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# TRUANCY AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS: EVIDENCE FROM MBEYA CITY, TANZANIA

***Ally Masoud***

Department of Education, Faculty of Science and Education, University of Iringa, Tanzania

**ABSTRACT :**

This study examined the impact of truancy on academic performance among public secondary school students in Mbeya City, Tanzania. Guided by three specific objectives to determine the extent of truancy among students, to examine the relationship between truancy and academic performance, and to assess the factors contributing to truancy the study adopted a mixed-methods convergent design underpinned by a pragmatic paradigm. A total of 292 respondents participated, comprising 216 students, 22 teachers, and 54 parents, achieving a 100.0% response rate. Structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document review were used to collect data. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies and percentages, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. Findings revealed that truancy is widespread and normalized, with 75.9% of students confirming frequent full-day absenteeism without permission, 84.2% acknowledging regular late arrivals, and 73.1% reporting internal period-skipping during the school day. A powerful negative relationship between truancy and academic performance was established: 81.5% of respondents agreed that missing school makes it difficult to understand subsequent lessons, 76.8% confirmed that truancy caused them to miss continuous assessment tests, and 86.1% agreed that regular late arrival results in loss of critical morning learning hours. The primary factors driving truancy included peer pressure (78.7%), weak parental supervision and family poverty (78.7%), classroom overcrowding (76.9%), and the pull of the local informal economy (83.3%). The study concludes that truancy causes progressive learning loss that leads directly to examination failure. It recommends period-by-period attendance monitoring, strict enforcement of child labour laws during school hours, expanded school infrastructure, and counselling-based student support systems.

**Keywords***: Truancy, academic performance, school absenteeism, Student Engagement Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, secondary schools, Mbeya City, Tanzania*

## 1.0 Introduction

Regular school attendance is one of the most fundamental prerequisites for effective learning in formal education systems. UNESCO (2022) identifies consistent classroom presence as a core enabler of Sustainable Development Goal 4, which seeks to ensure inclusive and quality education for all. When students are physically present in the classroom, they receive instruction, participate in assessments, engage with peers, and build the cumulative knowledge base that enables them to succeed in national examinations. However, when students deliberately and repeatedly absent themselves from school without valid reason a behaviour universally defined as truancy the educational consequences are severe and often irreversible within a single academic cycle (Keppens et al., 2022).

Globally, truancy has been documented as a persistent challenge across diverse educational contexts. In the United States and the United Kingdom, chronic absenteeism is directly linked to learning loss, qualification gaps, and reduced labour market outcomes (Brown, 2024). In Asian countries, truancy patterns are frequently associated with academic pressure in competitive examination systems, with students disengaging when they cannot cope with curriculum demands (Chen & Wong, 2021). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the challenge is compounded by poverty, long distances to school, lack of basic needs, overcrowded classrooms, and the pull of informal economic activities that compete with formal schooling (Ibrahim, 2023; Anyalebechi, 2022). These overlapping factors make truancy in African secondary schools a multi-dimensional structural problem rather than a simple individual behavioural failure.

In Tanzania, the government has made significant investments in basic education access through the Fee-Free Basic Education Policy, which has expanded school enrolment substantially (URT, 2021). Despite these advances, truancy remains one of the leading contributors to poor examination results in community ward secondary schools, including high rates of Division Zero outcomes in the Certificate of Secondary Education Examination (Kapinga, 2023). In Mbeya City, a thriving urban trading and agricultural hub near the Zambian border, students are uniquely exposed to informal economic temptations during school hours, with some leaving classrooms to engage in petty trade, motorcycle washing, or Boda-Boda operations

(Mnyanyi, 2021). Although the relationship between truancy and poor academic performance is widely acknowledged in Tanzania, limited empirical research has specifically examined this relationship in Mbeya City's public secondary schools within a single unified study design.

This study was guided by Student Engagement Theory (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004), which conceptualizes truancy as a manifestation of behavioural disengagement from learning, and by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, which situates student behaviour within interacting systems of family, school, and community. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for understanding why students disengage from school and how that disengagement affects their learning outcomes. The study pursued three specific objectives: to determine the extent of truancy among students in public secondary schools in Mbeya City; to examine the relationship between truancy and students' academic performance; and to assess the factors contributing to truancy among public secondary school students in Mbeya City.

## 2.0 Methodology

### *2.1 Study Area*

The study was conducted in Mbeya City, located in Mbeya Region in the southern highlands of Tanzania. Mbeya City is an important urban centre characterized by significant cross-border trade, agricultural commerce, and informal economic activity. Its public secondary schools serve students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, including urban, peri-urban, and low-income residential communities. The city was selected because reports from schools and education authorities identified truancy as a persistent challenge affecting student learning and examination performance (Katoto, 2025). The presence of both formal and informal economic sectors competing with school attendance makes Mbeya City particularly suitable for examining the structural drivers of student absenteeism.

### *2.2 Research Approach and Design*

The study adopted a mixed-methods research approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods within a convergent mixed-methods design. In this design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously but analysed separately, with findings from both strands merged during interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A pragmatic research paradigm underpinned the study, recognizing that social phenomena such as truancy are complex and influenced by multiple interacting factors that require both numerical measurement and rich contextual explanation. The study employed a descriptive research design to describe existing conditions without manipulating variables (Kothari, 2004).

### *2.3 Sampling Procedure and Sample Size*

The target population comprised students, teachers, and parents or guardians from four purposively selected public secondary schools in Mbeya City Council. The accessible population was estimated at 1,080, comprising 800 students, 80 teachers, and 200 parents. Using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, a sample size of 292 respondents was calculated. Proportionate allocation distributed this sample as 216 students, 22 teachers, and 54 parents. Students were selected using stratified random sampling, with strata formed by class level (Forms One through Four) to ensure equal representation of all forms. Teachers were selected using a combination of simple random sampling for subject teachers and purposive sampling for key administrative informants including heads of schools, academic masters, and discipline masters. Parents were selected using systematic sampling from parent meeting lists. All 292 targeted respondents participated fully in the study, yielding a 100.0% response rate.

### *2.4 Data Collection Methods*

Four data collection methods were employed. Structured questionnaires were administered to student respondents, covering five-point Likert-scale statements on the extent of truancy, its relationship with academic performance, and contributing factors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and school administrators to gather qualitative insights on truancy patterns, disciplinary challenges, and academic consequences. Focus group discussions were held with selected students to explore shared experiences and peer dynamics related to absenteeism. Document review of class attendance registers, grade books, and academic performance records provided objective evidence to corroborate self-reported data. Data collection was conducted across March, April, and May 2026.

### *2.5 Data Analysis*

Quantitative data from questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages, presented in structured tables. Qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions were analysed thematically by organizing responses into recurring patterns aligned with the three study objectives. Results from both quantitative and qualitative analyses were merged during interpretation to provide a holistic understanding

of truancy and its academic consequences. Validity was ensured through expert review of instruments and a pilot study in one school outside the sample. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, with a threshold of 0.70 or above. Trustworthiness of qualitative data was ensured through triangulation of multiple data sources, member checking, and maintaining an audit trail of analytical decisions (Creswell, 2014).

## 3.0 Results

### *3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents*

Of the 216 student respondents, 106 (49.1%) were male and 110 (50.9%) were female, providing a near-balanced gender distribution. The majority of students, 124 (57.4%), were aged between 15 and 16 years, followed by 52 (24.1%) aged 17 to 18 years, 32 (14.8%) aged 13 to 14 years, and 8 (3.7%) above 18 years. Students were equally distributed across all four class levels, with exactly 54 students (25.0%) representing each form from Form One to Form Four, reflecting precise application of stratified sampling. Among the 22 teacher respondents, 10 (45.5%) were general subject teachers, and 4 each (18.2%) were heads of schools, academic masters or mistresses, and discipline masters or mistresses respectively. Among the 54 parent respondents, 24 (44.4%) were engaged in informal petty trading, 18 (33.3%) in small-scale subsistence farming, 8 (14.8%) in formal employment, and 4 (7.4%) in casual labor. This means that over 77% of families relied on informal, labour-intensive economic activities — a household profile directly relevant to understanding how domestic pressures shape student attendance.

### *3.2 Extent of Truancy among Students*

The study found that truancy manifests in multiple forms and is widespread across public secondary schools. As shown in Table 1, 75.9% of students confirmed that some peers frequently miss full school days without permission, with 43.5% agreeing and 32.4% strongly agreeing with this statement.

**Table 1: Frequency of Missing School Without Permission (n=216)**

| Response Scale | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Strongly Disagree** | 12 | 5.6 |
| **Disagree** | 18 | 8.3 |
| **Neutral** | 22 | 10.2 |
| **Agree** | 94 | 43.5 |
| **Strongly Agree** | 70 | 32.4 |

*Source: Field Data, 2026*

Regarding the general prevalence of truancy, 75.0% of respondents viewed absenteeism as a common, normalized characteristic of their school environment. Regular late arrival was the most widely confirmed form of truancy, with a combined 84.2% agreeing or strongly agreeing that some students regularly arrive after the school day has begun. Internal period-skipping was confirmed by 75.9% of respondents, who acknowledged that students skip specific lessons while remaining within the school compound. Unauthorized early departure was confirmed by 67.6% of students, who agreed that some peers leave before classes officially end. These patterns were confirmed through document review of daily attendance registers, which showed average daily absenteeism of five to eight students per class stream during the data collection period.

Qualitative data deepened the quantitative findings. A discipline mistress described how students leave home in school uniform but divert to local business hubs rather than entering the school compound (DM1, March 2026). A general subject teacher explained that internal truancy is extremely difficult to monitor because in a room with 80 students, the absence of specific individuals during afternoon periods goes undetected by subject teachers who cannot check every face (ST1, May 2026). Students themselves, in a focus group discussion, acknowledged that period-skipping is driven by fear of difficult subjects and facilitated by broken perimeter fences and large unmonitored campus spaces (FGD2, May 2026).

### *3.3 Relationship between Truancy and Academic Performance*

A powerful negative relationship between truancy and academic performance was established across all four measured dimensions. Table 2 shows that 81.5% of respondents confirmed that missing school frequently makes it difficult to understand subsequent lessons.

**Table 2: Impact of Missing School on Understanding Lessons (n=216)**

| Response Scale | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly Disagree | 10 | 4.6 |
| Disagree | 14 | 6.5 |
| Neutral | 16 | 7.4 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Agree | 98 | 45.4 |
| Strongly Agree | 78 | 36.1 |

*Source: Field Data, 2026*

Regarding the impact on continuous assessment records, 76.8% of respondents confirmed that truancy directly causes them to miss continuous assessment tests, while document reviews of teacher grade books showed that chronic absenteeism columns corresponded with multiple blank or zero marks in internal assessment sections. Regular late arrival was confirmed as academically harmful by 86.1% of respondents, who agreed that arriving late leads to direct loss of morning learning hours. Internal period-skipping was found to reduce lesson coverage and examination readiness by 75.9% of respondents.

Qualitative evidence provided rich illustration of these academic consequences. An academic master explained during interview that out of twenty chronic truants reviewed on 14 April, fifteen carried zero marks in continuous assessment columns simply because they were absent when exercises were given, automatically pushing them into the lowest performance brackets before terminal examinations (AM1, April 2026). A second academic master described how students who missed mock evaluations developed a sense of academic failure early in the term, discouraging them from attending subsequent lessons because they felt their continuous records were already destroyed (AM2, April 2026). A general subject teacher described how ten late students entering a Form Two mathematics lesson forty minutes after it had begun could not follow any subsequent steps on the board and scored zeros in the immediate topic evaluation (ST2, May 2026). A head of school crosschecked term results and found a direct connection between students who regularly skipped afternoon history and geography periods and single-digit marks in terminal papers (HT1, May 2026). Students in a focus group explained that arriving late results in copying notes from classmates without comprehension, producing notebooks full of written words but no genuine understanding to draw on during examinations (FGD2, May 2026).

### *3.4 Factors Contributing to Truancy*

Four primary factors were identified as significant drivers of truancy, as summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3: Summary of Factors Contributing to Truancy (n=216)**

| Factor | Agreed + Strongly Agreed (n) | Percentage Agreed (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Peer pressure and bad friend groups | 170 | 78.7 |
| Weak parental supervision and family poverty | 170 | 78.7 |
| Classroom overcrowding and poor infrastructure | 166 | 76.9 |
| Thriving local informal economy | 180 | 83.3 |

*Source: Field Data, 2026*

The local informal economy was the most widely confirmed pull factor (83.3%), with students drawn to petty trading, Boda-Boda work, and casual labour opportunities that offer immediate daily income. Peer pressure and weak parental monitoring each received 78.7% agreement, confirming that social conformity to street groups and inadequate household tracking are equally powerful contributors to non-attendance. Classroom overcrowding was confirmed by 76.9% of respondents, who explained that in a room containing 80 to 100 students, individual absence goes undetected, creating a structural environment that facilitates hidden truancy.

Qualitative findings elaborated each factor. A discipline master described catching four Form Three boys hiding in an unfinished building during afternoon physics, who admitted they followed their friends to avoid being called cowards by their peer group (DM1, March 2026). Students in a focus group confirmed that fear of social exclusion within peer groups forces them to crawl under broken wire fences with friends even when they know it will cause them to miss weekly tests (FGD1, March 2026). A head of school described phoning a parent to report a week of full absence, only to find the parent completely unaware because she assumed her child had been attending school daily (HT1, April 2026). A parent representative described how a torn school uniform and lack of bus fare kept a student home, which then led to adaptation to a street routine and eventually to seeking casual income (P1, April 2026). A subject teacher described classrooms of over 90 students where back-row students feel completely invisible and know their absence will not be noticed, which encourages them to run away from class during lesson breaks (ST3, May 2026). A discipline mistress described catching three registered students working at a motorcycle parking bay during class hours, who explained that earning 3,000 shillings daily was more attractive than sitting in a crowded classroom (DM2, May 2026).

## 4.0 Discussion

### *4.1 Extent and Manifestation of Truancy*

The finding that truancy is exceptionally widespread and manifests in multiple forms full-day absenteeism, internal period-skipping, late arrival, and early unauthorized departure provides clear empirical grounding for Student Engagement Theory. Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) conceptualize truancy as a form of behavioural disengagement in which the student intentionally breaks the physical connection with the instructional environment. The finding that over three-quarters of students confirm frequent full-day absenteeism among their peers indicates that institutional attachment has significantly weakened among adolescent learners in Mbeya City's public secondary schools. This aligns with global literature documenting that chronic absenteeism functions as a primary institutional barrier to curriculum coverage and learning continuity (Gottfried, 2014), while differing from Western contexts where truancy is more often linked to psychological profiles such as school refusal or clinical anxiety (Smith, 2023).

The prevalence of internal period-skipping — where students are marked present at morning registration but absent during specific afternoon periods — represents a particularly concerning form of selective disengagement that conventional attendance monitoring systems are structurally unable to detect. This corresponds with earlier Tanzanian educational observations that internal period-skipping is driven by students' negative perceptions of specific subjects and their exploitation of classroom congestion (Komba, 2017), and with regional East African literature showing that overcrowded secondary schools face severe operational limitations in period-by-period tracking (Nsubuga, 2018). The finding that 84.2% of students confirmed regular late arrival as widespread is consistent with research in Tanzania and the broader Sub-Saharan region, which documents chronic morning delay as an intermediate step toward total school dropout when institutional punishments for lateness escalate rather than support re-entry (Omondi, 2024). The cumulative picture is of a school attendance crisis where multiple forms of absenteeism overlap and reinforce each other within the same student population.

### *4.2 Relationship between Truancy and Academic Performance*

The negative relationship between truancy and academic performance established in this study is consistent with a substantial body of empirical literature spanning global, African, and Tanzanian contexts. Student Engagement Theory explains this relationship directly: active and consistent participation in classroom instruction is the primary pathway through which learners achieve positive learning outcomes, and habitual absenteeism limits engagement across all three of its dimensions — behavioural, emotional, and cognitive (Christenson, Reschly & Wylie, 2012; Wang & Eccles, 2012). The specific finding that truancy causes cumulative zero entries in continuous assessment records is particularly significant within the Tanzanian context, where progressive classroom evaluations constitute a substantial portion of students' terminal academic profiles. Research in Kenya and Uganda corroborates this, with Ochieng (2019) finding that chronic absenteeism creates cumulative learning gaps that become impossible to recover before major national examinations.

The identification of regular late arrival as a specific academic threat linked to loss of core morning subject content particularly mathematics and English language, which are placed in opening periods extends the literature on timing and instructional quality. Lema (2024) established a direct relationship between instructional hours received and final examination marks in Tanzania, while the present study adds the dimension of time-of-day specificity: missed morning learning hours are not interchangeable with missed afternoon hours because the sequential, foundational content of technical subjects in early periods cannot be reconstructed from copied notes. The finding that this loss of foundational content leads to emotional rejection of the subject, creating a feedback loop of continued avoidance and worsening performance, is consistent with Muma's (2021) observation that regular non-attendance does not merely reduce performance but actively accelerates academic disengagement in a self-reinforcing cycle.

### *4.3 Factors Contributing to Truancy*

The multi-layered factors identified as contributors to truancy are best understood through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, which situates student behaviour within interconnected environmental systems from the immediate microsystem to the broader macrosystem. At the microsystem level, negative peer pressure operating within adolescent social groups functions as a powerful conformity mechanism. The finding that 78.7% of students confirmed peer pressure as a major truancy driver reflects the developmental sensitivity of adolescents to group validation, which aligns with research across East Africa documenting that truant behaviour frequently occurs in clusters rather than as isolated individual decisions, precisely because social exclusion functions as a more immediate deterrent than institutional discipline (Katana, 2022).

At the family microsystem level, the finding that weak parental supervision driven by informal economic labour patterns prevents households from monitoring school attendance is consistent with Malekela (2020), who found that household survival needs in Sub-Saharan Africa frequently take priority over formal secondary schooling when parental income is precarious and working hours are long and unpredictable. The economic profile of

parent respondents over 77% engaged in informal petty trading or subsistence farming directly explains the supervisory gap that allows students to maintain truant habits for extended periods without parental awareness.

At the school microsystem level, classroom overcrowding serves both as a push factor that reduces learning comfort and as a structural enabler of hidden truancy, because high class density prevents subject teachers from detecting individual absences during specific periods. This corresponds with regional literature documenting that rapid enrolment expansion under Tanzania's fee-free education policy has outpaced infrastructure provision, creating overcrowded classrooms where teacher-student interaction is severely reduced and individual learners feel invisible (Abagi, 2018). At the macrosystem level, the finding that 83.3% of students confirmed that the local informal economy pulls students away from school identifies a structural economic competition between immediate income opportunities and delayed educational returns that is particularly acute in trade-hub cities like Mbeya. Lukwaro (2022) found similar dynamics in other urban trade centres across Sub-Saharan Africa, where the informal business environment constantly competes with the school calendar for adolescent time and attention, particularly among students from low-income families who see no immediate financial return from classroom attendance.

## 5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the impact of truancy on academic performance among public secondary school students in Mbeya City, Tanzania. The findings establish that truancy is an exceptionally widespread, multi-form, and deeply normalized phenomenon in the public secondary schools studied. Full-day absenteeism, internal period-skipping, chronic late arrival, and unauthorized early departure collectively deprive students of substantial instructional time and create cumulative learning deficits that directly translate into poor continuous assessment records and terminal examination failure. The relationship between truancy and academic underperformance is not merely correlational but mechanistically clear: missed lessons produce knowledge gaps; missed assessments produce zero marks; and the accumulation of these deficits over the school year produces division zero examination outcomes that close off students' educational and economic futures.

The factors driving truancy operate across multiple environmental systems simultaneously. Peer pressure normalizes class avoidance within adolescent social groups. Family poverty and weak parental monitoring both products of informal labour patterns remove the household regulatory checks that might otherwise detect and correct truant behaviour before it becomes chronic. Classroom overcrowding creates institutional conditions that both discourage attendance and enable hidden absenteeism to go undetected. The thriving local informal economy of Mbeya City provides immediate financial rewards that compete directly and powerfully with the deferred benefits of staying in school. No single intervention can address all of these simultaneously — only a coordinated, systemic response can.

Based on these findings, the study recommends that municipal education authorities implement period-by-period attendance registration systems across all public secondary schools, moving beyond morning general registers that create administrative blind spots during afternoon hours. Digital or mobile-linked tracking tools should allow real-time notification of parents when unexcused absence is recorded. The government should urgently address classroom overcrowding through new classroom construction and strategic teacher recruitment, reducing class sizes to levels where teachers can conduct meaningful individual tracking and provide personalized instructional attention. Mbeya City Council should strictly enforce existing child labour bylaws by conducting regular monitoring sweeps of informal business areas during school hours, and by penalizing operators who employ school-aged children during the official school calendar. Schools should establish well-staffed, professionally trained guidance and counselling desks that provide psycho-social support to students experiencing peer pressure, academic anxiety, and household economic hardship. School leaders should build structured communication frameworks with parent-teacher associations to ensure that household supervisory gaps are bridged through regular, accessible reporting on attendance records rather than only at terminal examination review time.

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