

COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING THERAPY: A STRATEGY FOR MANAGING TRUANCY BEHAVIOUR AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN KWARA STATE

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Abstract

Truancy, or habitual absenteeism from school, poses significant challenges to academic achievement and overall development among secondary school students. This write-up views the application of Cognitive Restructuring Therapy (CRT) as an intervention for managing truancy behaviour among students in Kwara State, Nigeria. CRT, a cognitive-behavioural approach, aims to alter maladaptive thought patterns that contribute to negative behaviour, including truancy. The therapy helps students reframe negative beliefs about school, develop coping strategies, and enhance their motivation for regular attendance. The study concludes that CRT is a promising strategy for managing truancy in secondary schools, highlighting the need for further implementation and evaluation across diverse educational contexts. Suggestions include integrating CRT into school counselling programs and providing training for educators to support its application.

Keywords: Cognitive Restructuring Therapy, Truancy, Secondary School Students, Kwara State, Cognitive-Behavioral Approach, School Attendance

Introduction

Truancy is one of the social maladjustment challenges facing secondary school adolescents; this is fast becoming a critical issue to all stakeholders in educational sectors such as counsellors, psychologists, teachers, parents, school administrators and social health workers. If this is left unchecked, it can undermine the educational objectives of any country. The goal of secondary school education is to raise students who are strong in character and learning, as a result, we anticipate that students will acquire information, abilities, experience and discipline that will enable them to enhance their future and transform from their current state to their desired state. Ages between eleven and eighteen are the most common age range for students in secondary schools. These students are categorised as teenagers. The teenage period of development is defined by heightened levels of stress

and upheaval, this is because many developmental changes in the person's life take place during this period. If these changes are not well managed, it may lead to truancy behaviour.

Not all school absenteeism can be regarded as truancy behaviour, some students are absent from school due to some circumstances that are beyond their control such as sickness, the loss of loved ones, or financial incapacitation and many more students are absent from school because of aforementioned reasons cannot be regarded as a truant rather those that intentional stay away from school with reasons best known to them without the knowledge of the teachers and parents.

According to Alhassan et al. (2021), truancy refers to any unauthorised, and undocumented absence or abstention from school, disregarding the school's norms and regulations. Truancy can manifest in many ways, such as consistently arriving late or being absent for part or all of a school day. Truancy is a multifaceted problem that can arise from several factors, including the person's family and school structures. Individual conditions can increase the rate of truancy, such as learning disability, exposure to bullying, and mental health problems. With regards to family structure's contribution to truancy behaviour, this is very common among low-income families and single-parent households. Truancy behaviour is also prevalent among those living in more disadvantaged areas such as slums. Truancy is more prevalent among students who have inadequate parental assistance with their schoolwork (Esther et al., 2023).

School-level, research has shown that a school's failure to meet students' expectations significantly increases the risk of truancy. Furthermore, the social interactions between students and the school, along with the treatments they receive from teachers, peers and the school staff, constitute significant risk factors such as harassment, degrading behaviour bullying, which can exacerbate these factors and lead to truancy. (Agu et al., 2023).

Hence, the organisational attributes of the school settings as manifested by the norms and values of the staff's working conditions and the leadership styles, appear to play a crucial role in establishing a school environment that effectively discourages student truancy. According to Yankyerah et al, (2023), truancy is characterised by a consistent pattern of intentionally avoiding or skipping school without a valid reason. According to Obi (2023), truancy refers to a consistent pattern in which students intentionally avoid attending school without the awareness of their parents and teachers. Student's inconsistent attendance at school or lessons without permission contributes to so many acts of indiscipline among students that may lead to various forms of juvenile delinquency.

Concept of Truancy

Truancy is fast becoming a serious problem that can result in sociological and psychological maladjustment; it is a complex problem resulting from environmental influences, personality development and educational opportunities. Truancy is accompanied by a wide range of other mischievous behaviours that can result in adult criminality; most cases of adult criminality had a previous history of involvement in truancy behaviour. (Tanko & Ajayi, 2023).

Categories of Truancy Behaviour

Absenteeism- this category of truants skipped school approximately 10% of days in a term or session as the case maybe, the irregular attendance is not consecutively but sparse, usually parents is in the known of this category of truancy but sometimes helpless about the situation.

Habitual Truancy- this category of truancy behaviour is a situation where students miss school consistently in a row for days in a term or semester as the case may be, usually this category of truants easily drop out of school as a result of constant irregular school attendance.

Chronic Truancy- this category of truancy behaviour is of great concern to all stakeholders in the education sector, consistently piling up absences defiling interventions and measures of authority. In the previous literature study, the prevalence estimate for truancy showed variation. Akpunne et al, (2019) conducted a study in Nigeria, revealing a truancy frequency of 24.0% among secondary school teenagers. Truancy is the predominant antisocial activity among secondary school students in South East Nigeria, accounting for (38.7%) of cases. According to Nwafor (2021), truancy is prevalent among Kenya students, with a high incidence rate of 41% additionally. Separate research in Kenya, Also, in another study in Kenya, using the Youth Self Report (YSR), revealed a prevalence rate of 22.5% (Suleiman et al., 2022). Muttaqin et al (2022) discovered that 10.5 per cent of students in Tehran exhibited truancy behaviour or conduct disorder. A comprehensive nationwide study involving 29,739 Iranian children and adolescents found that the truancy behaviour rate among was 0.78%. Xiaoli et al. (2018) found that the truancy behaviour rate among Chinese children and adolescents, as measured by the DAWBA evaluation, was 0.62%. The United States of America, conducted research that revealed a prevalence rate of 5.44% for disruptive behaviours among teenagers. Igbokwe (2023) utilised the SDQ-parent report to determine the prevalence rate of truancy behaviour across seven European nations is 8.4%. The Australian Institute of Family Studies researched the prevalence of social maladjustment behaviours. The study found out that the most common types of socially maladjusted behaviour among early adolescents were truancy (32%). Researchers determined the frequency of truancy in South Asian Countries to be 26.6%. Bangladesh exhibited the highest rate, standing at 37%, while Pakistan followed closely after with the rate 24.7%., and Afghanistan had the lowest rate of 14.7%. Furthermore Hassan et al,(2024) in their research among three West African countries namely Benin, Ghana and Liberia showed that Liberia has the most frequency with 47.1% Ghana has 36.5% while Benin has the least prevalence, according to the report with 22.9%.

Causes of Truancy among Secondary School Students

The causes of truancy behaviour of adolescents are classified under five main categories according to Aqeel and Rehna (2020);(Omenebele & Jude 2023). They are as follows:

1. Family: It is obvious that the family as an institution has various functions to perform. By discharging their duties, parents indirectly fulfil the needs of their children. There are certain significant causes: social, economic and psychological, which contribute immensely to truancy behaviour in children.

(a) Social Causes: the social problem of one generation is the psychological problem of the next generation. Children coming from homes that have been broken due to death, divorce, desertion, separation, etc., are often maladjusted in their behaviours. Drunkard parents strained marital relationships of spouses, quarrels and fights between spouses are also responsible for developing frustration in children. Such children can become truants.

(b) Economic Causes: The occupational status of parents, problems of unemployment, poverty and low economic status breed truancy among children. Under such circumstances, parents are unable to satisfy the needs of their children which eventually -leads to frustration, aggression and hostile behaviours in growing children.

(c) Psychological causes: Psychological instability of parents is directly responsible for the truancy behaviour of their offspring. If parents are over-possessive, highly authoritative, unrealistic in their expectations, incompatible, abusive and prejudiced, this will have a deleterious effect on their children.

When the psychological needs are not met, children get frustrated and develop problems like nail biting, daydreaming, fear of dark, lack of self-confidence, flickering of eyes, etc. Those parents who threaten, nag, punish and humiliate their children before others are directly responsible for their children's isolated and rejected behaviours.

2. *Personal causes:* It is observed that individuals who are physically, mentally and visually handicapped react abnormally to the situation. Even children with partial deficiencies, such as defective eyesight, poor hearing and impaired speech may find it difficult to adjust under normal situations. When they cannot score well academically compared to their peers, they develop an inferiority complex. Finally, they isolate themselves from others and indulge in truancy behaviours.

3. *School-related causes:* Children spend roughly seven hours a day in school. When growing children do not find ways and means to channel their energy purposefully in the school, they exhibit truancy behaviour. The school authorities, including teachers, should organize various curricular and co-curricular activities to suit the needs of growing children.

4. *Teacher-related causes:* An imbalanced personality in teachers has an impact on the behaviours of children. If the teacher is unfair, biased or not involved with the students, it certainly affects the mental health of the children in the school, this can make him to dislike school.

5. *Peer-group-related causes:* Another important factor that disturbs the psycho-equilibrium of students is an unhealthy relationship with their peer group. Normally, students ask earnestly for recognition from their peer group during later childhood and adolescence.

However, popularity among the peer group depends on various factors, such as good looks, athletic abilities, social class, academic performance, and special talents. If the student lacks these qualities, he may fail to get status among his/her peer group and gets frustrated and maladjusted.

Cognitive Restructuring Therapy

Cognitive restructuring is based on rational emotive therapy propounded by Albert Ellis who focused more on thoughts. The 1960s and 70s saw the birth of cognitive behavioural therapies (sometimes today called simply "cognitive therapies"). First, in the form of Albert Ellis's Rational Emotive Therapy (RET), later Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) and Arron Beck's Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) (Ningsh et al., 2023). These therapies are considered "cognitive" because they address mental events such as thinking and feeling. They are called "cognitive behavioural" because they address those mental events in the context of the learning theory that was the base for the old pure-behavioural therapy. In cognitive therapy, the mind is taught new habits of thinking using the same old learning-theory-derived procedures that made systematic desensitization and other pure-behavioural interventions work. The basic technique that is taught in cognitive behavioural psychotherapy is something that could be called the "Analysis of Appraisal". It is usually called "cognitive restructuring" or sometimes "cognitive reframing" instead. Anything cognitive is connected with thinking or conscious mental process.

Albert Ellis and Arron Beck were the first to create cognitive restructuring. The process of learning to recognise and challenge illogical or unhelpful thoughts is a psychotherapy one. This is a coping mechanism that involves replacing socially maladjusted behaviour with social adjustment, affirming thoughts to make stressors seem less dangerous (Ningsh et al., 2023). There are four main actions that must be taken when using this method. They are: recognising "automatic thoughts," which are dysfunctional or pessimistic perceptions of oneself, the world, or the future; recognising cognitive distortions in the automatic thoughts; disputing automatic thoughts rationally with the Socratic dialogue; and developing a rational response to the automatic thoughts (Muyan-Yilik&Demir, 2020).

Cognitive restructuring as a psychotherapeutic process of learning to identify and dispute irrational or maladaptive thoughts, such as all or nothing thinking (splitting), magical thinking and emotional reasoning, which are commonly, associated with many mental health disorders.

According to Ekwulundu et al. (2022), cognitive restructuring is a process by which an individual is made to avoid crooked and irrational thinking, guiding the individual to think straight and logical. Cognitive restructuring is a counselling technique used to assist an individual to reduce negative emotional reactions. The emphasis during this therapy session is to help a client modify his/her distorted perception of the world caused by negative mind set. Cognitive restructuring aim at modifying distorted thinking patterns and negative self-talks that arise from internalized wrong belief. The technique restructures the already structured irrational thoughts, beliefs and philosophies, which an individual has already acquired by redressing and changing them at the mental level of the person concerned, to ensure his happiness and efficiency at school or workplace. Cognitive restructuring operationally is a behaviour modification technique that is based on teaching a client how to reduce, negative emotional reactions by getting him or her to interpret situations with greater accuracy. Specifically, the problem is to get the individual or client to avoid crooked thinking and think straight (Ekwulundu et al., 2022).

Esther et al. (2022), observed that in the course of thinking, one will tend to think negatively or have faulty thought processes and beliefs that create behaviours problems and emotions. According to cognitive therapists such as Ellis (1976), when one finds that his/her beliefs (or cognitions) are contrary (dissonant), it makes one uncomfortable and puts one in a state called cognitive dissonance. Such negative personal thoughts can be very destructive to the individual. In essence, cognitive therapists teach their patients to become conscious of the fact that they are unconsciously appraising and judging all the various stimulus events that come their way, and then teach them to consciously take charge of that appraisal process to make sure that their conclusions are accurate and free of biases and mistakes.

Cognitive restructuring, in layman term, is the process of learning to replace one's current negative thoughts with better and more beneficial thoughts. It is the process of learning a better way of speaking to one's self. Curtiss et al. (2021), stated that human beings made themselves victims of irrational thinking and could virtually destroy themselves through irrational and muddled thinking. Esther et al. (2023), and Ekwulundu et al. (2022) defined cognitive restructuring as a psychotherapeutic process of learning to identify and dispute irrational or maladaptive thoughts, such as all-or-nothing thinking (splitting), magical thinking and emotional reasoning, which are commonly associated with many mental health disorders. Curtiss et al. (2021) stated that cognitive restructuring involves a process of re-orienting one's thought process to reality or requiring one's mind to think truthfully, factually and logically. Cognitive restructuring also known as cognitive reframing is a technique that can help people identify, challenge and alter anxiety-provoking thought patterns and beliefs. For example, students who develop false assumption that they cannot study and pass examination on their own without help or assistance from others or cheating may not be properly motivated to study hard for examination, or a student who sees schooling as a total waste of time will not be motivated coming to school any time the needs arise.

Once a false assumption has been made, it will often be used as a basis for prompting behaviours that end up acting in response to the false assumption as if it were true. According to Hassan et al. (2023), irrational thoughts like this and their accompanying behaviours play a big part in the onset of anxiety. According to Ogugua (2020), some people "catastrophize" or turn an irrational belief into an imagined catastrophe. Irrational beliefs then can lead to catastrophizing an event or blowing it out of proportion. The most unfortunate aspect of irrational belief is that it can become a vicious cycle and repeat itself endlessly as negative emotions turn into negative behaviours.

Cognitive restructuring is a set of techniques for becoming more aware of thoughts and modifying them when they are distorted or are not useful. This approach does not involve distorting reality in a positive direction or attempting to believe the unbelievable. Rather, it uses reason and evidence to replace distorted thought patterns with more accurate, believable, and functional ones. The cognitive restructuring theory asserts that humans are directly responsible for generating their own negative emotions and that these self-created negative emotions, over time, lead to dysfunctions such as low self-concept, stress, depression, anxiety, and even social awkwardness.

According to Ekwulundu et al. (2022), CR learning theory assumes that individuals are not passive observers in their environment; rather they are active, goal-oriented and capable of taking responsibility for their decisions, and actions and consequently exercise control over their behaviours. CR technique involves teaching persons or individuals to reduce their negative emotional reactions by getting them to interpret situations with greater accuracy avoid distorted thinking and think rightly. It is cognitive behavioural technique that focuses on changing a person's perceptions and irrational assumptions of self and world. Cognitive restructuring gives people new ways of thinking and talking to themselves about their own problems. This technique believes that man's maladaptive behaviour (of academic underachievement) is hinged on irrational thoughts, beliefs, self-talk or verbalizations (self-concept). When utilizing cognitive restructuring in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), it helps in monitoring cognitive distortions, vivo experience, imaginable exposure, behavioural activation and homework assignments to achieve remission (Otte, 2022).

Cognitive Distortion

The term cognitive distortion refers to errors in thinking or patterns of thought that are biases in some ways. It is also called cognitive dissonance. People become prone to cognitive distortions when under stress, because under pressure some individuals are apt to take more cognitive shortcuts resulting in less accurate and more extreme; interpretation and reactions.

Cognitive distortions can also serve the function of trying to protect individuals from harm. For example, when a depressed or anxious student thinks "I can't do it", it justifies inaction and protects the student from possible academic failure of course, this strategy is ultimately self-limiting and defeating, and keeps stuck in old patterns that do not work very well. The numbers of common patterns of cognitive distortions according to Ogugua (2020) that have been identified include:

1. All-or-nothing thinking: You look at things in absolute, black-and-white categories. For example, if something is less than perfect, one sees it as a total failure.
2. Over-generalization: You view a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.
3. Mental filter: You dwell on the negatives and ignore the positives. By focusing on a single negative detail and dwelling on it exclusively until one's vision of reality becomes darkened.
4. Discounting the positives: You insist that your accomplishments or positive qualities "don't count."
5. Mind reading – you assume that people are reacting negatively to you when there's no definite evidence for this;
6. Fortune-telling – You arbitrarily predict that things will turn out badly.
7. Magnification or minimization: You blow things way up out of proportion or you shrink their importance inappropriately (e.g. magnifying the negative and minimizing the positive). A form of this

is called catastrophizing in which one tells oneself that an undesirable situation is unbearable when it is really just uncomfortable or inconvenience.

8. Emotional reasoning: You reason from how you feel: that is assuming that one's negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things are (because I feel it, it must be true) e.g. "I feel like an idiot, so I really must be one." Or "I don't feel like doing this, so I'll put it off."
9. "Should statements": You criticize yourself or other people with "should" or "shouldn't." "Musts," "ought to," and "have to s" are similar offenders.
10. Labelling: You identify with your shortcomings. Instead of saying "I made a mistake," you tell yourself, "I'm a jerk," or "a fool," or "a loser." Personalization and blame: You blame yourself for something you weren't entirely responsible for, or you blame other people and overlook ways that your own attitudes and behaviours might have contributed to a problem.

The researcher's choice of cognitive restructuring is based on its efficacy in managing both cognitive and behaviour problems as noted by Braswell & Kendall ,(2021). According to these two researchers, cognitive restructuring learning theory assumes that individuals are not passive observers in their environment, rather they are active, goal oriented and capable of taking responsibility for their decisions, actions and consequently exercise control over their behaviours. Cognitive restructuring technique involves teaching persons or individuals to reduce their negative emotional reactions by getting them to interpret situations with greater accuracy and avoid distorted thinking and think rightly (Otte, 2023). Cognitive restructuring was used by Ellis (1976), to effectively treat emotionally depressed patients. Utilizing cognitive restructuring intervention with youths has experienced an increasingly diverse research base, supporting the effectiveness of varied approaches with adolescents or children's clients (Braswell & Kendall, 2021).

However, this research has traditionally taken place in the out of school settings. They specifically connect cognitive restructuring with an improvement in academic self-concept, self-esteem and self-efficacy of low-achieving students in Nigeria. The significance of cognitive restructuring for academic underachieving students derives from its potential to improve the creative potential, independence, self-awareness, initiative taking, achievement motivation, analytical ability, interpersonal skills and personal competencies of a great number of students who would have ended up as indolent and dependent adults (Braswell & Kendall 2021). There is a need to tap into the natural resources of this class of students and turn them into goal-oriented and resourceful adults.

The purpose of cognitive restructuring is to widen students' conscious perspective and thus allow room for a change in low self-concept perception to a positive one because cognitive restructuring has been used to help individuals experiencing a variety of psychological or psychiatric conditions, including low self-concept, depression, substance abuse disorders, anxiety disorders collectively, bulimia, social phobia, borderline personality disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and gambling, just to name a few Joselt, 2019).

Conclusively, from the foregoing, it becomes clear that cognitive dissonance can be overcome through cognitive restructuring, that is, cognitive dissonance can be changed to a positive perspective through cognitive restructuring. Cognitive restructuring also leads to a change in attitude, which also affects our personality and behavioural problems either positively or negatively. Cognitive restructuring helps students consider any maladaptive patterns in their thinking-feeling-behaviour cycles. The students' goal is to rethink these patterns and consider more adaptive alternatives that will work better for them.

Suggestions

The following suggestions were made to effectively reduce truancy behaviours of secondary school students in Kwara State:

1. The school Counsellors and educational psychologists should consider using CRT intervention for treating or helping students with truancy behaviours as the findings indicate that both counselling interventions are effective in reducing truancy of secondary school students.
2. Counsellors and psychologists should incorporate cognitive restructuring intervention into school guidance curriculum activities to ensure all students are sensitized to the dangers of truancy.
3. Addressing truancy behaviour requires a collaborative effort involving the school counsellors, teachers, parents and other stakeholders. Therefore there is a need to establish strong partnerships and open communication channels to ensure a coordinated and comprehensive approach to support students in addressing truancy issues.

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