

# An Investigation Into Some of the Major Causes of Truancy in the Venda Technical College in the Limpopo Province

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With the emergence of the Democratic South Africa, a number of disciplinary problems emerged. One of these problems is truancy of school children from schools. The South African Schools Act (1996, p. 6) provides that if a learner who is subject to “compulsory attendance” fails to attend a school, the HODS (heads of departments) may take certain measures. These include among others informing their parents. This study tried to identify some of the major causes of truancy in area and came to conclusion on possible strategies to improve learner attendance, thus, minimizing juvenile delinquency, reducing school dropouts and protecting youth against drugs.

*Keywords:* truancy school dropout, learner attendance, juvenile delinquency

## Introduction

More often than not, truancy is the first sign of trouble, the first indicator that a young person is giving up and losing his/her way. When young people start skipping schools, they are telling their parents, school officials and the community at large that they are in trouble and need help, if they are to keep moving forward in life (U.S. Department of Education, 1996, p. 1).

Tyeman (1990, p. 8) asserted that non-attendance at school is a problem as a result of parents who break their statutory duties by failing to send their children to school. Byrne (1992, p. 29) suggested that poor attendance is related to poor motivation and that truancy is consequently an indication of more serious problems. According to the U.S. Department of Justice (1996, p. 1), truancy is a gateway to crime. High rates of truancy are linked to high daytime burglary rates and vandalism.

According to Reid (1994, p. 18) in the United States of America, 55% of learners in secondary schools do not attend school on a regular basis. Consequently, a lot of teachers being only human are not too upset when they find only 20 learners instead of 30 learners present in their classes. Such a situation simply means less work and more manageable units for them.

Reid (1994, p. 19) emphasized the fact that the majority of persistent truants are learners who are not performing well at school, lack parental encouragement to improve and have a variety of material or social problems unrelated to school. The U.S. Department of Education (1996, p. 1) revealed that learners who become truants and eventually drop out of high schools too often “set themselves up for a life of struggle”. This is confirmed by the fact that high school dropouts who are employed earn much lower salaries.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (1996, p. 1) and U.S. Department of Justice (1996, p. 2),

each school and each community needs to decide what steps to take in order to reduce truancy. These decisions should be made with the active involvement of parents, teachers and law enforcement representatives from social service, community and religious organizations.

The South African Schools Act (1996, p. 6) provided that if a learner who is subject to “compulsory attendance” fails to attend a school, the head of department may:

- (1) Investigate the circumstances of the learner’s absence from college;
- (2) Take appropriate measures to remedy the situation;
- (3) Issue a written notice to the parents of the learner requiring compliance with subsection (1), when failing to take such remedy.

The rationale for the study is that:

- (1) There is a need to conscientize the community regarding the dangers of truancy;
- (2) There is a need for learners to attend college regularly;
- (3) There is a need to keep learners away from the streets.

### **Problem Statement**

There is currently a great deal of concern and disquiet about learners who deliberately miss college daily. This anxiety is well founded because the results of consistently skipping school are very severe and suggest a wider social, psychological and educational problem. Socially, persistent truants do not know what to do with their time when they are away from school.

Some, for example, merely wander around their neighbourhood bored, engaging in such meaningless and monotonous activities as vandalizing public or private property. Truancy is related to juvenile delinquency. Educationally, truancy results in poor academic performance. Finally, psychologically, truants likely engage themselves in drug taking, snuffing glue and abusing alcohol.

The basic research question is what causes truancy by learners at schools. In order to solve these, following sub-questions were answered:

- (1) Do learners attend school regularly?
- (2) Are parents responsible for their children’s education?
- (3) Is the community aware of the dangers of truancy?
- (4) Which strategies can be used in order to combat truancy?
- (5) Do the law enforcement personnel deal with persistent truants?

This study tried to identify some of the major causes of truancy in area and came to conclusion on possible strategies to improve learner attendance, thus, minimizing juvenile delinquency, reducing school dropouts and protecting youth against drugs.

### **Causes and Effects of Truancy in Secondary Schools**

When young people start skipping school, they create major concern for college educators as well as for the community at large (U.S. Department of Education, 1996, p. 2). Belkin and Brown (1987, p. 336) stated that there is no single specific known cause for truancy and the difference between cases is usually greater than the similarities, however, there are general observations that can be fairly stated about truancy and there are a number of causes why learners absent themselves from school and the following are some them.

### **Home Background and Social Class Origins**

Agnew (1990, p. 535) asserted that home background and social class origins contribute to truancy. Agnew explained that home background and social class aspects incorporate unstable home backgrounds, such as divorce, separation, death of a parent, parent in prison, single parent families, unemployed parents and fathers who are away from home for long on frequent period, for example, long-distance lorry drivers.

Kornhauser (1994, p. 18) displayed that home and social class, such as caring for a younger brother or sister, while the mother is at work or understanding the family shopping. Allen-Meares, Washington, and Welsh (1996, p. 94) believed that learners who become chronic truants and poor achievers are members from families of low socio-economic status. Their learning environment is both generally inferior and specifically inadequate when compared with that of learners from middle class. According to Hoback (1993, p. 14), home and social class backgrounds include defective home discipline, homes with low incomes and low housekeeping standards, parents who demonstrate a variety of social pathologies, such as alcoholism, mental illness, family disorganization and associated stress.

### **School Aspects**

Colling (1995, p. 20) asserted that college aspects, such as falling behind in class work often following an illness, a dislike or fear of certain lessons, such as physical education, tests or examinations, boredom or inactivity at school contribute to truancy. Belkin and Brown (1987, p. 335) believed that bullying, extortion, difficult peer group relationship within individuals school, teasing due to personal characteristics, for example, fatness, red hair and squeaky voice, are some of the major causes of truancy.

Lack of college uniform, equipment or sport kit may cause learners to alienate themselves from the college (Eble, 1990, p. 14). This indicated that college rules and severe punishments, poor teacher-learner relationship and organizational factors within college, such as changing classrooms after every lesson, assemblies and staff attitudes are factors that may lead to truancy.

### **Peer Group Influence**

According to Allen-Meares et al. (1996, p. 93), learners' reasons for staying away from college entail a desire to be with friends who are not in a college set-up.

### **Socio-environmental, Social, Psychological and Cultural Explanations**

Belkin and Brown (1987, p. 27) asserted that socio-environmental, social, psychological and cultural explanations include poor housing, overcrowding, poverty, geographical location, urban and rural dimensions and community ethos and ethics, fear of attending school, personal factors, such as low self-concept, introversion or isolationism and peer group influences. According to Colling (1995, p. 21), the attraction of alternative employment, college community conflicts and individual characteristics, such as laziness, oversleeping, lateness and dislike of traveling to school, may be regarded as some the causes of truancy.

### **Educational Implications**

The college is responsible for providing instruction and informing parents when their child is absent. The state prescribes attendance, but enforcing attendance is the responsibility of parents and learners. Compulsory schooling can be equated with state truancy. Every truancy statute imposes criminal penalties on the parents or guardians who do not see that a learner for whom they are responsible receives the amount of education required by the state law for required age ranges. In early enforcement, if a parent or master did not teach a

learner whatever the law required, the learner was taken away from the parents or guardians and apprenticed to someone who would carry out the law (Bimler & Kirkland, 1998, p. 43).

Attendance officers are hired to enforce the law. Sometimes, they have been known as visiting lecturers, attendance lecturers and truant officers and more recently as learner advocates. In many states, laws have invested attendance officers with the powers of police officers, thereby enabling them to make arrests in enforcing attendance laws. If the learner continues to be absent, and then is subject to provisions of the children's court, the child then is subject to provisions of the children's court and code, which requires that the state provides assistance and takes whatever action in each incident.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

This study is qualitative in nature. Neuman (1994, p. 41) asserted that the aim of qualitative research is not to explain human behaviour in terms of the universally valid laws of generalizations, but rather to understand and interpret the meaning and intentions that underlie everyday human action. For the purpose of this study, qualitative research focuses on individuals' experiences and the meaning of those experiences.

### **Research Participants**

According to Nicolas (1991, p. 127), a participant is a person who gives responses to measuring instrument. For the purposes of this study, participants respond to questions either during interviews or from the questions. The following groups were included in this study:

- (1) HODS (Heads of departments);
- (2) Lecturers;
- (3) Learners.

### **Data Collecting Strategies**

Purposive sampling and random sampling were used as sampling techniques. Interview schedules were employed as research instruments.

#### **Purposive Sampling**

According to McNeill (1995, p. 39), purposive sampling occurs when a researcher chooses a particular group or place to study, because it is known to be the type that is wanted. This kind of sampling technique was used for HODS at this technical college.

#### **Random Sampling**

Lecturers of this technical college were randomly selected. These lecturers were interviewed. Learners were randomly selected and they were also interviewed.

#### **Interviews**

Labovitz and Hagedorn (1991, p. 106) asserted that an interview refers to the situation in which answers are directly drawn out from the respondents by an interviewer and usually records responses.

### **Analysis and Interpretation of the Data**

According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 119), Tesch's approach is a method that requires the researcher

to follow eight steps in data analysis. Guided by Tesch's approach, the researcher followed eight steps in data analysis. The researcher got a sense of the whole idea by reading through all the transcriptions carefully. The researchers then jotted down some ideas, as they came to mind. He selected one interview that was the shortest and most interesting. The questions that were asked HODS, lecturers and learners were the following:

- (1) Whether the technical college was experiencing the problem of truancy;
- (2) Whether lecturers reported the problem to HODS;
- (3) Whether HODS sometimes talked to truant learners;
- (4) The causes of learners playing truant.

### **Major Findings of the Study**

The following findings pertain to the HODS, lecturers and learners:

- (1) HODS, lecturer and learners indicated that parental neglect is a common cause of truancy. Many parents of truant learners do not even know what their children are doing at the technical college;
- (2) Lecturers do not even report learners who do not attend classes, because they think the learners are adults, and therefore, they should not know why they are not at the college;
- (3) HODS are ignorant of causes that can combat the problem of truancy by learners at the college;
- (4) The HODS indicated that their school policy emphasizes compulsory attendance and learners do not abide by these rules.

### **Recommendations Stemming From the Research**

The following are recommendations that arose as a result of the study:

- (1) Parents play a very important role in the education of their children. Parents need to take a very keen interest in the education of their children. They also know what they are doing at the college;
- (2) Lecturers must also report students who do not attend regularly to HODS, so that they can enquire the reasons why learners sometimes do not attend classes;
- (3) HODS need to be trained in identifying causes of truancy at colleges so that can be aware of them;
- (4) It is necessary to have school regarding the attendance of classes by learners, but policies need to be implemented.

### **Conclusions**

Combating truancy is one of the first ways that a community can reach out quickly to a disaffected young person and help families that may be struggling with a rebellious youth (Sampson, 1993, p. 19). It is therefore necessary that parents should show concern and try and know what their children are doing at school.

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