

Psychological Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Performance Among Slow-Learners of Upper Basic Education in Nassarawa Local Government, Kano State

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Abstract

Despite the numerous policies by the Nigerian Ministry of Education, under the guise of the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) to uplift the educational standard of basic education in Nigeria. Yet, slow-learning students emerged in the upper basic school due to a number of psychological factors, which contribute to poor academic performance and these factors are challenging to students, parents, and teachers. This study examined the psychological factors responsible for poor academic performance among slow-learning students of upper basic education in Kano State. The research employed a qualitative case study design through a purposeful sampling of six participants: Two teachers, two parents, and two students. Data were gathered, transcribed, and thematically analyzed through semi-structured interviews with the participants in which categories were identified and generated. Findings from the research revealed several major themes that are responsible for poor academic performance among slow-learning students of upper basic which include: Anxiety and stress, low self-esteem, and learning disabilities. Therefore, the researcher recommended that, school management under Universal Basic Education Scheme should organise and launch an intervention programmes for teachers to provide enabling atmosphere for slow-learning students. Conclusively, these strategies may bring back the situation to normalcy in which the slow-learners may perform well in their academic pursuits.

Keywords: A poor academic performance; Slow-learners; Upper basic; Students.

Introduction

Nigeria National Philosophy on Education categorically states that one of the goals of education is education is to be qualitative, comprehensive, functional, and relevant to the need of the society. National Policy on Education (NPE) in declares that, government aims to ensure equal educational opportunities for all citizens across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, within or outside formal educational systems Nigeria (Akanbi &Jekayinfa, 2019). Psychology as the study of human behaviour, matters a lot on students' day to day activities in school. According to Lee et al (2017), academic performance as a student's ability to learn and demonstrate knowledge in school setting, is contributed by many factors including gender, age, medium of instructions, role of teaching faculty, socio economic status and many more factors like adjustability with the peer groups, understanding the language to mention but a few. Research that have been conducted in the area of students' academic performance, in order to find out and rectify the factors that reflect

on the academic performance at various levels has shown that, various factors contributing poor academic performance have been attributed to slow-learning students.

Slow-learners are students who take more time to learn new information than the average student. This can be due to variety of factors, such as learning disabilities, cognitive differences, emotional problems, lack of motivation or other environmental factors. Slow-learners may also have difficulty with executive functioning, which include skills such as planning, organizing and self-regulation. Slow-learners are frequently portrayed as lacking the engagement, drive, and self-belief required to succeed in school (OECD, 2016). However, slow-learners are not necessarily less intelligent than other students, and with proper support and accommodations, they can often be successful in school if they are properly guided.

The success and failure of a slow-learning students defend largely on their ability to cope up with the above-mentioned factors within and outside their academic environment. The problem of poor performance especially among students with slow-learning capacity has been a growing cause of concern amongst parents, teachers and students themselves. According to Govindarajoo et al (2022), slow-learning students continue to struggle to learn, to achieve higher level of mastery or to fulfil the objectives and goals of their studies and education. Despite the teachers' continuous improvement initiatives to ensure the success and achievement of slow-learners, this group of students continues to encounter challenges in their learning.

Objectives

The objective of this research was to describe the psychological factors contributing to poor academic performance among slow-learners of the upper basic school in Kano State. Specifically, this research has the following objectives which are to:

1. Describe the psychological factors that contribute to poor academic performance among slow-learners of upper basic school.
2. Identify the effective teaching strategies used by classroom teachers in helping slow-learners succeed academically in the upper basic school.

Research Questions

In this research, the researcher aims to find the answer to research questions. Therefore, the central research question is, what are the psychological factors contributing to poor academic performance among slow-learning students of upper basic in Nassarawa Local Government Kano State? The specific research questions are:

1. What are the psychological factors that contribute to poor academic performance among slow-learners of upper basic school?
2. What are the effective teaching strategies used by classroom teachers in helping slow-learners succeed academically in the upper basic school?

Learning is an essential but complicated process that one pursues throughout their life. As in any other field, changes are inevitable in the education sector as well. While technological innovations have been received well by educationists, many schools continue to promote the traditional one-size-fits-all approach in teaching. The problem with such an approach is that not all students can adapt to a rigid and fast-paced style of learning. As a result, a gap forms between their true ability and their performance level and such children are then dubbed slow-learners.

According to Hassan and Aziz (2019), students' academic performance can be measured in several ways, such as through standardized tests, grades, and other assessments. Good academic performance is often seen as an important factor in a student's future success, and it can lead to opportunities such as scholarships and advanced placement in school. On the other hand, poor academic performance can lead to problems such as retention, social isolation, and dropping out of school.

According to Daga and Jain (2022), a slow-learner is a student who has intellectual potential slightly below the average and experiences delay in learning. Kathirisetty et al. (2020) suggest that a common way to define a slow-learner is through classification techniques applied to individuals' intellectual abilities measured by IQ assessments. These students require regular assistance to optimize their potential and achieve learning outcomes at the same levels as their peers. Contrary to common belief, slow-learners in the regular classroom are neither rare nor unique. The student commonly called a slow-learner is one who cannot learn at an average rate from the instructional resources, texts, workbooks, and learning materials that are designed for the majority of students in the classroom (Archival, 2019). These students as seen by Cashman et al (2021) need special instructional pacing, frequent feedback, and corrective instruction or modified materials. Slow-learners may face various problems such as physical and health development, social and psychological relations, and financial difficulties. It is important for teachers and parents to provide individual attention, motivation, and assistance to slow-learners in order to help them develop their cognitive, affective, physical and intuitive aspects of their academic life.

In addition to personal and environmental factors, there are a number of psychological factors that can contribute to poor academic performance among the students of upper basic school. Previous studies in literature are the evidence, Bansa (2019), examines the effect of psychological factors on students' academic performance, the results showed that, academic self-efficacy and psychological well-being as predictors of good academic performance. Moreover, Naz (2020) in a study conducted on effects of social and psychological factors on students learning achievement in English at intermediate level in Pakistan found that, students' anxiety, drug abuse and health risk behaviours affected their English learning achievement negatively. Additionally, in another research conducted by Govindarajoo (2022) on factors contributing to poor academic achievement among low performing pupils, findings revealed that the main factors related to pupils with low academic performance were lack of family or parental support, financial issues, motivation, learning facilities, interaction, equality and teaching techniques.

Several other factors related to poor academic performance among slow-learning students of upper basic school in Nassarawa Local Government Kano State, Nigeria include: Anxiety and stress, many students at upper basic experience high levels of anxiety and stress, which can make it difficult to concentrate and retain information. This is evident in a research conducted by Amirian (2012) found that self-awareness, teaching with problem solving techniques and coping with stress and anxiety significantly affected students' educational success. Similarly, Busch et al. (2014) state that depression and anxiety contributed to the cause of students' lower learning achievement which directly related to students' dropout from school. Research have shown that cognitive test anxiety causes poor performance in cognitive tasks (Khatoon & Mahmood, 2010 and Olatunde, 2010).

Another psychological factor contributing towards the poor academic performance among slow-learners is low self-esteem. Students with low self-esteem may have trouble believing in their own abilities and may not be motivated to succeed. This factor is also evidently reported in previous research conducted. Mirzaei et al. (2018) in their study found a positive relationship between self-esteem and students' academic performance among slow-learning children. Similarly, Sangeetha (2017) demonstrates considerable relationship between students' self-esteem and educational attainment. Further studies by Doodman et al. (2017) reveal that weaker learning achievement is a main cause of lower self-esteem and higher self-esteem cause better educational success.

Besides, learning disabilities is another psychological factor that leads to poor academic performance among slow-learning students. Some students may have undiagnosed learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), which can make it difficult for them to succeed in school. These difficulties may impact a student's ability to function well in the classroom in terms of reading, writing, spelling, speaking, thinking and listening. Learning disabilities can have a significant effect on slow-learning students. In some cases, a learning disability may be the primary cause of a student's slow progress in school. Previous studies indicated that poor academic performance occur as a result of learning disabilities among students. In survey research carried out by Samson (2024) to assess student with learning disability in some secondary schools in Abuja Municipal Area Council Nigeria, it was found that learning disabilities was among the prime causes of learning disabilities among secondary school students.

A student's knowledge is highly dependent on the teacher's teaching approaches, which may include expertise, pedagogy, knowledge, attitude and ability to reach and make the lesson understandable. Dibia and Ajoku (2018) assert that while the intelligent test is a commonly employed tool to identify slow-learners, alternative methods exist. One such method involves classroom observation of students. Studies have shown that, there are several effective strategies that teachers can use to help slow-learners to succeed, these include variety of instruction, small group instruction and the use of visual aids. Tai and Yasin (2017) state that, the teacher's awareness and attitudes measure students' success. Similarly, in a study conducted by Harris and Huffman (2018) conclude that, there is a strong relationship between teacher quality in terms of pedagogical expertise and student academic achievement. In the literature review, it is found that, as indicated by Bandura (1986) psychological factors play an important role among slow-learning students at upper basic level in their attempt to reach educational attainment.

Methodology

This study was designed as qualitative research, which is a case study research in a quest of understanding the experience of the targeted informants on the factors contributing to poor academic performance among upper basic students. The main function of a research design is to assist in answering the research questions confidently and convincingly (Sekaran 2003). Therefore, in a qualitative case study research broad expression can be disclose by the informants without any limitation like quantitative method (Shirin et al. 2014). The researcher used purposeful sampling, as the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, the

qualitative case study took place in Nassarawa Local Government Kano State, a North-Western part of Nigeria. Informants were chosen from certain selected upper basic (secondary) school.

The research instruments used for this study were a series of interviews with parents, teachers and students at the time and date of their choice. The data collection procedures in this research was based on the researcher's arrangement for face-to-face interview sessions. The interview questions were semi-structured in nature. In this regard, interview question were directly asked to the informants, and during the interview session, the researcher used audio-tape recorder in recording the responses. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), in a qualitative research, data collection and data analysis must be simultaneously processed. In doing the analysis, the researcher categorically organized the data, reviewed repeatedly, and continually coded in generating the themes. The main ideas for each informant were coded using the 7-column template. By classifying and interpreting the main ideas and sub-ideas of the informants, in which a number of sub-themes and themes were generated for the two main research questions.

In qualitative research various approaches can be used to address the issue in producing a valid and reliable research. According to Meadow and Morse (2001), a series of techniques can be used to establish reliability and validity of the research such as member checking, thick description, and prolonged engagement. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the collected data, some themes were extracted and gathered in a single script coupled with the relevant transcribed conversation. The script was sent to two experts in educational psychology and test and measurement to verify the appropriateness of the generated themes in light of the contextual oral discourse. The average agreement of the two inter-raters was 94 per cent and this indicated that the identified themes represent the ideas as intended by the informants. That is, the data obtain and the themes generated were rigorously subjected thereby meeting the validation requirements.

Findings

The findings of the study was based on the data collected, through the interviews with the teachers, parents and students on their responses regarding the psychological factors contributing to poor academic performance among slow-learners in the upper basic school in Nassarawa Local Government Kano State. The researcher employed a thematic analysis approach in analysing the data collected, which is the foundational process of qualitative research of data analysis. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyse, and report themes within the data. This type of analysis is very beneficial as it is highly flexible, accessible and useful which can potentially provide a rich and detailed account of the data. The statements, descriptions, illustrations and the narrations made by the informants were quoted accordingly from the interview excerpts.

Research Question 1

What are the psychological factors that contribute to poor academic performance among slow-learners of upper basic school?

From the informants' perspectives regarding question one, three major themes namely **anxiety and stress, low self-esteem and learning disability** were generated. All of the respondents that participated in the interview sessions expressed their different views with regard to what they perceived as the psychological factors contributing to poor academic performance among students.

Anxiety and Stress

Anxiety is a feeling of fear, whereas stress is any demand placed on an individual brain or body. From the series of interviews conducted by the researcher with the participants, anxiety and stress was one of the major themes. As lamented by almost all of the respondents, many students with slow-learning abilities had in one way or the other experienced some levels of anxiety or stress. This is best illustrated by an informant (a male teacher) who stated that:

“The slow-learning students have been known as they lack confidence in most of the classroom activities. Whenever, an assignment is given or a group work you find them withdrawing becoming so afraid and show nervousness. In fact, sometimes I had to give such a student and individual attention encouraging him to calm down and participate in the classroom activities along with the other students.”

In a similar tone (a female teacher and administrator) was so emotional on the psychological factors contributing to poor academic performance among slow-learners she said:

“.....these students have feelings of anxiety and tension that interferes with their academic activities especially the two most difficult courses that Mathematics and Sciences. This makes them to lose their self-confidence. To me this may be as a result of the influence of their parents, friends or even their teachers.”

Moreover, a student who is a slow learner in Mathematics shared his views on the psychological factors contributing to his poor academic performance lamented that:

“Whenever the Mathematics teacher comes, I have a feeling of fear and uneasiness. I cannot contribute, I cannot speak a single word. In fact, I feel frustrated, nervous and unable to understand anything at all. I also have a great fear and anxious when it comes to a test or exam in Mathematics. Sometimes I think of dropping out to join other field like business.”

Low Self-esteem

Low self-esteem is when an individual lacks confidence about who he is and what he can do. Students with low self-esteem often feel incompetent, unloved or inadequate. From the interviews carried out by the researcher with the informants, low self-esteem was another important psychological factor effecting the performance of slow-learning students. This is best narrated from what a student asserted:

“In many cases, I feel not wanted in the class, as I am afraid of the criticism with my fellow colleagues let alone my teachers. I sometimes withdraw from group assignment or activities that involves voluntary participation. I do not want to hold any conversation in the class with anybody because I am worried about my own personal problems.”

Additionally, it is confessed by another student that low self-esteem as a psychological factor contributed immensely to his low academic performance, where the student stated:

“Sometimes I do not feel comfortable in the class, therefore, I become so aggressive to whoever criticizes me because I have to defend myself.

But sometimes I decide to withdraw myself from my friends in order to avoid being into trouble whenever a group assignment is given.”

Learning disability

Learning disability has to do with the way an individual’s brain works. It makes it harder for a student to learn, understand or perform academic activities well. This is due to a reduction in one’s intellectual ability and difficulty in academic activities like reading, writing, speaking and calculation. Therefore, learning disability is another psychological factor contributing to poor performance among slow-learners. This is described by a seasoned classroom teacher, who declared:

“Most of the underperforming students at this level have one academic disability or the other in terms of receptive or productive skills. Such students with psychological problems perform poorly as a result of the disability they have in reading, writing or speaking. They cannot perform well, as they find it difficult to cope up with the cognitive challenges. They cannot fully participate in the classroom activities; they withdraw from the class. They fail to compile most of the homework or class work given to them.”

In a similar narration a parent, who is also a teacher expressed her views regarding learning disability as a predictor of poor academic performance among slow-learning students. She categorically said:

“Students with slow-learning capacity are mostly disabled in one area or the other, they find it very difficult to cope up with the academic challenges more especially in terms of cognitive exercises. These set of students, as I come across them in my teaching career, they are mostly lacking in sciences base courses. In fact, these students require special assistance to perform normally.”

Research Question 2

What are the effective teaching strategies used by classroom teachers in helping slow-learners succeed academically in the upper basic school?

From the informants’ views and responses regarding the question two, which sought for the effective strategies used by teachers to assist slow-learning students in succeeding academically. Three themes were generated as, **differentiated instruction, small group instruction and visual aids**. The informants that participated with their perceptions shared their views on the efforts they have been making to help the slow-learners in meeting their peculiar academic challenges.

Differentiated Instruction

This involves tailoring lessons and assignments to meet the individual needs of each student, rather than using one-size-fit-all approach. The informants believed that, although, the slow-learning students are laggard behind but despite that, they need to be given an extra attention to meet up with the academic challenges. That is why they have to design their lessons and teaching so as to cater for every students. A teacher and administrator confirmed that:

“As a classroom teacher with a vast experience, I normally employed different strategies to handle everybody including those that have failed behind due to their inability to cope up with the challenges by virtue of their slow-learning capacity. Those students I used to engage them separately because sometimes when you mix them with other children they withdraw.”

In the same vein, another teacher expressed his views clearly upon the same strategy employed to assist those students with slow-learning capacity. He expressed that:

“Students with slow-learning are sometimes very difficult to trace as they hide themselves behind the most brilliant students. Whenever I found such students, even though most of the classes I teach are very large and it is very difficult to understand such students quickly. But I adopt the system of giving them individual and extra attention in order to do well.”

Small Group Instruction

Working with students in small groups can allow teachers to give more individualized attention and support to slow-learning students. Regarding the above theme, the informants opined that, teaching students by dividing them into a small group, will best assist the slow- learners. However, some of them complained that the overcrowding classrooms happened to impede them from achieving that strategy successfully. This is asserted by one of the informants where he stated:

“Grouping the students into small group is one of the best way to assist the slow-learners. But in a situation whereby hundreds of students are merged into one class that is designed to accommodate only fifty students, how can you help those that are having issues in their learning. It is not possible at all.”

Another views given by a teacher concerning the above theme is that:

“This category of students that are slow-learners can best be assisted by group method of teaching, if they are grouped and given extra lesson can catch up with what they should have learnt from the teaching.”

Visual Aids

Using visual aids such as charts, diagrams, and models can help slow-learning students understand and remember information more easily. This theme was also discussed in the excerpts of the interview conducted with the informants. All the responses given regarding the strategies used to assist slow-learners in relation to the employment of visual aids, the respondents agreed to that, but they expressed their skepticism on the difficulty of using that strategy as they said government is not making provision for that. One of the teachers lamented that:

“Visual aids serve as the most appropriate gadgets for teaching and learning of the students that learn at very slow phase. When a teacher uses visual aids that help in catering all the students, and equally the slow-learners easily catch up with the class whenever the teaching is accompanied with the use of teaching aids, because they simplify the learning of the students regardless to your cognitive ability.

However, the government do not make provisions for the use of visual aids and a teacher cannot improvise with his money any materials.”

Another teacher, regarding the above theme stated:

“The use of visual aids is the best strategy to help the students who are very slow in learning, as that, enable them to easily understand whatever the teacher does in a class.”

Discussion

The present research revealed many important findings from the themes generated through the thematic analysis. The finding revealed three psychological factors that are contributing to the poor performance of slow-learners. Besides, another three themes were generated on the strategies which teachers can use to assist students that are slow-learners to succeed in their academic learning. The major psychological factors contributing poor academic performance among slow-learners in upper basic school is closely related to anxiety and stress, low self-esteem and learning disability. Furthermore, the strategies to be used by teachers in order to assist this category of students to succeed in their academic activities as expressed by the informants has to do with differential instructions, small group instructions and visual aids.

The findings of the current study showed that anxiety and stress have negative effects on upper basic students' learning especially those that are slow-learners. As expressed by the informant's anxiety and stress caused a lot of fear and less courage among students that are very slow in their learning. Findings from the previous research revealed that anxiety and stress, are one of the psychological factors affecting educational achievement. Das et al, (2014), found considerable relationship between academic anxiety and educational achievement of intermediate students. Furthermore, Safeer and Shah (2019) found significant negative effects of examination pressure on intermediate level male students' educational attainment.

Additionally, the current study revealed that, low self-esteem is one of the major factors contributing to the poor academic performance among slow-learners of the upper basic schools in Nassarawa local government Kano State. Low self-esteem, left many slow-learning students in the upper basic doubting their ability to succeed, making them hesitant to engage in learning activities. In a study conducted by Alavijeh et al, (2018), it was found that, low self-esteem negatively affect the learning of students. Similarly, Noronha et al, (2018), found that a high self-esteem resolves the conflicts and enable students to perform better in educational accomplishments

Furthermore, learning disability significantly affect the academic performance of slow-learners in the upper basic. Most of the respondents during the interviews expressed that learning disability affects the way a slow-learner understands information, and how they communicate. Previous research conducted, revealed the effect of learning disability on the academic performance of slow-learners. This is supported in a study conduct by Herbert (2009), it was found that, learning disability causes one to dislike learning, as a results, many children drop out of school due to the disability. In another study, conducted by Eke et al, (2018) on the influence of learning disabilities on academic achievement of Junior Secondary School students in Imo State. They found that, learning disabilities influence academic achievement of Junior Secondary School Students.

Findings of the thematic analysis revealed the effects of the strategies that should be employed in order to assist the slow-learning students succeed in their academic activities. In the series of the interviews conducted by the researcher, and by virtue of the thematic analysis, it was found that, differential instructions, small group instructions and visual aids as the strategies that the teachers used to assist the slow-learning students. Based upon this, research conducted previously revealed that instructional based strategies could help students overcome slow-learning problems of students. In a study conducted by Govindarajoo et al, (2022), it was found that, teachers' ideas, techniques and methods of instruction assist low-performing students significantly. This is equally supported by Chong (2020), who found that, supportive learning environment, teachers' strategies, and methods of instructions, encouragement, technology integration, and behaviour control turn a classroom into an active learning environment, resulting in more active learners.

Conclusion

On the basis of findings, the researcher concluded that, the research is not only exploring the psychological factors that contribute to the poor academic performance of the slow-learners among the upper basic students in Nassarawa local government Kano State but also delving into the effective teaching strategies that could be employed to assist the students that are slow in terms of learning. Some of the factors corresponding with the results from other studies were dealt with in an in-depth qualitative case study analysis. Therefore, the study found that, the upper basic schools in Nassarawa Local Government, Kano State are not immune to this contributing factors to poor academic performance among slow-learners. Consequently, the findings of this study indicated that slow-learning students experience a variety of obstacles in their educational and academic pursuits. For that, there is the need for the provision of compatible curriculum for slow-learners, which will enhance their self-esteem and restore their confidence, do away with the anxiety and stress during learning that has adverse effects on their academic performance.

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