

*Learning Environment and Academic Performance of Senior Secondary Schools
Students' in Abia State, Nigeria*

Irozuru, Elijah C., University of Calabar, Nigeria
Maureen Okon, University of Calabar, Nigeria

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Abstract

Learning is described as a change in behaviour that is relatively permanent resulting from experience. It is also the process of absorbing unknown information in a meaningful way and putting it to use. There has been a general conception as to what causes people to behave the way they do, what influence them to learn, what they think and the way they prefer to do things. The environment to a large extent influences learning. To achieve the purpose of this study two hypotheses were formulated. Ex-post facto research design was adopted. A sample of four hundred and eighty students was randomly selected using the stratified random sampling technique. This was to ensure that all the Education Zones in the State were adequately represented in the study. The questionnaire and English Language Achievement Test were the instruments used for data collection. The instruments were subjected to face and content validity by two experts in measurement and evaluation. The reliability estimate of the instrument was established through the Cronbach Alpha reliability method. The hypotheses were tested using Pearson Product moment correlation analysis. The results of the analysis reveal that home school environment and peer relationship significant relate with students' academic performance. Based on the findings, it was recommended among others that the government should increase funds for education so as to take care of constructing enough classrooms and also provide teaching aids and resources materials to enhance learning. They should also provide adequate training facilities and opportunities for teachers so as to render them better equipped to be effective teachers.

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Introduction

Background to the study

Learning is described as a change in behaviour that is relatively permanent resulting from experience. It is also the process of absorbing unknown information in a meaningful way and putting it to use. There has been a general conception as to what causes people to behave the way they do, what influence them to learn, what they think and the way they prefer to do things. The environment to a large extent influences learning. The extent to which a child could reach in academic attainment is dependent upon the existence of certain environmental conditions. It is axiomatic that people tends to derive a sense of well-being from a pleasant environment. Each of us was born with our hereditary potential and limitations into a set of surroundings and conditions. These factors interact continuously from birth until death. Thus, the child's environment is made up of all the forces that influence his or her growth and development, his or her behaviour and the realization of his potentials, intellectual and otherwise.

These environments help influence it for better or for worst. A child who comes from a remote village, for instance, will behave differently from another who comes from a city. This is the effect of environment. Good or criminal behaviour is learnt from good or criminal environment respectively, a stimulation environment To Denga (1986), good feeding, adequate physical exercises and clean habits positively affect the rate of learning. Thus two children who are born of the same parents and happen to have similar intellectual potentiality but who are reared in different environments (one rich and the other poor) Denga also added that they will certainly exhibit a significant difference in the rate of educational achievement in favour of the child reared in a rich and conducive environment. Thus environment helps the inherited potentialities to mature and actualize. Environment can be defined as those aspects of the organism's surroundings to which it responds at a given time (Denga 1986). Thus environment can also be an aspect of the "field" in which an individual functions.

Everything in the child's world that she or he can see, hear, taste, touch, smell or feel exerts some influence on his or her development and learning behaviour. Thus the home in which the child lives, the neighbourhood where he or she plays, the school he or she attends, the company he or she keeps and the community in which he or she grows up bear a lot of influence on his or her learning environment (Idowu, 2001). Learning environment is made up of the school environment, home environment, social environment and psychological environment. These are of no means the only environment of the Nigerian child.

A school learning environment is described by Gold (2002) as its overall atmosphere or characteristics, the things that are rewarded, encouraged, emphasized and the style of life that is most visibly expressed and felt". It is also assumed that children's learning outcome and educational performance are strongly affected by the standard and type of educational institution in which students get their education. The educational environment of the school one attends sets the parameter of students learning outcome.

Students from elite schools are expected to perform better because they attended these elite schools and the main reason is that these schools are usually very rich in resources and facilities. Some researchers have the view that school ownership and the funds available in school do indeed influence the performance of the students. Creemers (2004) noticed that school ownership, provision of facilities and availability of resources in school is an important structural component of the school. Private school due to the better funding, small sizes, dedicated ownership and access to resources such as computers, perform better than public schools. It is generally recognized that the general atmosphere of the school may affect students' motivation to learning. Nielson and Gerber (1979) for instance observed that truants act as a reminder of the inadequacies prevalent in our schools. Teachers may be part of the enabling factors in school that encourage truancy and absenteeism among students. The teachers' attitude to some students could make some students start fearing school, hence absenteeism is embarked. It is concluded that the type of schools in which students attend greatly influences the academic performance of the students.

Another atmosphere is the home environment. When a child is born he or she has all the potentials of becoming whatever those in charge of his or her care and training desire for him or her. Watson (1998) founder of behaviourism, asserted that with selective child-rearing practices, one could develop a physician, a lawyer or a beggar-man or even a thief out of a child. This in essence is the extent to which the child's home environment can contribute to his or her development. The home environment provides the foundation for learning and is an element of the student's life that can affect performance. Home environment also provides opportunity to learn outside and also helps facilitate students' academic performance. Academic is positively impacted by home learning opportunities such as parents reading to their children, being interested in their school welfare, helping in their assignments and so on. To do this successfully the mother or parental education level also plays an important role in the academic performance of students. To create a conducive home environment for learning, parents must be responsible for ensuring that their children are well fed, rest well, happy and calm. Creating a positive atmosphere in the home helps prepare students to be ready to learn. A parent-child relationship characterized by nurturing, acceptance as well as parent's responsiveness to the child's needs tends to correlate with positive academic performance.

A student's social environment also has significant consequences on his or her learning behaviour. Everyone needs mutually satisfying relationships with friends. Friendship serves as the basis for further social growth and provides opportunities to build confidence in the social and academic realms. Children who develop normally in the school social sphere learn social skills in a casual and informal manner, assimilating through incidental experiences appropriate ways of acting with people. An unsatisfying social experience, therefore can adversely affect school learning. The role that environmental factors can play on the rate and efficacy of learning is not in dispute. The hanging question therefore is how the environmental factors can be adequately harnessed and manipulated to enhance the corporate development of a child (learner).

For Piaget, learning is adaptation to the environment or surroundings. In surroundings there are living and non-living things, climate and weather conditions, which the learner is expected to adapt to, or which could affect the rate and efficacy of learning.

Unfortunately, most of our learning environment lacked facilities that bring about poor performance. Most of our schools are cited without feasibility studies to the extent that the terrains are not accessible. Some students have to cross streams and rivers before reaching their schools. This is the case in Odukpani Local Government Area. Government, social bodies, should come to the aid of the schools by improving the learning environment of our children. This can be done in so many ways like providing a beautiful scenery, clean and orderly environment and a quiet surrounding which is likely to contribute to a healthful emotional being of the individual, hence a better performance when confronted with any task.

Love and affection should also exist between teachers and student so that learning can take place. Public awareness campaign should also be launched on this issue so that parents and guardians should know that they too are responsible for the successes and failures of their children/wards.

Finally, insecurity can be an obstacle to smooth learning. Government should use the constitutional provision to ensure that Nigerians, wherever they are residing in this country, should have a sense of belonging.

Literature Review

School learning environment and students' academic performance

Learning which is defined as a process by which a person becomes knowledgeable and is able to do what he could not do is also referred to as any aspect in human phenomena, evidenced by change in an individual's behaviour and performance through practice, training or experience. Thus, modern definitions of learning are invariably in terms of behavioural changes resulting from experience. Denga (2002) defined learning as a change in behaviour or performance, which is a result of experience and practice, and which makes an individual face later situations differently. "On the other hand, with success and presentation of a situation, and on the other hand, with repeated efforts of the individual to react to it effectively". But how have these changes come about, what are the various learning constraints, where has the learning taken place etc. The answers to these and many more questions is the focus of this review. Various types of materials to aid learning, the importance of the environment, the parents and above all the role of the teacher as the facilitator of learning and the creator of such a classroom or school environment that would enhance change in student's behaviour would be critically examined.

The learning environment begins from the home set-up, to the school environment, and this varies from place to place and from school to school. According to Jonathan (2005) in his Journal posit that: school environment is made up of facilities, buildings, classrooms, desks, libraries, laboratories, audio visual equipment and array of instructional resources, curriculum. The content of what is taught and people; students and teachers (pg. 215).

These components of learning environment all have a measure of influence on what students learn and how well they learn. It indicate that variations in the facilities and curricular of the school account for relatively little variations in pupil achievement as measured by standard tests. Good facilities and good curricular are desirable but apparently not crucial in determining how well students learn.

Peer relationship and student's academic performance

Peer relationships are an important developmental context for children (Cellessen and Mayeux, 2004). Piaget (1932) suggested that children's relationship with peers were different, in both form and function, from their relationships with adults piaget argued that children interact more openly and spontaneously with their peers than with adults. Thus, it is possible to view peer relationship as unique and important with regards to general human development.

Research has established a significant link between peer relationships and student's academic performance, providing further support of the importance of these relationships. According to Vygotsky (1978), cognitive growth and development are a function, in large part, of inter personal exchange. Current research supporting this theory reveals that children who were accepted by their peers (De Rosier Kupersmidt, and Patterson, 1994) Azimitia and Montgomery (1993) suggest that the quality of the relationship between peers who are interacting with each other may contribute to cognitive growth and development. For example, these researchers argue that friends may challenge and debate with each other without much hesitation. Given that friends are more sensitive to each others' needs and more supportive of each others' thoughts and well-being than non-friends. It may be that children are more likely to talk openly and challenge each others' thoughts and feelings in the company of friends than non-friends. These researchers suggest that if this is the case, one would expect children who have friends to interact with their peers in a way that is more likely to promote cognitive growth compared to children who do not have friends. Combining the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, and the empirical research supporting their ideas, it is reasonable to state that children form unique relationships with their peers and that positive collaboration within these relationships may lead to cognitive growth outcomes that may be manifest through academic performance in the classroom.

Hypothesis one

School learning environment has no significant relationship on students' academic performance.

Independent variables: School learning environment

Dependent variables: Students' academic performance

Statistical techniques: Pearson's product moment correlation analysis

Hypothesis two

Peer does not significantly relate to students' academic performance.

Independent variables: Peer relationship

Dependent variables: Students' academic performance

Statistical techniques: Pearson's product moment correlation analysis

The following recommendations were made based on the facts revealed by this study.

- i. Parents should provide all necessary materials that will help their student develop basic concepts right at home before they get to school. Parents should learn to dialogue with teachers on issues pertaining to the well-being of their children.

- ii. The government should increase funds for education so as to take care of constructing enough classrooms and also provide teaching aids and resources materials to enhance learning. They should also provide adequate training facilities and opportunities for teachers so as to render them better equipped to be effective teachers.
- iii. Teachers should employ the strategies of teaching with a lot of practical examples, using resource materials where necessary. There should also create a cordial relationship among students to have the much needed conducive atmosphere in the school learning environment for a better performance.

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