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SCHOOL RELATED FACTORS AND PSYCHOSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR OF LEARNERS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated school related factors and psychosocial behaviour of learners in Nigeria. The research design adopted for the study is a survey research design. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select ten secondary schools as a representative sample of the population of secondary schools in the three education zones in Cross River State Nigeria. Each school was selected based on stratification by geographical location (urban/rural). Fifty students were randomly sampled from each of the selected school that was used for the study to make a sample of 550 students. Two instruments will be used in the study, a questionnaire to collect quantitative data on mental health issues, school related factors, and suicidal tendencies among learners. The instrument was pilot tested to ascertain reliability. The reliability coefficient was 0.75. Three research questions and two hypotheses were formulated and tested at .05 level of significance. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation. Findings from the description statistics revealed that a significant proportion of learners in Nigeria exhibit psychosocial behaviour. The analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between academic expectations, bullying experience and psychosocial behaviour. It was recommended that implementing evidence-based interventions, and fostering collaborating efforts among stakeholders, Nigeria can promote positive mental health outcomes and create a conducive learning environment for learners.

Keywords: Psychosocial Behaviour, Academic Expectations, Bullying, Learners

Introduction

Education is universally recognized as a critical instrument for societal development, as it aims to nurture individuals holistically—intellectually, emotionally, and socially. The ultimate

goal of education is to produce well-rounded individuals who can positively contribute to their communities and navigate life successfully. Beyond academic achievement, schools are pivotal in fostering psychosocial behaviors that are essential for students' overall well-being and societal integration.

Despite the significant role of education, issues surrounding the prevalence of negative psychosocial behaviors among learners have become increasingly alarming. Reports indicate a rise in maladaptive behaviors, including aggression, truancy, anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies, especially among adolescents (Durlak et al., 2016). These behaviors often stem from complex interactions between personal, environmental, and institutional factors. In Cross River State, the incidence of such behaviors is particularly concerning, with students frequently displaying signs of poor mental health and social dysfunction. These challenges undermine not only academic performance but also their future social stability.

Psychosocial behavior encompasses a range of emotional and social interactions that influence an individual's functioning and adaptation to their environment. Expected psychosocial behaviors among learners include positive peer relationships, effective conflict resolution, emotional regulation, empathy, and resilience in the face of challenges (Bretherton & Munholland, 2023). These behaviors are foundational for personal growth, academic success, and fostering a harmonious school environment. Empathy and emotional regulation, for example, enable learners to navigate social situations with understanding and care, thereby reducing conflicts and promoting prosocial behaviors like helping and collaboration (Luo et al., 2023). These behaviors are crucial for achieving personal success and contributing to a harmonious school environment. However, deviations from these expected behaviors are evident in many schools in Cross River State.

Cross River State has witnessed an increase in poor psychosocial behaviors among learners, manifesting in severe issues such as suicidal tendencies, substance abuse, low self-esteem, anxiety disorders, and violent behaviors. Suicide rates among adolescents have risen, with many students exhibiting warning signs like withdrawal, hopelessness, and emotional instability (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). Mental health challenges, often exacerbated by unaddressed bullying, academic pressures, and lack of social support, are alarmingly common. These behaviors not only disrupt the learning environment but also have long-term implications for students' personal and professional lives.

The researcher suspects that school-related factors, particularly academic expectations and bullying experiences, significantly influence students' psychosocial behaviors. Academic expectations refer to the standards or demands placed on students to achieve academically, which can cause stress when perceived as excessive or unattainable (Schunk et al., 2014). Bullying experiences encompass physical, verbal, or emotional harassment by peers, which can lead to psychological distress and maladaptive

behaviors (Olweus, 2019). These factors interact with learners' social and emotional contexts, potentially exacerbating or mitigating psychosocial challenges.

Academic expectations for instance with are pressures from teachers, parents, and schools for students to achieve specific academic goals. High expectations may motivate students to excel but may also lead to anxiety, burnout, and feelings of inadequacy when they are unrealistically high (Schunk et al., 2014). These emotional strains may manifest in social withdrawal, aggression, or other maladaptive behaviors.

Academic expectation and psychosocial behaviour

Academic expectations are the standards, beliefs, and performance benchmarks held by stakeholders—such as educators, parents, and students—regarding educational outcomes and conduct. These expectations significantly influence learners' motivation, behavior, and academic success. According to Rattan, Savani, Chugh, and Dweck (2017), academic expectations, when aligned with students' capabilities and needs, foster resilience and a growth mindset, promoting better learning outcomes. Expectations can be categorized into explicit ones, such as performance standards set by curricula, and implicit ones shaped by societal and cultural values (Collie, Martin, & Curwood, 2019). Effective academic expectations are characterized by being supportive, attainable, and encouraging, enabling learners to strive for excellence without undue stress. However, unrealistic or overly rigid expectations can lead to anxiety, disengagement, and burnout (Jiang et al., 2020).

Current studies emphasize the dual impact of academic expectations on learners. On one hand, high but reasonable expectations from teachers and parents have been linked to increased academic engagement and emotional well-being. Miller and Metz (2017) found that students who perceived their teachers' expectations as achievable demonstrated better academic performance and reported higher self-esteem. Similarly, Wang et al. (2018) observed that parental expectations positively influenced students' academic self-concept and resilience.

However, unrealistic or excessively high academic expectations can contribute to poor psychosocial outcomes. Lee, Lee, and Bong (2020) highlighted those unattainable expectations often lead to heightened levels of academic stress, depression, and feelings of inadequacy among learners. This is especially prevalent in competitive educational environments where students may experience a fear of failure due to external pressures (Jiang et al., 2020). Psychosocial behaviors such as resilience, stress management, and emotional regulation are deeply influenced by academic expectations. When expectations are perceived as supportive, they contribute positively to students' ability to navigate challenges (Collie et al., 2019). Conversely, excessive academic pressure can exacerbate mental health issues, reduce social interactions, and impair overall psychosocial functioning (Park, Holloway, & Arendtsz, 2019).

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Bullying experience and psychosocial behaviour

Bullying experience refers to the exposure of an individual, often repeatedly and over time, to aggressive behaviors intended to harm, dominate, or intimidate. This phenomenon occurs in various forms, including physical aggression, verbal abuse, social exclusion, and cyberbullying. According to Thornberg et al. (2018), bullying significantly impacts the psychosocial development and emotional well-being of learners, often leaving lasting effects on their behavior, academic performance, and interpersonal relationships.

Bullying experience can be categorized as direct (e.g., physical harm or verbal insults) or indirect (e.g., spreading rumors, exclusion, or online harassment). The imbalance of power, where the bully has perceived or actual power over the victim, is a hallmark characteristic of bullying behaviors (Olweus, 2017). Bullying is a global concern that transcends cultural and socio-economic boundaries. A study by Smith and Berkkun (2017) highlights that approximately 30% of school-aged children worldwide experience some form of bullying. In Cross River State, evidence suggests that bullying behaviors are pervasive in many schools, contributing to poor psychosocial outcomes for victims and even perpetrators.

Bullying negatively impacts learners' psychosocial behaviors, including emotional regulation, resilience, and relationships. Victims often exhibit symptoms of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal (Espelage et al., 2018). Chronic exposure to bullying can also result in suicidal ideation and tendencies, highlighting its critical impact on mental health. On the other hand, perpetrators of bullying may develop antisocial behaviors and a lack of empathy.

The relationship between bullying and psychosocial behavior is bidirectional. Bullying experiences can erode a learner's ability to regulate emotions and build healthy peer relationships. Conversely, learners with poor psychosocial skills may be more susceptible to becoming targets of bullying or engaging in bullying themselves (Rose et al., 2018). This cycle emphasizes the need for interventions that target both bullying behaviors and the development of psychosocial competencies.

Also bullying involves repeated aggressive behavior intended to harm or control another individual, often creating long-term psychological scars. Victims of bullying frequently may experience low self-esteem, depression, and suicidal ideation (Olweus, 2019). The prevalence of bullying in schools undermines efforts to create inclusive and supportive learning environments, leaving many students emotionally vulnerable. Conversely, hostile or neglectful teacher behaviors may exacerbate feelings of alienation and stress, contributing to negative psychosocial outcomes (Wentzel, 2018). Toxic peer relationships or exclusion may lead to feelings of loneliness, low self-worth, and increased risk of maladaptive behaviors (Rubin et al., 2006). It is against this backdrop that the researcher seeks to explore the relationship between school-related factors—academic expectations and bullying experiences—and the

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psychosocial behavior of learners in Cross River State.

Statement of the problem

Education is expected to holistically nurture learners, fostering not just cognitive and academic skills but also sound psychosocial behavior that enables them to thrive socially, emotionally, and morally. The Nigerian National Policy on Education emphasizes education as an instrument for national development, advocating for the promotion of effective character and sound attitudes among learners. Ideally, students should exhibit behaviors such as emotional regulation, empathy, resilience, conflict resolution skills, and constructive peer interactions, contributing to both individual success and a cohesive school environment.

In Cross River State, however, the psychosocial behaviors of learners have increasingly deviated from these ideals. Reports highlight widespread issues such as bullying, aggression, depression, anxiety, and suicidal tendencies among students. According to recent studies, learners in Cross River State face significant emotional and social challenges, often exacerbated by factors like academic pressure, a lack of adequate support systems, and school-related stressors. Bullying prevalence rates are alarmingly high, with many learners reporting feelings of isolation and emotional distress, further compounded by inadequate psychosocial interventions within schools.

Poor psychosocial behaviors have far-reaching consequences for both learners and the educational system. At the individual level, these issues contribute to reduced academic performance, absenteeism, and school dropouts. At the systemic level, they undermine the school environment, disrupt classroom dynamics, and diminish the overall quality of education. Furthermore, these behavioral challenges can lead to lifelong social and emotional difficulties, thereby compromising the role of education as a transformative tool for personal and societal development.

The current state of psychosocial behavior among learners in Cross River State is unacceptable. Education, as highlighted in Nigeria's national educational goals, is designed to produce individuals who are competent, self-reliant, and capable of contributing to the development of society. The persistent prevalence of poor psychosocial behaviors stands in stark contrast to these objectives. There is an urgent need to address this issue through targeted interventions that prioritize the mental health and social well-being of learners.

Research hypotheses

Tested in the study are the following hypotheses:

1. Academic expectation has no significant relationship with psychosocial behaviour of learners in Nigeria.
2. Bullying has no significant relationship with psychosocial behaviour of learners in Nigeria.

Research Method

This study adopts the survey research design method in investigating school related factors in the issue of mental health and suicide among learners in Nigerian

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secondary schools, a case of Cross River State. Ten secondary schools were randomly sampled across the state for on-the-spot assessment/observation and questionnaire administration. To collect quantitative data, a structured questionnaire was developed based on the research questions and objectives. The questionnaire includes validated scales and items to assess mental health issues, academic pressure and bullying among learners. A total of 550 senior secondary students - senior secondary one, two and three were randomly administered with copies of structured questionnaire which were properly filled and returned. Out of the 550-questionnaire administered to students, 25 were poorly filled hence discarded. Those properly filled and returned were what constitute the primary data for analysis. Respondents for this study made up of males and females. The selection of schools was based on stratification by geographic location (e.g., urban, rural) and class (SS2, SS3). In the second stage, learners within the selected schools were randomly sampled to participate in the study. The simple random sampling technique was used to select 55 students each from the ten selected schools. Inferential statistics was used in describing the data gathered from the field at 0.05 level of significance. Data was presented in tables. This was to make findings clearer and more understandable.

Data presentation and result

Hypothesis one: The null hypothesis stated that Academic expectation no significant relationship with psychosocial behaviour of learners in Nigeria.

The independent variable was academic expectation while the dependent was psychosocial behaviour. Pearson product moment correlation was used to test the hypothesis at .05 level of significance. The result of the analysis is presented in table 1 below

TABLE 1: Summary of Pearson product moment correlation analysis of the relationship between Academic expectation and psychosocial behaviour of learners

		Academic expectation	Psychosocial behaviour
ACADEMIC EXPECTATION	Pearson Correlation	1	.828**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	525	525
PSYCHOSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR	Pearson Correlation	.828**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	525	525

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The SPSS output analysis in table revealed a significant positive correlation between academic expectation and psychosocial behaviour of learners in Nigeria ($r = .828$, $p < 0.001$). this implies that Higher levels of academic expectation were associated with increased levels psychosocial behaviour.

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Hypothesis two: The null hypothesis stated that bullying has no significant relationship with psychosocial behaviour of learners in Nigeria. The independent variable was bullying while the dependent was psychosocial behaviour. Pearson product moment correlation was used to test the hypothesis at .05 level of significance. The result of the analysis is presented in table 2 below

TABLE 2: Summary of Pearson product moment correlation analysis of the relationship between bullying and psychosocial behaviour of learners

		Bullying	Psychosocial behaviour
BULLYING	Pearson Correlation	1	.773**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	525	525
PSYCHOSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR	Pearson Correlation	.773**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	525	525

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The analysis showed a significant positive correlation between bullying and psychosocial behaviour ($r = .773$, $p < 0.001$). Learners who reported higher levels of bullying also reported higher levels of psychosocial behaviour

Discussion of findings

The positive correlation between academic expectation and psychosocial behavior ($r = .828$, $p < 0.001$) suggests that higher levels of academic expectation are associated with enhanced psychosocial behavior among learners. This finding aligns with Smith et al. (2017), who argued that clear and high academic expectations provide a structured framework that motivates learners to develop resilience, emotional regulation, and effective peer relationships. Similarly, Galloway et al. (2018) found that when schools and educators communicate high but achievable expectations, students are more likely to engage positively with peers and exhibit adaptive behaviors. However, unrealistic or overly rigid academic expectations may also lead to stress, anxiety, and diminished psychosocial well-being, as noted by Espelage et al. (2018). Therefore, it is imperative for educators and stakeholders to strike a balance between challenging learners and providing adequate support to foster positive psychosocial outcomes.

The second analysis also showed a significant positive correlation between bullying experience and psychosocial behavior ($r = .773$, $p < 0.001$). This implies that learners experiencing higher levels of bullying are more likely to report issues with psychosocial behaviors, including anxiety, low self-esteem, and difficulties in emotional regulation. Thornberg et al. (2018) highlighted the detrimental impact of bullying on victims' emotional and social development, often leading to long-term psychological consequences. Moreover, Rose et al. (2018) emphasized that bullying disrupts the school environment, making it challenging for students to form positive peer relationships

and focus on academic goals. In some cases, exposure to bullying may lead to heightened aggression or withdrawal, further deteriorating psychosocial well-being. The bidirectional nature of this relationship underscores the need for targeted interventions to address both the root causes and consequences of bullying.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between school-related factors, mental health, and suicide among learners in Nigeria. The empirical findings revealed a significant prevalence of psychosocial behaviour, including depression, anxiety, and stress, among Nigerian learners. Academic expectation and bullying were identified as significant predictors of psychosocial behaviour. The significant relationships identified between academic expectations, bullying, and psychosocial behavior call for comprehensive educational strategies that address these variables holistically. As supported by existing research, fostering a positive, supportive educational environment is essential for enhancing psychosocial behavior and, ultimately, the overall well-being and success of learners.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, it is among others recommended that schools must prioritize creating an environment that sets realistic academic expectations while actively combating bullying through policies and programs that promote emotional intelligence, empathy, and inclusivity.

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