Examining Leadership Strategies Employed for Mitigating Truancy in Public Secondary Schools in Rombo District, Tanzania

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study was to examine leadership strategies employed in public secondary schools to mitigate truancy in Rombo District. Case study research design and qualitative research approach were used. The sample size was 60 respondents. This sample size included, 40 selected students, 10 Head teachers, 5 parents, and 5 selected discipline/academic teachers. The data collection method included semi-structure interviews, focus group discussions, and secondary data from documentary reviews. Thematic coding was used in analyzing data. The findings of the study showed that leadership strategies employed were parental involvement, guidance and counselling, improving school environment, students' motivation and collaboration with the community seen as a better approach towards improving and solving truancy in public secondary schools in Rombo District. In a nutshell, the major findings were the leadership strategies for mitigating truancy in our public schools are still weak. Therefore, there is still a need for leadership training on school heads in order to employ effective strategies to reduce truancy.*

Keywords: Leadership Strategies, Public Secondary Schools, and Truancy

1. Introduction

Truancy, characterized by chronic and unexcused student absences from school, is a pervasive issue in education worldwide. In the United States, Heilbrunn (2007) has identified truancy as a pressing concern. Truant students often face academic challenges, engage in risky behaviors, and have limited future opportunities. Additionally, truancy has been associated with drug abuse, alcohol consumption, criminal activities, and depression (Best et al., 2006).

Studies conducted in various countries, including the USA and England, have revealed factors contributing to truancy, such as accumulating unexcused absences and poor academic performance (Comly et al., 2020; Vaughn et al., 2013). In Indonesia, truancy is seen as a negative behavior linked to low self-esteem and lack of motivation to study (Fahiroh, 2019). In Australia, reluctance to prosecute parents for their children's truancy has led to policy changes (Dickson et al, 2010). In Africa, truancy exists as a significant issue, with parental roles and teacher-learner relationships affecting attendance (Nyang'ara, 2019).

Efforts to combat truancy vary by region. In the USA, monitoring attendance through record-keeping and databases is a common strategy (Comly et al, 2020). In Kenya, a safe learning environment and family engagement are utilized (Afande & Mathenge, 2015). The government of Tanzania takes measures to ensure regular school attendance through quality assurance, collaboration with communities, and family life education.

Despite these efforts, truancy persists, with statistics in Rombo District, Tanzania, showing disparities between boys and girls involved in border business activities. High truancy rates disrupt learning and hinder educational development.

To address this issue, a study in Rombo District aimed to examine leadership strategies employed in public secondary schools in mitigating truancy. This study seeks to provide actionable insights for school administrators, policymakers, and educators to create a conducive learning environment, reduce truancy, and improve the quality of education for students in the region.

2. Research Methodology

This section outlines the research methodology that guided the study. The study employed a case study research design and qualitative research approach were used. The sample size was 60 respondents. This sample size includes, 40 selected students, 10 Head teachers, 5 parents, and 5 selected discipline/academic teachers. The data collection method included semi-structure interviews, focus group discussions, and secondary data from documentary reviews. Thematic coding was used in analyzing data.

3. Research Findings and Discussions

Table 3.1 presents the findings concerning the reduction of truancy problem while using qualitative analysis based on the thematic analysis. The main themes were parental involvement, guidance and counselling, improving school environment, students' motivation, collaborating with the community, and elevating or developing students' talents.

Table 3.1: Thematic Analysis Table

Verbatim Quotes	Themes	Code
The leadership strategies for reducing truancy problem were like writing letters to parents and involving parents through giving seminars concerning the importance of education for their children. Also, the use of triangle method that is school administration, parents and students (DT/AT).	Parental Involvement	PI
Leadership strategies for mitigating truancy in public secondary schools in Rombo District was also through Guidance and Counselling that is; through gender for boys alone and girls alone by the specialized teachers (FGD).	Guidance and Counselling based in Gender	GCG
Most truants' problems were reduced through improving school environment such as; making sure that there was provision of food (breakfast and lunch), different varieties of sports and other extra – curriculum activities (Ts).	Improving School's Environment	ISE
Most teachers responded that in curbing truancy problem, motivating the students who were doing well in the class to extent of influencing those who had no interest in studies (Ts).	Student's Motivation in Studies	SMS
Most respondents affirmed that the leadership strategies for reducing truancy problem in public secondary was the collaboration with the village leaders (Ts).	Collaborating with the Community	CVL
The establishment of various entertainment such as; sports, music, dancing by enhancing or elevating different student's talents influenced most truant learners to attend school (HTs).	Elevating Student's Talents	EST
In most of the schools where hostel was constructed, students stayed or resided in schools due to the availability of hostels and truancy problem was controlled more (HTs).	Construction of Hostels in Schools	CHS
Most respondents observed that the Fee Free Policy could be revisited so as to provide school needs like lunch/food which was not provided by the government and other basic needs especially those from poor families (Ts).	Education Policy to be Reviewed	EPR
It was also said that the eradication of the discrimination between students with high standard in academic performance and those with low performance since there existed such tendency among teachers (FGD)	Discrimination among Students	EDS
The government to establish strategic planning concerning those students with low capacity or ability to study or have no interest in studies to have other options like joining VETA (Ts).	Government's Strategic Planning	GSP

Source: Field Data (2023)

3.1 Parental Involvement

The study's findings indicated a significant concern within the school administration regarding parental involvement in their children's education. Despite efforts such as sending letters to parents to invite them to meetings, only a few attended, possibly due to fears of being asked to cover outstanding debts like food and other expenses. Head teachers reported that 70% of parents were unresponsive to school requests and remained unaware of their children's academic progress. Similar challenges were observed in Indonesia, where truant students either sought or did not seek permission to miss school, with parents failing to inform the school of these actions. The Education Act of 1978 underscores the importance of regular school attendance, stating that students missing school for 90 consecutive days would be discontinued. This underscores the legal obligation for parents to actively engage in their children's education. The following discussion was responded by the Discipline Teachers/Academic Teachers **(DTs/ATs)** as follows:

> *The leadership strategies for reducing truan'y problem werelike writing letters to parents and involving parents through giving seminars concerning the importance of education for their children. Also, the use of triangle method that is school administration, parents and students (DTs/AT).*

Reid (2010) emphasized the need for school administrators to employ various methods to inform parents about their responsibilities in reducing truancy. One crucial approach was for teachers to actively engage with parents through formal interviews, establishing a positive rapport. This was particularly significant in Rombo District, where 80% of parents lived in urban areas and were preoccupied with business, leading to their limited involvement in their children's education. Monobe et al. (2012) further highlighted the importance of parents and students recognizing the significance of school attendance. Teachers, in their pursuit of reducing truancy, adopted a triangular approach involving teachers, students, and parents to foster collaboration and trust in student attendance. This approach also aimed to educate students and parents about their shared responsibility in ensuring regular school attendance. Interviews revealed that 60% of students attributed truancy to parental neglect, often exacerbated by fathers' alcohol addiction. Moreover, Durborow (2017) found that increased parental involvement in school events and communication with teachers positively correlated with higher school attendance among children.

3.2 Guidance and Counselling

In Tanzania, guidance and counseling programs are an integral part of the school curriculum, aiming to provide students with professional mentors who can assist them in dealing with psychological issues, depression, mental disorders, and disciplinary matters. This approach helps maintain school discipline without resorting to corporal punishment, suspension, or expulsion to address truancy issues. Effective guidance and counseling rely on teachers possessing professional skills, knowledge, attitudes, and competence in human relations, enabling them to create a supportive and motivating environment for students. Studies have shown that such programs effectively reduce truancy in public secondary schools. To address gender-specific needs, male and female students are assigned to teachers of the same gender who possess the necessary counseling skills.

Truancy is a global social problem, often tied to administrative deficiencies, highlighting the importance of addressing it in educational settings. The Head Teachers **(HTs)** reached the following agreement as follows:

*Leadership strategies for mitigating truancy in public secondary schools was also through Guidance and Counselling that is; through gender for boys alone and girls alone by the specialized teachers although they saw need for more teachers to be trained in this area (**HTs**).*

Similar studies done in Indonesia showed that truant behavior was a habit whereby students who were in adolescence stage felt comfortable with their friends in storytelling, watching movies, betting and crime involvement (Fahiroh, 2019). The respondents asserted that motivating students through friendship atmosphere for those performing well in academics and those who did not well influenced students to come to school and hence, study effectively.

3.3 Improving School's Environment

The school environment significantly impacts students' academic engagement and attendance. A study conducted in the United States identified various school-related factors that contribute to truancy issues, including teachers' attitudes, school size, peer interactions, inflexible teaching methods that don't cater to diverse learning styles, and inconsistent procedures for handling absenteeism and related problems (Baker et al., 2001). Similarly, a study conducted in Rombo District revealed that many public secondary schools faced challenges such as the lack of fencing, hostels, and overcrowded classrooms, emphasizing the urgent need for improvements in infrastructure to create a conducive learning environment for students. The head teachers and the teachers **(HTs &STs)** selected had the following to affirm:

*Most truants' problems were reduced through improving school environment such as; making sure that there was provision of food (breakfast and lunch), different varieties of sports and other extra – curriculum activities (**HTs &Ts**).*

Research suggests that fostering a positive school environment and strong staff relationships can help reduce truancy and absenteeism in schools (Mwajuma, 2019). Conversely, factors such as poor school management, authoritarian atmospheres, rigid rules, weak communication with parents, and ineffective teaching methods contribute to truancy (Suleman et al., 2017). To address these issues, using data to stress the importance of school attendance and implementing a national mentoring model in specific schools have been recommended (Childs & Groom, 2018). Additionally, teachers can lead by example, promoting school discipline, time management, and effective teaching while guiding and mentoring students to improve attendance.

3.4 Students Motivation

Motivation is a key factor in school administration, aimed at improving people's efforts and performance (Adiele et al, 2013). The teaching-learning process in schools not only enhances administrators' skills but also ensures the school's existence (Abraham, 2003). Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs influences behavior by considering various levels of individual needs and expectations. This study found that motivation from both teachers and students is effective in managing truant learners. Students' basic needs, aligned with Maslow's hierarchy, are essential for the teaching-learning process, fostering interest in studies and school attendance. Teachers supporting students' important needs, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, encourage regular school attendance.

The respondents the Academic Teachers **(Ts)** asserted as follows:

*Most teachers responded that in curbing truancy problem, motivating the students who were doing well in the class to extent of influencing those who had no interest in studies. Also, teachers developed an association in view of helping and encouraging students from extremely poor families and had a high ability of learning (**ATs**).*

Similarly, in the contemporary world, organizations or schools under the head teachers are concerned with what should be done to sustain the high level of performance through people and precisely teachers (Armstrong, 2006). Therefore, the findings revealed that if teachers were well motivated, then, it would enhance effective and efficiency in the teaching learning process and attract student's school attendance. In a related area of this study, scholars found that schools should create a kind of incentives to attract both parents and students in curbing truancy behavior in school (Halilu et al, 2019).

3.5 Collaborating with the Community

The findings showed that school administrators' good relationship between them and the community around the school helped in reducing truancy learners both short time and permanent truants. Therefore, collaborating with the community or society where students were coming from helped in mitigating truant learners and create awareness about the problem. Similar studies done in the United States, Texas revealed that communities undertook efforts to make sure that chronic absenteeism was reduced by initiating public health awareness campaign (Childs &Grooms, 2018). Therefore, the interviewees who were the Head Teachers **(Ts)** had the following to say:

*Most respondents affirmed that the leadership strategies for reducing truancy in public secondary schools was through the collaboration with the communities or societies around the school (**HTs**).*

Collaboration between schools and community organizations has been found to effectively reduce student absenteeism, with a study by Childs et al. (2018) highlighting its success. The involvement of the local

community is crucial in addressing this issue, given that teachers and Local Government Authorities are primarily concerned about student absences. Additionally, equitable education requires incorporating diverse perspectives in decision-making. Seeking input and feedback from students, parents, educators, and community members, as emphasized by Education Research & Policy (2021), fosters inclusivity and accessibility in the educational system, ultimately leading to more comprehensive and effective solutions for all students.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

It is evident that leadership approaches centered on parental involvement, guidance and counseling, the enhancement of the school environment, fostering student motivation, and fostering community collaboration have proven to be instrumental in tackling truancy effectively. These strategies not only address the immediate issue of absenteeism but also contribute to a more conducive and supportive educational environment. By recognizing the importance of these strategies, education authorities and school leaders can take proactive steps toward reducing truancy rates and ultimately improving the overall educational experience for students in Rombo District.

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