

Causes of Truancy in Debre Markos Preparatory Secondary School

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Abstract: Truancy which refers to students' action of staying away from some or all lessons after they are marked officially present at school is becoming one of the serious problems of schools today. This study examined the causes of truancy in Debre Markos Preparatory Secondary School. In order to achieve the objectives, data were gathered from truants, regularly attending students, and teachers through interviews. The qualitative analysis of the data gathered through interview revealed that truancy is linked with high family socio-economic status, strict control at home and school, the social context of the school, plasma instruction, lack of motivation and disinterest in learning, etc.

Background

It is a spectacular event that people gaze at several students who wore school uniforms wander on streets during schooling hours. As this happen during regular class time, it is easier to recognize that these students are staying away from some or all lessons after they are marked officially present at school; they are playing truant behavior.

Many educators have proposed the possible links between attendance and performance at every phase of schooling. For example, truants are usually identified as lower achievers. Studies showed several contributing factors to truancy, which are sometimes contradictory and at other times complementary. For instance, a study conducted in Wales on attendance, academic achievement and incidence of delinquency revealed that the conflict between students and teachers which leads to truancy is continually

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fuelled by the attempts of teachers to exercise control in areas of the students' lives where students expect autonomy (Henry et al. 1988). In this study, truancy was found to have been caused by control and tight discipline policies.

On the other hand, another study conducted in New York City schools showed that truancy in schools was identified as a result of relaxed teaching practices rather than economic or linguistic factors (Rousmaniere, 1997). Yet another study conducted in Israel by Feuerstein, as cited in Pollock and Waller (1994), indicated that children who have been through traumatic deprivations due to social and political upheavals in their country were found to be truant. Moreover, Petrie (1984), cited in Henry et al (1988) and Hamovitch (1997) pointed out that truancy can be facilitated by the organization of schooling. That is, schools with a low institutional pride syndrome among staff and students characterized by staff turnover, low levels of commitment by staff and the consequent breakdown on organization procedures and routines contribute to the development of truant behavior of students. These different findings clearly show that there are wide divergences in the causes of truancy, and these variations in cause stem from the differences in situations and contexts.

From a wider perspective, however, truancy has been found to be closely linked with a number of child pathologies including poverty, disaffection, young offending, and alcoholism. Disturbed adolescent development, parenting style, gang membership and substance abuse are also among the contributing factors. Not only these, but other factors like poor self-concept, poor health, experienced recent traumatic event, teenage pregnancy and financial difficulties are clearly connected with student truant behavior at school (Giles et al, 2004; Reid, 2003; Rousmaniere, 1997; Fine, 1994; Pollock and Waller, 1994; Henry et al, 1988).

In the Ethiopian context, the researcher believes that the problem is felt by many people from different walks of life though it is seldom researched.

Therefore, this research was aimed at investigating the causes of truancy in Deber Markos Preparatory Secondary School.

Problem Statement

The research questions formulated regarding truancy were:

- What are the causes of truancy in Debre Markos Preparatory Secondary School?
- Are the causes of truancy different for male and female students?
- What are the effects of playing truant behavior?

Literature Review

Truancy has been considered as one of the top ten major problems in secondary schools in the world at large, negatively affecting the future of the youth (Dekalb, 2004). The causes of truancy may vary from individual to individual, and also teachers and students may disagree about the underlying causes. According to Kinder, Wakefield, and Wilkin as cited in Edward and Malcolm (2002), the causes of truancy as perceived by the students themselves are:

- the influence of friends and peers, who are seen encouraging truancy as a status-seeking or as a way of joining in or blending in, and sometimes teasing or goading the child in to truanting;
- relationships with teachers, seen as lacking respect and fairness;
- the content and delivery of the curriculum, seen as lacking in relevance and stimulus;
- family factors, either parental attitudes or family problems; and
- classroom contexts, either because of teachers' inability to control, or problems arising from the child's own personality or learning abilities.

On the other hand, the views of professionals (teachers and officials) on the causes of truancy stated by Edward and Malcom (2002) are:

- individual factors: low self-esteem, poor peer relations, lack of academic ability, special needs, lack of concentration, etc;
- family and community factors: parentally condoned absence, not valuing education, domestic problems, inadequate or inconsistent parenting, economic deprivation, etc; and
- social factors: inability to deter truants, relationships with teachers and peers, problems related to the relevance of school and the curriculum, etc.

Case studies that are conducted in particular schools, however, identified contextual causes for truancy. A study conducted in New York City schools found out that the vibrant culture of street life lured students into the modern market place of popular entertainment, amusement parks, and dance halls. City streets were busy and sociable places, throbbing with traffic and trade, and rich with neighborhood culture. Thus, boys in particular joined gangs that asserted a tough street masculinity over seemingly more feminine world of the school (Rousmaniere, 1997).

Generally, truancy is considered to be an educational and social problem. In the teaching-learning process, it is detrimental to students' achievement and promotion. Researchers have found out that students who miss lessons fall behind their peers in the classroom (Dekalb, 2004; Edward and Malcolm, 2002).

Methodology

Schools are facing different kinds of problems these days. Among the many kinds of the problems, truancy is becoming more and more difficult to tackle due to its diversified causes. The purpose of this study was therefore to investigate the causes of truancy as perceived by truants, their classmates

and teachers. Thus, data was gathered from truants, regular attendants and teachers.

In order to gather relevant data, 10 truants, and 10 regularly attending students were selected by snow ball sampling technique. The homeroom teachers identified most frequently truanting students, and regularly attending students. Then, the identified students further identified other students who belonged to the respective groups. Besides, 5 teachers who were teaching the identified students in the semester of the data collection were selected purposefully.

The data used in the study were collected through interview. The interviews were so in-depth that several probing questions were asked following the participants' responses. The data collected was analyzed and interpreted through qualitative descriptions and narratives. Finally, conclusions were drawn.

Results

As data was gathered from truants, non-truants and teachers, the results are treated separately for the three groups.

Causes of Truancy for Truants

The data from truants were not easily accessed. This is because the truants did not like to be labeled 'truants'. After a long period of discussion, they participated in the interview.

From the in-depth interviews conducted with students who were labeled truants, it is identified that most of them were from the well-to-do families. This is a surprise as most of the findings of the causes of truancy in other countries disclosed that it is related to economic deprivation of families (Reid, 2003; Edward and Malcolm, 2002; Rousmaniere, 1997). This difference appeared due to differences in parenting styles. As the home is a

locked environment, the school and the school hours are taken as places and times of freedom. Because they have the money and they are placed in a relatively relaxed environment, such students go out of the class and join recreational places. The typical places where students spend their time are video and local liquor (tella) houses. One student, for instance, reported:

... I know that my parents could never allow me to watch videos, to chew chat or to go to 'tella' house. Therefore, I cut classes and go to such places to enjoy.

Another reason that students play truant is going out for a date with female partners. The conducive time for dating is the school hour for them. The plasma instruction is another reported reason for students to play truant. There is a strong hatred for the instructional television by truants; there are even times when students join another class that has no plasma instruction.

Causes of Truancy for Non-truants

Most students reported that lack of motivation to learn, teachers' strict follow-up and forced class attendance are the major causes of truancy. Non-truants believe that some students go to school forced by their parents. This implies that such students have less motivation to learn. They become truant and spend their time out of school to hide themselves both from their parents and teachers. This seems to have the potential to lead the students to develop further undesirable habits such as addiction to drug.

Form the in-depth interviews with these students, it is also identified that female truants were fewer than males. The causes were also different from the causes of male truants. Females often play truant when: they did not do their homework, they disliked a particular teacher, or they were in their period. Although the causes for females' truancy were more of academic and biological in nature, it has a multiple effect. That is, one female truant is more

likely to attract more than five males to play the same. Non-truants, like truants, also recognize plasma as a cause for truancy.

Causes of Truancy for Teachers

Teachers attribute the cause of truancy to students themselves, their peers, and their parents. They reported that students play truant because of peer pressure, less achievement motivation, and lack of parental control. They emphasized gang membership and inadequate and inconsistent parenting as causes of truancy. A significant number of teachers also believe that the social setting in which the school is placed contributes a lot to students to play truant. These days, video houses, 'chat' chewing centers and gambling places are abundant around schools. They are sources of attraction for students to withdraw from lessons. This is consistent with Rousmaniere's (1997) findings that reported the vibrant culture of street life as a factor to lure students into such places of entertainment, dance halls and the like.

The understandings of the truants conform to the reports of Sprinthall et al (1994) in that the causes and effects of truancy form a vicious cycle. That is, the more students cut classes, the less they do their academic work; and the less they could work successfully, the more they cut classes.

Conclusions

The following conclusions are drawn from the results.

- Truancy is related with high family socio-economic status.
- Strict control and tight home and school experiences contribute to the development of truancy in schools.
- The social contexts of the school (the surrounding video houses, 'chat' chewing centers) are factors leading to truancy.
- The over-utilization of instructional television (plasma) leads most students to truant behavior.

- Lack of motivation and disinterest in learning are also causes for truancy.
- Lack of motivation, plasma television, and strict control are causes for males and females' truancy. However, there are also different causes for males and females. The social context is a cause usually for males whereas failing to do homework, dislike of a particular teacher, and menstrual cycles are typical causes for females' truancy.
- Truants, non-truants, and teachers all perceive that truancy results in low academic performance which eventually leads the truants to dropout of school.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the subsequent recommendations are suggested:

- teachers and parents ought to keep their eyes on their students/ children;
- video houses and 'chat' clewing centers should not be located near schools;
- guidance and counseling services should be strengthened in schools; and
- students' behavior should be properly managed.

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