

UNDERSTANDING ACADEMIC SUCCESS THROUGH A GENDERED PEER LENS

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Abstract

This review examined the relationship between sex differences, sex role orientation and sex stereotypes in academic performance. It also attempted to find out interpersonal perception to academic performance. The results obtained demonstrated that more boys do perform better in science even when they have same average performance; the reasons being that though sex differences play a role in academic performance, the major factors are belief system, parental attitude and the fact that the girl child is not encouraged to perform better. Hence, students irrespective of gender should be encouraged by their teachers, counselors and parents to develop positive attitude towards their studies for improved academic performance.

Keywords: Sex differences, interpersonal perception, Academic performance, education, culture and tradition

INTRODUCTION

Education is the nucleus of development in any society be it modern (western) or traditional. It is the principal medium through which culture is passed from one generation to another. Nigeria, suffers from ill-informed and misplaced criticisms and bias. The Nigerian society has always been in favour of male education than female education. Culture and tradition rather than scientific proofs have governed our perception of academic performance. Perception is the process of selecting, organizing and interpreting our sensations or information from stimuli. It is the process of knowing and understanding the world. It is a process whereby one gains awareness of stimuli, object and situations that impinge upon and excite the sense receptors, (Bryant, 1974). Education for human relationship implies sensitivity to the fact that one is always a member of a group; that one's action may affect others in the group positively or negatively. It is an awareness that 'different from' does not necessarily mean 'better than' or 'worse than'. It encourages recognition and preservation of differences as necessary components of understanding, Ukeje (1979). Until recently, education for girls was comparatively poor. It was viewed as always ending in the kitchen. The attempt by the Yoruba race to foster female education met with less encouragement, (Taiwo 1980). Thus this study aimed at assessing sex differences in relation to interpersonal perceptions in academic performance. The principal questions this study tries to answer include; do males and females differ in academic performance? What role does sex difference play in academic performance? What factors really influence academic performance?

EFFECTS OF SEX DIFFERENCES ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Our perception set or mental predisposition is influenced by our experiences, assumptions and expectations (Asia, 2002). In Nigeria as in many countries and cultures of the world, our perceptions of academic performance and performance in other endeavour have been governed by gender differences. Females have always been regarded as the weaker vessel and men the stronger ones. This implies that males are always superior to female. This is evident when a male child is born. There is much happiness even if at the end he ends up a drunk or joins any class of social misfit. Results of studies on gender differences in intelligence vary; though majority tend to favour boys.

Antassi (1958) advocates the existence of psychological differences between males and females which is reflected in the results of psychological testing. Maccoby (1974) posits that the issue of gender differences is well established with boys obtaining higher score in numerical and special aptitudes. Sherman (1980) however finds no sex related difference in spatial visualization of males and females. Outcome of studies involving the Raven's standard progressive matrices have consistently pointed to male superiority. Kingehofer (1967) using African and Asian students in Tanzania found male superiority in the performance of students and McCarthy (1974) in his test in a Nigerian technical college also obtains a result in favour of the males.

Recent intelligence tests have only been concentrated in the cognition domain while other domains- psychomotor have been neglected. On the whole, the effect of gender differences on academic performance is controversial. Other factors act as determinants of academic performance. We can therefore agree partly with Skinner (1965) that behaviour is a function of environmental variables. This means that for any piece of behaviour there is a finite set of environmental conditions (past or present) such that it is a casual law that anyone whom all those conditions apply will perform that behaviour.

FACTORS INFLUENCING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

A lot of factors influence academic performance, which sometimes influence academic choices. These include:

Location of School: Whether a school is located in the urban or rural area affect the performance of students. Vernon (1979) establishes that test scores are generally lower in rural areas than in urban areas. Teasdale et al (1988) in their study found that intelligence between urban and rural students differs and observed that the problem arises from contemporary differences in the provision of education rather than the cumulative effect of previous generation of selective migration of relatively more intelligent people from rural to urban areas. Young and Shepherd (1962) observe differences among boys but not girls.

Interests: Peoples interests vary, a person's interest can help determine his/her satisfaction and therefore success. A favourite attitude towards a particular area of study will make for better achievement.

Preferences or desires: This is closely related to interests. A person may have an idea of what he would like to do without exactly understanding what his/her interests are. Achievement is independent of attitude. Students sometimes leave the course or discipline they do very well for others they are not likely

endowed. This has created serious problems of malpractices (Nnachi, 2002). These decisions are usually influenced by family tradition, a desire for prestige or ideas of classmates.

Past Performance: A person's past accomplishments play a large role in determining future success. These achievements are reflected in high grades, students' activities, recommendations from friends, acquaintances, hobbies and other leisure time interest and school records. There is difference in achievement in different types of activities due to a person's aptitude, interest and desires (World book, 1975).

Motivation: Adequate motivation in the form of rewards would encourage performance. The fact that boys were encouraged to go to school have in some way affected the number of boys going to school. Increased attention given to gender equity in the last three decades have helped encourage female attitudes towards education and the resultant performance in course or vocation which were exclusively for males. In various parts of the world, terms such as equal opportunities, equal access, anti-sexist, women liberation among others have extensively been used to capture new approaches to female education. This has spurred the females up to compete favourably with males in nearly all fields of endeavour.

Socio-Economic Status: Children from the high and middle class tend to have a sense of self-worth and are easily encouraged than those whose parents are of the lower class. They may be worried over their children's performance but are not always able to make provisions for improvement.

Heritage (Phenotype): Interaction of hereditary traits (genotype) and environment will favourably enhance performance. On the other hand, if one of them is faulty, then performance would suffer. The environment is easily controlled while hereditary traits are not (Clifford, 1990).

Nature of School: Studies such as Trickets and Benneth, (1972) have shown that coeducation has an impact on performance of students. Most of the results show that students in single sex schools have higher mean score than those from co-educational schools. In single sex schools, the competitive spirit of trying to do, outdo each other may be more interested in each other than academic work.

Family Size: Awoyemi (1986) observes substantial relationship between number of children in the family and the children's academic performance. Given the high cost of food, hospital bills, clothing and other life necessities, it is an uphill task for large families to adequately take care of their children in school. Hence large families are one of the causes of poverty and illiteracy in Nigeria.

Level of Parental Education: Findings from a research by Odebunmi (1988) shows significant differences in academic performance among student from different levels of parental education. Educated parents are more likely to provide for their children a more conducive learning environment at home than illiterate parents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Though sex differences play a role in academic performance, its effect is very minute compared to other factors involved. Boys may obtain higher scores than girls in a co-educational institution because of their sense of superiority. This may not be the case if the same test administered to separate single sex schools - one for boys and one for girls' equal provision are made to enhance learning.

McCarthy (1974) discovers that students who were offering courses centred on building who had one girl in their midst were more superior in their ability to understand abstract design than the commerce students who had more girls in their midst. He observes that gender differences occur at age 12 when most children begin formal operational thinking and confirms the superiority of males over females in intelligent tests.

Environment and heredity influence the development of intelligence as a threshold variable. The difference in performance in urban/rural schools may be due to provision of educational facilities - personnel and materials rather than knowledge. McCarthy (1994) gives a possible reason for superior performance in single sex schools over co-educational schools as adequate selection of brighter students for admission. Sutherland (1991) gives a social reason: boys and girls will be more interested in each other than in academic work. These reasons put together could account for high performance of students in single sex schools. If efforts are made in providing adequate material and human resources in rural schools as in urban schools, there would be a reduction in poor academic performance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study of sex differences in relationship to interpersonal perceptions in academic performance; we have found that academic performance is not based on gender but rather more on environmental factors. Hence, belief system rather than scientific proof is the main contributing factor to sex stereotype in academic performance. For example, if some girls belief that girls do not have the ability to study science, girls would have no interest in science and girls are not suitable for science related careers; then they themselves would end up having lower expectancy for success, interest and utility values in science (Mo Yin, 1992). To encourage performance, the study recommends that students, irrespective of gender should be encouraged by teachers, counselors and parents to develop positive attitude towards their studies; adequate and conducive learning environment should be provided for students to enhance learning. Adequate family planning programs should be carried out in the rural areas to discourage oversized family; Students should be adequately rewarded in order to improve their performance by way of bursary from government, community and faith based institutions. Students should be encouraged to pursue academic courses which they are likely to perform better.

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