trust, and cooperation. Emphasizing trust and civic engagement can inspire confidence in the framework's relevance among the audience. These relational dimensions are particularly relevant in the Manzini Region, where community cohesion and strong teacher–parent relationships can mitigate truancy among primary learners. This theory underpins the study by providing a lens through which truancy is understood not only as an individual or socioeconomic issue but also as a function of the strength of social networks within and around the school. Schools that cultivate strong connections among teachers, learners, and parents are therefore better positioned to mobilize social capital to foster inclusive, attendance-oriented school cultures.

Ultimately, Social Capital Theory offers a valuable lens for understanding how educational institutions and communities can collaborate to mitigate truancy and ensure equitable access to quality education. When synthesised with the empirical literature on school climate, cultural expectations, and community participation, social capital theory provides a unifying explanatory framework. It enables the study to move beyond the fragmentation of variables and to interpret truancy as an outcome of weak or fragmented relational networks.

By applying this framework to primary education in Eswatini, the study extends existing knowledge by demonstrating that social capital functions not only as a community resource but also as a mechanism for school-level attendance.

2.2 School-Based and Community Factors Mitigating Truancy

2.2.1 Global perspectives on school-based factors

Globally, research indicates that a favourable school climate, student engagement, and interactive teaching strategies are key to reducing truancy. According to Montesclaros et al. (2022), schools that prioritize emotional safety, supportive teacher-student relationships, and personalized learning report significantly lower absenteeism rates. For instance, in the United States and Australia, the implementation of student-centered pedagogies and social-emotional learning frameworks has been associated with increased student attendance and engagement. Martin (2025) further emphasizes that when students perceive their school environment as inclusive and their teachers as caring, their likelihood of chronic absenteeism decreases. Additionally, Ambon et al. (2024) found that schools that integrated continuous professional development for teachers in classroom management and inclusive teaching methods observed marked improvements in student attendance. Teacher preparedness directly impacts classroom engagement and student behaviour, both of which are strong predictors of school attendance.

These studies suggest that school climate, teacher capacity, and student well-being are central to addressing truancy. However, much of the global literature conceptualises these factors in isolation, treating school climate as an institutional variable rather than as a relational process embedded in broader community networks. Moreover, the focus is often on secondary education contexts in high-income countries, leaving primary-level dynamics in low-resource settings underexamined.

2.2.2 Regional perspectives: Southern Africa

In the Southern African context, truancy is influenced by socio-economic disparities, curricular and cultural disconnects, and weak school-community links. Ar Raf (2024) argues that culturally relevant teaching materials, particularly those that reflect local language, history, and customs, help learners feel represented and more engaged. Their study, conducted in Botswana and South Africa, demonstrated that primary schools that incorporated indigenous knowledge systems into their curricula experienced increased parental involvement and improved student attendance. Similarly, Nkosi (2023) highlights that inclusive school policies, such as flexible timetables for learners from agricultural or caregiving backgrounds, help reduce absenteeism. Furthermore, integrating school social workers and counselling services

in countries such as Namibia and Zambia has proven effective in identifying at-risk students and intervening early.

While regional studies acknowledge the importance of cultural relevance and inclusive practices, they often fall short of providing a theoretical account of how relational networks between schools and communities operate to sustain attendance. The emphasis tends to be programmatic (e.g., curriculum adaptation or support services) rather than analytical, leaving a gap in understanding the social mechanisms through which community cohesion and trust influence learner engagement.

2.2.3 Local context: Manzini Region, Eswatini

In Eswatini, particularly in the Manzini Region, truancy is often associated with poverty, child-headed households, and inadequate parental supervision. However, Sälzer et al. (2024) found that schools implementing community-linked attendance tracking systems, in which teachers and local leaders collaborate to follow up on absent learners, reported an increase in attendance. Additionally, clear attendance policies communicated through parent meetings and supported by local leaders help strengthen community ownership of education. Another study by Garcia-Vallès et al. (2024) found that schools that train teachers in inclusive pedagogy, particularly in large classrooms with mixed-ability learners, are more effective in keeping students engaged and reducing absenteeism. These schools also utilize culturally relevant resources, such as stories, songs, and symbols from Eswatini traditions, to enhance classroom relevance.

Although these local studies provide important insights into practical strategies for addressing absenteeism, they have not systematically connected these interventions to a broader theoretical framework. Specifically, there is limited examination of how bonding, bridging, and linking social capital interact to shape attendance patterns. This study seeks to address this gap by analysing school and community initiatives through a social capital lens, thus moving beyond description toward theory-informed explanation.

A range of school-based strategies has proven effective in mitigating truancy among primary school learners, particularly in the Manzini Region. One critical approach is the adoption of culturally responsive curricula, which enhance students' sense of identity, belonging, and attachment to school by reflecting their values, language, and lived experiences in the learning process. When learners feel seen and valued within the curriculum, their

motivation to attend school regularly increases. Professional development for teachers also plays a vital role in addressing truancy.

By equipping educators with skills to manage diverse classrooms and implement inclusive, engaging teaching methods, schools foster stronger student-teacher relationships and improve overall classroom engagement, thereby reducing absenteeism (Ambon et al., 2024). Additionally, the establishment of transparent and inclusive attendance policies that outline expectations, involve parents in school governance, and ensure consistent follow-up has been linked to improved attendance rates in Manzini schools (Maseko, 2021). Finally, community involvement and accountability structures are essential in sustaining attendance efforts. Partnerships with traditional leaders, parent committees, and local stakeholders foster a shared sense of responsibility, facilitating the early identification and support of at-risk learners (Dhemba & Dlamini, 2025). Collectively, these strategies constitute a comprehensive framework for schools to combat truancy proactively.

The existing literature establishes that school climate, socio-economic conditions, cultural expectations, and parental involvement influence truancy. However, these factors are frequently examined in isolation, with limited attention to their interconnected nature within primary school settings in sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, the application of social capital theory to understanding these interactions remains underdeveloped. This study builds on prior research by synthesising theoretical and empirical strands to explain how relational networks within schools and communities collectively shape learner attendance in the Manzini region.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design of the Study

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the complex social, cultural, and institutional factors influencing truancy among primary school learners in the Manzini Region. A qualitative approach was appropriate because it enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and relational dynamics that shape attendance behaviours. This design aligns with Social Capital Theory, as it enables examination of trust, networks, and community relationships that are not readily captured by numerical data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2021; Saunders et al., 2023). By focusing on rich narrative accounts from key stakeholders, the study provides context-sensitive insights into the mechanisms through which schools and communities mitigate truancy.

3.2 Site and Sampling Methods

This study was conducted in the Manzini Region of Eswatini, which comprises both urban and rural school environments, providing a rich context for examining truancy from multiple perspectives. A purposive sampling approach was used to select 40 participants: 10 principals, 10 teachers, 10 students, and 10 parents. The sample size was determined using the principle of information power, which posits that the more relevant and experienced the participants, the fewer participants are required to generate meaningful insights (Palinkas et al., 2019). Given that each stakeholder group holds distinct but complementary perspectives on truancy, including school leadership, classroom practice, parental engagement, and learner experience, a balanced representation of ten participants per group was deemed sufficient to ensure depth while maintaining manageable analytical rigor.

Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate because it effectively selects participants with direct experience and insights into truancy-related issues, ensuring that the data gathered would be both relevant and rich in information (Palinkas et al., 2019). In qualitative research, purposive sampling is beneficial for exploring complex social phenomena, as it enables the inclusion of diverse voices who are most knowledgeable about the issue under investigation (Iliyasu & Etikan, 2021). For this study, selecting participants across stakeholder groups, educators, learners, and parents, enabled a comprehensive understanding of both school- and community-level factors influencing attendance.

The equal distribution across stakeholder groups was intentional and analytically driven. Truancy is a multi-layered phenomenon within intersecting relational networks; therefore, balanced group representation ensured that no single voice dominated the narrative. This structure enhanced comparative analysis across groups and strengthened the study's credibility by allowing thematic convergence and divergence to emerge in the original analysis.

Moreover, the method aligns well with the qualitative component, which seeks depth, context, and subjective interpretation (Lim, 2025). This approach also reinforces the Social Capital Theory framework by targeting individuals whose relationships and social networks within schools and communities are critical to shaping learner engagement and attendance. The sampling strategy enhanced the study's trustworthiness, analytical depth, and credibility by systematically including diverse yet information-rich stakeholder perspectives. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, meaning that no substantially new themes or insights were emerging from additional interviews or discussions. Upon completing

40 participant engagements, patterns related to school climate, parental involvement, socioeconomic barriers, and community collaboration were consistently observed across groups, indicating analytical sufficiency.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

To gain a comprehensive understanding of truancy and the effectiveness of school and community-based mitigation strategies in the Manzini Region, the study employed multiple data collection methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals, teachers, and parents to gather rich, nuanced insights into their perceptions and experiences with absenteeism. This method provided flexibility to explore key themes while allowing participants to express their views in depth, a crucial feature for examining complex social phenomena (Daniels, 2024). Focus group discussions with students and community leaders further enriched the data by fostering open dialogue and revealing collective experiences and community-level strategies to improve school attendance (Johnson, 2021).

Document analysis of attendance registers and school records was conducted to contextualize interview findings and identify patterns discussed by participants. These records were used descriptively to support qualitative interpretation rather than for statistical analysis. Thematic analysis was employed as the primary analytical strategy. This method allowed the researcher to identify patterns across interviews, focus groups, observations, and documents, ensuring a coherent qualitative interpretation of the data.

3.4 Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data collected in this study were analysed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying and interpreting patterns and meanings within qualitative data. After transcribing interviews, focus group discussions, and observational notes, a coding framework was developed both inductively from emerging data and deductively from the study's conceptual framework. Using NVivo software, codes were systematically organized into themes representing school-based and community-level factors influencing truancy. Thematic analysis was particularly relevant as it facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and the contextual factors shaping learner absenteeism (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

This approach aligns with the social capital theoretical lens by enabling analysis of relational dynamics, such as trust and engagement, that are not readily quantifiable. To enhance

trustworthiness, the study employed triangulation, cross-verifying findings from multiple data sources, including interviews, observations, and document analysis, to ensure consistency and credibility. Member checking and peer debriefing were also incorporated to validate interpretations and guard against researcher bias. This multi-layered analytical approach strengthened the study by producing robust, context-sensitive insights into the complex social, cultural, and institutional drivers of truancy in the Manzini Region.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was foundational to this study, ensuring the rights, dignity, and well-being of all participants were protected throughout the research process. Following ethical clearance from the Bindura University of Science Education Ethics Committee, formal permission was obtained from the Eswatini Ministry of Education and Training and from relevant gatekeepers within the Manzini District. The researcher then engaged school principals, parents, and students to provide detailed information about the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and confidentiality measures. Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, while assent was secured from students, with parental consent where necessary. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences and that their data would be handled in strict confidence. Ethical principles, such as voluntary participation, anonymity, and informed consent, were observed in line with best practices outlined by Denscombe (2021) and supported by recent literature emphasizing the protection of participants in school-based research. These steps enhanced the study's credibility, encouraged open and honest participation, and ensured compliance with both institutional and international research ethics standards.

4. Findings and Discussions

The qualitative data generated from interviews, focus group discussions, and observations were analysed thematically. The initial open coding was conducted on the transcripts, followed by the grouping of related codes into broader categories. The researcher further refined these categories into overarching themes aligned with the study's research questions. Several codes and categories emerged to address the study's research questions. The

study used excerpts from interviews with principals (P), teachers (T), parents (PP), and students (S).

4.1 School-Level Factors Influencing Truancy

Table 1

Summary of generated themes on school-level factors influencing truancy

Codes	Categories	Themes
Teacher care, Emotional support	Teacher-student relationships	Supportive school environment
Inclusive policies, respect	School ethos	Supportive school environment
Poor sanitation, overcrowding	Infrastructure challenges	School-level barriers to attendance

Table 1 summarizes the school-level factors influencing truancy. The study found that strong teacher-student relationships, inclusive school policies, and an enabling school ethos are critical in mitigating truancy among primary learners in the Manzini Region. **P1, P3, T3, T7, T8, P6, PP4, and PP8** confirmed that:

“When learners feel supported, understood, and emotionally safe within the school, their attendance tends to improve. They look forward to attending school, participating in lessons and class activities, and engaging in other school events.”

This aligns with recent research indicating that relational trust between teachers and students enhances students’ sense of belonging, which, in turn, increases attendance (Adams et al., 2025; Sedekia et al., 2025). Similarly, Platz (2021) notes that trust is crucial for adolescents as they seek greater autonomy and respect. Teachers' respect for students is critical to shaping the classroom environment, which, in turn, affects students' sense of belonging. Research by Brito et al. (2021) found that when students lack trust, they struggle to cultivate emotional bonds with the school and its environment.

Unlike dominant global truancy models that frame absenteeism primarily as an individual behavioural or disciplinary problem, these findings position truancy as a relational and contextual phenomenon rooted in school climate and interpersonal trust rather than emphasising punitive attendance enforcement. The Manzini data highlights the centrality of emotional safety and teacher care as primary determinants of attendance.

Infrastructure quality also emerged as an important variable. The findings revealed variations in attendance among schools, depending on their infrastructure development. **S1**, **S4**, **S5**, and **S9** reported being reluctant to attend school because they feel their needs are not being adequately addressed and struggle to navigate between different sections of the school. They said,

“Inadequate school facilities, such as poor sanitation or overcrowded classrooms, negatively affect our attendance, especially for vulnerable groups like girls and other disabled children. Sometimes we also feel targeted and persecuted for who we are and do not feel fully accepted within the school community.”

Beyond the physical limitations described, these narratives suggest a depletion of social capital for bonding within the school environment. When learners perceive neglect or exclusion, trust in the institutional community weakens. Social capital theory suggests that attendance is not merely a behavioural choice but also a reflection of perceived membership in a network of trust. Where that membership is fragile, disengagement becomes more likely. According to Daily et al. (2020), students are more likely to attend schools that are clean, safe, and welcoming. This aligns with Social Capital Theory, which suggests that trust, norms, and networks within the school ecosystem promote cooperation and shared responsibility, fostering a climate conducive to attendance. Additionally, a positive school ethos, defined by inclusive values, student recognition, and high expectations, was repeatedly cited by participants as a deterrent to truancy. This supports the findings of Sibanda (2021), who argues that school climate plays a pivotal role in shaping learners' attitudes toward attendance.

While global literature often treats infrastructure as a background condition, Manzini's findings suggest that the physical environment and social inclusion are interconnected. Infrastructural deficits not only create discomfort but also signal social exclusion, which in turn affects learners' sense of belonging; a dimension less explicitly addressed in many mainstream truancy models.

Dogan and Bengisoy (2017) highlighted that successful schools can promote a positive learning environment compared to those with a poor culture. This aligns with Lopes et al. (2020), who argue that if an environment is not enabling, it is challenging to cultivate a positive culture among students. A positive culture enables a school to function effectively and bring

out the best in both students and teachers. Students and teachers need to feel at ease in their school and feel supported in their choices and decisions.

From a social capital perspective, these findings strongly reflect bonding social capital, defined as trust-based relationships within close-knit groups. The emergence of teacher-student care, emotional safety, and school ethos as central themes suggests that strong internal school relationships function as protective mechanisms for attendance. When learners experience trust and belonging within the school community, attendance becomes a natural extension of relational attachment rather than a forced obligation.

While much of the global literature emphasises structural or disciplinary responses to truancy, the present findings suggest relational trust may be a more immediate and locally responsive lever for change in primary school contexts. This shifts the focus from enforcement to relational investment.

4.2 Community and Cultural Dynamics

Table 2

Summary of themes generated on community and cultural dynamics

Codes	Categories	Themes
Household chores, gender roles	Cultural expectations	Community and cultural dynamics
Poverty, child-headed household.	Socio-economic constraints	Community and cultural dynamics
Peer pressure	Peer influence	Social influences on attendance

Table 2 reveals that cultural beliefs, community norms, and peer influences were central to understanding learners' attendance behaviours. **PP2, PP5, PP6** and **PP8** highlighted that.

“In some households, traditional gender roles and labour responsibilities take precedence over formal education, often resulting in a lack of opportunities for women. In most rural areas in the Manzini Region, children are expected to assist with domestic or agricultural duties before and after school. Sometimes, they are so tired at school that they cannot fully engage in learning. More often, they are discouraged by their test scores and grades and end up feeling negative about attending school, eventually becoming truant.”

From a social capital lens, these competing expectations reveal tension between school-based norms and community-based obligations. Where bridging social capital is weak, learners

navigate conflicting value systems without coordination between home and school. Truancy, in this context, emerges as a structural outcome of misaligned social networks rather than individual defiance.

These findings align with a study by Kahomwe and Muzingili (2025), which highlights how rural socio-cultural expectations in Southern Africa can lead to sporadic attendance among primary learners. Similarly, Sikhwari and Mudau (2024), in their research in South Africa, found that cultural factors, including language barriers and gender roles, contribute to absenteeism, particularly among the country's marginalised groups. Furthermore, Runhare et al. (2021) found that several schools in South Africa, particularly those in rural areas, face acute challenges, including poverty, unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure.

In contrast to many global truancy frameworks that prioritise economic deprivation as the primary driver of absenteeism, the Manzini findings reveal a more nuanced interplay between cultural expectations, gender roles, and social obligations. Truancy here emerges not solely from poverty, but from culturally embedded responsibilities that compete with formal schooling.

The data also showed that peer influence, both positive and negative, played a significant role in several students' decisions to become truants. **P1, P4, P10, T3, T4, T5, PP3, PP6** confirmed that.

“Some learners skip school to conform to friends who do not prioritize education, while others are encouraged to attend by academically focused peers. Several learners who are truants with their friends end up engaging in child labour for quick money, and some even end up trying drugs and gang activities like theft at an early age.”

This dual role of peer networks illustrates that social capital is value-neutral; it can either facilitate positive educational norms or reinforce disengagement. The direction of its influence depends on the network's dominant values. This nuanced interpretation extends social capital theory by demonstrating how peer bonding can function as either a protective or risk mechanism in primary school settings.

The dual role of peer influence is well-documented in a study by Labaona and Dhiu (2025), which found that peer-led mentorship programs can significantly reduce absenteeism. This dual nature of peer influence also extends beyond the deficit-oriented peer-deviance models common in global literature, which often emphasize negative group pressure. In the Manzini context. Peers function both as risk factors and protective social capital resources.

Parental involvement was highlighted as a significant protective factor against truancy. Parents who attended school meetings, helped with homework, or communicated with teachers had children with better attendance records. These findings are supported by Owoyale-Abdulganiy and Olokooba (2024), who found that consistent parental engagement correlates strongly with improved learner attendance and academic outcomes.

A study by Kapur (2018) concluded that school attendance, dedication, confidence, family support, parenting style, socioeconomic status, and interest in the subject were among the most important indicators influencing students' academic achievement. Several studies have shown that children rely on their parents as their primary source of information, expertise, and advice. For instance, Silinskas and Kikas (2019) argue that parents play a significant role in supporting their children, as evidenced by various practices, including helping with homework, attending school events such as parent-teacher days, sports events, speech and prize-giving days, and making decisions that contribute to a positive school environment. On the other hand, Poudel et al. (2024) found that insufficient parental involvement can undermine the motivation and support that students and the school need, potentially affecting student involvement and performance.

The themes emerging from this section illustrate the role of bridging social capital, which connects individuals across social groups such as families, peer networks, and schools. Cultural expectations, peer influence, and parental involvement represent intersecting social spheres that either strengthen or weaken these bridges. Where positive bridges exist between home and school, learners benefit from consistent messaging about the value of education. Where these bridges are fragmented, truancy emerges as a symptom of discomfort in disconnected social networks.

4.3 Collaborative Strategies: School-Community Partnerships

Table 3

Summary of themes generated on collaborative strategies

Codes	Categories	Themes
Parent meetings, homework support	Parental involvement	Protective community factors
Mentorship, sports programmes	Community engagement	Collaborative school-community strategies

Table 3 indicates that schools that collaborated with their communities reported fewer cases of chronic absenteeism. **P1, PP4, P6, PP7, PP8, and P10** suggested that:

“We need to establish and integrate local mentorship programs, community-led after-school activities, and partnerships with religious and civic organizations to support community development. These initiatives offer students an additional layer of support and accountability. Schools can partner with a community group to run weekend sports and study sessions, keeping learners engaged and fostering positive routines.”

These collaborations represent more than programmatic interventions; they signal the activation of linking social capital, in which vertical connections between schools and community authorities strengthen norms of attendance. When community leaders, religious institutions, and civic organisations reinforce school expectations, attendance becomes a shared moral and social obligation rather than merely a school policy.

Such partnerships are supported by recent studies demonstrating that integrated, community-based interventions improve school attendance (Miller et al., 2021). Collaborative structures, such as school-community committees and family support centers, were also instrumental in addressing socioeconomic barriers to regular attendance. Whereas many international truancy interventions rely heavily on formal policy enforcement mechanisms, such as attendance-tracking technologies and legal sanctions, this study's findings emphasise informal social networks, community accountability, and relational monitoring. This context-specific approach suggests that social capital may serve as a more sustainable mechanism for maintaining attendance in low-resource settings.

On the contrary, **P2, P3, T1, T4, T7, T8, P4, P5, and P6** identified challenges they faced in schools arising from a lack of collaboration among stakeholders in planning and implementing decisions that affect the smooth operation of schools. Their collective views revealed that,

“Several parents lack a positive relationship with their children. As a result, they are not involved in day-to-day decision-making and are unaware of the numerous challenges they face at school and at home.”

A study in South Africa by Motshusi et al. (2024) reports that parents experience daily stress due to uncertainty about their children's unique needs, stemming from limited

involvement. This persistent absence hinders children's academic progress and mental and psychological development. Similarly, Narot and Kiettikunwong (2024) found that in some Indonesian primary schools, parental support has helped schools implement inclusive classrooms that promote socialization, thereby mitigating students' emotional challenges at school. Several studies have concluded that student outcomes improve tremendously when parents are involved in their learning.

Indimuli (2022) argues that learners' comprehension improves when parents assist them with homework and test preparation at home. This reflects positively on their academic performance. In the same vein, Ntekane (2018) contends that parents act like a glue when they are involved and collaborate with the school in their child's learning. They not only motivate students but also help them stay grounded and enjoy their learning. Research findings by Gay et al. (2021) concluded that children do not see the value of learning when their parents are not involved. The lack of parental involvement in school activities creates cracks between the school and parents, through which students can slip and either become truants or behave in ways that damage their reputation and that of the school.

The themes reveal that bonding, bridging, and linking social capital operate interdependently in shaping learner attendance. Strong internal school relationships (bonding) create a foundation of trust; effective home-school and peer connections (bridging) reinforce shared educational values; and institutional partnerships (linking) provide structural support and accountability. This multi-level interaction extends social capital theory by demonstrating applicability to primary school truancy in a sub-Saharan context. Across all themes, truancy is revealed not as a discrete behavioural issue, but as an indicator of the strength or fragility of social-relational networks, bonding capital within schools, bridging capital between home and school, and linking capital across community structures that operate synergistically. Where these forms of capital are aligned, attendance is stabilised; where they are fractured, absenteeism emerges.

The study extends social capital theory by demonstrating that its three dimensions do not operate in isolation but interact dynamically within primary school settings. While prior applications of the theory have largely focused on community development or secondary education, this research illustrates how social functions as a multi-level attendance framework in early education contexts by conceptualising truancy as an outcome of relational

misalignment rather than as individual deviance. The study advances a more context-sensitive and sociologically embedded understanding of school attendance.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of truancy among primary school learners in Eswatini, underscoring the indispensable roles of both school and community factors in addressing this issue. It highlights that improving attendance is not solely a matter of student discipline but rather requires a holistic, collaborative response involving educators, parents, learners, and the broader community. A nurturing school climate, coupled with engaged parenting and responsive policies, can dramatically reduce truancy. Future research should assess the long-term effectiveness of these interventions and explore scalable strategies for broader policy implementation.

To address these challenges effectively, schools should develop inclusive attendance policies that are consistently enforced yet sensitive to learners' socio-cultural contexts. Principals and school leaders should create supportive environments where students feel emotionally and psychologically safe. At the same time, teachers are encouraged to build strong, empathetic relationships with learners through culturally responsive and engaging teaching methods. Ongoing professional development for educators is crucial in equipping them with the tools to address diverse learning needs and promote student engagement. Parents and guardians should increase their involvement in learners' education by participating in school activities, monitoring attendance, and reinforcing the value of education at home. Additionally, students should be encouraged to participate in extracurricular programs and peer-mentorship initiatives that foster a sense of belonging and accountability. For educational planners and policymakers, there is a need to support school-community partnerships through funding and strategic policy frameworks, while also addressing systemic barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, limited transportation, and food insecurity that contribute to absenteeism. Collectively, these recommendations aim to strengthen the education ecosystem and promote regular school attendance among primary learners in the Manzini Region.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of Bindura University of Science Education, Zimbabwe. The Bindura University of Science Education and the Eswatini Ministry of Education and Training have approved and granted the necessary clearances for its conduct.

Declaration

The authors declare the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in editing this paper. They used Grammarly and QuillBot to revise the grammar and sentence structure.

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