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Teachers and Students' Perception on Skipping Senior Secondary Two to Enrol for External Examinations in Southern Nigeria: Implications for Counselling

¹Olufunke Chenube

²Florence Omumu

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Authors' Affiliation

Faculty of Education,
University of Delta Agbor, Delta
State

¹Email: olufunke.chenube@unidel.edu.ng

²Email: florence.omumu@unidel.edu.ng

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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian Policy on Education stipulated three years for the Senior Secondary School (SSS) education, after which a student writes one or two external examinations: the West Africa Examination Certificate (WAEC) and the National Examination Council (NECO), but the trend now is students from SS1 moving to SS3 and eventually writing these external examinations, thus skipping SS2. This class skipping encourages examination malpractice because many of the candidates writing the exams are not usually adequately prepared. This is a downward trend for the nation and should be a serious concern for all relevant stakeholders. This paper therefore focuses on finding out the perception of teachers and students in Senior Secondary Schools in the Delta North Senatorial District on the causes of class skipping and who should be blamed most for this act. Purposive random sampling was used in selecting 674 SS students and 102 teachers from 35 schools in the 3 zones in the Senatorial District. The results showed that most students and teachers are aware of the standard regulations of writing external examination at the .. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that there will be an urgent counselling programmes for all relevant stakeholders on the dangers of rushing children in writing WAEC and the NECO.

Introduction

Corruption is a serious worry that slows the achievement of development goals in Nigeria. The Transparency International (2021) corruption index ranks Nigeria 149th out of 180 countries, with a performance score of 25 out of 100. Several studies on corruption in Nigeria report that corruption is rife across different sectors in the country (Moyosore, 2015; Jamo, 2021; & Rich, 2021). A recent survey listed Nigeria's education sector among the top-five most corrupt sectors in the country (Socio-economic Rights and Accountability Project [SERAP], 2019). Nigeria's education system currently ranks number 124 out of 140 countries globally, making the country among the poorest performers in education (World Economic Forum, 2019). Examination merit and integrity are indicators of a well-performing education system. The popularity of examination malpractice and its resulting consequences on Nigeria's education system, which reflect the reduction of the competence of human resources and perpetuation of unfairness, have resulted in the emergence of interventions to deal with the issue (Agwu *et al.*, 2022; Atueyi, 2019; & Belo-Osagie, 2017).

The National Policy on Education stipulates that students are expected, at the expiration of three years in the Senior Secondary School (SSS), to write two external examinations: the West African Certificate Examination (WAEC) and the National Examination Council (NECO), which are usually conducted by the West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) across Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, and the NECO just in Nigeria. The recent trend is that students now skip SS2 and move from SS1 to SS3 to write these external examinations. This has become a major cause of malpractice in these external exams because students enrol in them without adequately covering the three-year curriculum. The Federal Government, in its attempt to stem this unwholesome tide, released a circular, as reported by PUNCH on *Friday, September 24, 2021*. The circular, which was referenced as FME/DBSE/US/DOC/III/16, signed by the ministry's *Director, Senior Secondary Education*,

Hajia Binta Abdulkadir, and confirmed by the *Director of Press and Public Relations*, Ben Bem Goong, reads, "The ministry's attention has been drawn to the flagrant disregard to its directive on the writing of external examinations such as NABTEB (National Business and Technical Examinations) (NTC and NBC), WASSCE (West African Senior School Certificate Examination), and NECO (National Examination Council) (SSCE) by SS1 and SS2 students. Students who are involved in the practice find it difficult to settle down for serious studies. They become unruly and distract other students from achieving their goals. Any student caught having written any of the above examinations in SS1 or SS2 classes will be expelled from the college. All students must write these examinations after they have been duly registered for them by the college. All students at Federal Unity Colleges should adhere strictly to the content of this circular. Principals were also advised to bring the content of this circular to the knowledge of all parents of their respective schools."

The West Africa Examination equally stated on its website in the frequently asked questions (FAQs) section. In the case of the school examination, the prospective candidate must be in the SSS3 class at a recognised school. That means students are not expected to write the examination until they get to SS3. Therefore, when a student skips a whole senior Secondary School class contrary to standard regulations, it is unethical. Unethical behaviours are called "*academic misconduct* or *academic dishonesty*" (McCrink, 2010). Academic dishonesty is a serious problem worldwide that has negative consequences for individuals, institutions, and society at large (Anderman & Murdock, 2011). It is defined as intentionally carrying out forbidden behaviours to gain an unfair advantage in an academic context (Zhao *et al.*, 2022).

In Nigeria, it is against the rules to admit a new student into the final year class (Senior Secondary [SS] class 3). To prevent suspicious migration of students, schools hosting SSCEs are required to

submit Continuous Assessment Scores (CAS) for their students to WAEC for two (2) consecutive years before they are due to write SSCE in the school. Yet, some schools admit and register new students into the final year class, even when they cannot account for the Continuous Assessment Scores (CAS) of the students in preceding classes (SS 1 or 2). As such, the new school provides forged CAS for the candidate, which is a prerequisite to sitting WAEC or NECO examinations (Belo-Osagie, 2017). Evidence reveals that schools known for admitting candidates just close to when they are to sit SSCE are usually Miracle Examination Centres (MECs) (Ogechukwu & Adaku, 2020).

There is dearth of research on class or grade skipping but media reports have suggested that it may be influenced by a variety of contextual factors, such as the perception of peers' skipping as common or the culture of the schools that accept students from other schools for external exams, in addition to individual factors like demographics, ethical beliefs, or attitudes. Some empirical studies have found that the perception that one's peers are cheating or engaging in any form of dishonesty (which we will refer to as perceived peer cheating) is positively correlated with the student's own academic cheating (Ghanem & Mozahem, 2019; Hard *et al.*, 2006).

Aside from peer influence, another major cause of class skipping identified in media reports and oral discussions is parents' support and encouragement of their children to skip SS2, due to the burden of paying school fees for three years (Okolie *et al.*, 2019). In addition to the financial strain, some parents believe that their kids should be rushed through secondary school because they appear too old and mature. Media documentation also opined that some parents think that their kids are smart enough, even if they skip a whole year. These same wrong perceptions of parents have gradually reduced the six-year primary education to four years. The first instance of this was bypassing primary 6 and going directly to Secondary School.

Many people and the media have claimed that schools that admit students from other schools without doing a thorough background check on SS2 completion are the third reason why students skip class (Iyabo Ojo - The Guardian, 2021). Many schools, both private and public, that have converted to MCEs admit students primarily for profit. They force them to pay a hefty price for "assistance/help" (Exam Malpractice) in addition to the examination fee and registration fee (Okolie *et al.*, 2019).

One theoretical approach that points to the importance of peers in understanding academic dishonesty is social learning theory (Brauer & Tittle, 2012; Bandura, 1986, 1989). This theory posits that many human behaviours and attitudes are learned through the process of observational learning. This account suggests that a person who witnesses socially significant individuals engaging in and benefiting from a behaviour is more likely to engage in similar behaviours themselves, even if the behaviour violates societal norms (Goldstein & Cialdini, 2011). Thus, according to this theory, students will be more likely to cheat or engage in academic dishonesty if they observe their peers engaging in academic cheating.

Another theoretical approach that points to the importance of peers in understanding academic dishonesty is neutralisation theory. According to this theory, individuals adopt neutralisation techniques to justify violating social norms to maintain a positive self-image (Rettinger & Kramer, 2009; Pulvers & Diekhoff, 1999; Sykes & Matza, 1957). One neutralisation technique that is especially common in cheating contexts is the notion that "*everyone else is doing it*" (Kvalnes & Kvalnes 2019, Freiburger *et al.*, 2017, Haines *et al.*, 1986). This neutralisation technique reduces or displaces one's own responsibility by attributing the causes of behaviour to others or to external factors (Hawley, 2020; Stephens, 2017). Thus, when students observe cheating or others skipping classes among their peers, they may use it to justify their own cheating.

However, it should be noted that neutralising one's moral concerns does not necessarily mean that individuals are disengaging from moral principles

about honesty and integrity (Waltzer & Dahl, 2022; Schlenker *et al.*, 2009).

This dishonesty and gross unethical behaviour have a chain of individuals who should be blamed: parents, schools (both public and private), examination bodies, ministries with oversight responsibility, and even the students themselves. Okolie *et al.* (2018) revealed from their study that parents are the main actors in promoting dishonesty practices during examinations in the Nigerian education system. They directly or indirectly fund examination malpractices (EMs) and encourage their children to get involved in a bid to acquire school certificates with little or no skills. Despite these stipulated standards by both the Federal Government and WAEC, it is a known fact that many students and parents encourage this unethical behaviour of class skipping. Nevertheless, as far as we are aware, there is a paucity of literature on this because little investigation has been carried out concerning this unethical behaviour. This study is to fill this gap in the literature on the level of awareness of both teachers and students about the unethical practice of class skipping, affirm why students skip classes, and who should be blamed most for this act. This study was conducted to understand the magnitude and gain insight into the problem of skipping a whole SS class to write an external examination among senior secondary school students in Delta North Senatorial District.

The specific purposes of this study were:

1. To assess the awareness and ethical attitude towards standard regulations for SSS class completion among teachers and students in Delta North Senatorial District of Delta State,
2. To affirm reasons identified by the media and in regular discourse for class skipping,
3. To determine who should be blamed most for this unethical behaviour.

Method

This is a cross-sectional study using a self-administered survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was derived from media reports, anecdotal

conversations, and comments with relevant stakeholders on factors responsible for class skipping. A four-sectioned questionnaire was developed and given to respondents in 35 secondary schools in the Delta North Senatorial District in southern Nigeria. The first section of the questionnaire was designed to elicit general information regarding the respondent's background information, such as the students' age, zone in the senatorial district, and religion. For teachers, age was excluded and replaced with years of experience. The second section contained a few statements that bordered on ethical awareness of class skipping to write WAEC and NECO before the end of the 3rd year. The third section consists of items identified by the media and regular conversations on the causes of class skipping. Both teachers and students were expected to respond by picking one option: yes, no, or not sure. The last section focused on identifying who should be blamed for this unethical practice. The respondents were expected to rank their responses:

1. *For whom should be blamed most?*
2. *For the second person to be blamed most, and*
3. *For the third person to be blamed most.*

The research team obtained official permissions from the relevant authorities in the 35 schools used in the three zones of the Delta North Senatorial District. The students and teachers participated in the survey voluntarily and anonymously, with no personal identifiers.

on the questionnaire. A student's and teacher's submission of a completed survey implied his or her personal consent to participate. *Six hundred and seventy-four* (674) SS students and *one hundred and two* (102) teachers from the 35 secondary schools in the three zones (*Ika, Aniocha, and Kwale*) in Delta North participated in the study.

Table 1: PARTICIPANTS

Participants		Frequency		Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	STUDENT	674		86.9	86.9	86.9
	TEACHER	102		13.1	13.1	100.0
	Total	776		100.0	100.0	

Table 2: ZONES

Zones		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	IKA	236	30.4	30.4	30.4
	ANIOCHA	294	37.9	37.9	68.3
	UKWANI	246	31.7	31.7	100.0
	Total	776	100.0	100.0	

Table 3: RELIGION

Religion		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	CHRISTIANITY	774	99.7	99.7	99.7
	ISLAM	1	.1	.1	99.9
	TRADITIONAL	1	.1	.1	100.0
	Total	776	100.0	100.0	

Results

The study participants were six hundred and seventy-four (674) SS students and one hundred and two (102) teachers from 35 secondary schools in the three Units (Ika, Aniocha and Kwale) in Delta North Senatorial District. (Students $n=674$, 86.9%; Teachers $n=102$ 23.1%). Also, they were from three zones within the Senatorial District (Ika zone $n=236$, 30.4%, Aniocha, $n=294$, 37.9% Ukwani, $n=246$, 31.7%) Almost all the participants were Christians (Christianity, $n=774$, 99.7%; Islam, $n=1$, .1; Traditional Religion, $n=1$, .1

Awareness Levels and Ethical attitude to standard regulations on class completion before writing external examinations:

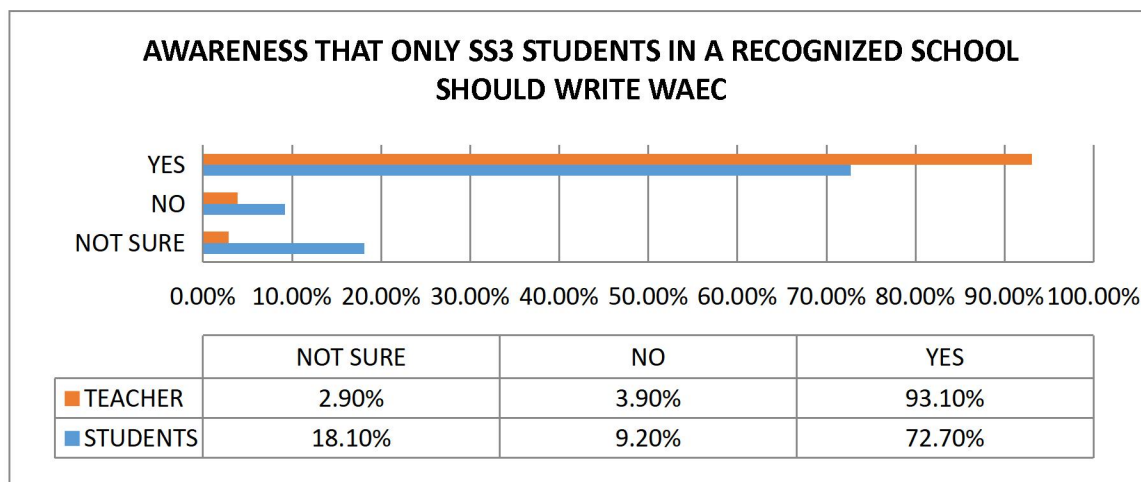


Figure 1:

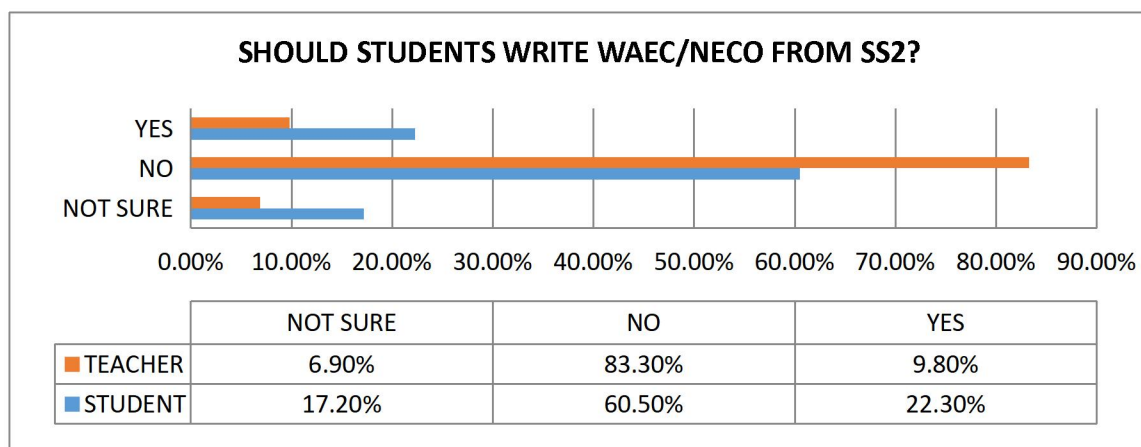


Figure 2:

The teachers (n=111.7, 93.1%) and students (n=489, 72.7%) claimed to be aware that only SS3 students in a recognised school should write WAEC/NECO examinations (Figure 1). About 408 (60.5%) of the students and 85 (83.3%) of the teachers said students should not write WAEC/NECO from SS2 (Figure 2). However, 150 (22.30%) students believed that SS2 students could write WAEC/NECO (Figure 2).

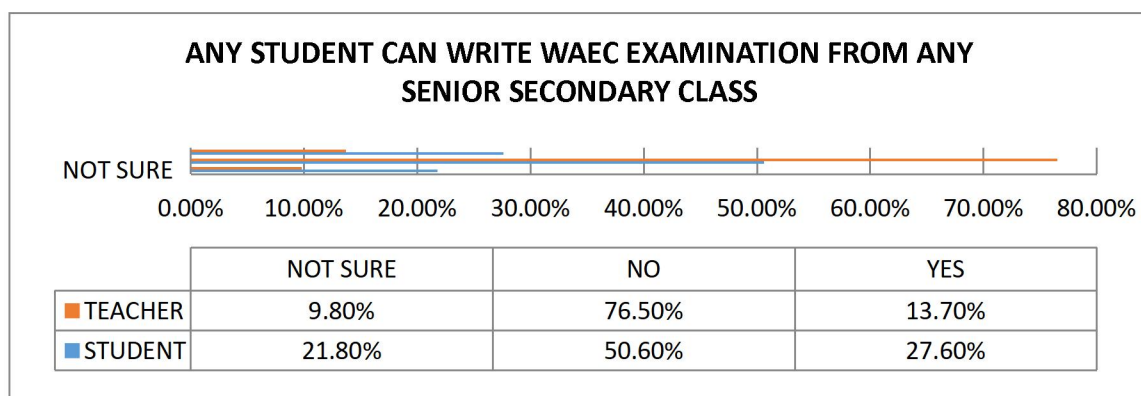


Figure 3:

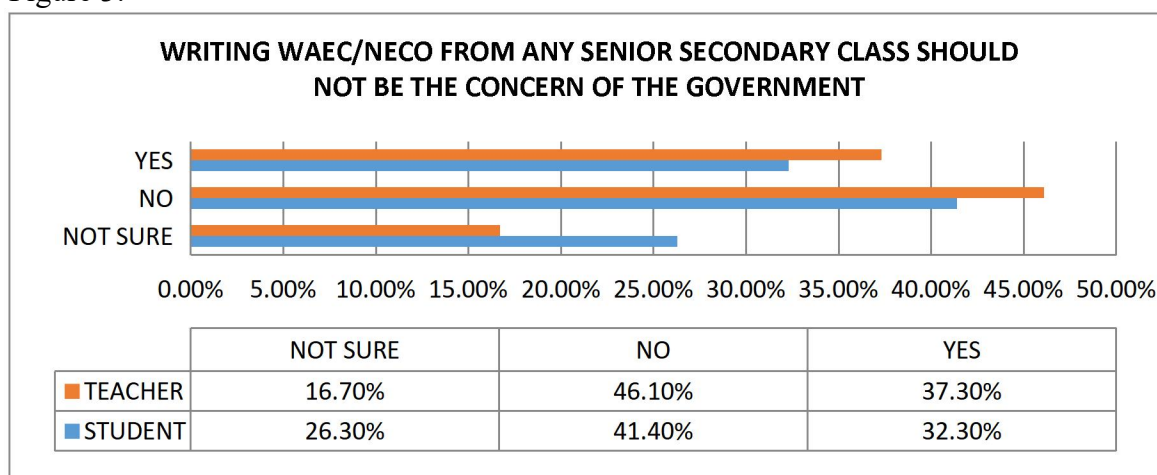


Figure 4

The teachers (78, 76.5%) insisted that students should not write WAEC/NECO examinations from any senior secondary class except SS3. However, even though about half of the students opined that students should not write WAEC/NECO examinations from any senior secondary class except SS3, about 27.6% said students could write WAEC/NECO examinations from any of the senior secondary classes (Figure 3). The teachers (46.1%) and students (41.4%) indicated that writing WAEC/NECO from any senior secondary class should be the government's concern. In comparison, about 37.3% and 32.3% of the teachers and students claimed that it should not be a government concern (Figure 4). The teachers (69.6%) did not agree that intelligent children, even if they are not emotionally mature, should write WAEC/NECO. On the other hand, the students (50.6%) agreed that an intelligent child, even if they are not emotionally mature, could write WAEC/NECO examinations (Figure 5)

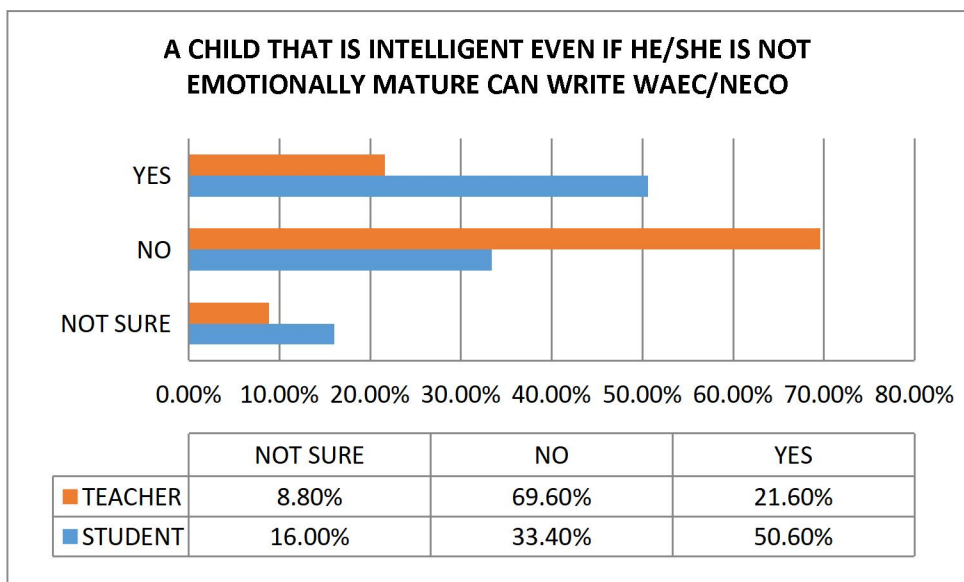


Figure 5:
REASONS WHY STUDENTS SKIP SS2 TO SS3 TO WRITE WAEC/NECO

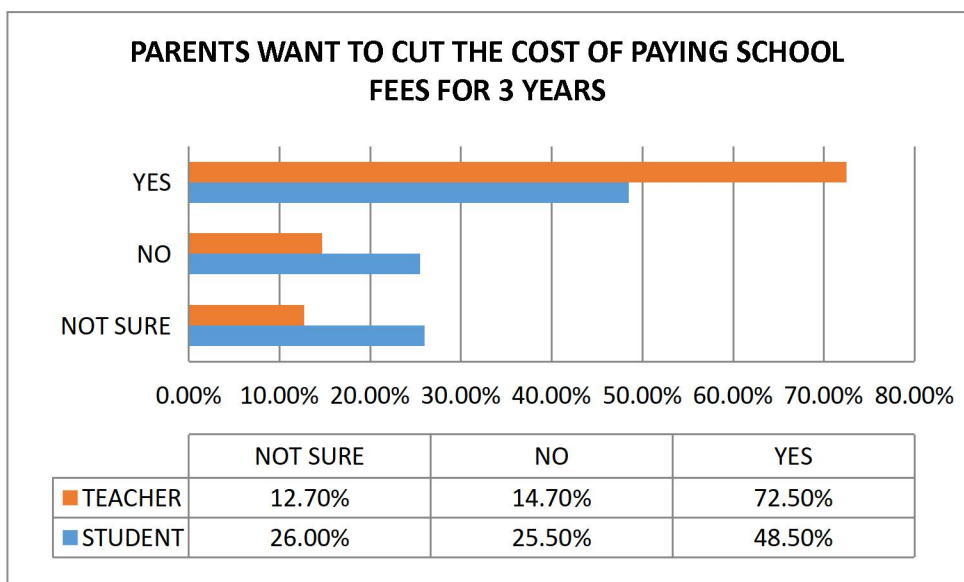


Figure 6

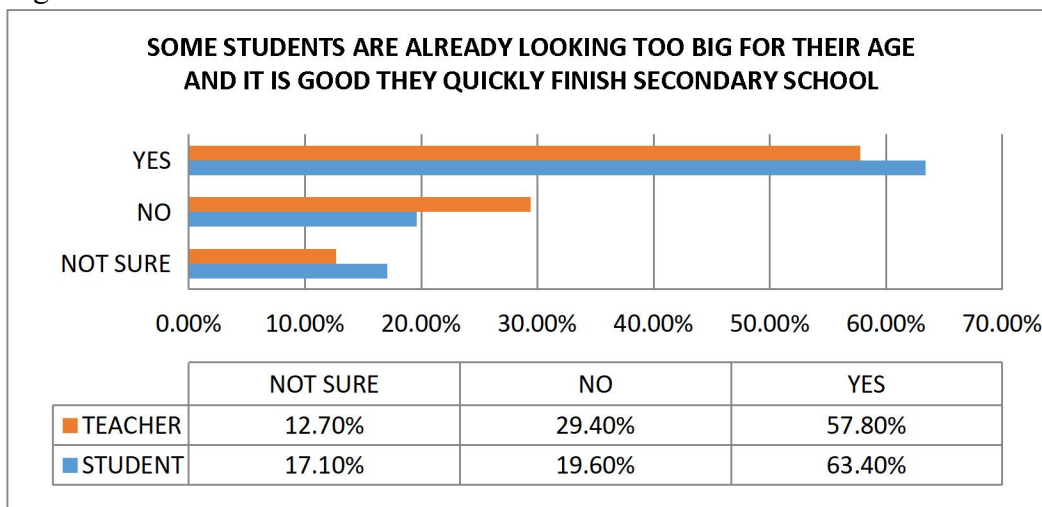


Figure 7

Many of the teachers (72.5%) and a little less than average of the students (48.5%) was of the view that parents enrolled their children from SS2 because they want to cut the cost of paying school fees for three years (Figure 6). The students (63.4%) and teachers (57.8%) agreed that one of the reasons why SS2 students are enrol for WAEC/NECO is because some of the students already look too big for their age, so it is necessary that they quickly finish secondary school (Figure7).

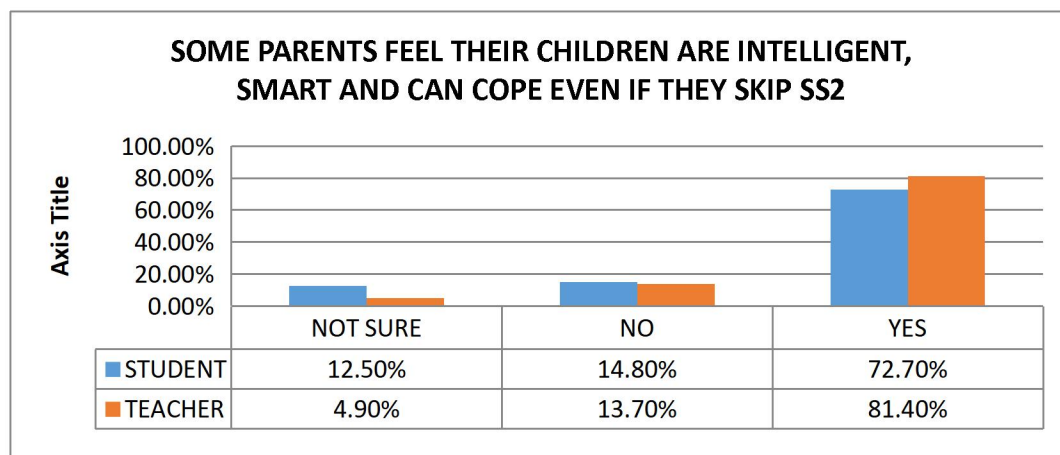


Figure 8

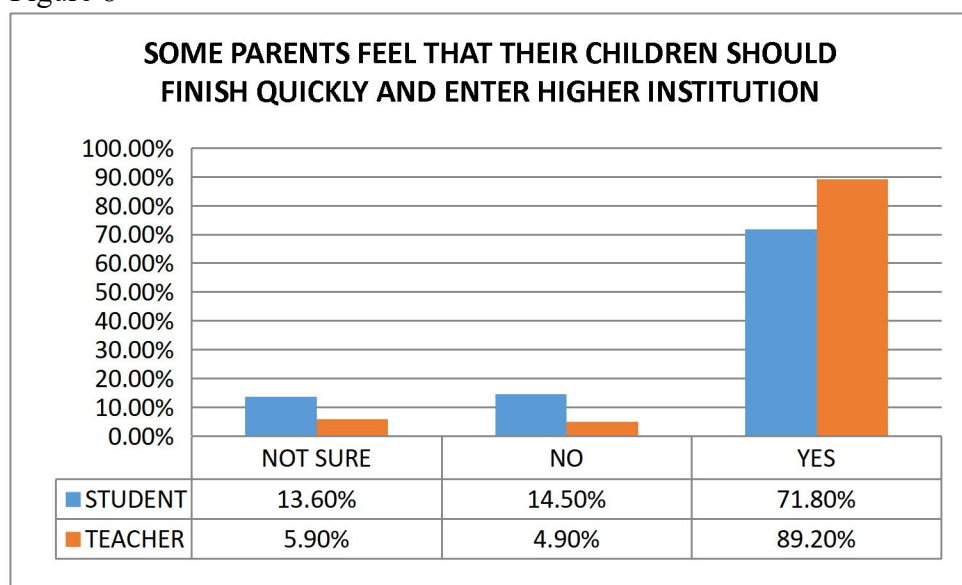


Figure 9

Both the students (72.7%) and teachers (81.40%) agreed that students skip SS2 to SS3 to write WAEC/NECO because some parents feel their children are intelligent, smart, and can cope even if they skip SS2 (Figure 8). Another reason given by the students (71.8%) and teachers (89.2%) was that some parents feel that their children should finish quickly and enter higher institutions (Figure 9).

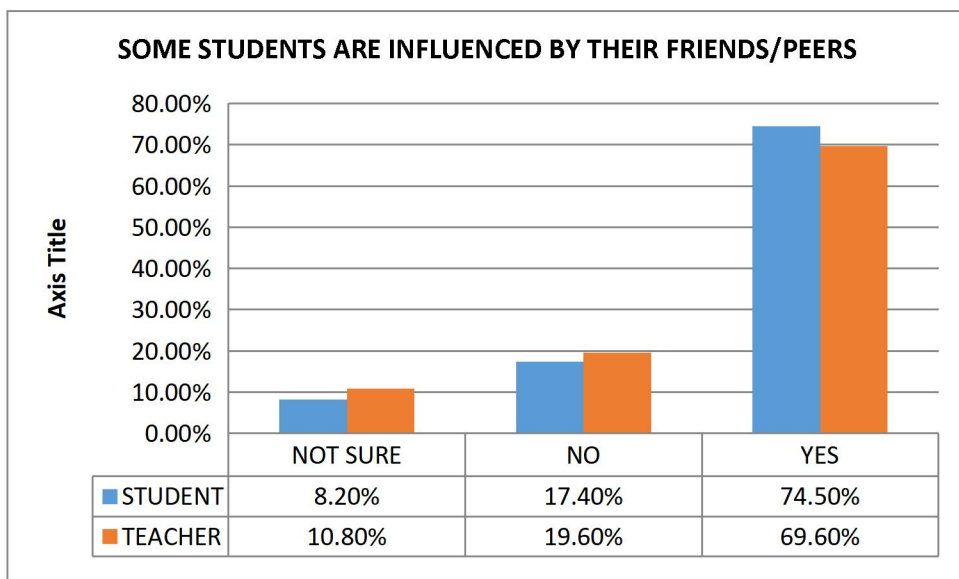


Figure 10

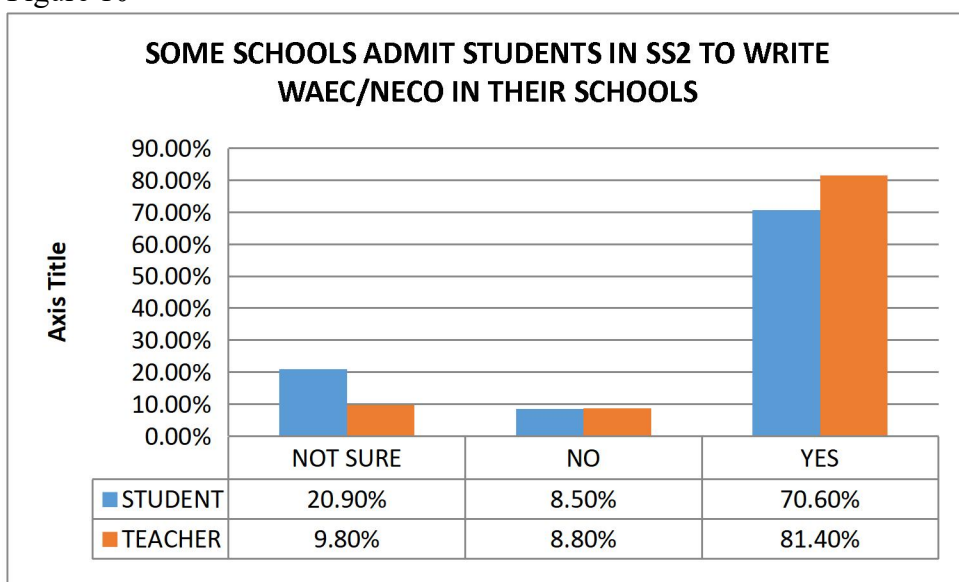


Figure 11

From Figure 10, 74.5% and 69.6% of the students and teachers agreed that students skip SS2 to SS3 to write WAEC/NECO because some students are influenced by their friends/peers. Also, in Figure 11, 70.6% and 81.4% of the students and teachers agreed that it was because some schools admit students in SS2 to write WAEC/NECO in their schools.

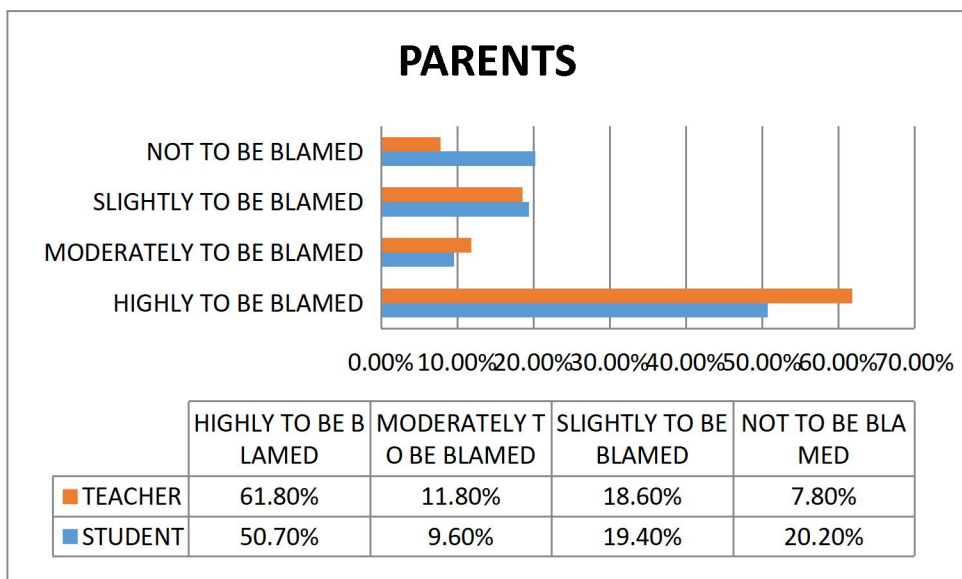


Figure 12

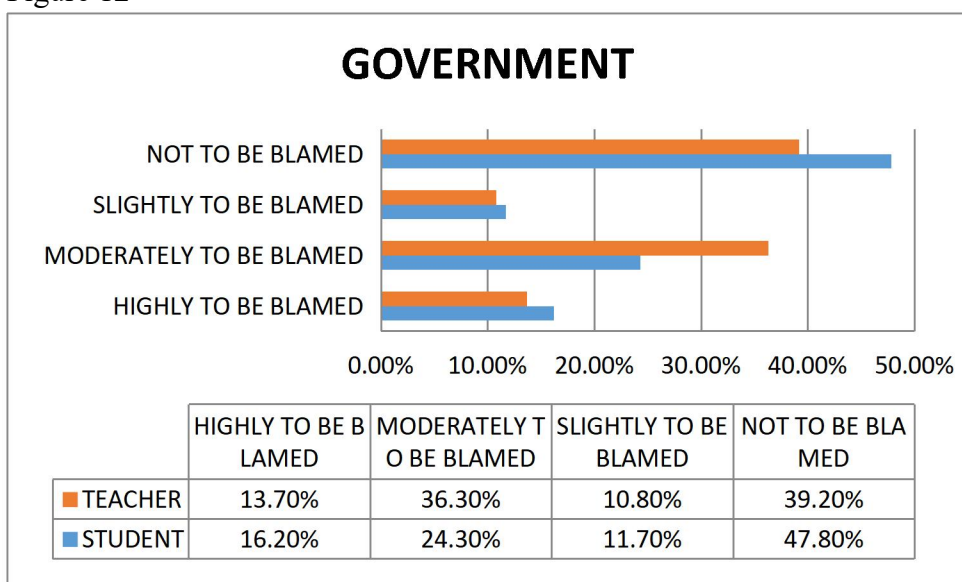


Figure 13

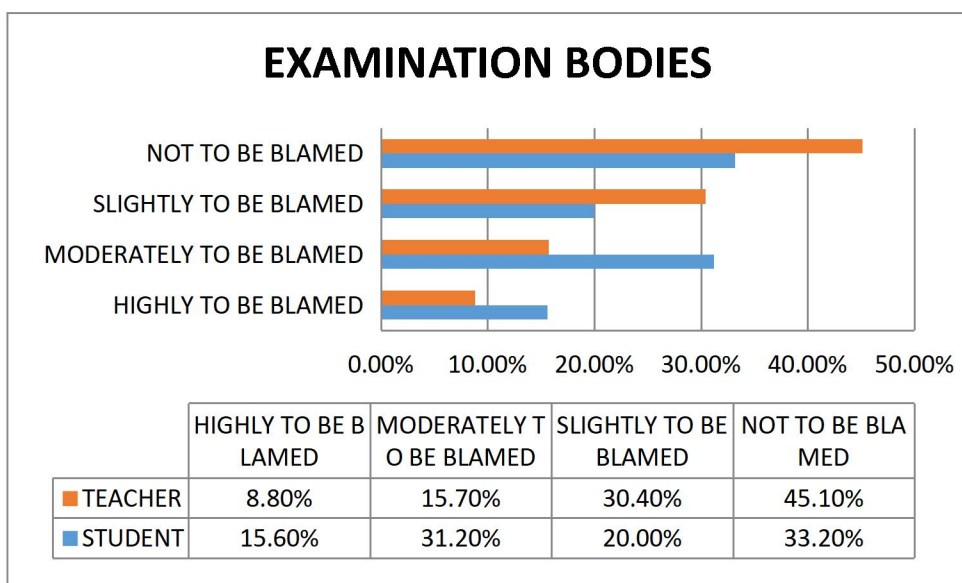


Figure 14

Concerning students skipping SS2 to SS3 to write WAEC/NECo, both the students (50.7%) and teachers (61.8%) said the parents are highly to be blamed (Figure 12). Also, students (47.8%) and teachers (39.2%) said the government should not be blamed (Figure 13). In addition, the students (33.2%) and teachers (45.1%) are of the view that examination bodies are not to be blamed (Figure 14).

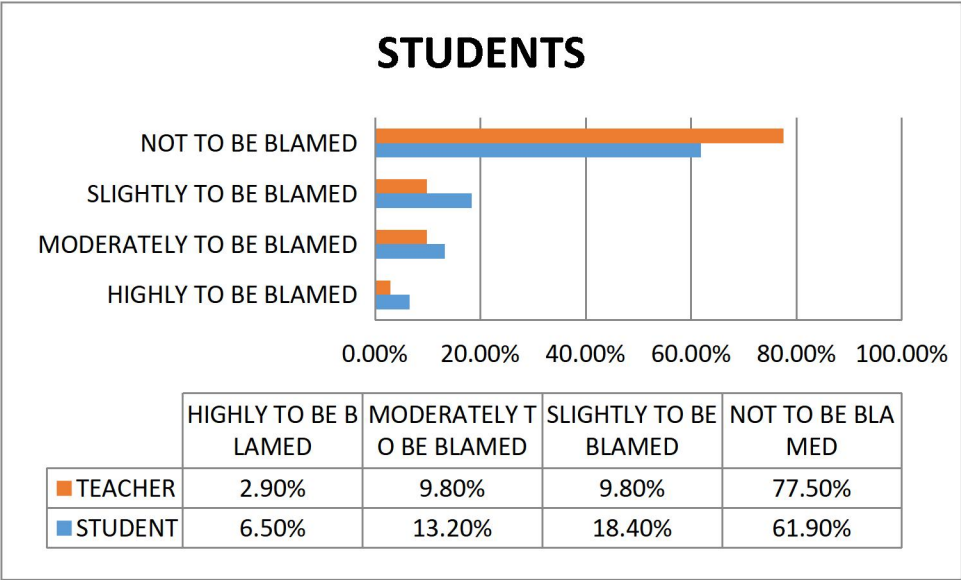


Figure 15

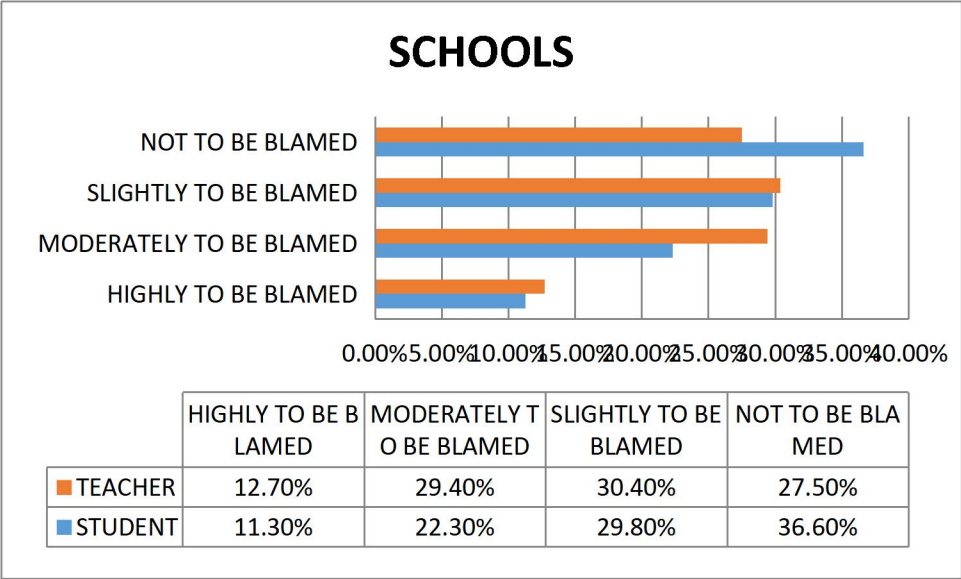


Figure 16

From figure 15, the students (61.9%) and teachers (77.5%) were of the view that the students are not to be blamed for students skipping SS2 to SS3 to enrol for WAEC/NECO examinations (Figure 15). However, while 30.4% and 29.8% of the teachers and students said the school is slightly to be blamed, 29.4% of the teachers also said the school is moderately to be blamed, and 36.6% of the students also said the school should not be blamed (Figure 16)

Discussion

The study revealed that majority of the teachers (111.72, 93.1%) and 489(72.7%) students sampled for this study are aware of the standard regulation that that only S3 students in a recognised school should write WAEC/NECO examinations. This shows that both teachers and students are not ignorant of the standard regulation, so when they engage or encourage class skipping, they are intentionally violating standard regulations. Equally about 408 (60.5%) of the students and 85 (83.3%) of the teachers opined that students should not write WAEC/NECO from SS2) though 150 students are of the opinion that students can write WAEC from SS2. This shows that despite the level of awareness by the students of the standard regulation, they do not see anything wrong in violating this regulation.

The findings from this study also show that the teachers (46.1%) and students (41.4%) hold the view that writing WAEC/NECO from any senior secondary class should not be the government's concern. This is quite worrying because the government has oversight responsibilities through its agencies to regulate activities in the various sectors. So, if most of the participants undermine the role of the government, that means citizens will violate regulations at will. This is seen in Nigerians' attitude to these examination regulations. To these sets of students and teachers, writing or not writing examinations from SS2 should be an individual's concern.

This study gives explanations on why students engage in class skipping which collaborate media discourse and informal conversations. Many of the teachers (72.5%) and a little less than average of the students (48.5%) was of the view that parents enrolled their children from SS2 because they want to cut the cost of paying school fees for three years. Also, students 63.4% and 57.8% teachers agreed that students are enrolled from SS 2 to write WAEC/NECO because some of the students are already looking too big for their age., so it becomes necessary to quicken their completion of secondary school. Another cause of class skipping was

confirmed in this study, both the students (72.7%) and teachers (81.40%) agreed that students skip SS2 to SS3 to write WAEC/NECO because some parents feel their children are intelligent, smart, and can cope even if they skipped SS2 and some parents feel that their children should finish quickly and enter higher institutions. These are the reasons why parents are the main player in this unwholesome practice because they do not look at the ethical and holistic academic implications of school completion. The findings do not rule out the influence of peers, 74.5% and 69.6% of the students and teachers agreed that students skip classes because of the peer influence. Lastly, most of the participants (both teachers and students) agreed that schools who admit students are equally the cause of this skipping. If the admission requirements are stringent, students will not leave their schools to enrol for these examinations elsewhere.

The findings of this study suggest that parents should receive the highest blamed for this unethical behaviour. The plausible explanation for this, parents are the ones who take the decision where their children will write the examination and equally pay the examination fee, The school cannot take such decision on behalf of the parents neither can the kids fund the payment. So, parents are the major culprit as established by the findings of this study. The school takes the next rank, 30.4% and 29.8% of the teachers and students respectively agreed the school should be slightly blamed, 29.4% of the teachers also opined the school should be moderately blamed. The plausible reason for this is because if the schools do not compromise admission standard and examination requirements, there will be no room for class skipping. Though the government and the examination bodies cannot be totally exonerated because more stringent rules can be introduced that will make moving to another school very difficult.

Conclusion

This study focused on class skipping, that is, students skipping a whole class (SS2) to write external examinations after SS 1. The study looked at the awareness levels of both students and teachers of the

standard regulations for being qualified to write these examinations.

The study revealed the causes of this unethical behaviour: parents desire to cut the cost of school fees, wrong perceptions of children's size, smartness, etc. Parents received the highest blame, followed by the school, for this class skipping. This shows that if this practice is to be stopped, much will depend on the parents and the school; they will need re-orientation and counselling.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- Parents need counselling to strengthen education in Nigeria by encouraging obedience to laws and best practices. Counsellors, in collaboration with the school, will need to organise seminars and other programmes to guide parents in making ethical and informed decisions about the academic implications of schooling at different levels.
- The government, through the examination bodies, should come up with stringent policies that will make it difficult for schools to admit new students in the final year. For instance, examination bodies are yet to enforce a transparent system of checking the CAS of candidates; CAS scores should be sent at the end of each session; and students whose names are not on the school list from SS 1 or 2 should not be enrolled in the final year.
- School counsellors should teach, guide, and counsel students against unethical behaviour and its consequences. This will go a long way in curbing the speed at which students move from SS1 to SS3. The government should enforce the standard regulations on class completion before writing external examinations such as WAEC and NECO to ensure that students only take these exams when they are academically and emotionally ready.
- Schools should educate parents on the importance of allowing their children to complete their secondary education before taking external examinations and discourage them from enrolling their children in SS2 just to cut costs.
- Teachers should continue to educate students on the dangers of skipping SS2 and the importance of completing their secondary education before taking external exams.
- Examination bodies such as WAEC and NECO should consider introducing measures to prevent students who have not completed SS3 from taking external exams (MECs) every year. Students can be made to sign a contract that is binding them to the school's statutes, rules, regulations, ordinances, and code of ethical conduct, pledging to uphold academic integrity and not to cheat or plagiarise.

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