



An Investigation of Factors Perpetuating Pupil Absenteeism in Chipata District: A Case Study of Mtowe Primary School in Eastern Province of Zambia

Tundashi Tommy, Dr. John Phiri

Dmi-St. Eugene University
Chipata, Zambia

Abstract- The purpose of this study was to investigate the factors that perpetuated pupil absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School of Chipata. The study aimed to find why pupils missed school often, how absenteeism affected learning, and what could be done to improve regular attendance. A mixed methods approach was used. Attendance records for the 2023 school year were analysed to show patterns and levels of absence. Interviews and focus group discussions were held with pupils, teachers, parents, and the head teacher to gather their views and experiences. Data were analysed using simple descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to identify the main causes and effects of absenteeism. The findings showed that absenteeism was caused by many linked factors. Poverty was a major cause: many families could not afford school supplies, fees, or uniforms, and some children worked to help at home. Health problems, especially malaria and poor nutrition, made pupils miss school frequently. Household duties and seasonal farm work also reduced attendance. School factors such as harsh discipline, occasional teacher absence, and low pupil engagement were reported to discourage regular attendance. Girls were more affected by household chores and early marriage risks. Community attitudes and weak links between the school and local services made it harder to follow up absent pupils. The study concluded that absenteeism at Mtowe Primary was a complex problem that needed combined actions. It recommended school feeding or health checks, support for poor families, better teacher training on pupil engagement, stronger community school partnerships, and regular monitoring of attendance with quick follow up for absent pupils. These measures were suggested to reduce absenteeism and improve learning outcomes

Keywords- Pupil absenteeism; School attendance; Poverty; Health and nutrition; Community school partnership.



I. Introduction

Chapter One provided the foundation of the study by introducing the problem of pupil absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School in Chipata District. It presented the global, national and local context of absenteeism and explained why the issue remained a major concern for educational development. The chapter outlined the background of the study, clearly stated the problem, and justified the need for investigating the factors that perpetuated absenteeism in a rural Zambian school. It also presented the purpose of the study, the research objectives, research questions, and the scope within which the study was conducted. Furthermore, the chapter described the characteristics of absenteeism as a phenomenon and highlighted the multiple factors—home based, school based, community based and health related—that influenced pupils' attendance patterns. Key operational definitions were provided to ensure clarity of concepts used throughout the study. The chapter concluded by summarising its main ideas and preparing the reader for the literature review presented in Chapter Two.

1. Background of the Study

Education has long been recognised as a powerful tool for social and economic development, and regular school attendance formed the foundation upon which meaningful learning took place. Globally, absenteeism has been identified as one of the major obstacles to achieving quality education, especially in low income countries where children faced multiple barriers to attending school consistently (UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). Studies from different regions of the world showed that pupils who missed school frequently performed poorly in examinations, struggled with reading and numeracy, repeated grades and were more likely to drop out before completing primary education (Rogers & Feller, 2018; Moyi, 2011). This pattern was particularly evident in rural communities where poverty, long distances to school and household responsibilities limited children's ability to attend school regularly (World Bank, 2022). In sub-Saharan Africa, absenteeism has been widely documented as a persistent challenge affecting millions of school aged children.

Research conducted in countries such as Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda showed that absenteeism was often linked to socio economic hardships, food insecurity, poor school infrastructure, cultural practices and seasonal agricultural demands (Moyi, 2011; Abudu & Fuseini, 2013; UNESCO, 2021). Many rural families depended on children's labour for farming, herding animals, fetching water or caring for younger siblings, especially during peak agricultural seasons. As a result, absenteeism tended to increase during planting, weeding and harvesting periods, creating significant disruptions in pupils' learning (World Bank, 2022; UNICEF, 2020).



In Zambia, absenteeism remained a major concern for the Ministry of Education (MoE), particularly in rural districts where poverty levels are high and access to basic services is limited. National education reports indicated that rural pupils missed more school days than their urban counterparts due to hunger, illness, long walking distances, poor school infrastructure and limited parental supervision (MoE, 2022; CSO, 2023). The Ministry's National Assessment Survey revealed that absenteeism contributed significantly to poor literacy and numeracy outcomes in early grades, with many pupils struggling to read at the expected level because they missed foundational lessons (MoE, 2021).

This challenge was further compounded by the fact that many rural schools lacked adequate teaching materials, trained teachers and supportive learning environments, making it difficult for pupils to remain motivated to attend school regularly (UNICEF Zambia, 2022).

Studies conducted in Eastern Province, where Mtowe Primary School was located, also highlighted the seriousness of absenteeism in rural communities. Research by Chileshe (2018) found that absenteeism increased sharply during the rainy season when rivers became difficult to cross and roads became muddy, making the journey to school unsafe for younger children. Tembo (2020) reported that many pupils in rural Chipata and Lundazi districts missed school during farming seasons because they were required to help their parents with field work. These findings were consistent with national trends showing that agricultural activities played a major role in shaping school attendance patterns in rural Zambia (CSO, 2023; MoE, 2022).

At Mtowe Primary School, absenteeism has been a long standing issue that affected pupils' academic performance and overall school participation.

Teachers reported that many pupils stayed away from school due to hunger, especially during the lean season when households experienced food shortages (Mtowe School Report, 2023). Hunger and malnutrition has been identified as major contributors to absenteeism in rural Zambia, with UNICEF Zambia (2022) noting that children who attended school without eating were more likely to feel weak, lose concentration and eventually stay home. In addition, some pupils lacked school uniforms, shoes or basic learning materials, which made them feel embarrassed to attend school, especially when their peers were better equipped (Banda & Tembo, 2020; CSO, 2023).

Health related challenges also played a significant role in absenteeism. Many pupils in rural areas suffered from malaria, diarrhoea, respiratory infections and other illnesses that kept them away from school for extended periods (Zambia Ministry of Health, 2023). Poor access to healthcare services, long distances to clinics and limited health awareness among parents made it difficult for children to receive timely treatment,



resulting in prolonged absenteeism (MoH, 2022). At Mtowe Primary School, teachers reported that sickness was one of the most common reasons for absenteeism, particularly during the rainy season when malaria cases increased.

Cultural and social factors further influenced absenteeism in rural Zambia. In some communities, early marriages, initiation ceremonies and traditional beliefs affected pupils' attendance, especially for girls (Phiri, 2021; UNICEF Zambia, 2022). Some parents did not prioritise education, believing that children—particularly girls—were better suited for domestic roles or early marriage. This mindset contributed to irregular attendance and increased dropout rates among female pupils (Chileshe, 2018; Banda & Tembo, 2020).

Given this complex background, absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School could not be understood in isolation. It was part of a broader pattern of educational challenges faced by rural communities in Zambia and across sub-Saharan Africa. The issue required a comprehensive investigation that examined the multiple dimensions of absenteeism and how they interacted to influence pupils' attendance patterns.

The present study therefore aimed to explore these factors in depth, drawing on both quantitative data from school records and qualitative insights from teachers, parents and community members.

2. Problem Statement

Despite the Government of Zambia's continued efforts to promote universal access to education, Mtowe Primary School in Chipata District continued to experience high levels of pupil absenteeism. This challenge persisted even though the Ministry of Education (MoE) has introduced several policies aimed at improving school attendance, such as the Free Primary Education Policy, the School Feeding Programme in selected districts, and community sensitisation campaigns (MoE, 2022). However, these interventions did not fully address the problem at Mtowe Primary School, where absenteeism remained a major barrier to effective teaching and learning. School attendance registers showed that many pupils missed classes for several days each month, while others stayed away for long periods without providing valid reasons (Mtowe School Attendance Register, 2023). This pattern of irregular attendance disrupted learning continuity and made it difficult for teachers to complete the syllabus on time.

Teachers at Mtowe Primary School reported that absenteeism contributed significantly to poor academic performance among pupils.

Many learners who missed school frequently struggled to read, write and solve basic mathematical problems because they lacked consistent exposure to classroom



instruction (Phiri, 2021). Research conducted in Zambia showed that absenteeism was strongly associated with poor literacy and numeracy outcomes, especially in early grades where foundational skills were taught (MoE, 2021; UNICEF Zambia, 2022). Pupils who missed lessons often fell behind their peers, lost confidence in their academic abilities and became less motivated to attend school regularly. Over time, this cycle of absenteeism and poor performance increased the likelihood of grade repetition and eventual dropout (Banda & Tembo, 2020; Chileshe, 2018).

The problem of absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School was further complicated by the socio economic conditions of the surrounding community. Many households in the area depended on subsistence farming, which required children to participate in agricultural activities such as planting, weeding and harvesting (Tembo, 2020). As a result, absenteeism tended to increase during farming seasons when pupils were expected to help their parents in the fields.

This trend was consistent with findings from other rural districts in Eastern Province, where children's labour was considered essential for household survival (Chileshe, 2018; CSO, 2023). Poverty also played a major role in absenteeism, as some pupils lacked school uniforms, shoes or basic learning materials, making them feel embarrassed to attend school (Banda & Tembo, 2020). In addition, hunger and food insecurity caused many pupils to stay home, especially during the lean season when households experienced shortages of food (UNICEF Zambia, 2022).

Health related challenges also contributed to absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School. Many pupils suffered from malaria, diarrhoea, respiratory infections and other illnesses that kept them away from school for extended periods (Zambia Ministry of Health, 2023). Poor access to healthcare services, long distances to clinics and limited health awareness among parents made it difficult for children to receive timely treatment, resulting in prolonged absenteeism (MoH, 2022). Teachers reported that sickness was one of the most common reasons for absenteeism, particularly during the rainy season when malaria cases increased. This pattern was consistent with national health statistics showing that malaria remained one of the leading causes of school absenteeism in rural Zambia (Zambia Ministry of Health, 2023).

Cultural and social factors further influenced absenteeism in the Mtowe community. In some households, parents did not prioritise education, especially for girls, who were often expected to perform domestic chores or prepare for early marriage (Phiri, 2021; UNICEF Zambia, 2022). Traditional ceremonies, initiation rites and community events also caused pupils to miss school for several days at a time. These cultural practices, while important to community identity, often conflicted with school schedules and contributed to irregular attendance (Banda & Tembo, 2020). In addition, some parents



lacked awareness of the long term benefits of education, leading to limited supervision of their children's attendance (Mwale & Chirwa, 2019).

Despite efforts by teachers and school administrators to address absenteeism through home visits, community meetings and follow ups, the problem persisted. Teachers reported that some parents were uncooperative or difficult to reach, while others did not take absenteeism seriously (Mtowe School Report, 2023).

The school lacked adequate resources to implement more effective interventions, such as a school feeding programme, counselling services or transportation support for pupils who lived far away. As a result, absenteeism continued to undermine the school's efforts to provide quality education to all learners.

The central problem addressed in this study was therefore the continued presence of pupil absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School despite existing policies, interventions and community efforts. The persistence of absenteeism suggested that the underlying causes were complex and deeply rooted in the social, economic and cultural context of the community. This study sought to identify these underlying factors and examine how they interacted to influence pupils' attendance patterns. By understanding the root causes of absenteeism, the study aimed to provide practical recommendations that could help the school, parents and education authorities develop more effective strategies to improve attendance and enhance learning outcomes.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the major factors that contributed to pupil absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School in Chipata District. Although absenteeism has been recognized as a national challenge affecting many rural schools in Zambia, the specific causes and patterns of absenteeism varied from one community to another due to differences in socio economic conditions, cultural practices, school environments and household responsibilities (MoE, 2022; UNICEF Zambia, 2022). For this reason, it was important to conduct a focused investigation at Mtowe Primary School to understand the unique circumstances that shaped pupils' attendance patterns in this particular setting.

By examining absenteeism at the school level, the study aimed to generate detailed, context specific evidence that could guide practical interventions tailored to the needs of the Mtowe community.

The study aimed to explore how home based factors such as poverty, hunger, household chores, parental attitudes and health challenges influenced pupils' ability to attend school regularly.



Previous research in Zambia has shown that children from low income households were more likely to miss school due to lack of food, clothing, learning materials or parental support (Banda & Tembo, 2020; CSO, 2023).

However, the extent to which these factors affected pupils at Mtowe Primary School has not been fully documented. This study therefore sought to fill that gap by gathering detailed information from parents, teachers and pupils about the home related challenges that contributed to absenteeism.

The study also aimed to examine school based factors that influenced absenteeism. These included long walking distances, poor school infrastructure, and lack of sanitation facilities, overcrowded classrooms, limited teacher motivation and inadequate learning materials. Research conducted in Eastern Province showed that pupils who walked long distances were more likely to miss school, especially during the rainy season when roads became muddy and rivers became difficult to cross (Chileshe, 2018; Tembo, 2020). At Mtowe Primary School, teachers reported that some pupils lived far from the school and faced challenges reaching the classroom on time. The study therefore aimed to investigate how these school related factors contributed to absenteeism and how they could be addressed to improve attendance.

In addition, the study aimed to explore community based factors such as cultural practices, initiation ceremonies, early marriages and community attitudes toward education. In some rural communities, traditional beliefs and cultural expectations influenced whether children attended school regularly, especially girls (Phiri, 2021; UNICEF Zambia, 2022).

The study sought to understand how these cultural and social dynamics affected attendance at Mtowe Primary School and how community engagement could be strengthened to support regular school attendance.

Another important purpose of the study was to examine the effects of absenteeism on pupils' academic performance and classroom participation. Teachers at Mtowe Primary School reported that pupils who missed school frequently struggled to keep up with lessons, performed poorly in tests and became less confident in their academic abilities (Mtowe School Report, 2023).

These observations were consistent with national and international research showing that absenteeism has a negative impact on learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2021; Rogers & Feller, 2018). The study therefore aimed to document the specific academic consequences of absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School and highlight the importance of regular attendance for educational success.



Finally, the study aimed to propose practical, evidence based strategies for reducing absenteeism and improving regular school attendance. These strategies were expected to be grounded in the findings of the study and tailored to the needs of the Mtowe community. Possible interventions included strengthening community sensitisation, improving school home communication, supporting vulnerable pupils, enhancing school infrastructure, and promoting parental involvement in education. By providing clear recommendations, the study aimed to support teachers, school administrators, parents and education authorities in developing effective solutions to the problem of absenteeism.

Overall, the purpose of the study was not only to identify the factors contributing to absenteeism but also to provide a foundation for meaningful action. By understanding the root causes of absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School, stakeholders would be better equipped to design interventions that improved attendance, enhanced learning outcomes and promoted educational equity for all pupils in the community.

5. Research Objectives

General Objective

To investigate the factors perpetuating pupil absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School of Chipata District.

Specific Objectives

- To identify home based, school based and community based factors contributing to pupil absenteeism.
- To examine the effects of absenteeism on pupils' academic performance and participation.
- To propose practical strategies for reducing absenteeism and improving regular school attendance.

Research Questions

- What home based, school based and community based factors contributed to pupil absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School?
- How did absenteeism affect pupils' academic performance and classroom participation?
- What strategies could be used to reduce absenteeism and promote regular attendance?

6. Characteristics of the Phenomenon

Pupil absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School displayed several distinct characteristics that reflected the broader educational challenges faced by rural communities in Zambia. One of the most notable characteristics was its seasonal nature, where absenteeism



increased sharply during specific times of the year. For example, absenteeism was highest during the farming season when pupils were required to help their families with agricultural activities such as planting, weeding and harvesting (Tembo, 2020; Chileshe, 2018).

This pattern was consistent with findings from other rural districts in Eastern Province, where children's labour was considered essential for household survival, especially in communities that depended heavily on subsistence farming (CSO, 2023; Banda & Tembo, 2020). Similar trends were reported in rural Malawi and Tanzania, where agricultural seasons significantly disrupted school attendance (UNICEF, 2020; World Bank, 2022). During these periods, many pupils stayed away from school for several days or weeks, resulting in significant learning gaps that were difficult to recover from. Another characteristic of absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School was its strong link to poverty and household economic conditions.

Pupils from low income households were more likely to miss school because they lacked basic necessities such as school uniforms, shoes, exercise books or pens (Banda & Tembo, 2020; UNICEF Zambia, 2022).

Poverty related absenteeism has been widely documented in Zambia, with national surveys showing that children from poorer households were more likely to miss school due to hunger, lack of clothing and inability to afford school supplies (CSO, 2023; MoGE, 2022). Studies conducted in rural Luapula and Northern Provinces also found that pupils often stayed home because they felt embarrassed to attend school without proper clothing (Mphande, 2017; Zulu, 2019).

Hunger was another major factor, as many pupils attended school without eating breakfast, and some stayed home when they felt too weak or hungry to concentrate in class (UNICEF, 2020; Zambia Ministry of Health, 2023). This challenge was particularly severe during the lean season when households experienced food shortages, making it difficult for children to attend school regularly.

Absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School was also characterized by health related challenges, especially during the rainy season when malaria, diarrhoea and respiratory infections were common (Zambia Ministry of Health, 2023).

Many pupils missed school due to illness, and some stayed away for extended periods because they lacked access to timely medical treatment. Rural communities often faced long distances to health facilities, limited availability of medicines and inadequate health awareness, which made it difficult for children to recover quickly (MoH, 2022; UNICEF Zambia, 2022). Teachers reported that sickness was one of the most frequent reasons for absenteeism, particularly among younger pupils who were more vulnerable



to disease. This pattern was consistent with national health statistics showing that malaria remained one of the leading causes of school absenteeism in Zambia (Zambia Ministry of Health, 2023; Chanda et al., 2019). Similar findings were reported in Kenya and Uganda, where malaria related absenteeism significantly affected learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2022).

A further characteristic of absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School was its association with long walking distances and difficult terrain. Many pupils lived far from the school and had to walk long distances each day, often crossing rivers or walking through muddy roads during the rainy season (Chileshe, 2018; Tembo, 2020).

These long distances made it difficult for pupils to arrive at school on time, and some stayed home when the journey became too challenging or unsafe. Younger pupils were particularly affected, as they lacked the physical strength to walk long distances consistently. Research conducted in rural Zambia showed that pupils who lived more than 3 kilometres from school were significantly more likely to be absent (MoE, 2021; CSO, 2023). Similar findings were reported in rural Ethiopia and Mozambique, where long distances were a major barrier to regular attendance (UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

Absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School was also influenced by cultural and social practices within the community.

Traditional ceremonies, initiation rites, funerals and community events often caused pupils to miss school for several days at a time (Phiri, 2021; Banda & Tembo, 2020). In some households, cultural expectations placed greater emphasis on domestic responsibilities, especially for girls, who were often required to perform chores such as cooking, cleaning, fetching water or caring for younger siblings. These responsibilities frequently conflicted with school schedules and contributed to irregular attendance (UNICEF Zambia, 2022; Chileshe, 2018). In addition, early marriages and gender based expectations influenced whether girls attended school regularly, with some parents prioritizing marriage over education (Phiri, 2021; MoE, 2022). Studies in Zambia's Southern and Eastern Provinces showed that cultural norms significantly affected girls' attendance and increased their risk of dropping out (Zulu, 2019; UNICEF, 2020).

Another characteristic of absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School was its connection to parental attitudes and levels of involvement. Teachers reported that some parents did not monitor their children's attendance or follow up when they missed school (Mtowe School Report, 2023). In some cases, parents did not fully understand the long term benefits of education, leading to limited encouragement for children to attend school regularly (Mwale & Chirwa, 2019). Research in Zambia showed that pupils whose



parents were actively involved in their education were more likely to attend school consistently and perform better academically (MoGE, 2021; UNICEF Zambia, 2022). Similar findings were reported in Malawi and Zimbabwe, where parental engagement was strongly linked to improved attendance (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2022).

Absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School also had a gendered dimension, with girls often facing more barriers to regular attendance than boys.

Girls were more likely to miss school due to domestic chores, menstrual hygiene challenges, cultural expectations and early marriages (UNICEF Zambia, 2022; Phiri, 2021). In some cases, girls stayed home during their menstrual periods because the school lacked adequate sanitation facilities or because they felt embarrassed to attend school without proper menstrual hygiene products.

These challenges contributed to higher absenteeism rates among girls, which in turn affected their academic performance and increased their risk of dropping out (MoE, 2022; Banda & Tembo, 2020). Studies in Zambia's Western and Northern Provinces also found that menstrual hygiene challenges were a major cause of absenteeism among adolescent girls (Zulu, 2019; UNICEF, 2020).

Finally, absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School was characterized by its cumulative and long term effects on pupils' learning. Pupils who missed school frequently struggled to keep up with lessons, performed poorly in tests and became less confident in their academic abilities (Mtowe School Report, 2023). Over time, these learning gaps widened, making it increasingly difficult for pupils to catch up. This pattern was consistent with research showing that absenteeism had long term consequences for academic achievement, grade progression and future educational opportunities (UNESCO, 2021; Rogers & Feller, 2018). At Mtowe Primary School, teachers observed that pupils who were frequently absent were more likely to repeat grades or drop out altogether. Similar findings were reported in Zambia's national assessment reports, which showed that absenteeism was a major predictor of poor academic performance (MoE, 2021; CSO, 2023).

Overall, the characteristics of absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School reflected a complex interplay of social, economic, cultural, and environmental and health related factors. Understanding these characteristics was essential for developing effective strategies to reduce absenteeism and improve educational outcomes for all pupils in the community.

7. Factors Related to the Phenomenon

Pupil absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School was influenced by a wide range of interacting factors that operated at the household, school, community and health levels.



These factors did not act in isolation; instead, they reinforced one another, creating a complex environment that made regular school attendance difficult for many pupils. Understanding these factors was essential for identifying the root causes of absenteeism and designing effective interventions.

Home Based Factors

Home based factors played a major role in shaping pupils' attendance patterns. Poverty was one of the most significant contributors to absenteeism, as many households in rural Chipata struggled to meet basic needs such as food, clothing and school supplies (CSO, 2023; Banda & Tembo, 2020). Pupils from low income families often lacked school uniforms, shoes or exercise books, which made them feel embarrassed to attend school. Similar findings were reported in rural Luapula and Northern Provinces, where children frequently stayed home due to lack of clothing or learning materials (Mphande, 2017; Zulu, 2019).

Hunger also contributed to absenteeism, especially during the lean season when households experienced food shortages. UNICEF Zambia (2022) noted that hunger reduced pupils' concentration and motivation, leading many to stay home.

Household responsibilities further contributed to absenteeism. Many pupils were required to perform domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning, fetching water or caring for younger siblings, especially in households where parents worked long hours in the fields (Mwale & Chirwa, 2019; Tembo, 2020). These responsibilities often conflicted with school schedules, causing pupils to miss classes. Studies in Zambia's Eastern and Southern Provinces showed that children's labour was considered essential for household survival, particularly during peak agricultural seasons (Chileshe, 2018; MoE, 2022). In addition, parental attitudes toward education influenced attendance. Some parents did not prioritise schooling, believing that children—especially girls—were better suited for domestic roles or early marriage (Phiri, 2021; UNICEF Zambia, 2022).

School Based Factors

School based factors also contributed significantly to absenteeism. Long walking distances were a major barrier, as many pupils lived far from Mtowe Primary School and had to walk several kilometres each day (Chileshe, 2018; Tembo, 2020).

During the rainy season, rivers became difficult to cross and roads became muddy, making the journey unsafe for younger children. Research in Zambia showed that pupils who lived more than 3 kilometres from school were more likely to be absent (MoE, 2021; CSO, 2023).



Poor school infrastructure further discouraged attendance. Some classrooms lacked adequate desks, ventilation or learning materials, making the learning environment uncomfortable (UNICEF Zambia, 2022; World Bank, 2022).

The lack of sanitation facilities, especially for girls, also contributed to absenteeism. Schools without proper toilets or menstrual hygiene facilities often experienced higher absenteeism among adolescent girls (MoE, 2022; Zulu, 2019). Teachers' attitudes and teaching methods influenced attendance as well. Pupils were more likely to attend school when teachers were supportive, motivated and consistent, but absenteeism increased when teachers were frequently absent or when classroom instruction was not engaging (UNESCO, 2021; Banda & Tembo, 2020).

Community Based Factors

Community based factors also shaped absenteeism. Cultural practices such as initiation ceremonies, funerals and traditional events often caused pupils to miss school for several days (Phiri, 2021; Banda & Tembo, 2020). In some communities, education was not prioritised, especially for girls, who were expected to perform domestic duties or prepare for early marriage (UNICEF Zambia, 2022; Chileshe, 2018). Community poverty also played a role, as families struggling to meet basic needs often viewed education as a lower priority compared to immediate survival needs (CSO, 2023; MoE, 2022). Limited community awareness about the long term benefits of education further contributed to absenteeism.

Health Related Factors

Health related factors were another major contributor to absenteeism. Many pupils suffered from malaria, diarrhoea, respiratory infections and other illnesses that kept them away from school for extended periods (Zambia Ministry of Health, 2023). Poor access to healthcare services, long distances to clinics and limited health awareness among parents made it difficult for children to receive timely treatment (MoH, 2022; UNICEF, 2020). Malaria was particularly problematic, as it remained one of the leading causes of school absenteeism in Zambia (Chanda et al., 2019; Zambia Ministry of Health, 2023). Poor nutrition and chronic illnesses also affected pupils' ability to attend school regularly.

Interaction of Factors

These factors interacted in complex ways. For example, poverty increased the likelihood of hunger, illness and lack of school materials, all of which contributed to absenteeism. Cultural expectations influenced household responsibilities, which in turn affected attendance. Long distances to school increased vulnerability to illness and fatigue, further reducing attendance. Understanding these interactions was essential for developing effective strategies to reduce absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School.



8. Global Statistical Scenario

Globally, absenteeism has been recognized as a major barrier to achieving quality education, particularly in low income countries. According to UNESCO (2021), millions of children worldwide missed school regularly due to poverty, illness, long distances, conflict and cultural practices. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report indicated that absenteeism contributed significantly to poor learning outcomes, with children who missed school frequently performing worse in reading and mathematics compared to their peers (UNESCO, 2021).

In many developing countries, absenteeism was closely linked to socio economic inequalities, with children from poorer households being more likely to miss school (UNICEF, 2020; World Bank, 2022).

In sub-Saharan Africa, absenteeism was widespread and often linked to structural challenges such as poverty, food insecurity, poor school infrastructure and limited access to healthcare (UNICEF, 2020; Moyi, 2011). Studies conducted in Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda showed that absenteeism increased during agricultural seasons when children were required to help with farming activities (World Bank, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). In Malawi, for example, pupils frequently missed school during the maize harvesting season, while in Tanzania, long walking distances and poor road conditions contributed significantly to absenteeism (UNICEF, 2020). Similar patterns were observed in Ethiopia, where girls missed school due to domestic chores and menstrual hygiene challenges (UNESCO, 2021).

Health related absenteeism was also a major concern globally. Malaria, diarrhoea and respiratory infections were among the leading causes of school absenteeism in many African countries (World Bank, 2022; UNICEF, 2020). In Kenya and Uganda, malaria accounted for a significant proportion of missed school days, particularly during the rainy season (UNESCO, 2021). Poor nutrition and chronic illnesses further contributed to absenteeism, especially in communities facing food insecurity (UNICEF, 2020).

Globally, gender disparities also influenced absenteeism. Girls were more likely to miss school due to domestic responsibilities, cultural expectations, early marriages and menstrual hygiene challenges (UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF, 2020).

In many African countries, girls missed several days of school each month due to lack of menstrual hygiene products or inadequate sanitation facilities (World Bank, 2022). These gender based challenges contributed to lower academic performance and higher dropout rates among girls.

International organisations such as UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank emphasized the need for targeted interventions to reduce absenteeism. These



interventions included school feeding programmes, improved sanitation facilities, community sensitisation, teacher training and support for vulnerable pupils (UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

Countries that implemented such interventions reported improvements in attendance and learning outcomes, demonstrating the importance of addressing absenteeism through comprehensive, multi sectorial approaches.

9. Local Statistical Scenario

At the national level, Zambia continued to face significant challenges related to pupil absenteeism, particularly in rural districts such as Chipata, where Mtowe Primary School was located. According to the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2022), absenteeism rates were consistently higher in rural areas than in urban centers due to poverty, long walking distances, hunger, illness, and limited parental involvement. National Education Statistical Bulletins showed that rural absenteeism rates often exceeded 20% during peak agricultural seasons, with some districts reporting even higher figures (MoE, 2021; CSO, 2023). These statistics highlighted absenteeism as a persistent national educational concern requiring targeted interventions.

In Eastern Province, absenteeism has been identified as one of the major barriers to achieving quality education. Provincial education reports indicated that many rural schools experienced high absenteeism during the rainy season when roads became impassable and streams overflowed, making it difficult for pupils to reach school safely (Eastern Province Education Office, 2022). A study conducted in rural Chipata and Lundazi districts found that absenteeism increased by more than 30% during the rainy season due to poor road conditions, flooding, and the difficulty of crossing seasonal streams (Chileshe, 2018). These findings were consistent with reports from the Zambia Meteorological Department, which noted that Eastern Province experienced heavy rainfall patterns that frequently disrupted transportation and school access (ZMD, 2022).

Local school records from Mtowe Primary School reflected these broader provincial trends. Attendance registers showed that absenteeism was highest between December and March, which coincided with the rainy season and peak malaria transmission period (Mtowe School Attendance Register, 2023).

Teachers reported that many pupils stayed home due to illness, especially malaria, which remained one of the leading causes of school absenteeism in the district (Zambia Ministry of Health, 2023). Health facility data from Chipata District Health Office confirmed that malaria cases increased significantly during the rainy season, affecting school aged children more than any other age group (Chipata DHO, 2022). This health



burden contributed to prolonged absenteeism, particularly among younger pupils who were more vulnerable to disease.

Food insecurity was another major factor influencing absenteeism in the local area. According to the Zambia Vulnerability Assessment Committee (VAC, 2022), Eastern Province experienced periodic food shortages due to inconsistent rainfall patterns, low crop yields, and limited household income. These shortages affected school attendance because many pupils stayed home when they had not eaten or when they were required to help their families search for food or engage in piecework (locally known as ganyu) to support household survival (VAC, 2022; UNICEF Zambia, 2022). Teachers at Mtowe Primary School reported that hunger was one of the most common reasons for absenteeism, particularly during the lean season between October and January (Mtowe School Report, 2023).

Local cultural practices also contributed to absenteeism in Chipata District. Unlike other regions of Zambia, the Mtowe community did not practice dances such as Vimbuza or Gule Wamkulu. Instead, absenteeism was influenced by funerals, initiation ceremonies such as Chinamwali for girls, church programmes, and extended family gatherings, which often required children to be away from school for several days (Phiri, 2021; Banda & Tembo, 2020). Funerals in Eastern Province typically lasted several days, and because of strong cultural expectations around attendance, many pupils missed school during these periods (Zulu, 2019).

Initiation ceremonies, especially Chinamwali, also contributed to absenteeism among adolescent girls, who were sometimes withdrawn from school for weeks during the training period (Phiri, 2021; UNICEF Zambia, 2022).

Gender related challenges further influenced absenteeism in the local context. Research conducted in Eastern Province found that girls were more likely to miss school due to domestic responsibilities, menstrual hygiene challenges, and early marriages (Zulu, 2019; UNICEF Zambia, 2022). Many rural schools, including Mtowe Primary School, lacked adequate sanitation facilities, making it difficult for girls to manage their menstrual periods comfortably. As a result, some girls stayed home during menstruation, contributing to higher absenteeism rates among female pupils (MoE, 2022). In addition, early marriages remained a concern in some rural communities, with girls dropping out of school or attending irregularly due to marital expectations (Phiri, 2021; CSO, 2023).

Local economic conditions further shaped absenteeism patterns. Chipata District had a high poverty rate, with many households relying on subsistence farming and informal labour for survival (CSO, 2023). During peak agricultural seasons, children were often required to help with farming activities such as planting, weeding, and harvesting,



leading to increased absenteeism (Tembo, 2020). In some cases, pupils missed school to engage in small scale trading or piecework to support household income, especially in households headed by single parents or grandparents (Mwale & Chirwa, 2019). These economic pressures made it difficult for families to prioritise education over immediate survival needs.

School level data from Mtowe Primary School also revealed structural challenges that contributed to absenteeism. The school had limited classroom space, inadequate desks, insufficient learning materials, and a shortage of trained teachers (Mtowe School Report, 2023).

These challenges created an uncondusive learning environment that discouraged regular attendance. Similar findings were reported in other rural schools in Eastern Province, where poor infrastructure and limited resources contributed to absenteeism and low academic performance (Eastern Province Education Office, 2022; UNICEF Zambia, 2022).

10. Scope of the Study

This study was deliberately limited to Mtowe Primary School in Chipata District of Eastern Province, Zambia.

The school was selected because it reflected the typical challenges faced by rural schools in the region, including high poverty levels, long walking distances, food insecurity, and limited access to health services. Provincial education reports consistently highlighted Chipata District as an area where absenteeism remained a persistent problem, especially during the rainy and farming seasons when pupils faced increased barriers to attending school (Eastern Province Education Office, 2022; Chileshe, 2018; CSO, 2023). Focusing on one school allowed the study to explore absenteeism in depth and capture the specific realities of the Mtowe community.

The study concentrated on pupil absenteeism and the factors that contributed to it. It examined influences arising from the home, school, community and health environment. These included poverty, hunger, household responsibilities, parental attitudes, long distances to school, inadequate infrastructure, cultural practices, funerals, initiation ceremonies, church programmes, and illnesses such as malaria and diarrhoea. These themes were selected because they had been widely identified in Zambia as major contributors to absenteeism in rural schools (MoE, 2022; UNICEF Zambia, 2022; Zambia Ministry of Health, 2023). The study did not attempt to investigate broader educational issues such as teacher absenteeism, curriculum implementation or school financing, as these were beyond the intended focus.



The study population included pupils in Grades 1 to 7, teachers, parents and selected community members associated with Mtowe Primary School. Pupils were the primary subjects because they were directly affected by absenteeism.

Teachers provided professional insights into attendance patterns and academic consequences, while parents and guardians offered perspectives on household conditions and cultural expectations.

Community members contributed broader views on local customs and social practices that influenced school attendance. Secondary school pupils and teachers were not included because the study focused exclusively on primary education.

The study covered absenteeism patterns observed during the 2023 academic year. This period included both the rainy and dry seasons, allowing the research to capture seasonal variations in attendance.

Absenteeism in rural Zambia often fluctuated across seasons, with higher rates during the rainy season due to malaria, flooding and poor road conditions, and during the farming season due to agricultural labour demands (Eastern Province Education Office, 2022; Chipata DHO, 2022). Limiting the study to one academic year ensured that the findings reflected a complete cycle of attendance challenges.

A mixed methods approach was used to collect and analyse data. Quantitative data were obtained from school attendance registers, which provided numerical evidence of absenteeism trends across different grades and seasons (Mtowe School Attendance Register, 2023). Qualitative data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions and observations involving teachers, parents and community members.

This approach made it possible to understand not only how often absenteeism occurred but also why it occurred, consistent with recommendations from educational researchers who emphasized the value of combining numerical and narrative data when studying complex social issues (Creswell, 2018; MoE, 2021).

The study focused specifically on identifying the factors perpetuating absenteeism and proposing practical solutions. It did not attempt to evaluate national policies such as the Free Primary Education Policy, the School Feeding Programme or the Re Entry Policy for girls.

Although these policies were relevant to the broader educational context, evaluating them would have required a larger study involving multiple schools and districts (MoE, 2022; UNICEF Zambia, 2022).



Instead, the study concentrated on localized factors affecting attendance at Mtowe Primary School and on generating recommendations that were realistic and applicable within the community.

The scope of the study was intentionally narrow to allow for a detailed examination of absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School. By focusing on a single school, a defined set of themes, selected participants and a specific timeframe, the study generated context specific insights that could inform practical interventions aimed at improving school attendance. The scope also ensured that the research remained manageable and achievable within the available time, resources and methodological constraints.

11. Usefulness of the Study in the Present Scenario

The study generated evidence with immediate and practical value for education stakeholders working to improve school attendance in rural Zambia. For district planners and school administrators, the detailed attendance patterns broken down by grade, season and gender provided a factual basis for prioritizing follow ups and allocating limited resources.

These data supported a shift from assumptions to evidence driven planning, consistent with the Ministry of Education's call for data guided school improvement strategies (MoE, 2022; Eastern Province Education Office, 2022). The UNICEF-ECZ absenteeism review also stressed the importance of localised attendance data for effective planning (UNICEF & ECZ, 2013). Studies in Nyimba, Petauke and Chadiza confirmed that district level planning improved when schools supplied disaggregated attendance data (Muyatwa, 2018; Phiri, 2021; Tembo, 2020).

The Zambia Education Statistical Bulletin further showed that rural districts benefited from school level monitoring (CSO, 2023).

For School Management Committees and community leaders, the findings revealed practical barriers that could be addressed through low cost, community based actions. The study identified gaps in communication between the school and households, unclear follow up procedures and inconsistent parental engagement.

These insights supported targeted capacity building efforts such as structured home visits, transparent attendance tracking systems and regular community sensitisation meetings. Similar approaches improved attendance in rural schools in Mambwe, Serenje and Lundazi, where community driven monitoring reduced chronic absenteeism (Chilala, 2021; Mulenga & Mwansa, 2020; Mwewa, 2025).

Evidence from Katete District also showed that strengthening school community coordination reduced absenteeism among lower primary pupils (Zimba, 2019). A



related study in Eastern Province found that community attendance committees improved daily participation (Mwanza, 2020).

For parents and guardians, the study provided clear evidence linking absenteeism to poor academic performance, reduced literacy levels and increased dropout risk. Many households were not fully aware of the long term consequences of irregular attendance, especially when children were kept home for domestic chores, farming activities or cultural obligations.

By presenting locally grounded data, the study encouraged parents to prioritise education and reduce avoidable absences. This aligned with national findings showing that parental involvement was one of the strongest predictors of regular attendance in rural Zambia (MoE, 2021; CSO, 2023). UNICEF Zambia (2022) similarly reported that children whose parents monitored attendance were more likely to complete primary school. Research in Chipata and Chadiza confirmed that parental attitudes strongly influenced attendance patterns (Tembo, 2020; Banda & Tembo, 2020). The Zambia National Assessment Survey also showed that absenteeism was linked to poor literacy outcomes (ECZ, 2020).

For health authorities, the study offered useful evidence showing how illness, especially malaria and diarrhoea diseases, directly affected school attendance. By identifying the periods when sickness related absenteeism peaked, the study supported targeted health outreach and strengthened collaboration between schools and clinics.

Chipata District Health Office reported that malaria cases were highest between December and March, and the study reinforced the need for intensified health education during this period (Chipata DHO, 2022; Zambia Ministry of Health, 2023).

National health surveillance data also showed that malaria remained one of the leading causes of absenteeism among school aged children (Chanda et al., 2019).

Similar patterns were documented in rural Mansa and Kasama, where malaria related absenteeism disrupted learning (Mwewa, 2025; Mulenga & Mwansa, 2020). A study by Sitali et al. (2017) confirmed that malaria was a major cause of missed school days in Eastern Province.

For NGOs and education partners operating in Eastern Province, the mixed methods findings provided rigorous guidance on which interventions were most likely to produce lasting improvements in attendance. The study showed that isolated actions, such as distributing uniforms or conducting one off sensitisation meetings, had limited impact when not supported by broader systems.



Instead, integrated approaches that addressed hunger, health, parental engagement and school community collaboration produced more durable results. This was consistent with evidence from Save the Children Zambia and UNICEF Zambia, which found that school feeding programmes and community involvement improved attendance in rural districts (Save the Children, 2021; UNICEF Zambia, 2022).

A study in Choma District also demonstrated that multi sectorial interventions produced the strongest improvements (Mulenga & Mwansa, 2020). Findings from World Vision Zambia (2021) further supported the effectiveness of integrated community school partnerships.

In academic and policy circles, the study contributed a detailed school level case that linked quantitative attendance data with qualitative insights into household conditions, cultural practices and school environments. This enriched the national evidence base on why absenteeism persisted in rural Zambia and demonstrated the value of combining numerical data with community narratives. Similar village level studies in Choma, Mpika and Katete showed that integrated monitoring produced more accurate and actionable insights than relying on national statistics alone (Mulenga & Mwansa, 2020; Chilala, 2021; Zimba, 2019).

The findings also complemented national research efforts such as the MoE Attendance Improvement Framework, which encouraged schools to adopt localised monitoring systems (MoE, 2022). Research by SACMEQ (2019) also emphasized the importance of school level attendance data for improving learning outcomes.

Practically, the study's recommendations were designed to be achievable within existing school and district capacities. These included strengthening follow up systems, improving teacher parent communication, supporting vulnerable pupils through community based initiatives and advocating for improved sanitation facilities to reduce gender related absenteeism.

By focusing on attendance patterns, seasonal risks and household vulnerabilities rather than general assumptions, the school and district authorities were positioned to demonstrate measurable improvements in attendance and to direct support where educational returns were highest. This approach aligned with findings from Muyatwa (2018), Tembo (2020) and Mwewa (2025), who emphasized the importance of context specific, low cost interventions in rural Zambian schools. Evidence from the Zambia Education Enhancement Project (2021) also supported the effectiveness of community driven attendance strategies.



Overall, the study provided timely, operationally relevant evidence that could strengthen the effectiveness, equity and long term impact of attendance improvement efforts at Mtowe Primary School and across rural Chipata District.

Its findings were valuable not only for immediate school level action but also for informing district planning, community engagement and future research on absenteeism in Zambia.

12. Operational Definitions

For the purpose of this study, absenteeism referred to a pupil's failure to attend school when school was in session, whether the absence was excused or unexcused. This definition followed the Ministry of Education's national guidelines, which classify absenteeism as any missed school day recorded in the attendance register (MoE, 2022). The Examinations Council of Zambia and UNICEF also define absenteeism as repeated or prolonged non attendance that disrupts learning and reduces academic progress (UNICEF & ECZ, 2013).

Chronic absenteeism referred to pupils who missed school frequently over a long period, regardless of the reason. In Zambia, pupils missing more than 20% of school days in a term are considered chronically absent (MoE, 2021). Studies in Nyimba and Mambwe districts also used this threshold when identifying pupils at risk of dropping out (Muyatwa, 2018; Chilala, 2021).

Excused absence referred to a pupil missing school for reasons considered valid by the school, such as illness, bereavement, or official family responsibilities. Schools in Eastern Province commonly accepted medical notes, clinic slips or parental explanations as valid documentation (Chipata DHO, 2022). This definition aligned with national attendance guidelines (MoGE, 2022).

Unexcused absence referred to a pupil missing school without a valid reason or without communication from parents or guardians. Examples included staying home for household chores, farming work or informal trading. Research in Chipata and Chadiza showed that unexcused absences were strongly linked to poor academic performance and early dropout (Tembo, 2020; Banda & Tembo, 2020).

Attendance rate referred to the percentage of days a pupil was present out of the total number of school days in a term or year. Schools in Zambia calculate attendance rates using daily registers, which are later compiled into monthly and termly summaries (CSO, 2023). The Zambia National Assessment Survey also uses attendance rates to measure school participation (ECZ, 2020).



Dropout referred to a pupil permanently leaving school before completing the primary cycle. Although dropout was not the main focus of this study, it was closely related to chronic absenteeism. National statistics show that absenteeism is one of the strongest predictors of dropout in rural areas (UNICEF Zambia, 2022; MoE, 2021).

Pupil related factors referred to personal circumstances affecting attendance, such as illness, hunger, lack of motivation or fear of punishment. Studies in Eastern Province found that malaria, diarrhoea and fatigue from long walking distances were common pupil related causes of absenteeism (Sitali et al., 2017; Chipata DHO, 2022).

Home based factors referred to conditions within the household that influenced attendance. These included poverty, domestic chores, farming responsibilities and parental attitudes toward education. Research in rural Zambia consistently identified home based factors as major contributors to absenteeism (Muyatwa, 2018; Tembo, 2020; CSO, 2023).

School based factors referred to conditions within the school environment that affected attendance, such as long distances, inadequate sanitation, and lack of learning materials or teacher related issues. Studies in Mambwe, Lundazi and Choma districts showed that poor school infrastructure discouraged regular attendance (Mulenga & Mwansa, 2020; Save the Children, 2021).

Community based factors referred to cultural and social practices within the community that influenced attendance. These included funerals, initiation ceremonies, church programmes and community gatherings. Research in Eastern Province found that cultural obligations often caused pupils to miss school for several days (Zimba, 2019; Banda & Tembo, 2020).

Health related factors referred to illnesses or medical conditions that prevented pupils from attending school. Malaria, respiratory infections and diarrhoea diseases were the most common health related causes of absenteeism in rural Zambia (Zambia Ministry of Health, 2023; Chanda et al., 2019).

Learning outcomes referred to the academic results achieved by pupils, including literacy, numeracy and overall performance. The Zambia National Assessment Survey showed that absenteeism had a strong negative effect on learning outcomes, especially in reading and mathematics (ECZ, 2020).

13. Chapterization

Chapter one introduced the study by explaining the background, the problem, the objectives, the research questions, the scope, the importance of the study and the key



terms used. This chapter set the direction of the research and explained why absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School needed to be studied.

Chapter Two reviewed literature from global, regional and Zambian studies on pupil absenteeism. It examined home, school, community and health related factors and showed how these issues affect learning in rural areas.

Chapter Three described the mixed methods design, the sampling, the data collection tools, the procedures followed, the analysis plan, the ethical steps taken, the timeline and the budget.

Chapter Four presented the results of the study. It showed the attendance patterns from the registers and the views of teachers, parents and community members, and combined these findings to give a full picture of the problem.

Chapter Five discussed the meaning of the results, linked them to the reviewed literature and provided practical recommendations for schools, communities and district officials. It also identified areas where more research is needed.

The References and Appendices section listed all the sources used and included the research tools, consent forms and other supporting documents.

14. Chapter Summary

Chapter One explained why absenteeism is a serious issue in rural Zambia, especially in schools like Mtowe where poverty, long distances, illness and cultural activities often keep pupils away from class (MoE, 2021; CSO, 2023).

It outlined the aims of the study, the guiding questions and the boundaries of what the study covered.

The chapter also defined key terms such as absenteeism and chronic absenteeism using national guidelines and findings from earlier studies (UNICEF & ECZ, 2013; Muyatwa, 2018). It described the mixed methods approach that would be used to understand attendance patterns and the reasons behind them.

In addition, the chapter highlighted how the study would help teachers, School Management Committees, district planners, NGOs and health workers by providing clear attendance data, seasonal trends and household level information that could guide better planning and support for pupils (Eastern Province Education Office, 2022; Save the Children, 2021).



The chapter ended by outlining how the rest of the thesis is organized, showing that the next chapters would review the literature, describe the methods, present the findings and give practical recommendations for reducing absenteeism and improving learning at Mtowe Primary School.

II. Literature Review

1. Overview

This chapter reviews the main studies and policy documents that explain why pupils in rural areas miss school and how absenteeism affects learning. The review is organised around four major themes that help to understand absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School. These themes are: (1) pupil related factors such as illness, hunger and motivation; (2) home based factors including poverty, domestic chores and farming work; (3) school based factors such as distance, infrastructure and teacher practices; and (4) community and cultural influences that affect school participation. The chapter begins with global and regional evidence, then narrows to national and district level studies from Zambia to show how absenteeism affects rural schools similar to Mtowe. The first theme looks at how sickness, hunger, long walking distances and lack of learning materials contribute to absenteeism. International studies show that illness—especially malaria—remains one of the leading causes of missed school days in sub-Saharan Africa (Chanda et al., 2019; WHO, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). Zambian research confirms that rural pupils often stay home because of fatigue, hunger and long travel distances, especially during the rainy season (MoE, 2021; CSO, 2023). Studies in Eastern Province also show that pupils who walk long distances are more likely to miss school when roads become muddy or flooded (Tembo, 2020; Eastern Province Education Office, 2022). Research from Malawi and Tanzania similarly found that long distances and poor road conditions significantly reduce attendance in rural schools (UNICEF, 2020).

The second theme reviews home based factors. Poverty, household chores, caring for siblings and farming responsibilities are major reasons why pupils in rural Zambia miss school. UNICEF and ECZ (2013) found that children from low income households had higher absenteeism rates. Research in Nyimba, Chadiza and Petauke districts also shows that parents' attitudes toward education strongly influence whether children attend school regularly (Muyatwa, 2018; Banda & Tembo, 2020).

Seasonal farming activities, especially during planting and harvesting, also pull children away from school (CSO, 2023; Mwewa, 2025). Studies in Kenya and Uganda also show that household labour demands are a major cause of absenteeism in rural communities (UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF, 2020).



The third theme focuses on school based factors. Poor infrastructure, lack of sanitation facilities, teacher absenteeism and limited learning materials can discourage pupils from attending school. Studies in Mambwe, Lundazi and Choma districts show that inadequate school environments reduce attendance, especially for girls who need safe and private sanitation facilities (Mulenga & Mwansa, 2020; Save the Children, 2021). National assessments also show that absenteeism is closely linked to poor literacy and numeracy outcomes (ECZ, 2020). Research from South Africa and Lesotho also found that poor school conditions and teacher shortages negatively affect attendance and learning (DBE South Africa, 2021; UNICEF Lesotho, 2020).

The fourth theme explores community and cultural influences. Funerals, initiation ceremonies, church activities and community events often interrupt schooling in rural areas. Research in Eastern Province shows that cultural obligations can keep pupils out of school for several days at a time (Zimba, 2019). Community beliefs about education also shape attendance patterns, with some households prioritising seasonal farming or social events over schooling (CSO, 2023). Studies in Malawi, Uganda and Kenya similarly show that cultural practices and community expectations strongly influence school attendance in rural settings (UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

Methodologically, the chapter reviews the strengths and weaknesses of different research approaches used in absenteeism studies. Quantitative studies provide attendance trends and patterns, while qualitative studies offer deeper explanations of why pupils miss school. Mixed methods studies in Zambia have been especially useful because they combine attendance records with interviews from teachers, parents and pupils, giving a fuller understanding of the problem (Chilala, 2021; Mwewa, 2025).

National reports also highlight the need for more school level data to support targeted interventions (MoE, 2022; UNICEF Zambia, 2022). The review also identifies gaps such as limited seasonal analysis, few village level studies and insufficient research linking absenteeism to specific household conditions.

Overall, the chapter shows that absenteeism is influenced by health, home conditions, school environments and community practices. These insights guided the design of the present study by highlighting the need for a mixed methods approach, seasonal data collection and close attention to household and school level factors affecting attendance at Mtowe Primary School.

2. Empirical Literature Review

Studies on pupil absenteeism in rural areas show similar patterns across Zambia, East Africa and other low income countries. Many pupils miss school because of sickness, long distances, hunger, poor school conditions and household responsibilities. Global studies by UNESCO (2021), UNICEF (2020) and the World Bank (2022) show that



illness—especially malaria—is one of the most common reasons for absenteeism in sub-Saharan Africa. In Zambia, malaria, diarrhoea and respiratory infections remain leading causes of missed school days, especially during the rainy season (Chanda et al., 2019; Zambia Ministry of Health, 2023; CSO, 2023). Research in Eastern Province also shows that pupils who walk long distances often miss school when roads become muddy or flooded (Tembo, 2020; Eastern Province Education Office, 2022).

Local studies provide more detailed evidence. Muyatwa (2018) found that pupils in Nyimba District frequently missed school because of farming work, hunger and household chores. Banda and Tembo (2020) reported similar findings in Chadiza, where many pupils stayed home to help with childcare or field work. UNICEF and ECZ (2013) also showed that children from poorer households had higher absenteeism rates than those from better off families. A study in Petauke found that pupils often missed school during the farming season because families depended on children's labour (Phiri, 2021).

Research in Malawi and Tanzania also confirms that household labour demands significantly reduce attendance in rural communities (UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF, 2020). A study in Uganda found that children in farming households missed up to 30% of school days during peak agricultural seasons (UNESCO Uganda, 2022).

School based factors also contribute to absenteeism. Mulenga and Mwansa (2020) found that poor sanitation facilities, lack of water and inadequate classrooms reduced attendance in rural schools in Lundazi and Mambwe. Save the Children (2021) reported that girls were more likely to miss school when toilets were unsafe or lacked privacy. National assessments by ECZ (2020) show that absenteeism is strongly linked to poor literacy and numeracy performance. Studies in South Africa and Lesotho also found that poor school environments, teacher shortages and overcrowded classrooms negatively affect attendance and learning (DBE South Africa, 2021; UNICEF Lesotho, 2020).

Research in Kenya further showed that pupils were more likely to attend school when teachers provided supportive learning environments and consistent routines (UNESCO, 2021).

Community and cultural factors also influence attendance. Zimba (2019) found that funerals, initiation ceremonies and church activities often kept pupils out of school in Eastern Province. CSO (2023) reported that seasonal farming activities, especially during planting and harvesting, caused large numbers of pupils to miss school. Studies in Kenya and Uganda also show that cultural obligations and community events regularly disrupt schooling in rural settings (UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). In Malawi, community expectations around initiation ceremonies were found to reduce



attendance for both boys and girls (UNICEF Malawi, 2022). A study in Tanzania also found that community level beliefs about early marriage and gender roles reduced girls' attendance (UNESCO Tanzania, 2021).

Methodologically, studies that used mixed methods provided the most complete understanding of absenteeism. Chilala (2021) combined attendance records with interviews in Mambwe and found that quantitative data alone did not explain why pupils stayed home. Mwewa (2025) used a similar approach in Kasama and showed that combining registers with household interviews helped identify hidden causes such as hunger, fear of punishment and lack of uniforms.

National reports also highlight the need for more school level data to support targeted interventions (MoE, 2022; UNICEF Zambia, 2022). Studies in Kenya and Tanzania also recommend mixed methods approaches to capture both attendance patterns and underlying social factors (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2022).

Overall, empirical evidence shows that absenteeism is caused by a combination of health problems, home responsibilities, school conditions and community practices. These findings guided the present study by showing the importance of collecting both numerical attendance data and qualitative information from teachers, parents and pupils.

3. Theoretical Review

Several theories help explain why pupils attend or miss school. These theories guide how absenteeism is studied and how solutions are designed.

The main theories relevant to this study are: the Ecological Systems Theory, the Health Belief Model, the Theory of Planned Behaviour and the Social Capital Theory.

The Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) explains how a child's behaviour is influenced by different layers of their environment, including the home, school, community and wider society. This theory is useful for absenteeism because it shows that attendance is shaped by many factors working together. Studies in Zambia and Malawi have used this theory to explain how home poverty, school conditions and community expectations influence attendance (UNICEF, 2020; MoE, 2021).

Research in Kenya also used this theory to show how family stress, school climate and community norms affect pupil participation (UNESCO, 2021). A study in Uganda found that pupils' attendance improved when school and community environments were supportive and predictable (UNICEF Uganda, 2022).



The Health Belief Model (HBM) helps explain how health problems affect attendance. It states that people take action when they believe they are at risk of illness and when they see benefits in taking preventive steps (Rosenstock, 1974).

This model is relevant because many pupils miss school due to malaria, diarrhoea and other illnesses. Studies in Zambia show that parents often keep children at home when they fear sickness or when health facilities are far away (Chanda et al., 2019; Zambia Ministry of Health, 2023). Research in Tanzania and Uganda also shows that health beliefs strongly influence school attendance during malaria seasons (UNICEF, 2020; WHO Africa, 2022).

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) explains how attitudes, social pressure and perceived control influence behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). This theory helps explain why some parents encourage school attendance while others do not. Studies in Eastern Province show that parents' beliefs about education strongly influence whether children attend school regularly (Banda & Tembo, 2020; Muyatwa, 2018). TPB also helps explain why pupils may skip school if they feel discouraged, unsafe or unsupported. Research in Kenya and Malawi also shows that pupils' attitudes and peer influence affect attendance decisions (UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF Malawi, 2022). A study in South Africa found that pupils' confidence in their ability to succeed strongly influenced their attendance (DBE South Africa, 2021).

The Social Capital Theory explains how relationships and community networks influence behaviour. Communities with strong cooperation, supportive leaders and active School Management Committees often have better attendance rates.

Studies in Zambia show that schools with strong community involvement have fewer cases of chronic absenteeism (Save the Children, 2021; Eastern Province Education Office, 2022). Research in Uganda and Kenya also shows that community support improves school participation (UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF, 2020). In Malawi, schools with active parent teacher associations recorded higher attendance among lower primary pupils (UNICEF Malawi, 2022). A study in Tanzania also found that community trust and cooperation improved school attendance and reduced dropout (UNESCO Tanzania, 2021).

Together, these theories show that absenteeism is influenced by health, home conditions, school environments, community beliefs and social relationships. No single theory explains absenteeism fully, but each one highlights different parts of the problem. For this reason, the present study uses a combined theoretical approach to understand attendance patterns at Mtowe Primary School.



4. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study explained how different factors worked together to influence pupil absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School. It showed that absenteeism was not caused by one issue alone but by the interaction of several conditions at the pupil, household, school and community levels. This understanding was guided by well established theories such as Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasised that children's behaviour was shaped by multiple layers of influence including the home, school, community and wider society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The Health Belief Model helped to explain how health risks such as malaria and diarrhoea affected attendance decisions (Rosenstock, 1974), while the Theory of Planned Behaviour showed how attitudes, social pressure and perceived control influenced whether pupils and parents valued schooling (Ajzen, 1991). Social Capital Theory also played an important role by showing how community relationships, trust and cooperation supported or weakened school participation (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000).

At the pupil level, the framework recognised that illness, hunger, long walking distances, lack of uniforms, low motivation and fear of punishment all contributed to absenteeism.

Studies in Zambia showed that malaria, diarrhoea and respiratory infections were among the leading causes of missed school days, especially during the rainy season when mosquito populations increased and water sources became contaminated (Chanda et al., 2019; Zambia Ministry of Health, 2023). The Ministry of Education (2021) also reported that hunger and fatigue from long distances were major barriers to regular attendance in rural districts. Similar findings were documented in Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda, where pupils who walked long distances or lacked basic learning materials were more likely to stay home (UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO, 2021; UNESCO Uganda, 2022). The World Bank (2022) further noted that poor health and inadequate nutrition were among the strongest predictors of absenteeism in rural African schools.

At the household level, the framework highlighted the influence of poverty, domestic chores, farming responsibilities, caring for siblings and parental attitudes toward education. UNICEF and ECZ (2013) reported that children from poorer households had higher absenteeism rates because they often lacked food, clothing and school supplies. Studies in Nyimba, Chadiza and Petauke showed that household labour demands, especially during planting and harvesting seasons, strongly influenced attendance (Muyatwa, 2018; Banda & Tembo, 2020; Phiri, 2021). In many rural households, children were expected to help with farming, herding animals, collecting water or caring for younger siblings, which reduced their ability to attend school regularly. Research in Kenya, Malawi and Uganda confirmed that household responsibilities and seasonal farming significantly reduced school participation (UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF



Malawi, 2022; UNICEF, 2020). Hungi and Thuku (2010) also found that poverty and household chores were major barriers to regular attendance in East African schools.

School based influences were equally important in the framework. Poor sanitation facilities, long distances to school, teacher absenteeism, lack of learning materials and unsafe school environments all contributed to absenteeism. Studies in Lundazi, Mambwe and Choma showed that inadequate school environments discouraged attendance, especially for girls who needed safe and private toilets (Mulenga & Mwansa, 2020; Save the Children, 2021).

National assessments by ECZ (2020) demonstrated that absenteeism was strongly linked to poor literacy and numeracy outcomes, showing that pupils who missed school frequently struggled to catch up academically. Research in South Africa and Lesotho confirmed that overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages and poor infrastructure reduced attendance and learning (DBE South Africa, 2021; UNICEF Lesotho, 2020). Spaul (2019) also showed that poor school quality discouraged pupils from attending regularly because they felt unsupported and unmotivated.

The framework also recognised the strong influence of community and environmental factors. Funerals, initiation ceremonies, church activities, seasonal farming and weather conditions all affected attendance. Studies in Eastern Province showed that cultural obligations often kept pupils out of school for several days, especially during funeral periods and initiation ceremonies (Zimba, 2019). CSO (2023) reported that farming seasons significantly affected attendance in rural Zambia because families relied heavily on children's labour. Research in Malawi, Kenya and Uganda found that cultural events and community expectations strongly influenced school attendance (UNICEF Malawi, 2022; UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF, 2020). Weather conditions, especially heavy rains, also made it difficult for pupils to reach school, a pattern observed across rural Zambia and East Africa (MoE, 2022; UNESCO Tanzania, 2021). The African Development Bank (2021) further noted that climate related disruptions such as floods and storms increasingly affected school attendance in rural communities. The framework showed that these factors did not operate separately. Instead, they interacted in ways that increased or reduced absenteeism. Illness was more likely when households lacked clean water or food; long distances became more challenging during rainy seasons; and cultural events had a stronger effect when parents did not value schooling. Studies in Zambia and East Africa supported this multi factor understanding of absenteeism (UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO, 2021; MoGE, 2022). Because of these complex interactions, the framework supported the use of a mixed methods approach, which many researchers recommended for understanding attendance patterns in rural schools (Chilala, 2021; Mwewa, 2025; World Bank, 2022).



5. Research Gap

Although many studies examined absenteeism in Zambia and other African countries, several important gaps remained, and these gaps showed why the present study was necessary. One major gap was the lack of detailed school level and village level data. National reports often provided general statistics but did not show specific attendance patterns for individual schools.

UNICEF and ECZ (2013) noted that many rural schools lacked accurate, disaggregated attendance records, making it difficult to identify which pupils were most affected. Studies in Eastern Province showed that attendance patterns differed widely even within the same district, meaning that district level data did not fully represent the situation in each school (Tembo, 2020; Muyatwa, 2018). The World Bank (2022) also reported that many African countries lacked reliable school level attendance data, which limited effective planning.

Another gap was the limited number of studies that combined attendance records with household information. Many studies focused on school factors alone, while others examined household conditions without linking them to actual attendance data. Research in Zambia often used attendance registers without exploring the home environment (MoE, 2021). Household surveys, on the other hand, rarely included detailed school attendance information (CSO, 2023). Mixed methods studies that combined both types of data were still limited, even though they provided deeper insights into the causes of absenteeism (Chilala, 2021; Mwewa, 2025).

Studies in Kenya and Tanzania also recommended combining school and household data to understand attendance more clearly (UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF, 2020).

A third gap was the lack of research on seasonal patterns of absenteeism. Most studies collected data at one point in time, even though absenteeism changed across seasons. Rainy seasons, farming seasons and malaria seasons all affected attendance differently (Chanda et al., 2019; Zambia Ministry of Health, 2023). Studies in Malawi and Uganda showed that seasonal labour demands significantly affected school participation (UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). However, few Zambian studies examined absenteeism across multiple seasons, leaving a gap in understanding how attendance fluctuated throughout the year. The African Development Bank (2021) also highlighted the need for seasonal education data in rural Africa.

There was also limited research on community and cultural influences. While some studies mentioned funerals and initiation ceremonies, few explored how cultural practices interacted with school policies and parental attitudes (Zimba, 2019). Research in Kenya and Malawi showed that cultural expectations strongly influenced attendance, but similar detailed studies in Zambia were scarce (UNICEF Malawi, 2022; UNESCO,



2021). Chimombo (2005) also showed that cultural norms significantly shaped school participation in Malawi, suggesting that similar patterns might exist in Zambia but remained under researched.

Gender specific absenteeism was another gap. Although girls often faced unique challenges such as menstruation, lack of privacy, early marriage and domestic expectations, few studies in Zambia examined these issues in depth (Save the Children, 2021; Mulenga & Mwansa, 2020). Studies in Tanzania and Uganda showed that gender norms strongly affected attendance, but similar research in Eastern Province remained limited (UNESCO Tanzania, 2021; UNICEF Uganda, 2022). Lloyd and Young (2009) also found that girls in rural Africa faced more attendance barriers than boys, especially during adolescence.

Finally, many studies identified causes of absenteeism but did not provide practical, low cost recommendations that rural schools could implement. MoE (2022) noted that rural schools needed simple, context appropriate strategies that matched their limited resources.

This gap made it difficult for schools like Mtowe to act on existing research. The World Bank (2022) and UNESCO (2021) also emphasised the need for practical, school level interventions in rural education.

Because of these gaps, the present study was designed to provide detailed school level data, combine attendance records with household information, examine seasonal patterns, explore cultural influences and offer practical recommendations for improving attendance at Mtowe Primary School.

6. Chapter Summary

Chapter Two provided a detailed review of the literature that helped to explain the major causes of pupil absenteeism in rural primary schools, with a focus on contexts similar to Mtowe Primary School.

The chapter showed that absenteeism was shaped by a wide range of interconnected factors rather than a single cause. It began by presenting global and regional evidence and then focused on national and district level studies from Zambia to show how absenteeism affected rural schools.

The chapter demonstrated that pupil level challenges such as illness, hunger, long walking distances and lack of learning materials were major contributors to absenteeism.

Research from Zambia and other African countries showed that malaria, diarrhoea and respiratory infections were among the leading causes of missed school days, especially



during the rainy season when disease transmission increased (Chanda et al., 2019; WHO, 2022; Zambia Ministry of Health, 2023).

Studies in Eastern Province reported that pupils often stayed home when roads became muddy or flooded, making it difficult to walk long distances to school (Tembo, 2020; Eastern Province Education Office, 2022). Similar findings were documented in Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda, where long distances and poor health conditions significantly reduced attendance (UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO, 2021; UNESCO Uganda, 2022).

The chapter also showed that home based factors played a major role in absenteeism. Poverty, household chores, farming responsibilities and caring for siblings were found to reduce school attendance. UNICEF and ECZ (2013) reported that children from poorer households had higher absenteeism rates because they often lacked food, clothing and school supplies. Studies in Nyimba, Chadiza and Petauke confirmed that farming seasons and domestic responsibilities frequently kept pupils away from school (Muyatwa, 2018; Banda & Tembo, 2020; Phiri, 2021). Research from Kenya, Malawi and Uganda supported these findings by showing that household labour demands and economic pressures strongly influenced school participation (UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF Malawi, 2022; UNICEF, 2020). Additional studies in East Africa showed that poverty and household chores were major barriers to regular attendance (Hungu & Thuku, 2010).

School based factors also contributed significantly to absenteeism. Poor sanitation, teacher absenteeism, long distances, lack of learning materials and unsafe school environments were identified as major challenges. Studies in Lundazi, Mambwe and Choma showed that inadequate school environments discouraged attendance, especially for girls who needed safe and private toilets (Mulenga & Mwansa, 2020; Save the Children, 2021).

National assessments by ECZ (2020) demonstrated that absenteeism was closely linked to poor literacy and numeracy outcomes. Research in South Africa and Lesotho confirmed that overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages and poor infrastructure reduced attendance and learning (DBE South Africa, 2021; UNICEF Lesotho, 2020). Spaul (2019) also found that poor school quality discouraged pupils from attending regularly because they felt unsupported and unmotivated.

The chapter further showed that community and cultural influences strongly affected attendance. Funerals, initiation ceremonies, church activities and seasonal farming were found to interrupt schooling in many rural areas. Research in Eastern Province reported that cultural obligations often kept pupils out of school for several days (Zimba, 2019). CSO (2023) showed that farming seasons significantly affected



attendance in rural Zambia. Similar findings were reported in Malawi, Kenya and Uganda, where cultural events and community expectations influenced school participation (UNICEF Malawi, 2022; UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF, 2020). The African Development Bank (2021) also noted that climate related disruptions such as floods and storms increasingly affected school attendance in rural communities.

The chapter also reviewed the main theories that guided the study. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explained how different layers of a child's environment influenced attendance (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The Health Belief Model showed how health risks affected school participation (Rosenstock, 1974). The Theory of Planned Behaviour helped to explain how attitudes, social pressure and perceived control shaped attendance decisions (Ajzen, 1991). Social Capital Theory highlighted the role of community relationships and cooperation in supporting school attendance (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). These theories provided a strong foundation for understanding absenteeism from multiple angles.

Finally, the chapter identified several research gaps that justified the present study. These included the lack of detailed school level data, limited studies combining attendance records with household information, insufficient research on seasonal patterns, limited attention to cultural influences, and inadequate focus on gender specific absenteeism. Many studies also failed to provide practical, low cost recommendations that rural schools could implement (MoE, 2022; World Bank, 2022; UNICEF Zambia, 2022).

Because of these gaps, the present study was designed to provide detailed school level data, combine attendance records with household information, examine seasonal patterns, explore cultural influences and offer practical recommendations for improving attendance at Mtowe Primary School.

Overall, Chapter Two provided a strong theoretical and empirical foundation for the study and guided the methodological choices presented in Chapter Three.

III. Research Methodology

1. Overview

This chapter presents the methodological approach used to investigate the factors perpetuating pupil absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School in Chipata District. The methodology was designed to ensure that the study produced reliable and valid findings that reflect the realities of rural schooling in Zambia. In educational research, the methodology chapter is essential because it outlines the systematic steps taken to collect, analyse, and interpret data (Creswell, 2014; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). The approach used in this study was shaped by the understanding that absenteeism is a



multidimensional issue influenced by socio economic, cultural, environmental, and school based factors. This complexity required a methodological framework capable of capturing both numerical patterns and lived experiences.

The methodological choices were guided by established research practices used in Zambia, especially in studies focusing on rural school attendance (Kasonde Ng'andu, 2013; MoE, 2018). Research conducted in Eastern Province has shown that absenteeism is often linked to poverty, long walking distances, seasonal farming, illness, and household responsibilities (UNICEF Zambia, 2021; MoE EMIS, 2022). Because of these diverse influences, the study adopted a mixed method approach to ensure that both quantitative and qualitative aspects of absenteeism were captured. Mixed method approaches are widely recommended for studies dealing with complex social issues in developing countries (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010; UNESCO, 2020).

2. Research Design

The study employed a descriptive survey design, which is widely used in educational research to describe existing conditions without manipulating variables. Descriptive surveys allow researchers to collect information from a large number of respondents at a single point in time, making them suitable for school based studies (Creswell, 2014; Cohen et al., 2018).

This design was appropriate because absenteeism is a natural phenomenon that occurs within the school environment, and the researcher needed to understand it as it happens. Descriptive surveys have been used in several Zambian studies examining absenteeism, dropout, and learning outcomes in rural districts such as Nyimba, Katete, and Lundazi (Mumba, 2019; Chansa & Chileshe, 2021; Mwansa, 2020). These studies found that absenteeism is influenced by factors such as poverty, child labour, illness, and long distances to school. The descriptive survey design therefore provided a framework for comparing the findings of this study with those of previous research.

The design also allowed the researcher to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data helped identify the frequency and patterns of absenteeism, while qualitative data provided deeper insights into the reasons behind absenteeism. Mixed method descriptive surveys are particularly important in rural African contexts where absenteeism is influenced by complex socio economic realities (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa, 2022). The Ministry of Education in Zambia also recommends descriptive surveys for school level research on attendance and learner welfare (MoE, 2018).

3. Universe

The universe of the study consisted of all individuals and records connected to teaching and learning at Mtowe Primary School. This included all pupils enrolled from Grades



1 to 7, all teachers, the head teacher, the senior teacher, and parents represented through the PTA. The universe also included school records such as attendance registers, class timetables, and school reports. These records provided objective evidence of absenteeism trends and helped validate information obtained from respondents.

Mtowe Primary School has an estimated enrolment of about 450 pupils and 12 teachers, which is typical for rural schools in Eastern Province (MoE EMIS, 2022).

The school serves a rural farming community where household responsibilities, poverty, and seasonal labour often affect pupil attendance. Studies conducted in rural Zambia have shown that absenteeism is strongly influenced by socio economic conditions, especially in communities where families depend on subsistence farming (UNICEF Zambia, 2021; Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2019). In such contexts, children often miss school to help with agricultural work, household chores, or caring for younger siblings.

Research in Southern Africa has also shown that rural absenteeism is influenced by long distances to school, poor nutrition, and inadequate learning resources (UNESCO, 2020; SACMEQ, 2017). Including the entire school community in the universe ensured that the study captured a wide range of experiences and perspectives. Attendance registers were particularly important because they provided historical data that helped identify long term patterns of absenteeism (MoE EMIS, 2022).

4. Sampling Procedure

The study used a combination of purposive sampling and simple random sampling to select respondents. Purposive sampling was used to select key informants such as the head teacher, senior teacher, class teachers, and PTA members. These individuals were chosen because they possess specialized knowledge about attendance patterns, school management, and community factors influencing absenteeism. Purposive sampling is recommended in educational research when selecting respondents who hold critical information (Kasonde Ng'andu, 2013; Patton, 2015). In Zambia, purposive sampling has been used in studies examining school dropout, early marriages, and absenteeism because school administrators and teachers often have deep insights into these issues (Mumba, 2019; Chileshe & Chansa, 2021).

Simple random sampling was used to select pupils from Grades 1 to 7. This method ensured that every pupil had an equal chance of being included in the study, reducing bias and increasing representativeness. Random sampling is commonly used in Zambian school based studies to ensure fairness and accuracy in data collection (Mulenga & Mwanza, 2020; MoE, 2018).



The combination of purposive and random sampling allowed the researcher to gather both expert insights and general learner experiences, which strengthened the validity of the findings.

Ethical considerations were also taken into account during sampling. Pupils were selected in a way that did not discriminate based on gender, academic performance, or socio economic background. Teachers and PTA members were informed about the purpose of the study and were assured that their responses would remain confidential. Ethical considerations are important in educational research because they help protect the rights and dignity of respondents (Creswell, 2014; Cohen et al., 2018).

5. Sample Population

The sample population consisted of 41 respondents drawn from different categories of the school community. These included the head teacher, senior teacher, seven class teachers, thirty pupils, and three PTA members. This sample was considered adequate because it included all key stakeholders who influence or experience absenteeism. According to Creswell (2014), small but well selected samples are acceptable in mixed method studies where the goal is to gain deep insights rather than statistical generalization.

Similar sample sizes have been used in studies on absenteeism in rural Zambia, such as research conducted in Nyimba and Katete districts (Mumba, 2019; Chansa & Chileshe, 2021). These studies found that small samples can still produce meaningful findings when respondents are carefully selected. The sample population in this study was diverse enough to provide a comprehensive understanding of absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School.

Teachers provided professional insights into attendance patterns, while pupils shared their personal experiences. PTA members provided community perspectives, which are important because absenteeism in rural Zambia is often linked to household responsibilities and cultural expectations (UNICEF Zambia, 2021; Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2019). Therefore, the sample population was well balanced and representative of the school community.

6. Sample Size

A total of 41 respondents participated in the study. The sample size was influenced by the rural location of the school, limited availability of respondents, and the need to balance depth and breadth of information. Small sample sizes are common in rural educational research due to logistical challenges such as long distances, limited resources, and seasonal farming activities that affect respondent availability (UNICEF Zambia, 2021; MoE, 2018).



In Zambia, many school based studies use sample sizes ranging from 30 to 60 respondents, especially when focusing on a single school or community (Kasonde Ng'andu, 2013; Mwansa, 2020). The sample size of 41 therefore falls within the acceptable range for educational research. The sample size also allowed the researcher to collect detailed information from each respondent, which is important for qualitative analysis (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015).

7. Sampling Area

The study was conducted at Mtowe Primary School, located in Chipata District of Eastern Province. The school is situated in a rural area characterized by high poverty levels, long walking distances to school, seasonal farming activities, and limited access to educational resources. These conditions often contribute to absenteeism, especially during the rainy season and farming periods (MoE, 2018; UNICEF Zambia, 2021). Chipata District has been highlighted in several Ministry of Education reports as an area where absenteeism remains a challenge, particularly in rural zones where children are expected to help with household and agricultural work (MoE EMIS, 2022).

Rural schools in Zambia often face challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, shortage of teachers, and limited learning materials, which can contribute to absenteeism (UNESCO, 2020; SACMEQ, 2017). The school's location also made it suitable for studying the impact of environmental factors such as long distances and poor road networks on attendance.

Research in Eastern Province has shown that pupils in rural areas often walk between 3 and 10 kilometres to school, which affects punctuality and attendance (Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2019; MoE, 2018). Therefore, the sampling area provided a realistic context for understanding absenteeism in rural Zambia.

8. Sources of Data

This study used both primary and secondary sources of data to ensure that the findings were comprehensive, credible, and grounded in the realities of Mtowe Primary School. Primary data were collected directly from respondents through questionnaires, interviews, and observations. These methods allowed the researcher to gather first hand information from pupils, teachers, and PTA members. Primary data are essential in educational research because they capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of respondents (Creswell, 2014; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

In the context of rural Zambia, primary data are particularly important because absenteeism is influenced by local socio economic conditions that may not be fully documented in official reports (UNICEF Zambia, 2021; MoE, 2018).



Secondary data were obtained from school attendance registers, Ministry of Education policy documents, previous research studies, and reports from organisations such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ). Attendance registers provided objective evidence of absenteeism trends over time, which helped validate the information collected from respondents. The Ministry of Education's Annual School Census (MoE EMIS, 2022) provided district level statistics on absenteeism, dropout, and enrolment patterns. Reports from UNICEF Zambia (2021) highlighted the impact of poverty, child labour, and long walking distances on school attendance in rural areas. UNESCO (2020) provided regional insights into absenteeism in Southern Africa, showing that rural learners often face barriers such as hunger, illness, and lack of learning materials. These secondary sources enriched the study by providing a broader context for understanding absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School.

9. Method of Data Collection

The study used three main methods of data collection: questionnaires, interviews, and observations. Each method was selected because it contributed unique strengths to the study and helped capture different dimensions of absenteeism.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires were administered to teachers and pupils to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaires included closed ended questions, which provided numerical data on absenteeism patterns, and open ended questions, which allowed respondents to explain their experiences in their own words. Questionnaires are widely used in educational research because they allow researchers to collect information from many respondents in a short period (Creswell, 2014; Kasonde Ng'andu, 2013). In rural Zambia, questionnaires are particularly useful because they can be administered even when time and resources are limited (MoE, 2018).

The use of questionnaires helped identify common causes of absenteeism such as illness, household chores, and long distances to school, which are consistent with findings from other studies in Eastern Province (Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2019; Mumba, 2019).

Interviews

Semi structured interviews were conducted with the head teacher, senior teacher, and PTA members. Interviews allowed the researcher to probe deeper into issues such as school policies, parental attitudes, and community practices that influence absenteeism. Semi structured interviews are widely recommended in qualitative research because they provide flexibility while maintaining focus (Patton, 2015; Cohen et al., 2018). In Zambia, interviews have been used in studies examining school dropout, early marriages, and absenteeism because they allow researchers to capture sensitive



information that may not be revealed through questionnaires (Chansa & Chileshe, 2021; UNICEF Zambia, 2021). Interviews in this study provided valuable insights into how poverty, farming activities, and cultural expectations contribute to absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School.

Observation

Observation was used to monitor classroom attendance, school environment, and pupil behaviour. The researcher used an observation checklist to record information such as punctuality, classroom participation, and the availability of learning materials. Observation is particularly useful in rural schools where some factors influencing absenteeism may not be captured through questionnaires alone (UNESCO, 2020). For example, the researcher observed that some pupils arrived late due to long walking distances, while others missed school because of poor weather conditions. Observation also helped identify environmental factors such as inadequate sanitation facilities, which have been linked to absenteeism among girls in rural Zambia (UNICEF Zambia, 2021; MoE, 2018).

10. Tools of Data Collection

The study used several tools to collect data, including questionnaire sheets, interview guides, observation checklists, and document analysis guides. Each tool was carefully designed to ensure that the data collected were accurate, reliable, and relevant to the research objectives.

Questionnaire Sheets

The questionnaire sheets were used to collect structured information from teachers and pupils. The questionnaires were written in simple English to ensure that pupils could understand the questions. Questionnaire sheets are commonly used in Zambian educational research because they allow researchers to collect large amounts of data efficiently (Kasonde Ng'andu, 2013; MoE, 2018).

Interview Guides

Interview guides were used to ensure consistency during interviews with key informants. The guides included questions on school attendance policies, parental involvement, and community factors influencing absenteeism. Interview guides are important because they help researchers stay focused while allowing respondents to express their views freely (Patton, 2015; Cohen et al., 2018).

Observation Checklists

Observation checklists were used to record attendance patterns, school environment conditions, and learner behaviour. The checklists included items such as pupil punctuality, classroom participation, and availability of learning materials. Observation



checklists are useful for capturing non verbal information that may not be reported by respondents (UNESCO, 2020; SACMEQ, 2017).

Document Analysis Guides

Document analysis guides were used to review attendance registers, class records, and school reports. These documents provided objective evidence of absenteeism trends and helped validate information obtained from respondents.

Document analysis is recommended in educational research because it provides historical data that can be compared with current findings (MoE EMIS, 2022; Creswell, 2014).

11. Tools for Data Analysis

Data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data from questionnaires were coded and analysed using frequencies, percentages, tables, and charts. These techniques helped summarise the data and identify patterns. Quantitative analysis is commonly used in educational research to present numerical data in a clear and understandable manner (Creswell, 2014; Cohen et al., 2018).

Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analysed using thematic analysis, which involves identifying recurring themes and patterns in the data. Thematic analysis is widely used in educational research because it allows for deep interpretation of respondents' views (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, thematic analysis helped identify major themes such as poverty, long distances, child labour, illness, and poor school environment. Similar analytical approaches have been used in studies on absenteeism in Zambia and other Southern African countries (UNESCO, 2020; Chansa & Chileshe, 2021).

The combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis strengthened the validity of the findings. Mixed method analysis is recommended for studies dealing with complex social issues such as absenteeism because it allows researchers to triangulate data from different sources (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010; UNICEF Zambia, 2021).

12. Limitations of the Study

The study faced several limitations that may have influenced the findings. Some pupils were absent on the day of data collection, reducing the number of available respondents. This limitation is common in absenteeism studies because the very issue being investigated affects participation (UNICEF Zambia, 2021). Limited financial resources restricted the researcher's ability to conduct follow up visits, which may have affected the depth of data collected.



Some parents were unavailable due to farming activities, which is common in rural Zambia where households depend on agriculture (MoE, 2018; Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2019). Younger pupils had difficulty understanding some questions, requiring the researcher to simplify explanations. Weather conditions, especially during the rainy season, affected travel to the school.

These limitations are typical in rural educational research and were acknowledged to ensure transparency and credibility (UNESCO, 2020; SACMEQ, 2017).

13. Difficulties Faced by the Researcher

The researcher encountered several difficulties during the study. Poor road networks made access to the school challenging, especially after rainfall. This is a common challenge in rural Zambia, where many schools are located in remote areas with limited infrastructure (MoE EMIS, 2022). Some respondents were hesitant to share information due to fear of being judged or misunderstood, which required the researcher to build trust and reassure respondents of confidentiality.

Time constraints arose due to school activities such as meetings, sports, and examinations. Language barriers were experienced with lower grade pupils who struggled to understand certain terms. PTA members were sometimes unavailable due to farming responsibilities. These challenges required flexibility and patience from the researcher and are commonly reported in rural educational research (UNICEF Zambia, 2021; Mumba, 2019).

14. Chapter Summary

This chapter presented and justified the methodological approach that was used to investigate the factors perpetuating pupil absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School. It explained in detail the research design that guided the study, showing why a mixed method approach was appropriate for capturing both numerical trends and the lived experiences of pupils, teachers, and parents.

The chapter also outlined the sampling procedures, describing how participants were selected to ensure that the study included a diverse and representative group of respondents who were directly affected by or knowledgeable about absenteeism.

In addition, the chapter discussed the data collection methods that were employed, including questionnaires, interviews, observations, and document analysis. Each method was described in terms of its purpose, strengths, and relevance to the research objectives. The procedures followed during data collection were also explained to demonstrate how accuracy, reliability, and ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study.



The chapter further outlined the data analysis techniques, showing how both quantitative and qualitative data were systematically examined to generate meaningful findings.

The chapter also highlighted the limitations and challenges encountered during the research process. These included logistical difficulties such as long distances, time constraints, and limited resources, as well as methodological challenges such as participant availability and the sensitivity of discussing absenteeism with some respondents. Despite these challenges, the study was successfully conducted, and the data collected were sufficient to address the research objectives.

Overall, the chapter provided a clear roadmap of how the study was carried out and established the foundation for understanding the results. The next chapter presented the findings and discussion, offering a detailed analysis of the patterns, causes, and effects of absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School.

IV. Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation

1. Introduction

This chapter presented, analysed, and interpreted the data that were collected from Mtowe Primary School in Chipata District. The purpose of the analysis was to address the research objectives, which sought to identify the major factors that perpetuated pupil absenteeism, examine how socio economic and cultural conditions influenced attendance, assess the effects of absenteeism on learning, and propose strategies for improvement. The study used a mixed method approach, combining quantitative data from questionnaires and attendance registers with qualitative data from interviews and observations. This approach was appropriate because absenteeism is a complex and multi layered issue that requires both numerical evidence and lived experiences to understand fully (Creswell, 2014; Kasonde Ng'andu, 2013).

The analysis followed the structure of the research objectives. Quantitative data were presented using tables, percentages, and charts, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The interpretation integrated both strands to provide a comprehensive understanding of absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School. The findings were compared with national and regional studies on absenteeism in Zambia, which consistently showed that rural learners faced multiple barriers to regular attendance (UNICEF Zambia, 2021; MoE EMIS, 2022). International studies also supported these patterns, showing that absenteeism in low income rural settings is often linked to poverty, distance, and household labour (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2018).

Furthermore, absenteeism was recognised globally as a major threat to educational attainment, especially in developing countries where structural inequalities, poor



infrastructure, and limited access to health services contributed to irregular attendance (UNESCO, 2019; African Union, 2020). The findings from Mtowe Primary School therefore reflected both local and global trends, reinforcing the need for context specific interventions.

2. Presentation of Data

Sample Description

A total of 41 respondents participated in the study. These included the head teacher, senior teacher, seven class teachers, thirty pupils, and three PTA members. This sample was considered adequate because it represented all key stakeholders who experienced or influenced absenteeism. Similar sample sizes were used in rural absenteeism studies in Eastern Province, where logistical constraints and small school populations made moderate samples appropriate (Mumba, 2019; Chansa & Chileshe, 2021).

The pupils who participated were drawn from Grades 1 to 7, ensuring that the study captured attendance patterns across different age groups. Teachers provided professional insights into attendance trends, while PTA members offered community perspectives. This diversity strengthened the reliability of the findings and ensured that the data reflected the realities of the school community.

The inclusion of multiple respondent categories also allowed the study to triangulate information, which is a key principle in mixed method research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). By comparing the views of teachers, pupils, and parents, the study ensured that the findings were not biased toward a single group. This approach was consistent with educational research practices in Zambia, where triangulation is encouraged to improve the credibility of findings (Kasonde Ng'andu, 2013).

Quantitative Results

Table 1

Cause of Absenteeism	Frequency	Percentage
Long walking distance	18	60%
Household chores	20	67%
Illness	14	47%
Lack of school materials	12	40%
Poor weather	10	33%
Hunger	16	53%
Peer influence	6	20%

The results showed that absenteeism was influenced by multiple overlapping factors. Household chores and long walking distances were reported most frequently. These



findings were consistent with national studies showing that rural children often missed school due to domestic responsibilities and long travel distances (UNICEF Zambia, 2021; MoE, 2018).

The high percentage of pupils reporting hunger (53%) reflected the economic challenges faced by many rural households. Hunger related absenteeism was documented in several Zambian studies, which found that children who attended school without eating breakfast often lacked concentration and motivation, leading to irregular attendance (Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2019; MoE, 2018). Internationally, the World Food Programme (2020) reported that school feeding programmes significantly reduced absenteeism in low income countries, highlighting the importance of nutrition in promoting regular attendance.

The 47% reporting illness also aligned with health related absenteeism patterns in rural Zambia, where malaria, diarrhoea, and respiratory infections were common among school age children (UNICEF Zambia, 2021; WHO, 2020). Poor weather conditions, especially heavy rains, were also cited as a barrier, which is typical in rural areas where roads become muddy and impassable during the rainy season (MoE, EMIS, 2022).

Table 2

Grade	Total Pupils	Average Days Absent	Highest Absence
Grade 1	65	7.2 days	18 days
Grade 2	58	6.8 days	16 days
Grade 3	62	8.1 days	20 days
Grade 4	55	5.9 days	14 days
Grade 5	48	6.4 days	15 days
Grade 6	42	5.1 days	12 days
Grade 7	40	4.8 days	10 days

Absenteeism was highest in lower grades. Younger pupils were more affected by distance, illness, and household chores. This pattern aligned with MoE EMIS (2022), which reported that lower grade learners in rural areas often struggled with mobility and health related challenges.

The higher absenteeism in early grades also reflected developmental factors. Younger children often required more parental support to prepare for school, and in rural areas, parents sometimes prioritised household labour over early education (UNICEF Zambia, 2021). International studies also showed that younger children in rural communities are more vulnerable to absenteeism due to dependency on adults for mobility and care (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2018).



Figure 4.1: Absenteeism by Gender

- Boys recorded an average of 6.1 days absent.
- Girls recorded an average of 7.4 days absent.

Girls missed more school due to domestic responsibilities such as water collection, childcare, and cooking. This gendered pattern was consistent with UNICEF Zambia (2021), which found that girls in rural areas often carried heavier household workloads. International studies also showed that girls in rural Africa face higher absenteeism due to gendered labour roles, early marriage pressures, and menstrual hygiene challenges (UNESCO, 2019; African Union, 2020). In Zambia, menstrual hygiene management was identified as a barrier to girls' attendance, especially in schools lacking adequate sanitation facilities (UNICEF Zambia, 2021).

Qualitative Findings

Theme 1: Long Walking Distances

Teachers and pupils reported that long distances were a major barrier to regular attendance.

“Some children walked more than 5 kilometres. Many arrived tired or late, and some stayed home.” — Senior Teacher

This challenge was common in rural Zambia, where many schools were located far from settlements (MoE, 2018). Internationally, long distances were identified as a major barrier to schooling in rural Malawi, Tanzania, and Kenya (UNESCO, 2020).

Long distances also increased safety concerns, especially for girls who walked alone early in the morning. Studies in Zambia reported that fear of harassment or wild animals discouraged some pupils from attending school regularly (UNICEF Zambia, 2021; MoE, 2018).

Theme 2: Household Chores and Farming

Parents and teachers explained that pupils, especially girls, were required to perform household chores before school.

“During farming season, pupils helped their parents in the fields.” — PTA Member

This finding matched studies showing that rural children often missed school during peak agricultural periods (Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2019). Similar patterns were reported in Ethiopia and Uganda, where children's labour demands reduced school attendance (World Bank, 2018).



In Zambia, rural households often depended on children for labour, especially during planting and harvesting seasons. This cultural expectation was documented in several studies, which found that children's labour contributions were considered essential for household survival (MoE, 2018; UNICEF Zambia, 2021).

Theme 3: Illness and Poor Health

Teachers reported that malaria, diarrhoea, and flu were common causes of absenteeism. "Malaria and diarrhoea were common. Sick children missed several days." — Grade 3 Teacher

Health related absenteeism was widely documented in rural Zambia due to limited access to clinics (UNICEF Zambia, 2021). International studies also showed that malaria is a leading cause of school absenteeism in Sub Saharan Africa (WHO, 2020).

In addition, poor nutrition weakened children's immune systems, making them more susceptible to illness. Studies in Zambia found that malnourished children were more likely to miss school due to frequent sickness (MoE, 2018; UNICEF Zambia, 2021).

Theme 4: Lack of Learning Materials

Teachers noted that some pupils stayed home because they lacked uniforms, books, or pens.

"Some pupils stayed home because they lacked books or uniforms." — Grade 5 Teacher
Poverty related absenteeism was highlighted in MoE (2018), which stated that lack of materials discouraged attendance. UNESCO (2020) also reported that lack of school supplies is a major barrier to education in low income countries.

In rural Zambia, uniforms are often required, and children without proper clothing sometimes felt embarrassed to attend school.

This psychological barrier was documented in studies on rural schooling, which found that children's self esteem and sense of belonging were affected by their appearance (Chansa & Chileshe, 2021).

Theme 5: Peer Influence

Teachers reported that some older boys encouraged younger ones to skip school. "Older boys encouraged younger ones to skip school." — Teacher Interview

Peer influence was identified as a factor in several rural absenteeism studies (Mulenga & Mwanza, 2020). Internationally, peer pressure was found to contribute to absenteeism in rural South Africa and Zimbabwe (UNICEF, 2019).



In Mtowe, some pupils were influenced by peers who preferred spending time at the trading centre or playing games instead of attending school. This behaviour was reinforced by the lack of strict parental supervision in some households.

3. Analysis of Data

Major Causes of Absenteeism

The findings showed that absenteeism was caused by a combination of socio economic, environmental, and health related factors. Household chores (67%) and long distances (60%) were the most common causes. Illness (47%) and hunger (53%) also played significant roles. These findings aligned with national absenteeism patterns reported in MoE EMIS (2022) and UNICEF Zambia (2021).

International research also supported these findings, showing that absenteeism in rural areas is often driven by poverty, illness, and labour demands (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2018). In Malawi and Tanzania, similar studies found that children missed school due to agricultural work, long distances, and poor health (UNESCO, 2019).

Influence of Socio Economic and Cultural Factors

The qualitative data revealed that socio economic conditions had a strong influence on attendance. Girls carried heavier domestic workloads, which reduced their school attendance.

Farming seasons led to increased absenteeism as children were required to help in the fields. Poverty limited access to uniforms and books, which discouraged attendance. These findings were consistent with rural education studies in Zambia (Chansa & Chileshe, 2021; Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2019). Internationally, similar patterns were observed in rural communities in Malawi, Kenya, and Ethiopia (UNESCO, 2020).

Cultural expectations also played a role. In many rural Zambian households, children are expected to contribute to family labour, especially during farming seasons. This cultural norm was documented in MoE (2018), which found that rural families often prioritised agricultural work over schooling.

Effects of Absenteeism

Teachers reported that absenteeism had negative effects on academic performance. Pupils who missed many days struggled to follow lessons, performed poorly in tests, and were more likely to repeat grades. Attendance registers showed that pupils with more than 10 days absent scored lower in literacy and numeracy assessments.

This finding supported MoE (2018), which stated that absenteeism was a major predictor of poor learning outcomes. International studies also confirmed that



absenteeism reduces academic achievement and increases dropout risk (UNESCO, 2019; World Bank, 2018).

In addition, absenteeism affected pupils' confidence and participation. Teachers reported that pupils who frequently missed school often felt left behind, which reduced their motivation to attend regularly.

4. Interpretation of Findings

The findings indicated that absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School was a multifaceted issue influenced by poverty, distance, health challenges, and household labour. The interpretation supported the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (Scoones, 1998), which explained how household assets and vulnerabilities shaped children's ability to attend school.

The findings also supported UNICEF Zambia (2021), which highlighted that rural absenteeism was driven by structural inequalities. Internationally, UNESCO (2020) reported similar patterns in rural schools across Sub Saharan Africa.

The study showed that absenteeism cannot be addressed through a single intervention. Instead, a combination of strategies targeting poverty, health, distance, and school resources was required.

5. Discussion

The discussion showed that distance and household chores were the strongest predictors of absenteeism. Girls experienced higher absenteeism due to gendered roles. Illness contributed significantly to missed school days, especially during malaria seasons. Poverty increased absenteeism by limiting access to learning materials.

These findings confirmed that absenteeism resulted from interacting socio economic and environmental conditions, consistent with MoE EMIS (2022) and Sikwibele & Mungoo (2019). International studies also supported these findings, showing that absenteeism in rural Africa is shaped by poverty, gender norms, and health challenges (UNESCO, 2020; WHO, 2020).

The discussion also highlighted the need for community involvement. Parents, teachers, and local leaders needed to work together to address absenteeism. This approach was recommended in several Zambian studies, which found that community engagement improved school attendance (Chansa & Chileshe, 2021; MoE, 2018).

6. Interpretation of Findings

The findings from Mtowe Primary School indicated that absenteeism was a deeply rooted challenge shaped by multiple interacting factors. The interpretation of these



findings required a holistic understanding of the socio economic, cultural, environmental, and school based conditions that characterized rural communities in Eastern Province. The patterns observed in this study were consistent with broader national trends, where absenteeism in rural Zambia was influenced by poverty, long distances, household labour, and health challenges (MoE EMIS, 2022; UNICEF Zambia, 2021).

Socio Economic Vulnerability and Household Survival Strategies

The findings showed that many households in Mtowe relied heavily on children for labour, especially during farming seasons. This reliance was not accidental, but rather a reflection of the economic realities of rural Zambia, where agriculture remained the primary source of livelihood (CSO, 2022). Families often prioritized immediate survival needs over long term educational goals. This interpretation aligned with the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (Scoones, 1998), which emphasised that households make decisions based on available assets, vulnerabilities, and livelihood strategies.

Internationally, similar patterns were observed in rural Malawi, Ethiopia, and Uganda, where children's labour contributions were essential for household survival (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2018). In these contexts, absenteeism was not merely a behavioural issue, but a structural outcome of poverty and limited livelihood options.

Distance as a Structural Barrier

Long walking distances emerged as a major barrier to regular attendance. This finding was consistent with MoE (2018), which reported that many rural Zambian pupils walk between 3 and 7 kilometres to school. The interpretation of this finding highlighted the structural nature of absenteeism: distance was not a choice, but a geographical reality shaped by settlement patterns, poor road networks, and limited school infrastructure. International studies also confirmed that distance is one of the strongest predictors of absenteeism in rural Africa (UNESCO, 2019; African Union, 2020). In Kenya and Tanzania, pupils who walked long distances were more likely to arrive late, miss morning lessons, or stay home during rainy seasons.

Gendered Labour Roles and Cultural Expectations

The interpretation of gendered absenteeism revealed that girls faced heavier domestic workloads than boys. This pattern was consistent with Zambian cultural norms, where girls are often expected to fetch water, cook, clean, and care for younger siblings (UNICEF Zambia, 2021).

These responsibilities reduced the time available for schooling and increased fatigue, leading to irregular attendance.



Internationally, gendered labour roles were identified as a major barrier to girls' education in Sub Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2020). In addition, menstrual hygiene challenges further contributed to absenteeism among girls, especially in schools lacking adequate sanitation facilities (African Union, 2020).

Health Challenges and Limited Access to Healthcare

Illness was another major factor influencing absenteeism. The interpretation of this finding highlighted the vulnerability of rural children to malaria, diarrhoea, and respiratory infections. These illnesses were common in rural Zambia due to poor sanitation, limited access to clean water, and inadequate health facilities (MoGE, 2018; UNICEF Zambia, 2021).

Internationally, the WHO (2020) reported that malaria alone accounts for millions of missed school days annually in Sub Saharan Africa. The interpretation of the findings from Mtowe therefore aligned with global evidence showing that health challenges significantly disrupt schooling.

Poverty and Lack of Learning Materials

The interpretation of poverty related absenteeism revealed that lack of uniforms, books, and pens discouraged pupils from attending school.

In rural Zambia, uniforms are often required, and children without proper clothing sometimes felt embarrassed to attend school. This psychological barrier was documented in several studies, which found that children's self esteem and sense of belonging were affected by their appearance (Chansa & Chileshe, 2021).

Internationally, UNESCO (2020) reported that lack of school supplies is a major barrier to education in low income countries. The interpretation of this finding therefore highlighted the need for targeted support to vulnerable households.

7. Discussion of Findings

Absenteeism as a Multi Layered Educational Challenge

The discussion of the findings showed that absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School was not caused by a single factor, but by a combination of socio economic, cultural, environmental, and health related challenges. This multi layered nature of absenteeism was consistent with national and international research, which emphasised that absenteeism in rural areas is shaped by structural inequalities (UNICEF Zambia, 2021; UNESCO, 2020).

The Interplay between Poverty and Education

Poverty emerged as the underlying driver of most absenteeism factors. Poor households relied on children for labour, struggled to provide learning materials, and lacked access



to healthcare. This interplay between poverty and education was documented in MoE (2018), which stated that poverty is one of the strongest predictors of irregular attendance in rural Zambia.

Internationally, the World Bank (2018) reported that poverty reduces educational participation by limiting access to school supplies, nutrition, and healthcare. The discussion therefore highlighted the need for poverty responsive educational policies. Cultural Norms and Gender Inequality

The discussion showed that cultural norms played a significant role in shaping absenteeism patterns. Girls were expected to perform domestic chores, which reduced their school attendance. This gendered pattern was consistent with UNICEF Zambia (2021), which found that girls in rural areas often carry heavier household workloads. International studies also reported that gender inequality contributes to absenteeism, especially in rural Africa (UNESCO, 2019). The discussion therefore emphasised the need for gender responsive interventions.

Environmental and Seasonal Factors

The discussion highlighted that environmental factors such as long distances, poor roads, and heavy rains contributed to absenteeism. Seasonal farming activities also increased absenteeism, as children were required to help in the fields. These patterns were consistent with rural education studies in Zambia (Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2019) and international research in Malawi and Tanzania (UNESCO, 2020).

Health and Nutrition as Determinants of Attendance

The discussion showed that illness and hunger significantly affected attendance. Pupils who attended school without eating breakfast often struggled to concentrate and sometimes stayed home. This finding aligned with studies showing that school feeding programmes reduce absenteeism (World Food Programme, 2020).

Health related absenteeism was also consistent with WHO (2020), which reported that malaria and diarrhoea are major causes of missed school days in Sub Saharan Africa.

School Environment and Teacher Absenteeism

Although not a major theme, some teachers reported that teacher absenteeism occasionally affected pupil attendance. When pupils expected that a teacher would be absent, some chose to stay home. This pattern was documented in MoE (2018), which found that teacher absenteeism contributes to pupil absenteeism in rural schools.

Parental Attitudes toward Education

Some parents did not prioritise education, especially for younger children. This attitude was influenced by low literacy levels among adults in rural Zambia (CSO, 2022).



Internationally, parental attitudes were found to influence attendance in rural Ethiopia and Malawi (UNESCO, 2020).

Lack of School Feeding Programme

The absence of a school feeding programme was mentioned by several teachers as a factor contributing to absenteeism. Pupils who attended school hungry often returned home early or missed school entirely. Studies in Zambia showed that school feeding programmes significantly improve attendance (WFP Zambia, 2021).

8. Chapter Summary

Chapter Four presented, analysed, and interpreted the data collected from Mtowe Primary School in Chipata District. The chapter used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explain the patterns, causes, and effects of pupil absenteeism. The findings showed that absenteeism at the school was not random, but a predictable outcome of the social, economic, cultural, and environmental conditions that shaped daily life in the community.

Quantitative results revealed that absenteeism was widespread across all grades, with younger pupils missing more days than older ones.

Girls recorded higher absenteeism than boys, mainly because of domestic responsibilities.

The most common causes of absenteeism reported by pupils included long walking distances, household chores, illness, hunger, lack of learning materials, and poor weather conditions. These patterns were consistent with national statistics from the Ministry of Education and international research on rural schooling.

Qualitative findings provided deeper insight into these patterns. Teachers, pupils, and parents explained that many children walked long distances to school, often arriving tired or late. Household labour demands—especially during farming seasons—frequently kept children at home. Illnesses such as malaria and diarrhoea were common and contributed significantly to missed school days. Poverty also played a major role, as some pupils lacked uniforms, books, or food, which discouraged regular attendance. Cultural expectations placed heavier domestic workloads on girls, further widening the gender gap in attendance.

The chapter also showed that absenteeism had serious academic consequences. Pupils who missed many days struggled to follow lessons, performed poorly in assessments, and were more likely to repeat grades.



Teachers reported that frequent absenteeism reduced pupils' confidence, participation, and motivation. These effects aligned with national and international studies showing that absenteeism undermines learning outcomes and increases the risk of dropout.

The interpretation of findings highlighted that absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School was a multi layered problem shaped by poverty, distance, gender norms, health challenges, and environmental barriers. The discussion emphasised that these factors interacted in complex ways, making absenteeism a structural issue rather than a matter of individual choice.

The chapter concluded that addressing absenteeism required comprehensive, community based, and multi sectoral interventions, including improved school infrastructure, support for vulnerable households, gender responsive strategies, and stronger health and nutrition programmes.

V. Key Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

1. Introduction

This chapter presented the key findings, drew conclusions, and outlined recommendations based on the data analysed in Chapter Four. The purpose of this chapter was to demonstrate how the results addressed the research objectives and to propose practical strategies for reducing pupil absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School. The findings were interpreted within the broader context of Zambia's rural education system and supported by international literature on absenteeism. The chapter also highlighted the implications of the findings for policy, practice, and future research.

2. Key Findings

The study generated several important findings that explained the nature, causes, and effects of absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School. These findings are presented according to the research objectives.

Findings on Major Causes of Absenteeism

The study revealed that absenteeism was driven by a combination of socio economic, environmental, cultural, and health related factors. Long walking distances emerged as one of the most significant barriers, especially for younger pupils who lacked the physical stamina to walk several kilometres daily. Many pupils arrived late, tired, or failed to attend altogether, particularly during the rainy season when roads became muddy and unsafe.

Household chores and farming activities also contributed heavily to absenteeism. Pupils, especially girls, were required to perform domestic tasks such as water collection, cooking, cleaning, and caring for siblings before attending school. During



farming seasons, children were often kept at home to help with planting, weeding, and harvesting. These responsibilities reduced the time available for schooling and frequently led to missed lessons.

Illnesses such as malaria, diarrhoea, and flu were common and frequently kept pupils away from school. Limited access to healthcare in rural areas worsened this challenge, as children often remained sick for several days without treatment.

Hunger and poor nutrition further affected attendance, with many pupils arriving at school without eating breakfast or staying home due to lack of food.

Poverty also played a major role, as some pupils lacked uniforms, books, or pens, which discouraged them from attending school. Poor weather conditions, especially heavy rains, made it difficult for pupils to reach school. Peer influence also contributed, as some pupils were encouraged by friends to skip school and spend time at the trading centre or playing games.

Findings on Socio Economic and Cultural Influences

The study found that absenteeism was strongly shaped by socio economic and cultural conditions. Poverty was the underlying factor, influencing hunger, lack of learning materials, and reliance on children's labour. Many households struggled to meet basic needs, making education a lower priority. Parents often depended on children to support household survival, especially during peak agricultural seasons.

Cultural expectations also played a significant role. Girls faced heavier domestic workloads than boys, including water collection, cooking, and caring for siblings. These responsibilities often reduced their school attendance and contributed to gender disparities in absenteeism. In addition, some parents did not prioritise education, especially for younger children. Low adult literacy levels in the community contributed to limited parental support for schooling, as some parents did not fully understand the long term benefits of education.

Findings on the Effects of Absenteeism

The study revealed that absenteeism had serious academic and social consequences. Pupils who frequently missed school performed poorly in literacy and numeracy assessments and struggled to follow lessons. Teachers reported that these pupils often felt left behind, which reduced their confidence and participation in class. Many pupils who missed several days of school found it difficult to catch up with the curriculum, leading to frustration and disengagement.

Absenteeism also increased the likelihood of grade repetition and long term dropout.



Pupils who missed many days were unable to keep up with academic demands, which placed them at risk of falling permanently behind. The study further found that absenteeism affected pupils' social development, as frequent absentees often lacked strong peer relationships and classroom engagement.

3. Conclusions

Based on the findings, several conclusions were drawn.

First, absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School was a structural problem rooted in poverty, distance, gender norms, and health challenges. It was not caused by pupil laziness or lack of interest, but by the difficult realities of rural life. The study concluded that absenteeism reflected broader socio economic inequalities that shaped children's daily experiences.

Second, socio economic conditions played a central role in shaping attendance. Poverty influenced hunger, lack of materials, and reliance on children's labour.

Without addressing poverty, absenteeism would continue to affect learning outcomes. Third, gender inequality increased absenteeism among girls. Cultural expectations placed heavier domestic responsibilities on girls, reducing their time and energy for schooling. The study concluded that gender responsive interventions were necessary to improve girls' attendance.

Fourth, health and nutrition were critical determinants of attendance. Illness and hunger significantly affected pupils' ability to attend and participate in school. Improving health and nutrition would therefore improve school participation.

Finally, absenteeism had negative effects on academic performance, participation, confidence, and long term educational progress. Addressing absenteeism required multi sectoral solutions involving the school, community, government, and development partners.

4. Recommendations

The following recommendations were proposed based on the findings and conclusions. Recommendations for the School

The school should strengthen attendance monitoring by keeping accurate registers and following up on frequent absentees. Regular sensitisation meetings with parents should be held to emphasise the importance of consistent attendance. Teachers should also provide remedial lessons and psychosocial support to pupils who fall behind due to absenteeism. The school should further collaborate with community leaders to address cultural practices that hinder attendance.



Recommendations for Parents and the Community

Parents should reduce household chores for school going children, especially during school days. They should also support children with basic learning materials where possible. Community members should work together to discourage loitering and ensure that children are not influenced by peers to skip school. Parents should also be encouraged to prioritise education and understand its long term benefits.

Recommendations for the Ministry of Education

The Ministry should introduce a school feeding programme to reduce hunger related absenteeism. More schools should be built closer to communities to reduce walking distances. Vulnerable pupils should be supported with uniforms, books, and bursaries. The Ministry should also deploy more teachers to rural schools to reduce teacher absenteeism and workload. Strengthening health education and school based health services would further support attendance.

Recommendations for NGOs and Development Partners

NGOs should support health and nutrition initiatives such as malaria prevention, deworming, and school feeding. They should also provide learning materials to vulnerable pupils and promote gender responsive programmes, including menstrual hygiene support for girls.

Development partners should collaborate with the Ministry of Education to implement community based interventions aimed at reducing absenteeism.

5. Suggestions for Further Research

The study recommended further research in the following areas:

- A comparative study of absenteeism between rural and urban schools in Eastern Province.
- An investigation into the impact of school feeding programmes on attendance.
- A longitudinal study tracking absenteeism over several years.
- A gender focused study examining barriers specific to girls' attendance.
- An evaluation of community based interventions aimed at reducing absenteeism.

6. Chapter Summary

This chapter summarised the major findings, drew conclusions, and outlined recommendations aimed at addressing pupil absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School. The analysis presented in the chapter demonstrated that absenteeism was not a single cause problem but a complex and interconnected issue shaped by multiple factors within the school, home, and wider community environment. The findings showed that absenteeism was strongly influenced by poverty, long walking distances, gender based responsibilities, health related challenges, and environmental barriers such as poor weather and inadequate infrastructure. These factors interacted in ways that made



regular school attendance difficult for many pupils, particularly those from vulnerable households.

The chapter concluded that absenteeism at Mtowe Primary School was deeply rooted in the socio economic realities of rural life. Poverty emerged as the most significant underlying factor, affecting children's access to food, learning materials, and healthcare. Gender norms placed heavier domestic workloads on girls, reducing their time and energy for schooling. Health challenges, especially malaria and diarrhoea, further contributed to frequent absences, while long distances to school discouraged younger pupils and those with limited physical stamina. The chapter also highlighted that absenteeism had serious academic consequences, including poor performance, reduced participation, and increased risk of repetition and dropout.

In response to these findings, the chapter presented a set of recommendations targeting different stakeholders.

The school was encouraged to strengthen attendance monitoring, provide remedial support, and engage parents more actively. Parents and community members were urged to reduce children's domestic workloads and prioritise education. The Ministry of Education was advised to introduce school feeding programmes, improve rural school infrastructure, and support vulnerable pupils with learning materials. NGOs and development partners were encouraged to assist with health, nutrition, and gender responsive initiatives. These recommendations reflected the need for a coordinated, multi sectoral approach to effectively reduce absenteeism.

The chapter conclude by noting that the next section of the dissertation would present the full reference list, which supported the study's analysis and provided the academic foundation for the findings and recommendations.

References

1. Abudu, A., & Fuseini, M. (2013). Causes and effects of absenteeism on basic school pupils in rural Africa. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 4(5), 1–9.
2. African Development Bank. (2021). Education and human development report. AFDB. Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.
3. African Union. (2020). Continental education strategy for Africa (CESA 16–25). AU Commission. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
4. Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 179–211.
5. Banda, L., & Tembo, M. (2020). Socio economic factors influencing pupil absenteeism in rural Zambia. *Zambia Journal of Education*, 12(2), 44–59.



6. Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, USA.
7. Central Statistical Office (CSO). (2023). *Zambia demographic and health indicators report*. Government of Zambia. Lusaka, Zambia.
8. Chansa, P., & Chileshe, H. (2021). *Household poverty and school attendance in rural Zambia*. University of Zambia Press. Lusaka, Zambia.
9. Chileshe, H. (2018). *Household responsibilities and school attendance in Eastern Province*. University of Zambia Press. Chipata, Zambia.
10. Chilala, M. (2021). Gendered barriers to education in rural Zambia. *Zambia Social Science Review*, 9(1), 33–48.
11. Chimombo, J. (2005). Quantity versus quality in education: Case studies in Malawi. *International Review of Education*, 51(2), 155–172.
12. Coleman, J. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, S95–S120.
13. Creswell, J. W. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th Ed.). SAGE Publications. Thousand Oaks, USA.
14. Eastern Province Education Office. (2022). *Annual education performance report*. Ministry of Education. Chipata, Zambia.
15. Examinations Council of Zambia (ECZ). (2020). *National assessment survey report*. ECZ. Lusaka, Zambia.
16. Hungi, N., & Thuku, F. (2010). Variations in reading achievement across 14 southern African school systems. *International Review of Education*, 56(1), 63–88.
17. Lloyd, C., & Young, J. (2009). *Schooling and adolescent development in Africa*. Population Council. New York, USA.
18. Ministry of Education (MoE). (2018). *Education statistical bulletin*. Government of Zambia. Lusaka, Zambia.
19. Ministry of Education (MoE). (2021). *National assessment survey report*. Government of Zambia. Lusaka, Zambia.
20. Ministry of Education (MoE). (2022). *Annual education performance report*. Government of Zambia. Lusaka, Zambia.
21. Ministry of Health (MoH). (2022). *National health sector performance report*. Government of Zambia. Lusaka, Zambia.
22. Moyi, P. (2011). Child labor and school attendance in Kenya. *Educational Research and Reviews*, 6(1), 26–35.
23. Mphande, S. (2017). Factors influencing absenteeism in rural primary schools. *Zambia Journal of Educational Research*, 5(2), 77–89.
24. Mtowe Primary School. (2023). *School attendance register and annual report*. Chipata District Education Office. Chipata, Zambia.
25. Mulenga, B., & Mwansa, P. (2020). Peer influence and school attendance among rural pupils. *Zambia Education Review*, 8(1), 55–70.



26. Mumba, S. (2019). Socio economic determinants of absenteeism in Eastern Province. University of Zambia. Lusaka, Zambia.
27. Mwale, N., & Chirwa, M. (2019). Barriers to school attendance among rural pupils in Zambia. *African Journal of Education and Development*, 7(3), 55–68.
28. Mwewa, T. (2025). School community partnerships and attendance improvement. *Zambia Journal of Educational Management*, 3(1), 12–26.
29. Mwanza, J. (2020). Seasonal absenteeism in rural Zambia. *Journal of Rural Education Studies*, 6(2), 41–58.
30. Phiri, J. (2021). Teacher perspectives on absenteeism in rural schools. Chipata District Education Office. Chipata, Zambia.
31. Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster. New York, USA.
32. Rogers, T., & Feller, A. (2018). Reducing student absenteeism in elementary schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 55(6), 1163–1206.
33. Rosenstock, I. (1974). Historical origins of the health belief model. *Health Education Monographs*, 2(4), 328–335.
34. SACMEQ. (2017). Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality report. SACMEQ. Nairobi, Kenya.
35. SACMEQ. (2019). Education quality indicators report. SACMEQ. Nairobi, Kenya.
36. Save the Children. (2021). Barriers to education in rural communities. Save the Children International. London, UK.
37. Scoones, I. (1998). Sustainable rural livelihoods: A framework for analysis. IDS Working Paper 72. Institute of Development Studies. Brighton, UK.
38. Sikwibele, A., & Mungoo, J. (2019). Household labour and absenteeism in rural Zambia. *Zambia Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(2), 22–39.
39. Sitali, D., et al. (2017). Health challenges affecting school attendance in Zambia. *Zambia Public Health Journal*, 3(1), 14–22.
40. Spaul, N. (2019). Learning deficits in sub-Saharan Africa. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Paris, France.
41. Tembo, S. (2020). Agricultural seasons and pupil absenteeism in Eastern Province. *Zambia Journal of Rural Education*, 5(1), 21–34.
42. UNESCO. (2019). Education for all global monitoring report. UNESCO Publishing. Paris, France.
43. UNESCO. (2020). Global education monitoring report. UNESCO Publishing. Paris, France.
44. UNESCO. (2021). Education and equity report. UNESCO Publishing. Paris, France.
45. UNESCO. (2021). School attendance and learning outcomes. UNESCO Country Office. Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
46. UNESCO. (2022). Barriers to education in rural communities. UNESCO Country Office. Kampala, Uganda.



47. UNICEF. (2020). The state of the world's children: Education and equity. UNICEF. New York, USA.
48. UNICEF. (2021). Global school attendance report. UNICEF. New York, USA.
49. UNICEF. (2022). Education and child well-being report. UNICEF Regional Office. Nairobi, Kenya.
50. UNICEF. (2020). Barriers to girls' education. UNICEF Lesotho. Maseru, Lesotho.
51. UNICEF. (2022). School attendance and nutrition report. UNICEF Malawi. Lilongwe, Malawi.
52. UNICEF. (2020). School attendance and learning outcomes in rural Zambia. UNICEF Zambia. Lusaka, Zambia.
53. UNICEF. (2022). Education and child well-being report. UNICEF Zambia. Lusaka, Zambia.
54. World Bank. (2022). Education challenges in sub-Saharan Africa. World Bank Publications. Washington, DC, USA.
55. World Food Programme. (2020). School feeding and attendance improvement report. WFP. Rome, Italy.
56. World Vision Zambia. (2021). Community education support programme. World Vision. Lusaka, Zambia.
57. Zambia Education Enhancement Project. (2021). Improving rural school attendance. Ministry of Education. Lusaka, Zambia.
58. Zambia Meteorological Department (ZMD). (2022). Seasonal climate outlook. Government of Zambia. Lusaka, Zambia.
59. Zambia Ministry of Health. (2023). Annual disease burden report. Government of Zambia. Lusaka, Zambia.