

CAUSES OF AND REMEDIES TO POOR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND CHARACTER DECLINE IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The twin problems of poor academic performance and character decline in public secondary schools in Nigeria pose a serious threat to the nation's achievement of its educational goals and objectives, given the strategic place of secondary education in the nation's educational system. This paper identifies the probable causes of the problems and proffers solution on how to arrest/redress the seeming albatross around the educational system. The challenge of poor academic performance can be confronted from the dimensions of teacher-factors, student-related factors, family-related factors and society/government-related factors. This challenge can be curbed by, among others, appointing professionally trained guidance and counsellors for all secondary schools. Special incentives should be given to teachers to sustain their (teachers') positive attitude and commitment to their job. The menace of moral decadence can be confronted by regular and intensive inspection of schools by the Ministry of Education to ensure strict compliance with laid-down regulations regarding curriculum implementation, effective instructional delivery and maintenance of standard of behaviour.

Keywords: Academic Performance, Character Decline, Special Incentives, Educational System

Introduction

Universally, education involves the acquisition of knowledge and experiences by individuals, on daily basis, and such can be formal, non-formal and informal. It is through education that people learn how to become socially and politically conscious and how to increase ability to acquire and use knowledge to improve the quality of their lives. It is on this premise that the Nigerian policy on education (2013) posits that no nation can rise above the quality of its educational system. In practical terms, education is expected to develop in its recipient, his (recipient's) cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains. Simply put, education should develop the head (cognitive/knowledge), the hand (psychomotor/manipulative skill), and the heart

(affective/attitudes or interpersonal relationships). Any form of education that does not result in the development of the three domains has no place in modern life.

A deep cursory look at the Nigeria's educational economic, social and political problems will likely reflect a seeming failure in the country's educational system. It is against the background of the interplay of these macro forces of political, social and economic environments that one has to examine the general practical factors that have caused and may continue to cause poor academic performance and character decay in Nigeria's public schools. The twin phenomenon of poor academic performance and the pervasive moral decadence have constituted and may continue to constitute an albatross in the nation's educational system. In addition to poor academic performance in schools, students also engage in

cybercrime, kidnapping, fetish activities, rape, murder and all sorts of examination malpractices. All these activities constitute a despicable dilemma in the implementation of the nation's educational system which must be addressed vigorously.

Therefore, the objectives of this paper are to:

- * interrogate some of the causes of poor academic performance in public secondary schools;
- * examine some of the causes of character decline in public secondary schools;
- * suggest some remedies to arrest/redress the identified causes of poor academic performance in public secondary schools;
- * proffer some remedies to arrest/redress the examined causes of character decline in public secondary schools; and
- * draw conclusion on the gains and pains of poor academic performance and character deficit in public secondary schools.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is hinged on Bandura's (1997) social learning theory. According to the theory, behaviour is dictated by the thought mechanisms of an individual, the atmosphere and the action itself. This implies that although affected by the external conditions, individuals decide their own actions. The theory of social learning emphasizes the role of observer learning about the existence and effect of models. This suggests that possibly the students who engage in unethical activities are more likely to have acquired the actions from their setting. It is believed that students learn through emulation of the aggressive actions and activities exhibited through adults and instructors. The implication of this theory is that students who misbehave in schools are likely to have learned such behaviour from their homes and peers.

Academic Performance in Public Secondary Schools

Academic performance is conceptualized as the measurement of student achievement across various academic subjects, using benchmarks such as entrance examination result, graduation rate. Result of students

from standardized tests, like the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), National Examinations Council (NECO), etc. Poor academic performance can be described as any performance that falls below a desired standard in a given evaluation exercise such as a test, an examination or a series of continuous assessments. On the causes of poor performance in school, some people blame the students, others blame the teachers, while others are inclined to blame the government. In any case, academic failure is not only frustrating to the students and the parents, its effect is equally devastating on the society in terms of dearth of manpower in all spheres of the economy. The secondary school level is supposed to be the base and the foundation for advanced knowledge in tertiary institutions: Universities, polytechnics, monotechnics and Colleges of Education where students are expected to acquire deeper knowledge, great skills, as well as imbibe values and attitudes necessary for achieving a country's economic, social, political, technological, scientific and cultural development.

However, it is a sad commentary that year-on-year, students have been performing abysmally low in the senior school certificate examination (SSCE) conducted by WAEC and NECO. In the Nigerian context, the results of an end of school, course or programme evaluation is often used to determine the success or quality of any educational endeavour or system; and the responsibility of the evaluation is bequeathed on organised examinations bodies such as WAEC and NECO which conduct certification examinations for Senior Secondary School students. It is noteworthy that the results that these bodies finally publish at the end of a period of examination is always used to make decisions and overall evaluation of the success or otherwise of the secondary education system, at one time or the other.

Over the years the performance of students in WASCE has become a matter of serious concern to education stakeholders in Nigeria. For instance, performance of candidates in the West African Examinations Council's Senior Secondary School Certificate examination from

2010 to 2015 did not rise beyond 46.75%. In 2010, 23.3% of the candidates who sat for the examination obtained a minimum of five credit passes in five subjects including English and Mathematics, and the performance level rose to 46.7% in 2014 only to decline again to 39% in 2015. Performance fluctuated from 52.97% pass in 2016, 59.22% in 2017, 50% in 2018 to 64% in 2019. Probably owing to the COVID-19 global pandemic resulting in lock-down of social and economic activities in the country, candidates' performance dropped to 39.82% in 2020. In 2021, the success rate rose to 81.7% only to drop again to 76.36% in 2022, and rose slightly again to 79.81% in 2023 academic session (source: WAEC Website). The despicable scenario of poor performance by Nigerian youths, as highlighted above, poses a serious threat to the country's educational system against the background of the truism that no nation can rise above the quality of its educational system. If this ugly trend must be reversed, there is the need for stakeholders to strive to identify the probable causes of the generally poor performance of students in public schools, with a view to proffering solutions.

It is a commonly-shared belief that academic achievement refers to a successful accomplishment or performance in a particular subject area, and is indicated by grades, marks and scores of descriptive commentaries. Academic performance also refers to how students deal with their studies, and how they cope with or accomplish different tasks given to them by their teachers in a fixed time or academic year (Justice, 2012, citing Dimbisso, 2009). We can look at academic achievement from 2 perspectives. Firstly, it can be considered more objectively in terms of the numerical scores of a pupil's knowledge, which measure the degree of a pupil's adaptation to school work and to the educational system. The second perspective is a bit subjective in that the academic success of a student is determined by the student's attitudes towards his academic achievement and himself, as well as by the attitudes of significant others towards his/her success and him/herself.

According to Ojedokun, and Aladejana (2012), students' learning outcomes, whether good or bad are indicators of performance standards, and they could be regarded as indexes of output or quality of education. This may also agree with Stufflebeam's idea of "product" evaluation. To Stufflebeam (2007), a product is an "outcome" of an endeavour, and it is the criteria against which a performance objective is measured. This then suggests that the success of any educational policy or system could be determined by the performances of the learners, after a course of study. Aremu (2000) defines poor academic performance as performance that is adjudged by the examinee/testee as falling below an expected standard. The concept of low academic performance varies in its definition. Diaz (2003) cited in Justice 2012 considers low academic performance or academic failure as the situation in which the subject does not attain the expected achievement, according to his or her abilities, resulting in an altered personality which affects all other aspects of life.

Poor academic performance among public secondary school students has been a source of concern for various stakeholders, in the educational industry. We can group the causes into: academic related issues; emotional matters; socioeconomic sources; and perhaps infrastructural material issues, among several others. However, character deficit among students, in that category, is a product of the totality of the several factors in the equation of moral value addition. The society remains a mirror for upcoming generations to act as moral gauge, and all stakeholders must be conscious of that.

Some Causes of Poor Academic Performance in Public Secondary Schools

In several available literatures, scholars have tried to trace the sources of poor academic performance to the doorsteps of inadequate number of teachers; lack of instructional material and facilities; poor motivation of teachers generally; poor administration by principals; lack of dedication by both staff and students; lack of guidance and

counseling service in our schools are among some of the factors leading to poor performance.

Poor performance implies obtaining low or poor grades by majority of learners. Causes of poor performance are a broader term than under achievement. It includes those who probably could perform better and those who could not. These may either be general, manifesting in most areas of school work or specific to one or two areas. The causes of poor performance can be classified as follows:: Teachers-Related Problems, Students-Related Problems, Parents-Related Problems, Government-Related Problems, Socioeconomic-Related Problems, etc.

The politicization of the education sector in all ramifications has been another contributing factor. Adesina (1985) has explained that students' poor performance in senior secondary certificate level could be attributed to the politicization of education in the country. The causes of poor academic performance are varied based upon each country and region. Poor academic performance might be because of poor teaching methodology, due to a gap between teaching materials and evaluation instruments, especially those used for international purposes. These gaps have to be bridged.

Teachers-Related Problems

It is common knowledge that several public secondary schools do not have enough teachers to interface between students and the curriculum. This scenario is forcing many schools to make do with whatever is available. Several teachers in the humanities are used in teaching the English language, literature in English and other related subjects. It is the same experience in the sciences. Apart from that, Adesina (1985) has identified poor teaching and learning facilities, irregular payment of teacher's salaries as some of the teacher-related problems that can lead to low motivation and divided interest among teachers. These factors include, among others, the proliferation of schools without commensurate number of qualified teachers, and

other necessary elements in the teaching-learning process that can enhance students' performance.

The methods adopted for teaching cannot be said to be specifically unique since no method can be said to be exclusive of any stage in the teaching-learning process. Nonetheless, some teachers do not improve upon, or vary their methods of teaching. A teacher who uses the same teaching method to teach the same subject for 5 to 1010 years cannot claim to have those years' number of experience. A good teacher should regularly vary and review his approaches and methodologies. The situation seems to be worse in the sciences. Balogun (1985), and Jegede (1982), in different works have reported that some schools have only one laboratory for all the sciences, especially schools in the rural areas, and students are hardly brought for practical. Associated with this, is either the non-existing or the unqualified laboratory assistants who are more ignorant than those they are supposed to help. And closely related to that is the issue of large class size, which tends to compound the situation, and as such reduces the teachers' and students' interaction.

Some teachers often spend instructional hours in controlling moral decadence among students. Uncontrollable attitude towards alcoholic drinks creates room for deadly diseases like, lung cancer and brain cancer, sexual immorality and the spread of contagious diseases, smoking and abuse of drugs can lead to mental disorder among students, drug abuse is capable of turning the individual into a radical and violent person and truancy negatively affect educational achievement of students were the effect of moral decadence on senior high school students. Many teachers use precious time allocated to teaching for solving extracurricular problems.

Parents-Related Problems

There is also parental influence, which is so much that parents have been found to impose themselves on the choice of subjects and courses on their children, irrespective of the fact that whether the children have the capacity and competence or not. This can consequently

lead to drop in performance by students in senior secondary school classes and examinations.

Student-Related Problems

The factors responsible for the causes of poor academic performance among senior secondary school certificate examinations may also include: language barrier or subject technicalities, laxity on the part of students, shortage of qualified teachers, lack of concentration, lack of motivation, poverty, etc. Others can be peer bullying; learning disorder; slothfulness; inadequate study time; financial constraints; lack of study materials; broken home; discouragement, low self-esteem, etc. there is also the learning strategy by students. This is summed up by Ojedokun and Aladejana (2012) who posit that academic curriculum, personnel, resources and logistics are also capable of determining the success or otherwise of secondary education students in Nigeria.

Some of the Causes of Character Decline in Public Secondary Schools

Moral decadence has pervaded the moral fabric of our society. It is sad that public secondary schools have become the bedrock of social malaise and character decline. This trend is traceable to a number of factors. Principal among the factors is the downplay on the people's collective moral values. The society celebrates the rich, and not hard work. Religious institutions have not helped matters due to the fact that money has occupied the center focus of the national psyche.

The search for quick/sudden wealth has resulted in serious moral decadence in all the levels of Nigeria's education industry. From the primary level up to the tertiary level, pupils, secondary school students, as well as university and other tertiary students engage in cybercrime, kidnapping, fetish activities, rape, murder for wealth, and all sorts of examination malpractices. All these illicit activities are as a result of wanting to get rich quickly. The downplay on the significance of religious studies and history, as subjects of study, has killed the avenue for moral teaching and studies of national heroes and heroines. Religious

institutions and socio cultural institutions are therefore not helping matters.

Another probable reason for character decline is low self-esteem. Many students who cannot make it through education often result to one form of social misdemeanors or the other. Their belief is that education is not the only route to success. Politicization of our education system is another strong factor that is affecting character decline. Geopolitics often promotes mediocrity. There are different cut off scores for prospective students seeking admission into federal secondary schools in Nigeria. That alone does not promote hard work among students. Different yard sticks are being used for admission into colleges, as well as procuring employment opportunities. Education should be a birth right of all human beings, and, very importantly, secondary education plays a major and fundamental role in any child's life. It plays a complex role in shaping the child's personality and career choice, later in life. It is the time when they are exposed to the outside world, and start making decisions on their own.

The problem is also traceable to homes. Some students from single parenthood homes are liable to misbehavior due to lack of adequate care, effective monitoring and attention. Also, circumstances of birth often result in over pampering of children, and in some extreme cases, parents often aid or supervise the assault of school staff on the excuse that a form of punishment is considered too severe or harsh. A situation in which a misbehaving student is the only product of a long marriage, parents' perspectives of any form of punishment system may not be objective. Cases of attacks on teachers are daily reported in the mass media. Parents often result to invading schools with thugs to molest teachers. It is almost a daily occurrence in most states of Nigeria. Peer pressure and influence is another factor that promotes character decay. Many students are forcefully initiated into cultism while gang raping and kidnapping are considered as things of play. Due to low self-esteem, such groups have mentors and role models (that have failed academically) such as successful

musicians, miscreants and other social deviants (who enjoy government patronage and encouragement). Energies are deliberately directed at becoming successes like their mentors. And this is where the relevance of Social Learning Theory comes in. Sadly, acts of utter vandalism, destruction of school property, truancy and delinquent behaviour and, in the recent time, attack on teachers, drug addiction even in the class and the school promises have now become the order of the day in secondary schools. It is also disturbing that precipitators of the mentioned indecent behaviours are under the influence of peer groups. Unfortunately, this alarming proportion of rioting, drug-taking, teachers' molestation and other maladaptive behaviours among secondary school students in Nigeria continue to be on the rise.

Research evidence has revealed a strong relationship between students' home background and their academic performance in schools. (Dronkers, 2020; Ebuka, O. 2016; Onsonwa, et al, 2013). In Nigeria, where there is a large percentage of families living below the poverty level, poor performance of their wards is concomitant to poverty, penury and squalor. Many of the secondary school girls take to hawking during school hours, and boys ride motorbikes to augment their home's income. Some others engage in car wash business during school periods. Such students will definitely go to school late, or skip school outright. A sad development is that most of the teenage secondary school girls resort to prostitution, drug use and drug peddling. The picture is indeed very sordid. If we examine the factors identified so far, it is pertinent to see the relevance of Bandura's social learning theory here.

The social learning theory states that behaviour is dictated by the thought mechanisms of an individual, the atmosphere and the action itself. This implies that although affected by the external conditions, individuals decide their own actions. The theory of social learning emphasizes the role of observer learning about the existence and effect of models. This suggests the students engaging in unethical activities are more likely to have

acquired the actions from their setting. It is believed that students learn through emulation of the aggressive actions and activities exhibited through adults and instructors.

The implication of this theory is that from their homes and peers, students who misbehave in schools are likely to have learned this behaviour. Most of the factors pupil may participate in unethical activities such as substance usage or vandalism of school properties may be that others do so, so if they may not replicate the conduct, they will be thrown out of their peer group. Children who frequently observe these actions among adults or between adults and children can experience antisocial or unethical behaviour. Atieno (2014) claimed that most senior high school students who usually read novels, magazines, and watch television, are most likely to be influenced by characters they imitate. Parents and teachers become role models for kids as they mimic just what they are doing. Therefore, it is important to remember that the students learn from their peers and adults as well as parents by modelling and observation. Moral decadence among students is induced mainly by copying or imitating those poor habits witnessed and praised by peers and the community.

Some Remedies to Arrest the Identified Causes of Poor Academic Performance In Public Secondary Schools

Having seen the possible causes of poor performance in school, it is not the end of the road for such students. If proper measures are applied, the performance of a student could improve. Thus, here are things that can be done to help improve the school's performance of a student. Since education is an open experience, it is believed that the probable solutions to poor academic performance should be multi-varied, cross-linked and integral. Thus, for instance, the focus is to be broadened from the class to the family, to the environment, and to the social world of the students. The teacher is at the centre of teaching-learning activities. As a result, teachers should engage in activities that can motivate students to succeed. Teachers can motivate his students by making them his close friends,

encourage healthy competition among the students by providing them immediate feedback, helping them to develop positive self-concept, and making the students to perceive their failure as a consequent lack in their effort rather than see it as externally motivated.

Furthermore, there is the need as parents to cultivate a positive relationship with children. Parents who do not relate well with their children may find it difficult to tell when a child is having difficulties at school. By building a good relationship, a parent will have the necessary information about children. Also, as a parent, going to parent-teacher meetings will also provide the opportunity to meet and speak, with the child's teachers, and know areas where assistance should be given to the child. A good parent should help set a regular time for homework. A child may have an easier time to finish an assignment if it is broken down into small steps. He or she may also need to study for short periods, at a time, if concentration is difficult. A parent may decide to employ a lesson tutor in order to complement formal school work. Although this is good, many parents do this for selfish reasons. However, where a child is performing poorly in school, the child may need more time and more guided attention than a teacher can give, during the day, at school.

Every child needs enough sleep to maintain good body chemistry. A parent can help to set a bedtime for a child to follow. Closely related to that is the need for reduction in Screen Time. Screen time is the amount of television, computer, smart phone, and video game time your child is exposed to each day. It is important to limit screen time. This helps the child get enough sleep, physical activity, and social interaction each day. Many children/students have become obsessed in watching television, and interaction with hand phones. This is also a strong point of distraction from effective study. The importance of special dietaries in nurturing a child cannot be overemphasized children are supposed to be offered a variety of healthy foods including fruits, vegetables, lean meats, fish, low-fat dairy products,

whole-grain breads, and cooked beans. Adequate nutrition may boost a child's performance. In addition, praises and gifts promised have a way of challenging a child to do better. A student who is performing badly at school can always top the class if the root cause of the problem is discovered, and handled effectively.

On the side of the students, it is important to get the syllabus of the subjects chosen, and study the topics by getting the required textbooks and study consistently over a long period. It is advised that students to avoid reliance on "short notes" at the beginning of learning a topic. It is relevant to learn to answer questions after each topic. This will enable the students to determine how far they have assimilated the topic. Students may use past questions, or form their own related questions on the specific topic studied. It is of importance to answer such questions in writing, as a form of constant practice. It is also good to share knowledge and exchange ideas with mates since one may not have access to all textbooks or knowledge on a topic. Students should not indulge in memorizing model answers prepared by somebody else. They should make attempts to produce their own responses (answers), based on what they have read and understood.

Some remedies to arrest the examined causes of character decline in public secondary schools

Secondary school students remain an essential component of Nigerian's future, hence, everything pertaining to their character and learning should take a front burner position in the equation of the national planning activities. In South Korea, the main instrument of rebirth is **Mind Education**. Everyone is expected to do what is right, at all time. Similarly, a total reorientation is needed. As the saying goes, 'the fish rots from the head'. The educational, religious, political as well as traditional leaders need to lead by good examples, and the need to have a lot of value orientation, if the nation's future must be secured. Secondary school students learn from their mates, their parents, their teachers and from their community leaders,

religious leaders, government office holders, among others. They keep records of those who cut corners, and are ready to cut corners too to achieve their own 'models' of success, no matter the odds.

For the essence of scholarship, however, on student-related factors, guidance and counselling activities should be undertaken by guardian counsellors appointed on full-time basis, for all secondary schools. The counsellors will provide vocational and psycho-social counselling for the students, especially to curb the challenge of students' slothfulness and toxic friendship. Background checks should also be regularly conducted on the prospective teachers to be employed by government's education supervising agencies, in terms of character and employment or past academic records. Parents should endeavour to provide for the needs of their children, grant them (the children) quality time at home to discuss academic and social issues as well as identifying their (children's) needs and challenges. This will go a long way in helping the children to achieve emotional stability.

Government should endeavour to provide conducive school environment, and also motivate teachers with appropriate incentives and prompt payment of their entitlements. This will encourage the teachers to be more committed to their job of eliciting quality learning by students. There is the need for review of the curriculum of secondary school education in Nigeria to incorporate the various historical and cultural nuances, particularly, those that focus on character building and repair, moral rejuvenation, moral uprightness, reward and punishment, integrity, etc. Appropriate existing laws should be strengthened to curb the menace of drug abuse, cybercrime, kidnapping, rape and other social ills among the Nigerian youths. Most especially, governments, at all levels and through their agencies, should respect rules of law.

In addition, government should endeavour to embark on regular advocacy for engendering keener interest in education through enlightenment in the mass media (electronic and print). The National Orientation Agency and similar bodies of the Federal Government of Nigeria should be saddled with this responsibility. To further curb moral decadence in schools, there is the need for a more concerted effort such as establishment of rules and regulation by head teachers, involvement of teachers and students in making rules and regulations, parental supervision and school counseling, provision of mentors and mentoring strategies.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Education develops in the individual, three domains namely, cognitive, psychomotor and affective. It is the bedrock of a country's economic, social and political development. The challenge of poor academic performance and character decline in public schools in Nigeria can be confronted frontally from the dimensions of student-related factors, teacher-related factors, family-related factors and society/government related factors. To curb the challenge of student's slothfulness and toxic friendship, professionally trained guidance and counselors should be appointed on full-time basis by Government for all secondary schools to provide counselling services. Furthermore, the dimension of teacher-factors can be addressed by government (their employer) by giving the teachers special incentives and other motivational paradigms to sustain their (teachers') positive attitude and commitment to their job.

The prevalence of moral decadence among senior high school students should not be overlooked because moral decadence among students could lead to students being traumatized, low academic performance, school dropout and reduction in literate population. It is however concluded that the presence of these could be attributed to moral decadence. School administrators, old students, teachers and students need to be sensitized to the negative

effects of moral decadence on students by means of lectures, conferences, talks and symposia because this may go a long way in minimizing the problem. The Ministries of Education and the head teachers ought to improve counselling facilities in schools for children. It could go a long way in avoiding a scenario in which the world might lose much of its population in the immediate future, because moral decadence might cause certain students to drop out finally, and become drug addicts.

It is recommended that in terms of quality control, there is still much to be done, as most personnel servicing the education sector need to be propelled one way or the other before they could deliver their required services. Motivation is key in effective performance. There is need for regular inspections to schools. This is because regular internal and external supervision always enhance effective instructional delivery and maintenance of standards in the school system. Principals, vice-principals and head of departments are internal supervisors of schools, officers of the ministry of education are the external supervisors, who have the duties to “ensure that high standards are maintained and the schools are run in accordance with the laid down regulations (Ekundayo, 2010: 189). Given the strategic place of secondary education in the Nigerian education system, it is the views of Ojedokun and Aladejana (2012) that secondary education should be “near-perfect”, in both standard and quality. This is the only way by which justifications could be made for it as an essential component of human rights of children.

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