

Exploring The Experiences of Students with Truancy Behaviour During a Peer Mentorship Program: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of students with truancy behaviour participating in a peer mentorship programme designed to reduce truancy and enhance school engagement in secondary schools in Awka North Local Government Area, Nigeria. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the researcher collected data from focus group discussions with 12 mentees and 5 mentors who participated in a six-week quasi-experimental intervention. The study employed purposive sampling method to select the participants. Interview questions were generated for the study to use as data. The interviews were conducted with mentees to explore their personal perspectives on the peer mentorship programme, focusing on changes in attendance, engagement, and challenges encountered. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which revealed substantial improvements in school attendance, classroom participation, self-discipline, and self-confidence among mentees which showed success in the peer mentorship intervention programme. Despite challenges such as peer pressure, privacy concerns and adapting to increased school work that were experienced during the course of the mentorship, participants reported overwhelmingly positive experiences. The findings illustrate the potential of peer mentorship as an effective intervention for addressing truancy and fostering holistic student development. This study emphasizes the importance of mentor training, privacy protocols, and inclusive school cultures in optimizing programme outcomes. The insights contribute to the growing body of evidence on the role of peer mentorship in secondary education.

Keywords: Peer Mentorship, Truancy, Focus Group, School Engagement, Student Development, Secondary Education

INTRODUCTION

Truancy is a persistent challenge confronting educational systems worldwide, with far-reaching implications for students, schools, and society. Defined as an unauthorized absence from school without valid reasons, truancy disrupts academic

progress, weakens school engagement, and increases the likelihood of delinquent behaviour (Adeyemi, 2021). While absenteeism can stem from various factors, including economic hardship, family instability, and disengagement with the school environment, its cumulative effects are often profound, leading to poor academic performance, social maladjustment, and an increased risk of school dropout (Animasahun & Shoneye, 2017). Given these wide-ranging consequences, understanding truancy within specific educational contexts becomes crucial.

In Nigeria, truancy remains a systemic problem, particularly in secondary schools where student disengagement continues to rise (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021). Reports indicate that secondary school absenteeism rates range from 25% to 30% in Anambra State, with even higher truancy rates in Awka North Local Government Area, where surveys suggest over 60% of students' self-report being absent from school regularly (Okafor & Achumba, 2022; Ezeamama & Ugwoegbu, 2020). These figures reveal an urgent need for strategic interventions that address the root causes of truancy and foster sustainable student engagement. Truancy manifests in various forms, from sporadic absences to chronic disengagement that precedes complete school withdrawal. While truancy is frequently associated with physical absenteeism, scholars have also identified an emerging pattern of internal truancy, wherein students attend school but actively disengage from learning activities. Internal truancy, characterized by skipping classes, evading assignments, and showing passive resistance to instruction, is a growing concern in Nigerian secondary schools (Munyo, 2015; Havik, Bru & Ertesvag, 2015). This form of disengagement, though less overt than complete absenteeism, reflects a deeper issue of student detachment from the learning process which may be attributed to various factors.

Several factors contribute to truancy in Nigerian schools. Home environment plays a significant role, with family instability, economic hardship, and lack of parental supervision being major predictors of absenteeism (Adekunle, 2015). For many students, the need to support family income often outweighs the perceived

benefits of formal education, leading to irregular attendance and eventual disengagement. School-related factors such as harsh disciplinary measures, uninspiring teaching methods, and lack of emotional support further alienate students, reinforcing negative attitudes toward education (Teasley, 2014). Additionally, peer influence can either exacerbate or mitigate truancy; while association with delinquent peers may encourage absenteeism, positive peer relationships, such as those cultivated in mentorship programmes, can foster motivation and accountability (Garringer, 2018). Hence, understanding the broader implications of truancy is essential in designing effective interventions that address both academic and social dimensions of student disengagement.

Traditionally, punitive approaches such as suspensions, detentions, and expulsions have been the dominant responses to truancy in Nigerian schools. However, empirical evidence suggests that these measures do little to curb absenteeism among students with chronic disengagement (Nnamani & Oyibe, 2017). While these strategies aim to enforce compliance, they fail to address the underlying issues that drive students to disengage from school. Given the limitations of punitive measures, alternative interventions that prioritize student support and engagement have gained prominence in educational discourse.

One such intervention is peer mentorship, which has been recognized as a promising strategy for fostering school engagement, emotional well-being (Eleje *et al.*, 2025, 2024a, 2024b), and academic achievement and motivation among at-risk students (Hickman *et al.*, 2020). Peer mentorship programmes pair experienced students (mentors) with struggling peers (mentees) to provide guidance, support, and encouragement. Unlike punitive measures that isolate students, mentorship fosters a sense of belonging and accountability, creating an environment where students feel valued and supported in their academic journey (Lyons & McQuillin, 2021).

It is noteworthy to mention that empirical research emphasizes the effectiveness of mentorship programmes in improving school attendance and engagement. In a U.S.-based study, middle school students who participated in a

peer mentorship programme exhibited higher attendance rates, improved academic performance, and increased motivation compared to their non-mentored counterparts (Lakind, Atkins & Eddy, 2015). Similarly, a randomized control trial in the U.K. found that mentored students demonstrated a significant reduction in truancy rates and a more positive attitude towards school (Audrey *et al.*, 2015). These findings suggest that mentorship programmes can serve as a viable intervention for addressing truancy by fostering a supportive and inclusive school environment.

In Nigeria, the application of peer mentorship as a structured intervention remains relatively underexplored. However, emerging studies suggest its potential in curbing absenteeism and fostering student retention. For instance, Adeyemo (2020) found that secondary school students in Oyo State who participated in a mentorship programme reported increased school engagement and motivation. Likewise, a qualitative study by Eniola (2021) on at-risk girls in Lagos indicated that peer mentorship enhanced participants' self-confidence, academic interest, and emotional well-being. Despite these promising findings, more research is needed to assess the specific impact of mentorship on students with truancy behaviour in different educational contexts.

Given the escalating rates of truancy in Awka North and the limited application of peer mentorship in Nigerian secondary schools, this study seeks to explore the experiences of students with truancy behaviour within a structured peer mentorship programme. While previous research has examined general factors influencing truancy and school disengagement, there remains a significant gap in understanding how mentorship is experienced by truant students themselves. Studies in Western contexts have explored the effectiveness of mentorship programmes in improving school attendance and motivation (Lakind, Atkins & Eddy, 2015; Audrey *et al.*, 2015), yet there is limited empirical evidence examining the lived experiences of mentees within such programmes, particularly in Nigerian settings.

Furthermore, existing Nigerian studies on mentorship and school engagement have largely focused on academic performance and retention rates rather than personal narratives and perspectives of truant students (Adeyemo, 2020; Eniola, 2021). Exploring these experiences is crucial, as mentorship interventions rely heavily on mentee engagement, perceptions of support, and the social dynamics between mentors and mentees. Understanding these interactions will provide insight into the factors that contribute to successful mentorship relationships and the challenges that may hinder their effectiveness.

Studying the experiences of students with truancy behaviour within peer mentorship programmes is necessary to determine whether such interventions provide a sense of belonging, improve school motivation, and encourage attendance. By capturing students perspectives, this study aims to offer evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and educators seeking to implement or improve mentorship initiatives. Addressing this research gap will not only deepen theoretical understanding of mentorship in truancy intervention but will also contribute to more effective strategies for re-engaging at-risk students within the Nigerian educational system.

Objectives

This study aims to explore the perceptions of students with truancy behaviour experiences in peer mentorship programme living in Awka North Local Government Area of Anambra state. Specifically, the research objectives are:

1. How do students with truancy behaviour perceive their experiences in a peer mentorship programme?
2. What impact does peer mentorship have on the school engagement and attendance of students with truancy behaviour?
3. What are the success factors and challenges that influence the effectiveness of peer mentorship in addressing truancy?

Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of students with truancy behaviour who participated in a peer mentorship programme. Phenomenology is appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions and the meanings they attribute to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher was very aware of the sensitive nature of this enquiry. As Liamputtong (2007) rightly puts it, researching vulnerable populations requires not just methodological rigour, but also empathy and ethical sensitivity.

Participants

The study employed purposive sampling method to select the participants, a method Patton (2014) described as ideal for identifying information-rich cases in qualitative research. One secondary school was used for the experimental study while another served as the control group. The mentees were JSS2 students identified as truant by school counselors and form teachers through attendance records and classroom behaviour. Mentors were SS2 students recognized for their strong academic performance, good conduct, and commitment to school activities. A total of 17 participants were selected, 12 mentees and 5 mentors, for the experimental school. Additionally, a total of 15 truants students were selected as control from the other school.

Data Collection Methods

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to obtain detailed accounts of participants' experiences. As noted by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), this approach allows for flexibility while ensuring that key topics are covered consistently across all interviews. The interviews were conducted with mentees to explore their personal perspectives on the peer mentorship programme, focusing on changes in attendance, engagement, and challenges encountered.

The researcher conducted the interviews in Igbo language to enable the mentees to express themselves appropriately. The researcher translated the interviews answers in English language without altering the context of the mentees responses. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Transcripts were carefully reviewed to identify recurring patterns, which were grouped into themes that reflected participants experiences, challenges, and perceived impacts of the programme.

Ethical Considerations

In conducting this study, the researcher was aware of the vulnerability of the participants and the sensitive nature of the inquiry. Bearing a profound responsibility, the researcher aimed to ensure that the study not only yielded valuable insights but also respected the rights, dignity, and well-being of the students with truancy behaviour involved. This approach aligns with the ethical principle of informed consent, as outlined by the National Health Research Ethics Committee of Nigeria. Participants provided informed consent after being briefed on the study's purpose and their rights. Participation was voluntary, and participants had right to withdraw at any stage.

The interviews were conducted in familiar, comfortable settings in the school. A trusted adult, usually a teacher, was always within sight during the interviews, providing a sense of security for the students with truancy behaviour.

Throughout the study, strict adherence to the ethical guidelines provided by Nigerian law, particularly the National Code of Health Research Ethics, was maintained (Ogunrin, Ogundiran & Adebamowo, 2013). This included ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, securely storing data, and using pseudonyms (alphabets) in all research outputs.

Interview Questions

1. How do you feel the peer mentorship programme has helped you to attend and engage in school?

2. Can you share any specific experiences or interactions with your peer mentor that have been particularly meaningful or helpful for you?
3. In what ways has the peer mentorship programme supported you in overcoming obstacles related to truancy?
4. Have there been any challenges or difficulties you have faced in the peer mentorship programme? If so, how have you navigated them?
5. Have you noticed any changes in your attitude towards school or learning since participating in the peer mentorship programme? Can you let me know about the experiences.
6. Is there anything you think could be improved about the mentorship programme?

Data Analysis Approach

Thematic analysis was chosen as the primary method for analyzing the qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews. This approach is suitable for identifying patterns, themes, and meanings within the participants experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase process: which includes, familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

Research Question One: how did students with truancy behaviour perceive their experiences in the peer mentorship programme.

Table 1: Improved School Attendance and Consistency

Quotes	Codes	Subthemes	Theme 1
"I feel good because it helped me to be attending school every day, I don't miss school anymore" (Student A)	Regular attendance	Development of attendance habits	Improved School Attendance and Consistency

"The programme made me to attend school regularly and punctual" (Student D)	Punctuality; Regular attendance	Time management; Commitment to attendance	
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A major theme that emerged was the improved school attendance and consistency. Mentees described the mentorship process as instrumental in helping them develop a sense of responsibility and commitment to attending school regularly. These accounts show how mentorship created a structure of motivating mentees to prioritize school attendance.

Table 2: Enhanced Engagement with Academic Activities

Quotes	Codes	Subthemes	Theme 2
"It also helped me to listen whenever the teacher is teaching" (Student B)	Active listening	Classroom attentiveness	Enhanced Engagement with Academic Activities
"I ask questions in class and answer the questions I know. I also write my notes" (Student C)	Classroom participation; Note-taking	Active learning behaviour	

Participants reported increased classroom participation, attentiveness, and completion of academic tasks as a result of the mentorship programme. Mentees described how mentors actively monitored their performance, which encouraged them to stay focused and complete their work. This theme reveals that mentorship fostered a proactive learning attitude and a greater sense of academic ownership among participants.

Table 3: Development of Positive Peer Relationships and Support Systems

Quotes	Codes	Subthemes	Theme 3
"I thought he will beat me or report me to the teacher rather he commended me writing the test and	Positive reinforcement; Encouragement	Supportive mentorship	Development of Positive Peer

encouraged me to try my best next time" (Student C)			Relationships and Support Systems
"There are some difficult topics that I will encounter, my mentor will encourage me to...study with my class members who understood the topic better" (Student K)	Problem-solving support; Learning strategies	Guidance for academic challenges	

The mentorship programme promoted collaborative learning and supportive peer interactions. Mentees reported feeling a sense of connection with their mentors and peers, which contributed to their academic confidence and motivation. This sense of belonging played a pivotal role in motivating students to remain engaged in their education.

Research Question 2: What impact does the peer mentorship programme have on the school engagement and attendance of students with truancy behaviour?

Table 4: Accountability through Mentorship

Quotes	Codes	Subthemes	Theme 4
"She comes to my class every day to ask me or my class members questions about me" (Student B)	Daily monitoring; Peer verification	Regular oversight	Accountability through Mentorship
"He comes and make sure I stay in class, by asking other members of the class. He also checks my notes, test and assignments" (Student E)	Comprehensive checking; Multiple accountability methods	Thorough monitoring	

The programme instilled a structure of accountability, where mentors consistently monitored mentees attendance and behaviour. This mentorship role acted as a motivating force, ensuring that mentees adhered to school expectations.

Others shared that their mentors persistent encouragement and reminders were critical to their improved attendance.

Research Question 3: What are success factors and challenges that influence the effectiveness of peer mentorship programme in addressing truancy?

Table 5: Peer Pressure and Social Dynamics

Quotes	Codes	Subthemes	Theme 5
"The only difficulty I encountered was some of my class mates that are not part of us, tried to act as our mentors in an insulting manner but I ignored them" (Student C)	Mock mentorship; Peer ridicule	Negative peer interactions	Peer Pressure and Social Dynamics
"Not much difficulty but... it should be private instead of asking other members of the class which I find somehow, because other members of the class will be looking at me" (Student F)	Public scrutiny; Unwanted attention	Social discomfort	

Some mentees reported experiencing ridicule or negative behaviour from classmates not involved in the programme. This external pressure occasionally created discomfort.

Table 6: Privacy Concerns

Quotes	Codes	Subthemes	Theme 6
"The mentor should have believed what I answered him and it should be private instead of asking other members of the class" (Student F)	Desire for privacy; Trust issues	Need for confidentiality	Privacy Concerns
"The meeting with the mentors should be private" (Student F)	Request for private interactions	Preference for confidential mentoring	

Mentees expressed concerns about certain interactions with mentors being conducted in ways that felt public.

Table 7: Adapting to Increased School Work

Quotes	Codes	Subthemes	Theme 7
"My mentor reported me to the teacher, because I was not writing my notes... Since that day I try all I could so that the mentor will not report me" (Student H)	Behavioural change through accountability; Avoidance of negative consequences	Adaptation through consequence awareness	Adapting to Increased School Work
"Not much challenge, I have to listen to my mentor's instructions, so that she will not report me to the teacher and I realized that it helped me" (Student J)	Initial compliance; Recognition of benefits	Progression from external to internal motivation	

For some mentees, the initial adjustment to expectations and accountability posed a challenge. While these challenges were notable, participants generally viewed them as temporary obstacles that contributed to their growth and behavioural change.

Discussion

The findings revealed how peer mentorship influenced truant students behaviour and school engagement. Through regular interactions and support, mentees developed better attendance habits and showed increased participation in school activities. These improvements support previous research by Adeyemo (2020), who found similar positive outcomes in Oyo State schools when structured mentoring programmes were implemented. Also, Lakind, Atkins, and Eddy (2015) showed that structured mentoring programmes encourage accountability and regular school attendance. By fostering consistent check-ins and active monitoring, mentors in this study served as positive role models, motivating mentees to prioritize school.

The improvement in classroom participation and academic habits also matches with findings by Eniola (2021), who noted that peer mentorship enhances students academic confidence and self-discipline. Mentees reported increase in note-taking, assignment completion, and classroom engagement revealed the multidimensional impact of mentorship on school behaviour.

Although the programme showed clear benefits, some challenges emerged. Issues like peer pressure and privacy concerns affected how some students experienced the mentorship process. These findings echo observations by Cavell and Elledge (2014), who noted that social dynamics within school-based mentoring programmes can sometimes create difficulties for participants. The presence of these challenges suggests a need for better privacy protocols and more attention to how mentoring activities are conducted in public spaces.

Furthermore, school attendance among participants increased significantly after joining the programme. Many participants noted an improvement in their attitudes toward education, with some stating that their mentors helped them develop better study habits. These findings suggest that peer mentorship can serve as a valuable intervention for addressing truancy by fostering a supportive school environment, improving student engagement, and encouraging consistent school attendance. However, the effectiveness of such programmes depends on proper mentor-mentee matching, sustained support, and institutional backing.

Overall, the findings suggest that mentorship programmes not only improve school attendance and engagement but also contribute to long-term aspirational changes in students with truancy behaviour. By helping them cultivate academic goals, mentorship initiatives can play a crucial role in breaking cycles of school disengagement and absenteeism.

Conclusions and Implications

This study has provided perception of the experiences of students with truancy behaviour participating in a peer mentorship programme, revealing both the

benefits and challenges of such interventions. The findings revealed that mentorship fosters a sense of belonging and improves school engagement. Many mentees developed stronger academic motivation, increased their school attendance, and formed meaningful connections with their mentors. However, challenges such as, privacy concerns, and logistical constraints suggest the need for structured mentor training and institutional support.

The implications of these findings extend to educational policymakers, school administrators, and mentorship programme designers. Schools should consider integrating structured mentorship initiatives as part of a broader truancy reduction strategy. Policymakers should recognize the value of non-punitive interventions and allocate resources toward mentorship programmes that support at-risk students.

Limitations of the Study

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted in a specific geographic region in Awka North Local Government Area, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Future research should explore similar interventions in different regions and educational settings to assess the broader applicability of the results. The study focused on truant students experiences, it did not explore the perspectives of mentors, teachers, or parents, who may offer valuable insights into the mentorship process. Future research should adopt a multi-stakeholder approach to better understand the full ecosystem surrounding peer mentorship in addressing truancy.

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