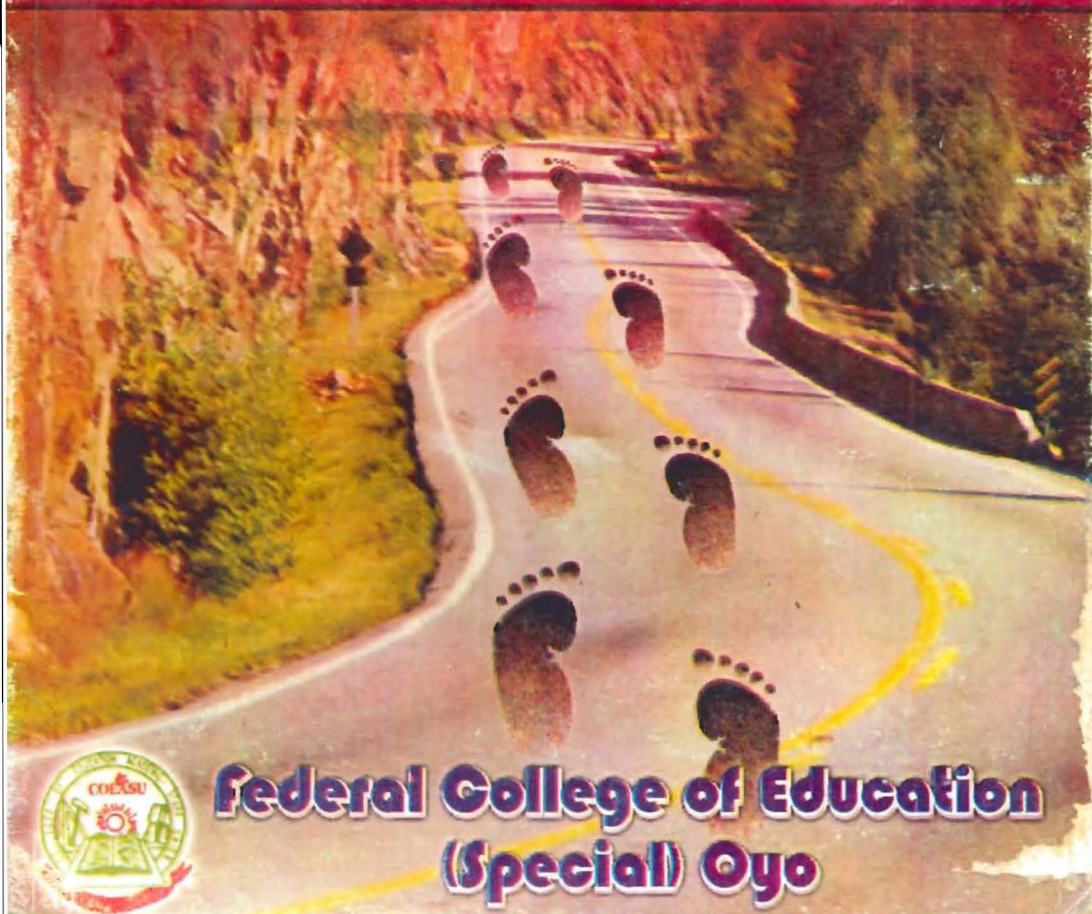


FOOTPRINTS

Journal of COEASU

Vol. 3 Number 1

August, 2004



**Federal College of Education
(Special) Oyo**

TRUANCY IN INSTITUTION OF LEARNING: ISSUES, PROBLEMS AND REMEDIES

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Abstract

Irregular attendance in school by students is one the major factors hat has been preventing the educational policies from attaining its objectives. Despite conscious efforts to eradicate this menace among learners the rate of its occurrence continue unabated. This paper is preoccupied with a number of issues that have been found to sustain the increasing wave of truancy in institutions of learning in Nigeria. The paper concluded that truancy would be reduced to its bearest minimum if government and non-government organizations, teachers and guidance counsellors cooperatively implement a number of practicable recommendations.

Introduction

An Overview of the Origin of Truancy

The establishment of schooling system required the students to leave their respective homes to attend school on regular basis. At the inception of schooling system attendance in the school was neither a legal requirement nor a mater of compulsion. Students were therefore allowed to come to the school at will. In such situation, hundred percent attendances on regular basis by all the students cannot be recorded.

Truancy, which is also known as non-school attendance behavior, has been described as one of the issues that have bedeviled schools from the inception of schooling (Coleman, 1986). This assertion is quite correct when one considers the fact

that non-attendance in school may be as a result of justified reasons.

Students' non-attendance behaviours during the inception of schooling were not taken to be serious probably because an ample number of students were involved. Greater attention was, however, accorded to this behaviour when its occurrence in the schools continues to increase astronomically. Several studies also revealed its association with education, social, behavioural, vocational, economic and heredity problems.

The period when due attention was given to it, however, varied from one country to the other. For instance, Galloway (1985) reported that in most parts of United States the problem of illegal absence dated back from 1876. Koizumi (1990) submitted that non-attendance in schools in Japan became a subject of academic discussion around 1960 though it was known as school phobia. Stoll (1993) also observed that during the past five years or so government in Britain has taken steps to address this problem. In Nigeria non-school attendance behaviour is yet to be accorded the right type of attention it deserves, most especially, from researchers and governments despite the increasing rates in the number of students who missed school on daily basis.

What is Truancy?

Truancy has been used to mean the same thing as absenteeism as well as a distinct term. Scholars who have used the term interchangeably include Reid (1984); Maguire (1985); Osarenren (1996). On the other side are scholars who maintained that absenteeism differs from truancy. This clear distinction is made known through their definitions of truancy. An indept analysis of these definitions also shows that a number of parameters have been used to determine whether failure to appear in the school in its strict sense is truancy or not.

For instance, absence from the school is considered to be truancy by Elburn (1983) it is without the knowledge of parents. On the other hand, the failure of the absentee to obtain permission to be absent from the school is considered to be truancy in the definition proposed by Osarenren (1996) and Medahunsi (2001). While Galloway (1985) considered lack of permission to be absent

from parents as an important factor in the definition of truancy. Adana (1987) and Bolarin (1996) preferred lack of permission from the school authority or approval of the school authority. It is, however, the contention of Robbins and Ratcliffe (1980) that absence from the school with and without the permission or approval of parents and / or school authority is truancy.

The analysis of truancy definitions also revealed that some of these definitions have their focus on reasons for absence. This is in terms of whether it is a justified or an unjustified absence. When an absence from school is without a legitimate cause Stoll (1990) and Aramide (1998) concurred that it is truancy. On the other hand, absence from school which lacks tenable or justifiable reasons in the view of Kaeser (1985): the Acts of Parliament Western Australia (1992) is truancy.

Winconsin (2000), however, posited that a case of truancy could only be established if the parents failed to provide valid reasons for a student's absence. From a slightly different point of view Bos, Ruifjers and Visscher (1992) submitted that the absence from the school must be without a reason considered valid by the school before it is referred to as truancy. If absence without a valid reason is considered to be truancy Hughes, Mitchell and Ramson (1992) in the same vein considered absence from school without explanation or leave as no less different. Similarly, the submission of Fitzgibbon (1996) is that absence in school is regarded to be truancy if it is persistent, habitual, and unexplained. It can occur with parental knowledge and sometimes consent. From the definitions given to truancy by these scholars, absence in school is truancy in its strict sense if it is:

- without the knowledge of parent;
- without permission;
- without parent's permission;
- without permission or consent of the school authority;
- with and without permission or approval from the school authority;
- without a legitimate cause;
- without a tenable reason;
- with an unexcused reason;
- without parents' providing valid reason;

- without a reason considered valid by the school; and
- without explanation or leave.

From the foregoing, the analysis of truancy definitions has shown that numerous definitions of the term exist. It is also evident that there are areas of agreements and contradictions in these definitions. A consensus definition is, however, unattainable where there is diverging viewpoints. This observation led credence to Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent (2001) submission that uniform definitions of truancy does not exist. Indeed, it is desirable that a consensus definition is fashioned out. Ioannakis (1997) observed that the need for a working definition is not only apparent but also long overdue. An attempt to have a consensus definition would, however, require the resolution of the contradictions in the existing definitions.

Typology of Truancy

The typology of truancy is generated from the period or time of student's absence in the school in a day. Broadly speaking, absenteeism in the school takes two major forms. These are blanket and post-registration. Blanket *truancy* occurs when the absence takes the whole day and post-registration truancy otherwise known as hidden truancy. The occurrence of post-registration non-attendance is manifested in three ways. It occurs when a student is:

- marked to be present in the school in the morning only to leave before the closing hour;
- marked to be absent in the morning only to be present in the afternoon; and
- marked to be present in the school only to be absent in some lessons.

From this explanation, a clear-cut distinction exists between blanket non-attenders and post-registration non-attenders. Unlike blanket non-attenders who completely stay away from the school, the post-registration non-attenders are officially marked to be present in the school. Kinder, Wakefield and Wilkin (1996), however, noted that when the post-registration truants are in school, they sometimes remained lurked within the sound of school bell so as to attend only the lessons they have interest in.

Blanket or post-registration non-attendance in school could, however, be supported or unsupported. Supported non-attendance in school occurs when the absence is without the awareness or connivance of parent(s), while the unsupported non-attendance in school occurs when the absence is without the awareness or connivance of parent(s).

Similarly, the rate at which blanket or post-registration non-attendance is perpetrated could be broadly classified into two major categories. If it is irregular, it is regarded to be occasional or mild non-attendance but when it is persistent occurrence, it is referred to as chronic or persistent absenteeism in the school. The danger associated with prolonged absence of student in the school is summed up in this way by Galloway (1985):

The longer a pupil remains out of school the greater the difficulty in persuading him to return. The longer he remains out of school, moreover, the greater the obstacles to ensuring that return to school is associated with something more positive than boredom, educational failure and /or disruptive behaviour (p. 157).

Who is a Chronic Absentee?

The classification of students on the basis of their attendance rate given above could not provide specific number of attendance or absence the students must have attained before the classification is made. Learmonth (1995) rightly pointed this out when he noted that there is absence of consistent definition on when a poor attender becomes a hard-core non-attender. In an attempt to eliminate this deficiency, quite a number of recommendations have been made on what should be regarded as a reasonable number of attendance and unacceptable number of absence expected in the school. For instance, while Fitzgibbon (1996) recommended 80 percent attendance Ioannakis (1997) argued for 80 days attendance in any given academic year. The policy statement on continuous assessment in Nigeria recognized 75 percent attendance rate before a student is allowed to write examination or be promoted to the next class (Ajayi, 1995).

The required number of absence in the school before a student is labelled as chronic absentee has also received considerable attention. For instance, Reid (1982) defined

persistent absentees as students with absence rates of 65 percent of every school term. It is the contention of Fitzgibbon (1996) that a persistent absentee is a student who has missed 40 days or more in the school. On the other hand, Ioannakis (1997), for the purpose of his study, considered 20 days or 40 half days as unacceptable level of absence. In a study conducted by Gesinde (2004) the subjects of the study were labelled as chronic absentees because they have missed more than one third required number of attendance in the school.

The Measurement of Non-attendance Behaviour in Schools

It is an indisputable fact that non-school attendance acts exist in all institution of learning. One may therefore desire to know the instrument used to determine the presence or absence of learners in school. This section specifically deals with the instrument of measuring non-school attendance behaviour of students.

Educational institutions all over the world rely on school attendance register in order to assess the attendance or non-attendance of learners. In its simplest form, attendance register is a book in which the presence of students in a school is recorded on a daily basis (Ajayi, 1995). The main purpose of using attendance register is to determine the presence or absence of students in school. Other vital information obtainable from the attendance register includes students' full name, age, sex and admission number. It is the legal responsibility of schools to record on daily basis presence or absence of the students. Munn and Johnstone (1992) asserted that a good attendance rate is seen by many people as a characteristic of a good school.

Determinant of Truancy

The attendance register is to be marked both in the morning and in the afternoon. The presence of students in the morning and afternoon is represented by these mark (\ /) respectively. Teachers are the personnel saddled with this responsibility with the hope that school attendance register security and reliability would be protected. When the attendance register is appropriately marked as at when due, the segregation

of regular attenders from habitual absentees as well as the identification of the number of students in the class are made easy. It would also be practically possible to identify post-registration absentees. These are students who disappeared from the school after being marked present as stated earlier. The use of attendance register would also enable teachers to: predict students' behaviour; elicit information on students' patterns and reasons for absence; provide needed data for researchers, planners, ministry officials; and identify students who have met 75 percent mandatory attendance requirement of continuous assessment policy in order to write examination or be promoted (Ajayi, 1995). It is, therefore, imperative that accurate record should be taken and kept by teachers, if distorted information or data is not to be made use of. It has, however, been observed that keeping track record of attendance is no easy matter for schools (Munn and Johnstone, 1992).

As profitable as the use of school attendance register is its users so also would a careful analysis reveal its deficiencies. Gabb (1997) submitted that attendance registers might not accurately reflect students' attendance in school. He cited cases where attendance registers have been reported to be susceptible to open wide rigging by head teachers and its failure to take care of children who skipped classes after marking attendance at the beginning of the morning and afternoon sessions. In the same vein did Galloway (1985) observe that attendance registers are not always accurate since they cannot account for hidden truancy, which occurs when pupils miss lesson after registration. Similarly, Boyson (1975) had earlier affirmed that reliability of attendance registers poses serious doubt when one considers certain occurrences in schools. He revealed that it is becoming more widely acknowledged that all pupils who register at 9:00 a.m. may not still be in school at 10.00 a.m. or even 9.30 a.m. It has also been observed by Stoll (1993) that despite the fact that previous researches on student attendance in school relied solely on the evidences of school attendance registers, yet schools admit that "with the best will in the world, it is impossible to keep registers 100 percent accurate" (p.35). On the basis of this, she recommended that for a realistic idea of nature and extent of

truancy, it is imperative to consult or ask those who indulged in the act.

An attempt to get precise information about the nature and extent of school non-attendance, according to Ioannakis (1997) is near impossible to obtain because of many forms it takes. In order to justify this assertion, he reported Denne (1981) to have made the following comments on truancy:

There are so many ways to truant. Many are not obvious enough to make a clear-cut count. Some children miss set classes only, or 'wag' after being marked present. Other forge sick notes or are covered by parents who can't get their children to school but don't want them taken to court. Others have an everlasting supply of good reasons for leaving school once they have arrived. Others kept home by parents and some have simply been away for so long their names are no longer on the roll (p. 5).

One other major deficiency of the attendance register is its inability to give reasons or causes for students' absenteeism. It is practically impossible to determine through the attendance register students who took permission to be absent and those who failed to seek the consent of their parents or school authority. In other words, legitimate and illegitimate absences are not taken care of. A student whose absence was due to severe ailment or a student who was asked to represent the school in a quiz competition outside the school premises or a student who was roaming about the street or hawking when he/she ought to be in school would be marked absent in the school attendance register. This may explain Saunder's (1979) submission that:

There is little reliable evidence on the incidence of illegal absenteeism from school. The figures are difficult to obtain because they are concealed within the overall figures for absence, which include children who are not attending school for justifiable reasons (p. 185).

Kaeser (1985) supported this view when he observed that most attendance data do not differentiate between legal and unexcused absences.

This unreliable state of school attendance register is also glaringly evident in Nigeria schools. Evidences from repeated

observations by this researcher revealed that some teachers saddled with the responsibility of marking students' attendance tend to:

- transfer the responsibility of recording students' attendance in the school attendance register to class representative;
- mark the register only twice or thrice in a week;
- use the presence or absence of pupils in the morning to determine presence in the afternoon or vice versa;
- mark those present absent or vice versa;
- ask pupils to confirm presence or absence in school since it is not marked as at when due or regularly; and
- fail to indicate late comers among the pupils.

Remedies

On the basis of the above it is recommended that:

- government should promulgate compulsory attendance laws;
- truancy units should be established in the federal and States' Ministries of Education to cater for all matters arising from students' non-school attendance behaviour;
- adequate number of counsellors should be employed in schools;
- guidance counsellors saddled with the responsibility of managing students' maladaptive behaviour, as a matter of urgency, need to mount workable preventive and corrective programmes to combat non-school attendance problems. Government and non-government organisations should give adequate support in the realization of this objective;
- guidance counsellors, counselling psychologists and educational psychologists need to educate the general populace on the danger inherent in non-school attendance behaviour, most especially, its association with behavioural, vocational, economic, and hereditary problems;
- since diverse researches would expose the true picture of non-school attendance behaviour at a particular point in time in schools, researchers should be encouraged and sponsored by government and non-government organizations to carry out researches in all facets of non-school attendance behaviour;

- teachers should ensure that sanctions against unlawful absence are not only clearly spelt out but are also implemented;
- teachers should keep accurate record of students' attendance and refer students with irregular attendance to counsellors for psychological intervention; and continuous assessment policy of 75 percent attendance in school before moving from one class to the other or write an examination should be implemented.

Conclusion

Arising from the discussion above, it completely evident that truancy is an age long maladaptive behaviour in institutions of learning. It is, however, possible to reduce its adverse effects on our educational programmes if all the stakeholders see it as a cankerworm that could be reduced to its bearest minimum.

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