



PATTERNS OF DISCIPLINARY SANCTIONS FOR STUDENT TRUANCY: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY IN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS IN TIMOR-LESTE

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse the patterns of disciplinary sanctions applied to student truancy behaviour in Public High Schools in Dili City, Timor-Leste. Using a descriptive qualitative method, data were collected through in-depth interviews with eight informants: six students and two teachers. The novelty of this research lies in the identification of non-conventional physical and financial sanctions still in place within the Dili education system to deter. The results reveal three categories of sanction patterns: physical-environmental sanctions (sanitation and cleaning), academic-financial sanctions (monetary fines and suspensions), and severe administrative sanctions (parental summons and expulsion). The findings indicate that the applied sanction mechanisms tend to be punitive and reactive, with effectiveness often hindered by weak information synchronisation between the school and parents. This study concludes that there is a need for a transformation in disciplinary management, shifting from a physical punishment approach toward strengthening counselling and guidance, and intensifying communication with guardians.

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of discipline within the school environment is a crucial instrument for ensuring the quality of the learning process. Truancy, as one of the most common disciplinary violations, is often addressed by schools through various

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sanction schemes intended to deter (Jannah et al., 2024). In developing countries like Timor-Leste, enforcing attendance rules poses a significant challenge because of the gap between school policies and students' social realities on the ground. Sanctions serve not only as a tool for control but also reflect the school management's philosophy in fostering student character (Curren, 2020).

In the context of modern education, the effectiveness of sanctions is shifting from physical approaches toward more restorative ones. However, many educational institutions still rely on conventional administrative sanctions such as suspension or parental summons (Salina, 2022). The excessive use of sanctions without educational dialogue often causes students to feel alienated (Nurida & Setyawati, 2025), which ultimately leads to truancy or even school (Mireles-Ríos et al., 2020). The firmness of sanctions must be balanced with procedural fairness so that students rationally understand the consequences of their actions (Rachmawati et al., 2021).

The effectiveness of a sanction depends heavily on how information regarding the violation is communicated to parents or guardians. Effective school management requires synchronisation among subject teachers, principals, and parents in monitoring attendance (Chiuri et al., 2020; Datahan, 2020; Sunaengsih et al., 2019). Without a rapid reporting system, administrative sanctions, such as summons letters, often lose momentum because parents only become aware of their child's violation after truancy has become frequent (Amiruddin et al., 2023; Animar, 2024). This indicates that administrative sanctions require effective support for the communication infrastructure.

In public schools in Dili City, sanctions for truancy include physical tasks and monetary fines. The practice of assigning tasks such as cleaning school facilities, including bathrooms (Irfan et al., 2023), or imposing financial fines is a reality faced by students (Riskaa et al., 2024). This study focuses on how the school implements these sanctions and explores students' and teachers' perceptions of the fairness and impact of the punishments used to maintain academic order.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative, descriptive design to gain an in-depth understanding of student absenteeism through the experiences and perspectives of

informants in their natural school context. The descriptive qualitative design was chosen because it allows researchers to systematically and factually describe complex social phenomena (Abdussamad, 2021), particularly absenteeism, which cannot be understood solely through numbers but also through social practices, reasons, perceptions, and meanings given by the informants themselves. The study was conducted in five public schools in Dili City, selected because they are relevant to the research focus and show observable absenteeism phenomena that can be analysed holistically. The informants consisted of two groups: eight students, serving as primary informants who had experience with absenteeism, and eleven additional informants who provided supporting information, ensuring data were obtained from diverse perspectives.

Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. According to Nikmah (2020) and Setiawan et al. (2022), this method is flexible and was used in this study to explore student absenteeism, the dynamics of the learning process, the role of teachers, and school environmental conditions that influence student behaviour. Data were analysed qualitatively through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, carried out continuously from data collection to completion to ensure the integrity of the findings. To ensure data validity, this study employed source triangulation, comparing information from primary and additional informants to verify the consistency and credibility of the findings. This approach aligns with qualitative research practices designed to enhance internal validity, such as member checking and source triangulation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Result

Based on interviews with informants, several findings emerged regarding the reasons students engaged in truancy. Each finding presented below is explicitly grounded in information provided by specific informants.

1. Peer Influence

The interview results indicate that peer influence is a major factor contributing to students' truancy. Students often encourage one another to skip classes, particularly when some of their peers are still outside the classroom at the beginning of a lesson. In such situations, students tend to follow their friends in

order to avoid feeling isolated or different from the group. This finding was reported by several informants, who stated that truancy frequently occurs due to peer influence.

Because they were influenced by other peers who often skipped classes, [...] they became disinterested in subjects that involve a lot of calculations [INF 1].

Students are reluctant to participate in learning activities (skip classes), sometimes because they influence each other [INF 3].

I skip learning activities (classes) because I do not like certain subjects, such as Malay. This is due to poor teaching methods and a strict teacher. The teacher only asked us to write, then went out to talk with a friend without explaining the material. When it was time to leave, the teacher just came to collect the books and left. Even during exams, we were sometimes asked to pay to photocopy the learning materials, [...] sometimes my reason for skipping class is also influenced by my friends' invitations [INF 5].

2. Dislike of Certain Subjects

Several informants stated that they skipped school because they disliked certain subjects. The subjects most frequently mentioned include Mathematics, Physics, English, Tetum, Portuguese, Malay, Religious Education, Biology, and Civics. This dislike was generally attributed to subject matter perceived as difficult, involving excessive calculations, or taught in a foreign language that was hard to understand. As a result, students felt unable to follow the lessons and chose to skip classes.

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by my friends' invitations [INF 5].

Friends who skip classes, [...] mostly do so on their own accord, especially because they dislike certain subjects. [...], sometimes because of assignments or exams, which makes them reluctant to attend school. [...] This is also due to teachers of those subjects whom they do not like, either because of poor teaching methods or approaches that do not resonate with them [...] [INF 7].

Friends who skip school often claim they want to do chores at home, go for a walk, or lie by saying they are sick [...]. There are also subjects they dislike, such as English and Tetun [INF 8].

Friends skip classes because they are reluctant to attend certain lessons, such as Portuguese and Religion [INF 9].

Based on my observations, friends who skip classes sometimes do so because the teacher is absent and choose to go home. [...] Sometimes they dislike certain subjects, such as Physical Education, Mathematics, Civics, and Biology. This is due to unengaging explanations by the teacher; some teachers ignore the class when students are noisy, some rarely attend (coming only once or twice a week), and some ask us to photocopy materials but do not teach, only providing the material right before exams [...] [INF 10].

In my opinion, friends skip classes because they are lazy [...] sometimes they dislike Mathematics [...]. Some skip because they dislike their teacher or do not want to follow school rules, so they choose not to participate in learning activities [...] [INF 11].

In my view, friends skip classes because they dislike the subject matter, usually in English, Mathematics, and Physics [...]. This is because explanations in English are considered very minimal, while Mathematics is seen as having too many calculations [...] [INF 12].

I skipped school because I did not bring my learning materials, arrived late, and disliked some subjects, such as Temas e Literaturas [...] [INF 16].

3. Ineffective Teaching Methods

Interview data reveal that teaching methods play a significant role in influencing students' decisions to skip classes. Some informants explained that certain teachers merely instructed students to write or photocopy materials without providing adequate explanations. In some cases, teachers left the classroom after assigning tasks and only returned at the end of the lesson or shortly before examinations. This situation caused students to feel neglected and lose interest in participating in classroom learning activities.

Because they did not like the teachers' teaching methods, such as in English, Physics, and Tetun classes, some teachers only instructed students to write without providing any explanation. Others merely asked students to photocopy the materials, particularly in Physics, where the teacher only required students to photocopy the learning materials without any explanation. This situation caused students who could not afford photocopying to become reluctant to attend class. In addition, the open school environment made it easy for students to skip classes. At that time, there was no student council (OSIS), so students could enter and leave the school freely" [INF 2].

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I did not attend learning activities (skipped classes) because I felt lazy, especially

since school started in the afternoon, which made me uninterested in studying in class [...]. The way the teacher taught also made me reluctant and uncomfortable in class; the explanations were unengaging, which made me sleepy and ultimately led me to skip classes [...]. This usually happened in English lessons [INF 14].

4. Authoritarian Teacher Attitudes and Physical Punishment

In addition to teaching methods, teachers' attitudes were also identified as a reason for truancy. Several informants reported that some teachers were easily angered, overly strict, and imposed punishments when students gave incorrect answers. There were also accounts of students being physically punished when they failed to solve problems in front of the class. Such treatment created fear and psychological pressure, leading students to prefer skipping classes rather than attending lessons.

When class began, if there were still one or two students outside, they would call each other one by one to go out together. This happened because the large number of students in the classroom made it difficult to concentrate, so they preferred to skip class. This phenomenon often occurred, particularly in Mathematics, Geology, English, and Tetun lessons. For example, in Mathematics class, when students were unable to complete exercises in front of the class, the teacher would use a hose to punish them [INF 4].

I skipped school because of overly strict teacher rules, especially in English lessons; if we answered a question incorrectly, we would be punished [INF 6].

5. Unconducive Classroom Conditions

The findings indicate that overcrowded classrooms contributed to students' truancy. Classes with approximately 80 to 90 students created noisy and unconducive learning environments. Some students reported being unable to find seating, which made them uncomfortable and ultimately led them to skip classes.

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Sometimes I skip class because a teacher is absent, because I mingle with other friends, and because the classroom is overcrowded. Since there are too many students, sometimes I cannot find a seat, so I choose to skip class [...]. In addition, another factor is the school's lack of toilet facilities [...] [INF 15].

I skip class because the number of students in our class is too large, around 90 students, so I cannot find a seat. This is what makes me reluctant to attend class [...] [INF 17].

6. Open School Environment and Weak Supervision

Several informants reported that the open school environment made it easy for students to enter and leave without strict supervision. At that time, the school did not yet have a student council (OSIS), resulting in weak internal control over student discipline. This condition allowed students to leave the school premises at will, including skipping classes.

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7. Teacher Absenteeism and School Facilities

The findings also show that teacher absenteeism during scheduled lessons

was another reason students skipped school. In such cases, students chose to go home or not attend classes. In addition, limited school facilities, such as insufficient toilet facilities and other supporting infrastructure, affected students' comfort at school and contributed to truancy.

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Discussion

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that student truancy is not caused by a single factor but results from interactions among various personal, pedagogical, and structural factors. According to Tsani et al. (2024) and Hisma et al. (2024), absenteeism is influenced by a combination of internal and external factors, such as learning motivation, peer influence, and the school environment.

Peer influence serves as a powerful factor in shaping student behaviour. This is consistent with the characteristics of adolescents, who tend to seek social acceptance within their groups. When truancy becomes a group habit, other students feel pressured to do the same to avoid social isolation. According to Akkuş & Çinkir (2022) and Okafor et al. (2025), social interaction with peers can encourage students to engage in truant behaviour, especially when it is normalised within the group. Furthermore, Adesina et al. (2023) demonstrate that peer attachment affects student engagement in school, thereby influencing classroom attendance.

Dislike for certain subjects and teacher pedagogical methods indicates that the

quality of learning plays a crucial role in maintaining student attendance in the classroom. One-way learning, which lacks explanation and fails to consider students' abilities and backgrounds, can reduce motivation to learn. Furthermore, the use of physical punishment and authoritarian teacher attitudes creates fear and a rejection of learning activities. According to Almutawa & Suwaidan (2026) and Fard et al. (2023), teaching quality and the academic environment significantly influence student attendance. Andriani et al. (2023) add that monotonous, one-way learning that disregards student capabilities can diminish learning motivation. Egunlusi (2020) emphasises that the use of physical punishment and authoritarian teaching practices fosters fear and, in turn, resistance to educational activities.

Furthermore, overcrowded classrooms and limited school facilities exacerbate the learning situation. An uncondusive learning environment makes it difficult for students to concentrate and feel comfortable in class. In this context, truancy becomes a form of escape for students from unsupportive learning situations. According to Alvarez (2024), an uncondusive learning environment causes students to struggle with concentration and feel uncomfortable in class (BISHMI, 2024), which can increase truancy rates as a means of escaping unsupportive learning conditions (Da Costa, 2026). Ambubuyog et al. (2025) also emphasise that the physical quality of the school, such as classroom capacity and facilities, affects overall student engagement (Da Costa & Freitas, 2025).

From a school management perspective, weak supervision, the absence of a student council (OSIS), and teacher absenteeism indicate an urgent need to strengthen the school management system. The sanctions imposed on truant students tend to be reactive and have not yet addressed preventive measures or sustainable character building. According to Sugiar et al. (2024) and Wilkins et al. (2024), effective school management practices, including teacher distribution and classroom supervision, can significantly influence student attendance. Zahra & Fathoni (2024) further demonstrate that the interaction between school policies and students plays a vital role in shaping attendance behaviour.

Finally, the results of this study emphasise that efforts to address student truancy must be comprehensive, encompassing improvements in learning quality, refinements in teacher attitudes and instructional methods, adequate facilities, strengthened school discipline, and positive relationships between teachers and

students. According to Hisma et al. (2024), effective interventions include enhancing the quality of learning, improving teacher attitudes and teaching methods (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020), providing adequate facilities (Kearney et al., 2019), strengthening school discipline (Cruz et al., 2021), and fostering positive teacher-student relationships (Freeman et al., 2019).

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the research findings and discussion, it can be concluded that student truancy is a complex phenomenon influenced by multiple interrelated factors. The primary factors contributing to truancy include peer influence, students' dislike of certain subjects, and teachers' teaching methods and attitudes. Learning materials perceived as difficult, ineffective instructional practices, and authoritarian or non-educational disciplinary approaches reduce students' motivation to participate in classroom learning.

In addition to pedagogical factors, structural and institutional conditions within the school also play a significant role in encouraging truancy. An open school environment, weak supervision, the absence of a student council, teacher absenteeism, overcrowded classrooms, and limited school facilities contribute to uncondusive learning conditions. Under such circumstances, students tend to choose truancy as a coping mechanism to escape uncomfortable learning environments. The school's sanctions are largely administrative and have not fully addressed the underlying causes of truancy, underscoring the need for more comprehensive, student-centred intervention strategies.

Recommendations

1. For Students

Students are encouraged to increase their awareness of the importance of regular attendance and active participation in the learning process. They should take responsibility for their academic obligations, manage negative peer pressure, and openly communicate any learning difficulties to teachers or school authorities to receive proper support.

2. For Parents

Parents are expected to provide closer supervision and attention to their children's school attendance and learning activities. Maintaining open communication with both their children and the school, as well as offering emotional support and motivation for learning, can help students feel valued and encouraged to attend school consistently.

3. For Teachers

Teachers are encouraged to implement more varied, interactive, and student-centred teaching methods that align with students' characteristics and needs. They should foster positive, humane relationships with students, avoid authoritarian attitudes and physical punishment, and provide clear explanations to create a comfortable, motivating learning environment.

4. For Schools

Schools are advised to strengthen supervision and student discipline systems, including activating the student council's role in internal school control. Schools should also create a conducive learning environment by managing class size, improving school facilities, and ensuring teachers' regular attendance. Preventive and educational approaches to student discipline should be prioritised over purely punitive measures.

5. For the Ministry of Education

The Ministry of Education is expected to formulate policies that support improvements in learning quality and school welfare, particularly by ensuring equitable teacher distribution, monitoring teacher attendance, and providing adequate educational facilities. Furthermore, continuous professional development programs focusing on pedagogy and classroom management should be strengthened to systematically reduce student truancy.

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