

Examining Apathy in Nigerian Secondary School Education: Signs, Causes, Effects, and Solutions

Areola E. O.

Canadian Bridge Academy,
Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja
emmanuelojoareola@gmail.com; +2348063147487

Abdullahi M. H.

Department of Science and Technology Education,
University of Jos,
Plateau State, Nigeria
maimunabashir223@gmail.com; +234 816 951 3632

&

Hayatu S. A.

Department of Science and Technology Education,
Faculty of Education,
University of Jos, Plateau State
hayatudukku@gmail.com; +234 706 743 7731

Abstract

Apathy in secondary school education in Nigeria has emerged as a significant challenge that hampers student engagement, academic achievement, and overall educational development. This paper examines the signs, causes, and impacts of apathy among secondary school students, highlighting its detrimental effects on learning outcomes and the broader implications for the nation's future. The study identifies key indicators of student apathy, including disagreement or lack of motivation, truancy, and poor academic performance, and examines the underlying causes such as socioeconomic factors, poor teaching methods, and inadequate school facilities. Additionally, the paper outlines the far-reaching consequences of apathy, including diminished academic success, low self-esteem, and a disengaged youth population. The discussion further proposes comprehensive solutions for combating apathy, involving collaborative efforts from teachers, students, parents, schools, and government stakeholders. Recommendations include the adoption of innovative teaching methods, fostering student motivation through counseling, enhancing parental involvement, and ensuring the provision of adequate educational resources by the government. Addressing these factors, could the cycle of apathy can be broken, leading to more engaged students, and improved educational outcomes. This study underscores the importance of a holistic approach to education reform in tackling the growing issue of apathy in Nigeria's secondary school education.

Keywords: Apathy, Secondary School Education, Student Engagement, Academic Achievement, Nigeria, Educational Reform.

Introduction

Education is a vital tool for the socio-economic, cultural, and moral development of individuals and societies. It not only imparts knowledge but also nurtures skills, attitudes, and

competencies required to meet both current and future challenges (Kim, Raza, & Seidman, 2019). Beyond its functional value, education is foundational in fostering critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and civic responsibility, making it indispensable for societal progress. As Malhotra and Goyal (2013) aptly put it, education shapes an individual's thought patterns, feelings, and actions, thereby serving as a crucial mechanism for the smooth transmission of cultural, social, and moral values across generations.

Secondary school education plays a crucial role in this transformative process. It serves as the bridge between primary and tertiary education, providing students with the foundational skills and knowledge necessary for higher learning and professional pursuits. In the Nigerian context, secondary education is particularly significant because it prepares students for their future roles as active contributors to national development (Bashar & Yasin, 2020).

Structured to cater to learners aged 11 to 17, the Nigerian secondary school education system comprises a three-year junior secondary and a three-year senior secondary segment. Each stage is designed to offer students opportunities for academic and technical skill acquisition tailored to their aspirations and aptitudes (Suleiman & Umejiaku, 2023). Certificates at these levels are awarded based on assessments conducted by recognized examination bodies, such as the Basic Education Certificate Examination (NECO-BECE) for junior secondary and the Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WAEC or NECO) for senior secondary (Nanbak, 2020).

The objectives of secondary school education in Nigeria are broad and ambitious. According to Nanbak (2020), these include ensuring equitable access for all learners regardless of gender, religion, or socio-economic background; fostering scientific and technical literacy; nurturing self-reliance and critical thinking; and promoting national unity through shared values. Despite these ambitious goals, secondary education in Nigeria is increasingly being undermined by apathy among students, posing a serious threat to its effectiveness and relevance.

Apathy, characterized by a lack of interest, enthusiasm, or motivation, has become a growing concern in Nigerian secondary schools. Many students exhibit behaviors that reflect disengagement, such as truancy, lack of participation, and a general disinterest in academic activities. This phenomenon, which is antithetical to student engagement, not only affects individual learners but also has broader implications for the educational system and society at large (Oriade & Agbowuro, 2015). Addressing this issue is critical for ensuring that secondary education serves as a transformative force in the lives of young Nigerians and the development of the nation as a whole.

Signs of Apathy in Students

Apathy in secondary school education is a pressing issue that undermines students' academic engagement and overall learning experience. Identifying its signs is crucial for educators, parents, and stakeholders to address the issue effectively. Below are detailed discussions of some signs of apathy in secondary school education:

3. Constant Complaints About Overwhelming Class Assignments

Students who frequently complain about the volume of classwork and assignments often demonstrate apathy toward learning. This reaction may stem from a perceived lack of relevance

or understanding of the assigned tasks. According to Tella (2007), such complaints indicate a disconnect between the curriculum's expectations and the learner's capacity or interest, contributing to disengagement and poor performance.

4. Class Skipping

Apathetic students are more likely to skip classes, seeing them as uninteresting or irrelevant. This behavior, if unchecked, not only leads to missed lessons but also contributes to a knowledge gap that affects their academic achievement. Researchers like Obi and Eze (2019) have highlighted class skipping as a common symptom of academic disengagement in Nigerian schools.

5. Boredom

Apathy often manifests as boredom, where students fail to find excitement or meaning in their academic activities. Boredom can result from monotonous teaching methods, lack of practical applications, or unrelatable content. Suleiman and Umejiaku (2023) noted that when students perceive education as lacking in stimulation, they become disinterested and disengaged.

6. Truancy

Truancy, involving deliberate absenteeism from school, is a significant sign of apathy. Truant students often lack motivation to participate in academic activities, preferring to engage in non-academic or even delinquent behavior. Uche (2020) identified truancy as a red flag that indicates deeper issues such as frustration with the learning environment or external distractions like peer pressure.

7. Lack of Interest in Learning

A clear sign of apathy is when students show minimal or no interest in learning. They may avoid participating in discussions, neglect homework, or show indifference to academic achievements. According to Agbowuro, Obi and Eze (2015), such behavior signifies a disconnection between the student's personal goals and the educational system.

8. Routine Illnesses

Apathetic students often exhibit physical symptoms such as frequent complaints of headaches, stomachaches, or fatigue, which may serve as excuses to avoid school or academic responsibilities. These psychosomatic symptoms are often linked to anxiety or stress associated with schoolwork (Tunde & Adeleke, 2017).

9. Negative Behavioural Changes

Apathy can lead to noticeable changes in behavior, such as irritability, defiance, or withdrawal from peers and teachers. Students might also exhibit insensitivity or sluggishness in their academic tasks, signaling a lack of enthusiasm or energy to engage meaningfully with their studies (Obasi, 2016).

10 Unmotivated Towards Educational Tasks

A lack of motivation is a hallmark of apathy. Students may avoid taking initiatives, fail to complete assignments, or show reluctance in preparing for exams. This lack of drive often results in stagnation and declining academic performance, as observed by Nwosu (2019).

11. Lack of Participation in Class Activities

Apathetic students often refrain from participating in interactive classroom activities such as discussions, group work, or experiments. Such behavior limits their opportunities for active learning and collaborative skills development. Ogundele and Fajuyigbe (2020) noted that non-participation is a sign of disengagement that hampers both personal and collective learning outcomes.

12. Probation and Weak Academic Performance

Apathy often culminates in weak academic performance, with students struggling to meet the required standards. This may lead to probation or, in extreme cases, withdrawal from school. Low academic performance is both a consequence and a sign of apathy, creating a vicious cycle of disengagement (Nanbak, 2020).

13. Withdrawal from School

In extreme cases, apathy can drive students to drop out of school entirely. This withdrawal reflects a complete loss of faith in the education system and often has long-term consequences for the individual and society. According to UNESCO (2021), dropout rates are alarmingly high in Nigeria, with apathy being a significant contributing factor.

Major Causes of Apathy

Apathy among secondary school students can be attributed to a myriad of factors, often interconnected and context specific. Understanding these causes is vital for educators, parents, and policymakers to address the root issues and re-engage learners. Below are detailed discussions of the primary causes of apathy in secondary school education:

1. Poor Teaching Methods

The use of monotonous or teacher-centered instructional approaches can lead to student disengagement. When lessons are overly theoretical, devoid of practical applications, or fail to cater to diverse learning styles, students may lose interest. According to Rahman (2020), methods that lack interaction, creativity, and relevance to real-world experiences discourage active participation, making students view education as a tedious obligation rather than an opportunity for growth.

2. Overloaded Curriculum

An overly demanding curriculum, packed with excessive content and unrealistic expectations, can overwhelm students. This often results in frustration, stress, and eventual apathy toward learning. As noted by Suleiman and Umejiaku (2023), secondary school students in Nigeria frequently struggle with curricula that are mismatched with their cognitive capacities and contextual realities, leading to burnout and disinterest.

3. Negative Peer Influence

Peers play a significant role in shaping students' attitudes toward education. Negative peer pressure, such as encouraging truancy, disdain for academic success, or prioritizing non-academic activities, fosters apathy. Uche (2020) highlighted that adolescents, in their quest for social

acceptance, are prone to adopting the attitudes and behaviors of peers, even when these are detrimental to their educational goals.

4. Lack of Parental Support

Parental involvement is a critical factor in motivating students to stay engaged in their education. When parents fail to provide adequate support, guidance, or show interest in their children's academics, students often perceive education as unimportant. According to Nwosu and Ihejirika (2019), students who lack parental encouragement are more likely to feel isolated and indifferent toward their studies.

5. Teacher-Student Relationship

The nature of interactions between teachers and students greatly influences the latter's attitude toward education. A hostile or indifferent teacher-student relationship can alienate students, making them feel undervalued or unsupported. Obasi (2016) emphasized that teachers who fail to build rapport or show empathy contribute to students' lack of motivation and eventual apathy.

6. Irrelevant Curriculum Content

When students perceive the curriculum as disconnected from their interests, aspirations, or real-life applications, they often struggle to see its value. This irrelevance fosters apathy, as students fail to understand how their education prepares them for future challenges. Agbowuro, Obi and Eze (2015) noted that curricula lacking cultural, social, or economic alignment with students' lives tend to disengage them.

7. Socioeconomic Challenges

Socioeconomic factors such as poverty, lack of access to essential resources, and unstable home environments can significantly impact students' ability to engage in education. These challenges often divert students' attention to immediate survival needs, leaving little room for academic pursuits. UNESCO (2021) reported that financial hardships are a major cause of apathy and dropout rates among secondary school students in Nigeria.

8. Lack of Motivation

Motivation is a driving force behind academic success. When students lack intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, they tend to disengage from learning activities. Suleiman and Umejiaku (2023) observed that the absence of rewards, recognition, or meaningful goals in the education system contributes to students' indifference toward their studies.

9. Bullying and Social Alienation

Experiences of bullying or exclusion can lead to emotional distress, which undermines students' confidence and enthusiasm for school activities. Victims of bullying often develop feelings of worthlessness and avoid school to escape negative experiences. Ogundele and Fajuyigbe (2020) identified bullying as a prevalent issue that fosters apathy by eroding the sense of safety and belonging among students.

10. Unstimulating Learning Environment

An uninspiring or poorly maintained school environment can significantly affect students' attitudes toward learning. Factors such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities, and lack of extracurricular opportunities create an atmosphere of mediocrity. According to Tunde and Adeleke (2017), students in such environments often feel neglected and unmotivated to participate in educational activities.

11. Health Issues

Physical and mental health challenges can cause students to become apathetic toward their studies. Conditions such as chronic illnesses, malnutrition, or undiagnosed learning disabilities may hinder students' ability to concentrate and perform well academically. Obasi (2016) emphasized that untreated mental health issues like anxiety or depression often manifest as apathy in school settings.

12. Cultural and Societal Influences

In some communities, cultural or societal norms may undermine the importance of education, especially for certain groups such as girls. Gender biases, early marriages, or expectations to prioritize household duties over schooling contribute to students' lack of enthusiasm for academics. Nwosu and Ihejirika (2019) highlighted the detrimental effects of societal expectations on students' commitment to education.

13. Unrealistic Expectations and Pressure

Excessive academic pressure from schools or parents can overwhelm students, causing stress and eventual disinterest. Unrealistic expectations to excel in multiple subjects, participate in numerous extracurricular activities, and meet rigid deadlines often backfire, leading to apathy. According to Rahman (2020), balancing academic rigor with emotional support is key to preventing burnout.

Detrimental Effects of Apathy

Apathy in secondary school education can have far-reaching and detrimental consequences, not only for the students themselves but also for the broader educational system and society. Below are detailed discussions of the major detrimental effects of apathy in secondary school education:

1. Decline in Academic Performance

A lack of motivation and effort in academic activities often results in poor performance. When students disengage from their studies, they are less inclined to complete assignments, prepare for exams, or participate actively in class. This disengagement leads to declining grades and hampers their ability to reach their academic potential. Rahman (2020) notes that students who exhibit low levels of engagement rarely achieve their educational goals, which can have lasting effects on their academic trajectory.

2. Increased Dropout Rates

The decision to abandon school is frequently linked to feelings of detachment from the educational system. Students who perceive education as irrelevant to their lives are more likely to drop out entirely. According to UNESCO (2021), this detachment significantly contributes to the high dropout rates observed in secondary schools, particularly in areas where educational resources are scarce.

3. Erosion of Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills

Indifference stifles the intellectual curiosity essential for fostering critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Students who disengage are less inclined to ask meaningful questions, explore innovative solutions, or engage in thought-provoking discussions. Bruner (1966) underscores the importance of active engagement, noting that learning thrives on curiosity and active exploration.

4. Poor Self-Esteem and Confidence

The inability to perform well academically often leaves apathetic students grappling with diminished self-worth and confidence. Feelings of inadequacy can arise from their limited contributions to classroom activities and poor results. Uche (2020) highlights that this cycle of underperformance and low self-esteem further alienates students from the educational process.

5. Disruption of Classroom Dynamics

Apathy can disturb the equilibrium of the classroom environment. Disinterested students sometimes disrupt lessons, diverting attention from learning and negatively influencing their peers. According to Ogundele and Fajuyigbe (2020), classrooms with significant levels of disengagement face greater discipline challenges, which hinder the teaching-learning experience.

6. Loss of Teachers' Morale

The persistent lack of enthusiasm from students can erode teachers' motivation and satisfaction. Educators may feel undervalued and question their effectiveness, particularly when their efforts fail to elicit engagement. Suleiman and Umejiaku (2023) point out that teacher burnout is often exacerbated by prolonged exposure to apathetic learners.

7. Limited Career Opportunities

Students who disengage from their education frequently find themselves ill-equipped for higher education or competitive job markets. Poor academic outcomes and premature school withdrawal narrow their career options, perpetuating cycles of poverty and unemployment. Agbowuro, Obi, and Eze (2015) argue that such students are ill-prepared to meet workforce demands, restricting their socioeconomic mobility.

8. Impact on National Development

The widespread disengagement of students undermines education's role as a catalyst for national progress. A less skilled workforce emerges, stifling economic growth and reducing global competitiveness. UNESCO (2021) warns that apathy within the education sector jeopardizes the achievement of sustainable development goals.

9. Increase in Social Vices

Disengagement from education often drives students toward unhealthy coping mechanisms, including substance abuse, truancy, and criminal activities. Obasi (2016) notes that apathetic individuals are more susceptible to negative peer influences, which can spiral into behaviors that disrupt societal harmony.

10. Weak Civic Engagement

A disengaged student population is less likely to develop into informed and active citizens. The absence of critical awareness and responsibility impairs democratic participation and weakens societal cohesion. Nwosu and Ihejirika (2019) emphasize the role of education in cultivating engaged citizens, a mission that apathy jeopardizes.

11. Emotional and Mental Health Issues

Prolonged disengagement often coincides with emotional and psychological challenges such as stress, anxiety, and depression. These mental health struggles further inhibit students' ability to achieve academic success. Ogundele and Fajuyigbe (2020) observe that apathetic students face greater risks of emotional detachment and psychological distress.

12. Undermining of Educational Equity

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately affected by apathy, often exacerbating existing educational inequities. Factors such as poverty, lack of resources, and minimal parental involvement amplify this issue. Suleiman and Umejiaku (2023) advocate for systemic reforms to bridge these gaps and promote equitable educational opportunities.

13. Intergenerational Impact

The repercussions of apathy are not confined to the present generation but extend to future ones. Adults who disengage from education are less likely to prioritize it for their children, perpetuating cycles of low achievement and limited opportunities. Rahman (2020) highlights the urgency of interventions to break this intergenerational pattern.

Solutions for Apathy in Secondary School Education

Apathy among secondary school students poses significant challenges to educational attainment, social development, and future success. However, various remedies and strategies can be implemented to address this issue. These approaches aim to re-engage students, foster motivation, and create a more supportive and stimulating educational environment. Below is a detailed discussion of the remedies for apathy in secondary school education:

1. Enhancing Teacher-Student Relationships

A strong, positive relationship between teachers and students is essential for combating apathy. Teachers who show genuine interest in their students' well-being, provide emotional support, and engage with them as individuals can motivate students to become more involved in their learning. Research by Rahman (2020) highlights that students who feel cared for and respected by their teachers are more likely to develop an interest in their studies. Teachers should focus on building trust and rapport, understanding each student's needs, and offering encouragement tailored to individual challenges.

2. Active Learning and Engaging Pedagogical Approaches

Traditional, passive methods of teaching can contribute to apathy by failing to engage students meaningfully. Active learning techniques such as project-based learning, collaborative group work, and inquiry-based learning allow students to take ownership of their learning and apply their knowledge in practical, real-world contexts. Bruner (1966) advocates for an interactive approach where students are not mere recipients of knowledge but active participants. When students are involved in problem-solving, critical thinking, and hands-on activities, they are more likely to remain engaged and motivated.

3. Incorporating Technology into the Classroom

The integration of technology into teaching can make learning more engaging and relevant to students. Interactive tools, educational apps, and online resources can bring learning to life, providing immediate feedback and creating a more dynamic educational experience. According to UNESCO (2021), when students use technology to explore topics, create digital content, or collaborate with peers globally, they become more interested and invested in their learning. This approach also caters to the diverse learning preferences of students, helping to overcome apathy in a tech-savvy generation.

4. Personalized Learning and Student-Centered Approaches

A one-size-fits-all approach often fails to address the unique needs and learning styles of students, contributing to disengagement. Personalized learning focuses on adapting the curriculum, teaching methods, and learning pace to suit individual students. This could involve offering different pathways for students to achieve the same learning outcomes, ensuring that they feel challenged yet capable. Uche (2020) highlights that personalized learning can foster a sense of accomplishment, helping students understand the relevance of their studies and motivating them to engage more actively.

5. Creating a Positive and Inclusive School Environment

A welcoming, inclusive, and supportive school environment is key to combating apathy. Students who feel safe, valued, and accepted are more likely to feel motivated and engaged in their education. A positive school climate is one in which teachers, administrators, and students work together to build a culture of respect, inclusivity, and mutual support. Ogundele and Fajuyigbe (2020) emphasize fostering a supportive school environment reduces anxiety, aids in forming positive relationships, and encourages active participation in learning.

6. Offering Career Guidance and Relevance to Real-World Applications

Apathy often stems from students perceiving their education as irrelevant to their lives or future careers. To combat this, schools should offer career guidance that helps students understand how their education links to real-world applications and future opportunities. By exposing students to various career paths, internships, job shadowing, or even entrepreneurship opportunities, schools can reignite students' interest in their studies. As noted by Agbowuro Obi and Eze (2015),

when students see the practical value of their education, they are more motivated to engage and perform well academically.

7. Fostering Intrinsic Motivation through Goal Setting

While extrinsic rewards like grades and prizes can be motivating, fostering intrinsic motivation is crucial for long-term engagement. Encouraging students to set personal learning goals, reflect on their progress, and understand the intrinsic value of learning can help mitigate apathy. Teachers can guide students in setting SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals that align with their interests and ambitions. Bruner (1966) suggests that when students understand the purpose of their education and see their progress toward meaningful goals, their engagement naturally increases.

8. Encouraging Student Autonomy and Leadership Opportunities

Providing students with opportunities to take responsibility for their learning and the school community can reduce feelings of apathy. When students are given roles such as class representatives, peer tutors, or leaders in extracurricular activities, they gain a sense of ownership and purpose. This involvement can foster pride and motivation, which are essential for overcoming disengagement. Rahman (2020) argues that student leadership and participation in decision-making processes can positively influence their motivation, making them feel more invested in their educational journey.

9. Promoting Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Students who are apathetic may struggle with emotional regulation, self-awareness, and interpersonal skills. Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs teach students how to manage their emotions, build healthy relationships, set goals, and make responsible decisions. By incorporating SEL into the curriculum, schools can address the emotional and psychological factors that contribute to apathy. Uche (2020) suggests that SEL programs foster resilience and empathy, enabling students to navigate academic challenges and personal issues, thus reducing disengagement.

10. Parental Involvement and Support

Parental involvement plays a significant role in motivating students and addressing apathy. When parents take an active interest in their child's education, it sends a message that learning is valuable and important. Schools can encourage greater parental involvement through regular communication, parent-teacher conferences, and workshops that provide parents with tools to support their children academically and emotionally. According to Suleiman and Umejiaku (2023), when students see that their parents are invested in their education, they are more likely to engage positively and take ownership of their academic progress.

11. Recognition and Positive Reinforcement

Students who experience academic success or make an effort to engage with their learning should be recognized and celebrated. Positive reinforcement, such as praise, certificates, or even a simple acknowledgment in class, can boost a student's self-esteem and motivation. According to Ogundele and Fajuyigbe (2020), recognition of effort, not just academic success, encourages students to keep working toward improvement, helping them overcome feelings of apathy.

12. Peer Mentoring and Support Networks

Peer mentoring can play a critical role in re-engaging apathetic students. When students collaborate with their peers, they can provide each other with academic and emotional support. Peer mentors, particularly those who have faced similar challenges, can offer strategies for coping

and staying motivated. This peer-driven approach can make learning more relatable and less intimidating, thus fostering greater engagement. Rahman (2020) asserts that peer mentorship provides students with a sense of community and belonging, reducing feelings of isolation and apathy.

Conclusion

Addressing apathy in secondary school education is a critical task that demands a multi-faceted approach. Teachers, students, parents, and the government must collaborate to create a supportive and stimulating educational environment. This will reinvigorate student interest, reduce apathy, and contribute to academic and personal growth. With concerted effort, apathy in secondary school education can be mitigated, leading to better academic outcomes and a more promising future for the next generation.

Recommendations

Apathy in secondary school education is a serious issue that undermines student engagement, hinders academic achievement, and has long-term consequences on the development of the nation's human capital. Addressing this issue requires a holistic approach that involves teachers, students, parents, school administrators, and government stakeholders. By identifying the signs, causes, and impacts of apathy, it becomes possible to develop targeted strategies to mitigate its effects and enhance the learning environment for students.

To effectively combat apathy, several key recommendations should be adopted:

- 1. Teachers and Schools:** Teachers should employ innovative teaching methods that engage students actively in the learning process (Kim, Raza, & Seidman, 2019). This includes incorporating interactive sessions, using technology, and offering individualized support to cater to students' unique learning needs. Creating an emotionally supportive and nurturing classroom environment is crucial in building student motivation (Bashar & Yasin, 2020). Additionally, schools should incorporate extracurricular activities such as sports and arts to help students discover their passions outside traditional academic settings (Nanbak, 2020).
- 2. Students:** Students must take responsibility for their learning by cultivating self-discipline, setting academic goals, and seeking help when necessary. It is also vital for students to engage in school activities, seek counseling when facing challenges, and strive to remain focused on their academic growth (Suleiman & Umejiaku, 2023). Self-efficacy and self-motivation play a critical role in reducing apathy and improving academic outcomes (Malhotra & Goyal, 2013).
- 3. Parents and Guardians:** Parents have an essential role in ensuring their children's academic success. They should provide a supportive home environment, encourage their children to stay committed to their studies, and engage with teachers and counselors for guidance (Kim, Raza, & Seidman, 2019). Encouraging a balanced life at home, free from stressors such as socio-economic pressures, can significantly reduce feelings of frustration that may lead to apathy (Bashar & Yasin, 2020).
- 4. Government and Policy Makers:** Governments must prioritize education by providing adequate funding for the development of educational infrastructure, including libraries, laboratories, and classrooms (Nanbak, 2020). Moreover, offering incentives for teachers, such as professional development opportunities and better compensation, will improve teacher motivation

and classroom dynamics, thereby fostering a more engaging learning environment (Suleiman & Umejiaku, 2023). The implementation of free education policies and a robust school inspection system are crucial in ensuring quality education for all students, regardless of background (Bashar & Yasin, 2020).

5. Media and Public Awareness: The media should contribute to sensitizing the public on the importance of education and the dangers of apathy (Nanbak, 2020). Public campaigns can help raise awareness among students and their communities about the value of education and the long-term benefits of active engagement in learning.

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