

THE CAUSES OF LOW SCHOOL ATTENDANCE OF GRADE 5 AND 6 LEARNERS AT A PRIMARY SCHOOL IN THE ZAMBEZI REGION

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ABSTRACT

The low school attendance of learners is one of the major causes of learners' poor academic performances. Absenteeism affects learners' ability to get higher scores in the examination which may result in the learner failing, and repeating the same grade. This paper investigated the reasons for the low school attendance of learners at a selected school in the Zambezi Region of Namibia. The main objective was to find out factors that were causing the low school attendance of learners and the most effective strategies that the school was using to improve the school attendance of the learners. A one on one interview strategy was employed whereby prepared questions

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were asked to the participants. Open-ended questions were used throughout the interview. The answers provided during the interviews were recorded as per participant in the study. The attendance registers for the selected school and the selected grades which are grade 5A to D and grade 6A to D were collected and reviewed. These attendance registers only covered term one to show the attendance of learners for that specific term. The findings revealed that factors influencing school attendance broadly include; school conditions, home-based behavioral issues, peer issues, psychological issues, school-based behavioral issues, family background, illnesses, as well as lack of motivation or lack of interest in school.

KEYWORDS: Absenteeism, truancy, sampling, research methodology, Zambezi Region

BACKGROUND

The research on the school attendance of learners is very crucial in the education sector hence it is the baseline factor in determining student success. This simply means that successful schools begin by engaging students and making sure they come to school regularly. In this case, attendance is an important factor in school success among children and youth. Studies conducted by Rothman (2004) show that better attendance is related to higher academic achievement for learners of all backgrounds, but particularly for learners with low socio-economic status. Beginning in kindergarten, learners who attend school regularly score higher on a test than their peers who are frequently absent. Predictors of absenteeism can be found both inside and outside the school environment. There are many factors that can predict students' absenteeism and truancy. According to Balfanz (2012) study, these factors broadly include; school conditions, home-based behavioral issues, peer issues, psychological issues, school-based behavioral

issues, family background, as well as lack of motivation or lack of interest in school. Frequent unexcused absence is a strong predictor of undesirable outcomes in adolescence, including academic failure, dropping out of school, substance abuse, gang involvement and criminal activities. Balfanz (2012) also states that other factors contributing to learners absenteeism include financial concern, poor school climate, transportation problems and differing community attitude towards education. These factors have received increased attention in recent years but continue to be an area where more research is needed. Most schools in the Zambezi region are facing school attendance problems.

Statement of the Problem

Poor school attendance has high costs in terms of young people's academic learning. Absenteeism affects learners' ability to get higher scores in the examination which can cause poor grades or the learner may fail to result in repeating the same grade. Learners that spend time attending classes have a significant, positive effect on their performance. Such learners participate and exhibit higher grades and scores in examinations (Ifanc & Wales, 2011). Absenteeism had been noted in the school especially in grade 6 during the school base studies and it is why the study was narrowed to grade 6 and not the whole school.

Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to find out factors that influence students' low school attendance. Objectives of the study include:

- i) To study the factors causing the low school attendance of learners.
- ii) To find out the most effective strategies that the school is using to improve the school attendance of learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Factors contributing to low school attendance

Poor Health/illnesses

According to Balfanz (2012), illness is one of the major causes of learners' absenteeism in primary schools. These illnesses include colds, flu and childhood ailments. According to Balfanz (2012) study, the most common illness/diseases being mentioned by the participants were: HIV/AIDS, cold, malaria, flu and cough, asthma, sickle cell, snake bites and epilepsy as causes of students' absenteeism in schools. According to Keter (2013), some diseases like asthma which requires attention and care as well as an environment that is warm and dusty could make students stay at home. Balfanz (2012) recent survey results indicate that fewer than 6% of children miss more than 11 days due to illnesses or injury. According to Kelly (2014), some school absences are unavoidable, kids get sick.

Home-based behavioral issues

Family status and their health situations, poor learning environment, drug and alcohol use plus differing of community attitudes towards education are all conditions leading to the low school attendance of learners. Sometimes family obligations may as well cause a child not to go to school. Hence as children reach early adolescence, family responsibilities may hold them back from going to school e.g. household chores. At times in places where poverty rules, these young adolescents provide emergency daycare for their young siblings. However, some parents tend to ignore their children's frequent absence at school by ignoring their excuses when no valid reasons are apparent to them staying at home.

Balfanz (2012) further stated that poor planning, family needs and unpredictable transportation may cause students to get to school late and so they may choose to stay away from school.

Students who are homeless and staying with friends, relatives have slight chances of going to school daily than those staying with their biological parents for instance in rural areas; they wake up very early in the morning and go to the garden, fetch enough water for use and do all the household chores before they are set off to school. Some learners have the unexcused tendency of absenting themselves from school because they lack interest in school or that their parents do not see the need of them being in schools. Balfanz (2012) further states that students choose not to attend, either because they or their parents or guardian do not see the value in school. Perry (2017) study shows that if drugs or alcohol is used at home, children are at an increased risk of being absent from school. Other problems include; divorce, physical or verbal abuse, and frequent movement from place to place may lead to more frequent absences of learners at school.

Poverty/hunger

Wadesango et al. (2011) study show that students are less likely to attend classes because of their socio-economic character such as poverty. The situation then forces them to seek for part-time employment instead of committing themselves fully to their studies.

School behavioral issues

According to William (2000) schools and their curricular and strength of sanctions against chronic absenteeism are also contributing causes of low school attendance. Shahzada (2011) said lack of challenging coursework and curriculum are also some of the reasons why some learners choose to stay home. According to Flemming (1995), some of the major reasons why learners prefer staying home than going to school is that some lessons in various subjects have poor teaching techniques/methods, timing and of course poor learning content. Sometimes children decide to skip classes simply because they do not

have stationery like books, pens, pencils, uniform etc. and when they feel they do not have the necessary requirements to be in schools. According to Balfanz (2012) learners choose to stay home since they do not have scholastic requirements/materials such as; books, pens and uniforms.

Wastaff (2000) stipulated that students are less likely to attend school when they perceive their classes are boring or irrelevant; feel unsupported or disrespected by teachers and other school staff; feel uncomfortable or bullied by other students, or feel targeted for discipline and other behavioral challenges. They explained that some students are less likely to attend school when they perceive that they have fallen behind on their school work or cannot balance the competing demands of work, leisure and school.

Kearney (2008) has explained that certain risk factors may also increase anxiety or school refusal behaviour leading to absenteeism are school violence and victimization, school climate and connectedness, lack of parental involvement and gang involvements. According to Shore (2017) the longer a student is absent from school, the greater the risk of not returning to school. Another cause of students' absenteeism is the weak policy on absenteeism (Osuu, 2014).

Teacher factor

Teasley (2004) believes that those learners who have displeasing relationships with teachers will automatically stay home just so they do not cross path with such teachers they had bad encounters with. Students absent from school due to the factors ranging from poor teaching methods by teachers, length of lessons, and the act of favouritism to certain learners. He also stated that the demeaning teacher attitudes often lead to school avoidance by learners. According to Berstein (2001), student's psychological traits have an enormous

influence over their daily decisions regarding whether to attend or skip school. When learners realize that teachers do not care enough to follow up on absences, their motivation for attendance becomes very low.

Harsh punishment

Harsh school rules and regulations could cause absenteeism which includes; corporal punishment (Shahzada, 2011). When schools have harsh or punitive discipline policies, learners feel less connected to the school. Students who are forced to leave school either through suspension, expulsion or being sent to an alternative school will engage with school. Wadesango (2011) study shows that the practice of harsh punishment at school is still done in many rural schools.

According to students, some teachers do not listen to students' reason of coming late even if a student has a genuine reason, the only answer is "late is late" go down and you are canned as they are pleased. Learners then opt to stay away from school when they come late at school. Shahzada (2011) study states that corporal punishment creates fear in learners which in turn will lead them in deciding to stay at home.

Distance to and from school and economic crisis

Low-income students are more likely to miss school due to health care issues, unstable housing, and transportation problems (Kelly, 2014). Some of the learners must track or walk a long distance to school so by the time they reach their schools they are already exhausted and so they find it difficult to concentrate in class. It is because of these factors that these learners decide to stay home and attend school only at times.

Peer influence and access to entertainment

Another factor which affects learners' school attendance is bad company/gang involvement or peer influence from people they choose to hang out with (Balfanz, 2012). They then develop "I don't care"

attitude towards school work. They lose interest and eventually tend to dodge going to school and are involved in drinking and watching videos. These learners see studying as a waste of time. In Wadesango (2011) study, lack of motivation for the learners and unexcused absences from classrooms were the reasons why such learners choose to take absent from school and be with their peers. According to Keter (2013) pampered is one of the factors that lead to the low school attendance of most learners. Students who get excessive pocket money from their families are most likely to abscond from school since they need time to spend the money. Keter (2013) further states that accessibility of entertainment facilities like cinemas could divert the attention of some learners from school. Kelly (2014) study shows that a negative school environment can also be a factor as it is hard for a child who is struggling to stay or is constantly being disciplined, he may start to resist going to school.

Physical development of a child

Several factors in a child's life contribute to low school attendance such as phobic adolescence (Keter, 2013). During this stage, there's a lot of fear developed because of physical changes of the body, for example, the growth of pimples and turbulent emotions. These scare teens away from school.

Unfavorable learning environment and being bullied Kelly (2014) study shows that a negative school environment can also be a factor as it is hard for a child who is struggling to stay or is constantly being disciplined, he may start to resist going to. According to Shore (2017), some students absenteeism is a result of events that happen in school. Some anxiety-provoking situations that can cause resistance to attending school include difficulties with school work, ridicule or bullying by classmates, an embarrassing incident, lack of acceptance by peers and loss of close friends.

Summary of low school attendance conceptual framework



From figure one above; certain factors are identified as the causes of the low school attendance of learners. Such factors include; illness such as colds, flu, asthma and sometimes injuries. Other factors include; family responsibilities, and household chores (Balfanz, 2012). The distance between home and school, lack of financial support or economic crisis and sometimes hunger at school also contribute to the low school attendances of learners (Balfanz, 2012). Another challenge is harsh punishment given to learners as a form of discipline.

Wadesango (2011) and Shahzada (2011) have included corporal punishment as one of the factors that creates fear in learners. Too much coursework given to learners, and sometimes the coursework was given to them is not more challenging enough for the learners (Keter, 2013).

Sometimes it is the poor teaching methods, the timing of the lesson and poor quality of the lesson content that causes absenteeism (Flemming, 1995). Learners sometimes lose interest in education and decide to stay back home. Sometimes the learning environment is not favorable enough for the learners. Keter (2013) states that other factors which have an impact on the school attendance of learners are: Lack of scholastic material such as school uniform and books. Peer influence, being bullied, and sometimes the accessibility of entertainment near the school or any education facilities contribute to the low school attendance of learners. Pampered is one of the factors that lead to the low school attendance of most learners (Keter, 2013). Other factors include; difficulties with school work, bullying by classmates, an embarrassing incident, lack of acceptance by peers, loss of close friends and fear of strict teachers and sometimes family issues (Shore, 2017).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design as it aimed to understand phenomena through focusing on meaning that events have for the people involved, it also addressed the research problem and relied on the views of the participants. (Amin, 2005)

Sampling

A sample is a portion which is selected from the entire population under study. The population must be sampled for effectively carry out a project work. In the study, the reliable conclusions are drawn regarding the properties of the surveyed group. Such a group is called a population.

To collect required information for the study from every factor in the population is very expensive. It is more time consuming, expensive and laborious work under such circumstances, a sub-group works as the representative of the population. Purposeful sampling was employed. Which means the sampling technique in which subject judged (population information about the topic) to be representatives of the population are included in the sample.

The study was done in Katima circuit from a selected school. The participants included; the Head of Department and three teachers teaching grade 5 and 6 classes. The selected sample provided full and accurate information of the attendance of learners in the selected grades. (Krejcie, 1970)

Data collection methods

The researcher developed interviews from protocol forms for recording data and documents were collected from the selected school. Data were prepared for analysis using the notes acquired in the field which provided the necessary records on learners' school attendance.

Interview

A one on one interview strategy was employed whereby prepared questions were asked of the participants. The answers provided during

the interviews were recorded as per participant in the study. Open-ended questions were used throughout the interview.

Documents review

The attendance registers for the selected school and the selected grades which are grade 5A to D and grade 6A to D were collected and reviewed. These attendance registers only covered term one to show the attendance of learners for that specific term. (Babbie, 2001)

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using a text of segments according to themes and categories. Codes of text were used for both description and theme in the research report. The researcher located text segments and assigned a code label to them. She also read through data to obtain a general sense of learner's absenteeism. Finally, the researcher prepared data for analysis using transcribes field notes that prove records where learners were absent and present. (Creswell, 2012)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Absenteeism in the selected school

According to the attendance registers of learners which were reviewed during the document review, the number of learners who were absent from school for more than 5 days in term 1 for the two selected grades includes; grade 5A was 6, 5B was 3, 5C was 4, and 5D was 3, which makes up the total sum of 16 learners. The number of learners who were absent in the grade 6 classes includes; 6A and 6B were 4, 6C was 2 and 6D was 5, and the total was 15.

Class	A	B	C	D	Total
Grade 5	6	3	4	3	16
Grade 6	4	4	2	5	15

Factors affecting the learners' school attendance

Location of the school and accessibility of entertainment

According to teacher A, some learners opt to stay at home and not attend school on a regular basis because; the school is located near the informal settlements where violence is at its highest level and where learners engage in gangs and are exposed mainly to drinking (they tend to party and drink alcohol all night long) as a result only a few learners might turn up to school the next day. According to teacher D, as the world is developing, many learners are too exposed to entertainment activities and at the end they neglect school. This view has also been noted by other researchers like Keter (2013). According to him, sometimes the accessibility of entertainment near the school or any education facilities contributes to the low school attendance of learners.

Distance between school and home

Teacher A further stated that distance was also a contributing factor whereas some of the learners come from informal settlements which are far from the school. These learners have to walk maybe 5 or 6 km from their homes to school and by the time they arrive at school they are already exhausted, and so they might choose not to go to school the next day, especially for those who don't have the passion for education. Kelly (2014) has explained that low-income students are more likely to miss school due to the fact that they walk for long distances to school. By the time they reach their schools they are already exhausted and so they find it difficult to concentrate in class. It is because of this factor that these learners decide to stay home and attend school only at times. Sometimes those learners play truancy, especially on Mondays and Fridays (Kelly, 2014).

Home based behavioural issues

Another factor mentioned by teacher A is the situation at home/family responsibilities, whereas some of the parents work outside town. These parents leave their kids at home alone and unattended to and in the

care of a child who is still attending his/her primary education. This means that there will be disorder and chaos at home, and the learners will never be able to control themselves. Three-quarters of kids staying without their parents' monitoring will not show up at school because there's no responsible person to control them and push them to go to school.

According to teacher B, one of the factors affecting learners' school attendance is the situation at home. Some learners are completely neglected; most of them reside in informal settlements, whereas parents and their kids do not sleep in the same house. Sometimes they do not even attempt to go check their kids in the other house and see if they woke up and left for school, especially in winter. Sometimes there's no an elder sibling to even wake them up, so these kids will sleep and by the time they wake up it will be too late to even go to school, as a result, they end up missing school and attend school only at times. According to teacher D, parental involvement is also a factor, hence some parents are not actively involved in the education of their children. In the end, these learners might not want to go to school because they are not pushed to go to school. This view has also been noted by Balfanz (2012). According to him sometimes family obligations may cause a child not to go to school. Hence as children reach early adolescence, family responsibilities may hold them back from going to school. At times in places where poverty rules, these young adolescents provide emergency daycare for their young siblings.

Poverty and economic crisis

Another factor is poverty, whereas some learners come from poor families. In some cases, it might happen that that child slept without eating supper, and as a result, that child may not turn up to school the next day because there's no food at home.

Some learners do not even have proper winter clothes, they at times put on floppies and sometimes even a simple shirt, and as a result, they might end up not turning up to school because of the coldness. This view has also been echoed by other researchers like Balfanz (2012). He believes that lack of financial support or economic crisis and sometimes hunger at school also contribute to the low school attendances of learners.

Teacher C explained that some of the factors influencing learners' low school attendance are social and closely linked to the economic status of the learners. Wadesango, et al. (2011) study shows that students are less likely to attend classes because of their socio-economic character such as poverty. Looking at the family backgrounds, some learners come from poor families and their parents are not working because they do not have a good educational background. Sometimes these learners are not really motivated educationally, and as a result, they end up not turning up to school.

Health/illnesses

Another factor which was raised by teacher B is the illness. Some learners' truancy is unavoidable and is as a result of illnesses, whereas proper care might not be given to the child especially in broken homes where the child lives with his/her step-mother. The child can spend close to a week without going to school. Such illnesses include; colds, flu, asthma and sometimes injuries (Balfanz, 2012).

Lack of interest in school and unfavorable learning environment

According to teacher D, lack of interest is also one of the factors affecting the learners' school attendance. Some learners are not interested in attending school regularly. Some learners have an unexcused tendency of absenting themselves from school because they lack interest in being at school or that their parents do not see the

need of them being in schools (Balfanz, 2012). Another factor according to teacher D is the school environment whereas some learners bully their peers. When this happens, the learner being bullied might not turn up to school the following day because of fear that he/she might be bullied again. Keter (2013) has explained that peer influence and being bullied contribute to the low school attendance of learners.

Teacher factor

Another factor is teachers' approach or attitudes towards the learners. If the learner is not comfortable with the teacher due to several encounters the learners have had with the teacher or maybe the teachers have not been showing care towards that learner, he/she might not feel like going to school. According to Berstein (2001) when learners realize that teachers do not care enough to follow up on absences, their motivation for attendance becomes very low. Keter (2013) in addition, conductive interpersonal relationships between learners and teachers lead to the low school attendance of learners.

Effective strategies that the school is using to improve the attendance of learners

Monitoring of learners and parental involvement

According to teacher A, teacher C, and teacher D, one of the strategies that the school is using to improve learners' low school attendance is the monitoring of learners. Learners have their classroom managers who monitor the attendance of learners in their respective classes/grades. The school also monitors their learners through parents meetings. The school has to identify learners who are persistent in taking absent from school through reviewing of classroom registers, and then involve the parents. They conduct a meeting with the parents and learners individually, to create a favorable atmosphere for the parents, or invite all the persistent learners' parents so that they came and discuss about their children's low school attendance and try

to find out reasons why those learners are not attending school as per school calendar, as well as try to find out possible solutions to their kids' truancy. "Sometimes if a learner is absent, the classroom manager has to phone the child's parents and make follow-ups, trying to find out why the learner is absent" (TD). Ifanc and Wales (2011) study stipulates that in order to overcome attendance problems, it can be useful to have meetings with parents to discuss strategies in schools and at home which encourage regular school attendance.

Parents' meetings and school board engagement

According to teacher A, another strategy is the scheduling of the truancy issue on the agenda during the parents' meetings especially if the number of learners who are playing truancy is getting high.

They discuss as a team, parents with understanding will pick it from there and edge their children to do away with truancy. Another strategy which was mentioned by teacher A is the involvement of the school board. The school board is a committee of parents which is set at the school. When the truancy issue is persisting, it will be discussed with the school board members who will then have time to talk or address the issue to parents. This helps because it will be a parent talking the matter to another parent. Ifanc and Wales (2011) have suggested that we should communicate frequently with the parents about positive achievements and improvements and in ways which emphasize the responsibility and the role of parents in partnership with the school.

Giving awards

Another strategy as mentioned by teacher C is awarding of learners who stop playing truancy with gifts. The classroom managers have to monitor those learners playing truancy and if their attendance is improving (let us say attending school for maybe a whole week or so without being absent), they can give them gifts like sweets or school materials like pens. This show of appreciation will encourage these

learners to keep up the good work of going to school every day. Ifanc and Wales (2011) believes that providing attendance awards can be helpful in improving attendance. According to Ifanc and Wales (2011) encouraging and rewarding attendance increase the profile of attendance, both within the school and in a wider community.

Application of suitable punishment

According to teacher D, another strategy is applying suitable punishment to learners who play truancy so that they refrain from the tendency of skipping school. "Some learners have a tendency of lying about their whereabouts, sometimes they say they were sick while it was not the case. Learners who say they were sick have to produce their health passports" (TC). According to teens (2017) study, many schools impose detention and in cases of regular teen truancy, even suspension or community services. Parents may choose to withhold privileges as a form of punishment for their kids' truancy. Withholding privileges may reduce the distractions to teens' studies. Parents and teachers may restrict their teens' access to the internet and phone privileges as a form of punishment. Parents who deal with teens constantly skipping school may also try to set reasonable academic goals for their children, and if they meet this, they receive a reward.

If they don't, some of their privileges will be restricted until the goals are met. This way children focus on the real goals than on skipping school (Teens, 2017).

How learners are motivated to always attend school

Introducing of school related program/activities

According to teacher A,

Learners are motivated when they are engaged in a specific program. You know them, you identify them, you work with them, and you are with them whenever they are given homework and they are facing difficulties in completing their homework. (TA)

Have a program with them by having an attendance register especially for learners who are still persistent to be signing whenever they return back to school. The provision of after-school programs motivates students to attend school in order to participate. According to CEP (2012) study, some schools have created programs to increase motivation for a certain group of students. These programs are targeted mostly at students who are most likely to lose motivation but differ in the way in which they identify those students. Many of the programs target dropouts, other programs see a decrease in attendance or failure to complete school work as indicators that students are losing motivation and interest in school (CEP, 2012).

Giving a motivational speech

Teacher B and D believe that giving motivational speeches to the learners will also help. In this case, the school can invite a successful motivational speaker, one who was in the same situation as theirs, who also walked long distances to school to come and talk to them about the importance of education in their lives and how absenteeism can affect their academic performance. By so doing, the learners will also become more enthusiastic about attending school and they will say if he did it, I can also do it. "I always give them my educational background as a teacher" (Teacher C). Wikiphow (2017) has suggested that should be invited to your class or school that students can look into. These would be role models that students can identify themselves to.

If the students can see clearly how to structure their learning in order to achieve what those people have, they will be much more inspired in their studies and attend school every day.

Giving rewards

According to teacher C, another way of motivating these learners is by giving them rewards according to their performances. The rewarding of

these learners is another way of encouraging them to keep going to school every day so that they also get the rewards. Verner (2007) study stipulates that one never fail motivational method you can use with your students is giving rewards. Tell your students that if everyone will get 80% or higher on the given test, they will have a pizza party.

Creating a favorable learning environment

According to teacher D, we should create an open, relaxed, positive learning environment, where learners should feel comfortable and feel safe when he/she is at school. Teachers should care and show love for the learners, in this way these learners will be motivated to attend school on a regular basis. According to students who know that you care about them are more likely to come to school. Students don't always remember what you do, but they always remember how you made them feel Killian (2015). According to Footprints (2015) study, creating a positive learning environment will allow your students to feel comfortable, safe and engaged. It is very important that learners know that there's an inclusive, respectful, community-oriented environment. This motivates learners to attend school regularly (Footprints, 2015).

CONCLUSION

There is no single and simple solution to truancy or absenteeism, given the fact that a number of different contributing factors of low school attendance were identified. Multiple strategies were also identified to effectively reduce the low school attendance of learners. These factors broadly include; school conditions, home-based behavioural issues, peer issues, psychological issues, school-based behavioural issues, family background, illnesses, as well as lack of motivation or lack of interest in school. Effective strategies identified in solving these problems include; parental involvement in children's education, involving the school board to attend to such matters, application of

suitable punishment to persisting learners, awarding of learners who refrain from playing truancy, engaging learners in school-based programs, and constant monitoring of learners' school attendance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Societies at large need to know the importance of education and why there's a need for learners to be in school all the time. The school system should work hand in hand with parents and the community at large and see to it that children are guided on important issues such as truancy. They need to be told about the impacts truancy has on their academic performances. Learners need to be educated to refrain from truancy and hopefully, their low school attendance will improve. Learners' main focus should be on their studies. Collaboration between the school and family begins with frequent and open talks about the learners' attendance problem. The schools need to provide parents with information and ideas about activities and techniques they can use at home to improve their child's school attendance problem. Schools need to also understand why some classes have more absenteeism than others and encourage parents to take interest in their children's education. Nkengbeza (2014, p. 168) has elaborated on the use of a program called "Wilma". This site links parents, learners/ students and teachers. Test scores, absenteeism among others are reported on this site and it is seen by the parents immediately. This is a system that can be implemented so that parents are able to know the where about of their children at any moment the children leave home.

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