

Ensuring Sustainable Development in Africa through Education: A Ghanaian Case Study of Tackling Truancy

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Abstract

Effective formal education, beginning from the basic level, is paramount to a nation's sustainable development; and Ghana strives to ensure an education process that will help it make progress. This study investigates the effects of one of the challenges to this good effort—truancy, on the academic performance of students at the junior high school level and makes recommendations for its management. Primary data were collected by the researchers from 100 respondents through semi-structured interviews and Lickert Scale type of questionnaires with a few fill-ins. The data were then computed and analyzed using the Statistical Package of Social Sciences version 16.0, and results presented in simple frequencies and tables. Findings from the study showed that there was a relationship between truancy and delinquency and as a result, truant children usually perform poorly in class and grow to become adult social misfits. Absenteeism was generally seen as a motivation for disinterest in formal education. The researchers recommend that it should be mandatory for teachers, agents of change and all other stakeholders of education to provide the needed motivation and logistics necessary for students to be punctual and regular to school to receive the requisite instructions to enhance performance.

Keywords

Educational Leadership and Truancy; Students' Academic Performance

1. Introduction

Education is one of the most important investments a country can make in its people for socio-economic devel-

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opment since it primarily enriches people's understanding of themselves and the world around them. It improves the quality of life and leads to broad social benefits. Education increases productivity and creativity and promotes entrepreneurship as well as technological advancements. It is an indispensable requirement for any country that wants to develop. Several United Nation (UN) initiatives have been launched in Africa, particularly, on the importance of education for socio-economic development. One of such initiatives is the Basic Education in Africa Programme (BEAP); an initiative for Africa seeking to support a holistic and comprehensive reform of basic education with the view to assisting countries to achieve education for all by the year 2015.

In Ghana for instance, the setting up of various committees annually to review educational policies is an indication that, one of the basic needs of successive governments is to find lasting solutions to the numerous educational problems and their negative rippling effects on the total development of the nation. One of such measures is the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) programme launched in fulfillment of the 1992 Constitution mandate, which states in Chapter 6 section 38 sub-sections 1 and 2:

The government shall provide educational facilities at all levels and in all regions of Ghana and shall, to a greater extent, be visible to make those facilities available to all citizens. The Government shall within two years after parliament's first meeting upon coming into force of the Constitution, draw up programmes for the implementation within the following ten years, for the provision of the FCUBE", [1].

There have been other initiatives by Ghana's governments to make parents, students and all other stakeholders in different sectors to realize the importance of education and its associated opportunities to the citizenry and thereby contribute their quota to a national and global progress. These initiatives include the Science, Mathematics and Technology Education (STME) clinics; provision of Free School Uniforms and Books initiative; School Feeding Programme; creation of a Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs (MOWAC); the Girl Child Education Unit (GUE) of the Ghana Education Service; provision of the Capitation Grants given per child; and employing the youth as teaching assistants to beef up the staff strength of schools under the National Youth Employment Programme (NYEP).

In spite of all these measures targeted at providing quality education to all children of school going age who are well motivated to be in school in the country, Ghana still faces challenges with retaining them in school due to absenteeism and truancy. The problem of truancy is one of the major contributing factors for poor academic performance in many schools, more especially, at the Junior High School (JHS) level. Hundreds of thousands of the youth of school-going age are usually seen loitering about with ethereal and elusive excuses whilst schools are in session. The statistics from the Ministry of Education for the year 2008 and 2009 under review in Ghana indicates that at the beginning of every academic year, one fifth of the pupils enrolled in almost every school miss classes across the nation and this comes with attendant negative implications on performance.

Truancy is a symptom: it is the result of one or more factors in a child's life which prevent regular school attendance. The possible causes and contributing factors of truancy are numerous and diverse. These symptoms must be recognized for an attempt at resolution to be made if any far-reaching impact can be made in each individual case. Truancy is a deliberate absence from compulsory school attendance by pupils without medical report or permission to ascertain reasons for their absence [2].

A truant pupil regularly absents him/herself from school without permission and usually pretends to be actively involved in school activities. O'keeffe [3] divides truancy into two types; the "blanket truancy" where pupils stay completely away from school and the "post-registration truancy" where pupils initially register officially as being present at school only for them to dodge the subsequent lessons of the day. Preliminary surveys conducted as spot checks by the Ministry of Education in a communiqué in 2011 on some selected schools in the ten regions of Ghana revealed that truancy is widespread and it is continually increasing at an alarming rate.

2. Methodology

The research design is a case study and the quantitative and qualitative research technique of the descriptive approach was the preferred choice for the researchers. This choice was based on the fact that a case study approach excels at bringing us to an understanding of a complex issue (such as truancy) and can extend experience or add strength to what is already known through previous research [4] [5].

A sample of hundred (100) respondents made up of sixty-three (63) students from JHS1 to JHS3 of Tema Metropolitan Assembly "2" JHS (TMA 2) who have been found by parents and school authorities to be truant,

thirty (30) parents (15 females and 15 males (30), and seven (7) teachers (4 males and 3 females). The tools for the data collection processes were questionnaires and personal interviews. The researchers were of the view that since TMA “2” was the main focus of the study it was expedient to select the subjects from there to enable the researchers make a comparative analysis of the data collected. Manhean is a suburb of Tema, a fishing community with a population of about twenty five-thousand, majority of whom are fisher folks. It has a harbour and an off-shore fishing market that promote various economic activities.

3. Causes of Truancy

In Ghana a lot of factors account for absenteeism and truancy among basic school pupils, and these factors have negative impacts on students’ academic performance especially on the results of the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE). Some contributing factors of truancy are school-related and include the nature of interaction with peers and teachers, bullying, the delivery of curriculum and its relevance, fear of punishment and boredom with academic work. With regard to a child’s relationship with the school is the notion where the child sees the school as an unsafe environment. This notion transcends beyond one isolated instance of harassment to a continuous act of maltreatment thereby preventing the child from seeing the school as the supposed safe haven. Recent reports by some media houses in Ghana reveal that truancy is on ascendancy across the country and it is not only prevalent at the basic school level but widespread among Senior High School (SHS) students. The Daily Graphic on March, 7, 2013, reported that four hundred final year students were suspended for being truant in the Ashanti region of Ghana. The Ghana News Agency on February 7th, 2013 cited a Development Consultant as saying that the future of the country’s educational system was in jeopardy with the prevailing trend of truancy and absenteeism in schools. He expressed sadness particularly with final year students in SHS who after registering for the West Africa Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE), indulge in truancy by refusing to attend classes.

A report by the Ghana News Agency (GNA) on July 14, 2010 cited the head mistress of Manhean Tema Metropolitan Assembly “2” JHS when she paid a courtesy call on the Tema Mantse. She said the high rate of truancy among pupils in the community was a major challenge to acceptable performances in examinations. She further stated that she had declared war on truancy as a way of instilling discipline in the students to enhance performance. Another GNA report on May 17, 2009, revealed that the Tema Traditional Council (TTC) had directed video houses in the Tema-Manhean metropolis to open for operations only after school, on weekends, and not to admit children of school-going age after 8pm. The Mantse and president of the council said the initiative had been taken as one intervention to help reverse the low academic performance of students in the area. He provided statistics of performance of the BECE results of TMA “2” JHS between 2005 and 2008 abhorring pass rates of 40%, 25%, 45%, and 20% respectively with similar trends in the sister school TMA “1” JHS. A teacher of the TMA “2” school confirmed the low performance in BECE in the school and reiterated that the refusal of pupils to attend classes immediately after they had registered for the BECE makes them miss out on very important discussion sessions on examinations which in effect affect their performance.

One major cause of truancy in Ghana is the shift system currently being run by a number of schools especially in the urban areas. Technically, the shift system is a practice where two or more groups or sets of classes alternate the use of one classroom. In other words, a classroom is shared between two or more groups. Thus, one group uses it in the morning or within a particular period and the other takes over in the afternoon or after the first shift period had ended.

Practically, instead of the children benefiting from about eight hours of instructional time daily, they end up receiving about four hours of teaching and learning which is woefully inadequate for effective academic work. In effect, these children are deprived of a holistic education which negatively affects performance. Poor performance is an incentive for disinterest in education consequential of high drop-out rates that add up to streetism, petty crimes and other anti-social behaviours. The Daily Graphic of February 22, 2004, reported the then Eastern Regional Director of the Ghana National Commission on Children advocating strongly against the shift system and stressing that the system bred truancy among pupils where children seen loitering around during school hours generally gave excuses that they belonged to the other shifts (morning or afternoon). A Daily Graphic report on January 3, 2010 cite the then Minister of Education (MOE) as saying that the shift system was not good since it made students truants. The Circuit Supervisor for the cluster of schools in Korle-Gonno, Accra in an interview with the Daily Graphic of October 2, 2009, stated that the shift system currently being practised was a

deficit for quality education and performance since majority of the pupils took undue advantage of it to skip classes.

Additionally, the teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil relationships in the school could be considered a cause of absenteeism. Studies [6]-[8] have shown that the child considers the school as his/her second home and the lack of cordiality and co-operation could cause them to become alienated and see going to school as a punishment. Osarenren [9] reiterates that the unsavory relationship between teachers and pupils is a breeding ground for distasteful remarks rendered in derogatory names (*i.e.*; block-heads, good-for-nothing, moron etc.). The victims of such unhealthy relationships become stigmatized and eventually stay away from school.

Many years of research by Eagle, [10] Henderson & Berla, [11], US Department of Education, [12] and Ziegler, [13] have confirmed that family involvement is a powerful tool on children's achievement in school. They assert that when families are involved in their children's education, the children score higher marks in tests; attend school regularly; complete homework on time; demonstrate more positive attitudes and behaviour; graduate from high school; and are more likely to enroll in higher educational institutions than students with less involved families. Sometimes however, the desire for economic security takes parents and guardians away to various places of work and thus, deprives children of the needed quality time to be shared with parents. Coupled with this insurgent lack of parental relationship resulting from economic hardships is the engagement of the children themselves in other economic activities to supplement efforts of parents in providing for the home. Children are engaged in viable economic activities such as street hawking, fishing, farming, and baby sitting, caring for the aged and sick, and sometimes serving as porters only to become truants.

When parents do not value the education of their children, they tend to condone the children's continuous absence from school as a good reason to comfortably help them with house chores. Berger [14] attests that the active involvement of parents in the child's school life can be important for them during their adolescent stage. Berger believes that parents who attend Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings and help their children with their homework provide encouragement to them to be punctual and regular at school and to enhance academic performance.

Another point worthy of mention is attitudinal truancy by the pupils themselves. Some pupils play truant in spite of efforts made by their parents and other stakeholders to educate them. This is manifest when a child in pretence assures the parents of going to school only to end up as a delinquent. More often than not, peers encourage truancy as a status-seeking activity or as a way of blending in. The child's natural instinct to be part of a larger crowd or peers will take over even if they were taught better habits at home. Often times the peer group is able to influence that child in the face of any resistance put forth prompting teasing him/her into becoming truant.

4. Results

Table 1 is the responses gathered through personal interview sessions with students on reasons why they miss school.

From **Table 1**, the most common reason why students miss school is that school work is boring. Seventeen of the student respondents representing 26.9% agreed with this and confirmed that they preferred playing video games to attending classes. Twelve respondents representing 19.1% said they stayed away from school because they had problems with some teachers not only because of a sour relationship but with the mode of delivery

Table 1. Reasons for staying away from school.

Responses	Rate of occurrence	Percentages (%)
Bullying	9	14.3
Problems with particular teachers	12	19.1
Problems with work (almost always too hard)	11	17.5
School work is boring (opt to play video games)	17	26.9
Having no friends/quarrels with friends	5	7.9
Peer pressure	9	14.3
Total	63	100

of their content in the classroom. Additionally, eleven respondents representing 17.5% said that school work was too difficult for them to grasp because they trailed in almost every subject and that was discouraging enough to cause them to stay away. They had given up entirely on themselves and rather felt appreciated outside the confines of the school. Nine respondents representing 14.3% revealed that they miss out of school because of bullying and 9 others representing 14.3% also said peer-pressure was a reason why they miss school. Non conformity to some set rules by the peers came with acts of bullying such as fines ranging from payment of sums of money to denial from being part of a team for games that demanded team work. The least factor was five respondents representing 7.9% who were of the view that having no friends and quarreling with friends was a recipe for them to play truancy.

5. Outcome of Truancy

Truancy has consequences on the academic performance of pupils. Recent reports by some districts, metropolis and media houses in Ghana indicate that pupils' academic performance is negatively impacted if they miss school frequently. Not only is truancy highly correlated with low levels of school achievement but also with high dropout rates. Bye, [15] believed that even if truants somehow managed to attend schools daily their minds were not always focused on studying but on what they intended to do once the class or school session was over. Bye further emphasized that with such negative attitudes from students, the tendency of concentration with its associated acquisition of knowledge became impossible.

According to Garry [16], individuals that drop out from school are two-and-a-half times more probable to be on welfare; nearly twice as likely to be unemployed; with an average of three-quarters earning significantly lower wages than those who graduate from the basic level of education. Garry further states that truancy is consequential of delinquency and criminal activities and other social vices. McCray [17] reiterates that truant students are at a higher risk for substance abuse, violence, armed robbery, defrauding by pretence, impersonation for favours among others.

An Educational Sector report by the Ho Municipal Assembly in 2006 revealed that the dropout rate was 4.1% between 2004 and 2005. The report further revealed that poverty was closely related to truancy and that truancy was increasing at an alarming rate of 25.0% annually and was a major cause of the low performance at the BECE in the municipality. Another report by the GNA on February 7, 2013, cites a Development Consultant as saying that the future of the country's educational system was in jeopardy with the prevailing trend of truancy and absenteeism in schools leading to examination malpractice. He expressed unhappiness particularly with final year students who after registering, refused to attend classes.

A Ghana News Agency and the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) report of August 5, 2009 cited a Social Welfare Director of the AMA as saying that between February and December 2008, seventy-five children appeared before the Juvenile court in the metropolis on offences like pilfering, stealing, assault and exposure to moral and physical dangers. She noted that most of these children were truants who were supposed to be in school at the time of the arrest.

A report by the Ghana Business News on November 12, 2011, cited the Municipal Director of Education of Ejisu-Juabeng, at a ceremony to award hard working teachers in the municipality who expressed concern about the high rate of truancy among basic schools in the municipality. This she said had contributed to the poor performance of pupils at almost all examinations in the municipality.

Coles, Bradshaw, Godfrey and Johnson [18] identify truanting from school before the age of 16 as a risk factor for not being in education, employment or training at age 16 - 18. This statement implies that students who do not receive formal education to an appreciable level were likely to leave school with no qualification. A well educated person, no matter how poor they may be were sure to have much self esteem than a person with little or no qualification.

Findings from the teachers in interview sessions also revealed that one major effect of truancy was academic underachievement. They reiterated that absence breaks the continuity of learning from a curriculum that is fully and tightly structured where a miss meant losing valuable information leading to a gap in knowledge acquisition. The data from the interview revealed that truancy was cyclical; pupils got into the swing of staying off or into "the rut of non-attendance" and that made it increasingly difficult for them to return to school to catch up. The truant pupils were thus caught in a vicious circle and abhorred seeking help. This "snowball" phenomenon creates an unending pattern of cause and effect. Truants become frustrated, bad-tempered, restless and unkempt,

lack concentration, and are difficult to discipline. After losing the “security of a normal school routine” the performance rate of truants drop and this is reflected in their level of confidence and self-esteem.

Table 2 is findings from the questionnaire from teachers on the outcome of truancy.

The results of findings on the teachers’ responses on the outcome of truancy reveal that under item 1, four teachers representing 57.2% agreed that one major effect of truancy was poor academic achievement. Students are unable to answer questions as expected and this is evident in low scores in routine class exercises and examinations. Two participants representing 28.5% strongly agreed to this and one participant (14.3%) disagreed. Four respondents representing 54.2% strongly agreed that truancy leads to delinquency and other problems. One respondent representing 26.9% disagreed, while none of the participants strongly disagreed. Two of the respondents representing 28.5% agreed that students’ truancy records and low performance damaged a school’s reputation and two respondents also strongly agreed to this. One participant however strongly disagreed and emphasized that if teachers were worried about the reputation of the school because a student was truant, those teachers should do their best to make the students stay in school in order not to damage the school’s reputation. The next table presents strategies for reducing truancy.

Table 3 is findings from the questionnaires on respondents’ reactions to the possible strategies for reducing truancy.

Table 3 shows that under relationship building, out of the 100 respondents, 50 of them representing (50%) strongly agreed that a healthy relationship between teachers and students was necessary for reducing truancy. This is because when truant students are at ease with teachers, they will want to always be in school. Thirty-five respondents representing 35% also agreed to this and fifteen respondents representing 15% disagreed that relationship building could make students attend school the more. They were of the view that if students were regular to school there was no way the school authorities would have problems with them. None of the respondents however strongly disagreed with this assertion.

With peer group counselling, forty-five participants (45%) strongly agreed that peer group counseling could assist in minimizing truancy. This number of people believed that when students were given career guidance and counseling experts to pursue courses that would make them more relevant to the job market, they would follow their dreams and work towards the attainment of such dreams and the tendency of unemployment would be brought to the barest minimum. Forty respondents (40%) also agreed to peer group counselling as a way of reducing truancy and 10 respondents representing 10% disagreed to this. The percentage that disagreed was of the

Table 2. Responses from teachers on the outcome of truancy.

No.	Statement	Agree (A)	Strongly Agree (SA)	Disagree (D)	Strongly Disagree (SD)
1.	Poor academic achievement	4 57.2%	2 28.5%	1 14.3%	-
2.	Delinquency and its associated problems	2 28.5%	4 54.2%	1 14.3%	-
3.	Damage to a school reputation	2 28.5%	2 28.5%	2 28.5%	1 14.3%

Table 3. Strategies to reduce truancy.

No.	Statement	Agree (A)	Strongly Agree (SA)	Disagree (D)	Strongly Disagree (SD)
1.	Relationship building	35 35%	50 50%	15 15%	-
2.	Peer group counseling	40 40%	4 45%	10 10%	5 5%
3.	Abolishing bullying in schools	50 50%	30 30%	10 10%	10 10%
4.	Involving truants in extracurricular activities	35 35%	39 39%	21 21%	5 5%
5.	Teacher contacting parents regarding the effects of truancy	30 30%	33 33%	10 10%	27 27%

view that career counselling should be the responsibility of parents because they were the providers of resources for their children's education and direct beneficiaries of their children's success stories in future and therefore they should see to it that their wards remained in school. Five participants strongly disagreed to the assertion that peer counselling could be of immense assistance to curbing truancy and pointed out that children should be made responsible for their own actions and not to be pampered through guidance and counselling.

With item 3, fifty respondents (50%) agreed that abolishing bullying in schools would help reduce truancy. This is because if students are bullied in the school environment then they should as well stay at home to enjoy their peace. Thirty respondents (30%) strongly agreed to abolishing bullying in school and thirty-nine respondents (39%) also strongly disagreed. The number that agreed was of the view that involving truants in extra-curricular activities was laudable since "all work and no play made Jack a dull boy". Thirty-nine respondents representing 39% also agreed with twenty-one (21%) disagreeing, and 5(5%) strongly disagreeing.

Table 3 again shows that, thirty-three of the respondents representing 33% strongly agreed that when a student becomes truant, one best way to minimize it is for the school authority to contact the parents of the ensuing danger since majority of these parents may not even be aware of the problem. Thirty respondents representing 30% strongly agreed to this with ten participants representing 10% disagreeing, and 27 representing 27% strongly disagreeing too. Those that disagreed were also of the belief that it was mandatory for parents and guardians of students to pay regular visits to schools of their wards to acquaint themselves with information about their performance appraisal and not always wait at home for end of term reports which in actual sense do not report on all that the parents or guardians are supposed to know about their children.

6. Recommendations and Conclusions

Education is a fundamental factor of development and it is the best legacy a country can give her citizens because it is considered by many as a tool for national development. Giving priority to education supports development since a well educated population is essential for countries that want to take advantage of market opportunities for foreign investment. The World Development Report 2000/2001 indicates that the biggest problem of poverty, besides the lack of food, is directly related to lack of knowledge. According to Education at a Glance [19], a recent report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) revealed that countries that aggressively invest in education have the largest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the world. Without doubt, such countries with knowledge-based have seen the most amount of economic transformation and this confirms that indeed education is the key to sustainable economic growth and development. Aristotle knew this centuries ago when he said that the fate of empires depended on the education of youth.

It is assumed that the most successful economies in the world are those that invest the most in their human resources and Ghana as a third world country needs robust education system which will enable the youth to realistically contribute to a sustainable development process. Education plays a vital role in securing economic and social progress and improves income distribution for national growth that is why Ghana should see education as a fundamental human right and see to it that all children are in school.

Truancy is a sign of trouble and an indicator that the young person involved may be giving up. When children start skipping school, they are indirectly telling their parents, school authority, government, stake holders and the entire community that they are in trouble and need our help. Truants eventually drop out of school and put themselves at a long term disadvantage of becoming productive citizens. It is therefore necessary for the government, school authorities and all other stake holders to develop comprehensive approaches to identify traces of truancy and reducing the menace.

Based on the findings of the study, we strongly recommend the following to students, parents, school administrators, teachers and all stakeholders of education for their better participation in the teaching-learning process. Teachers would agree that students' poor attendance does have a negative impact on students' poor achievement. Students who are absent therefore do not receive the same type of instruction and insight as those present or regular in school.

The government should develop a policy spelling out punitive measures in the form of fines and community service for parents who do not ensure that their children are punctual and regular at school. It is also believed that collaboration between parents and teachers could help reduce truancy. Teachers should make identified truants and their parents sign bonds. Those children should also be kept at school after regular sessions and be restricted. Parents could be made to assist if punishments such as the withdrawal of privileges, use of television,

playing games and particularly, playing outdoors with other youths are enforced to reduce the menace of truancy. Such sanctions are meant to challenge the youth to work on their own rather than ask their colleagues who are in school to help them do their home work. Additionally, parents of truant children could be provided with a variety of supports beginning with notification of their children's absence from school and then providing counseling services and workshops to offer information about the consequences of truancy and how it could be minimized or prevented entirely.

School management should make extra efforts at assisting parents who may be divorced, single, very young, or poor, since it has been found that such categories of people are associated more with truant children. School authorities could also help reduce truancy by establishing close links with the local police to swoop neighbourhoods in which truant youth are often found and to bring them to face appropriate sanctions. This could serve as a deterrent to other children not to be truants. Opinion leaders and other agents of change in the community could on regular bases organize forums to educate the youth on the effects of truancy and its attendant socio-economic implications. For instance, the Tema Traditional Council in collaboration with the Salvation Education Fund organized a funfair at Tema-Manhean on January 24, 2008, as an intervention and a platform to meet the youth and discuss measures to help reduce incidents of truancy. When the youth were made to be part of the decisions concerning their welfare, they willingly came out with suggestions and recommendations that they felt could help them. These suggestions and recommendations were regarded as rules they had set for themselves for which they could not break. If such laudable programmes are repeated on periodic bases, the youth who are dealing with truancy would be helped out of this menace.

The researchers strongly recommend that teachers should make sure that students are at school so they can receive the maximum instruction and the results would be shown on their standardized test. Such good results have the potential to enhance the school, the teacher, and the parents' reputation. More importantly, school leaders should help ensure that the school community is lively, filled with useful activities for the youth so that even those who used to be truants because they felt the school was boring, would now be happy to come back. The study has also affirmed the assertion of [20] that truancy has always been associated with negative behaviours such as drug abuse, alcohol abuse, pre-marital sex and teenage pregnancy. It is important that school heads, with the support of parents and other community leaders, ensure that the youth look forward to going to school. If truancy has a negative impact on achievement, then governments, parents and school authorities must work together to create, implement and enforce effective attendance protocol interventions appreciated by the community, or at least the majority for curbing truancy so that all will adhere to the tenets of its enforcements and achieve effective growth for Ghana.

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