

Percieved Academic Competence on Students' Peer Acceptance and Task Engagement

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Abstract: The study examined the perceived academic competence on their peer acceptance and task engagement in Nsukka Education Zone. Three research questions and three null hypotheses guided the study. The study used an ex-post facto design. The population for the study was 10616 senior secondary II students and a sample of 121 SSII students who participated in a sociometric interview conducted by 24 teachers randomly sampled from eight (8) public secondary schools in Nsukka Education zone of Enugu State, Nigeria. The instruments for data collection were well structured interview schedule and questionnaire with 3 clusters; PACQ, PAQ and TEQ. Cronbach Alpha Reliability yielded 0.79, 0.85 and 0.76 respectively. Mean and standard deviation were used for data analysis while t-test was used to test the hypotheses. The result of the study indicates that students with positively perceived academic competence are more accepted by peers and are fully engaged in tasks, while those with negatively perceived academic competence were less accepted by peers and are less engaged in tasks. This shows that students' perceived academic competence of classmates has a significant influence on their peer acceptance and task engagements. It was recommended, among others, that teachers should develop individual differences that students perceive as acceptable through an inventory of the skills of each class member in order to give the needed self-confidence and prestige in the eyes of peers.

Key words: Academic Competence • Peer Influence • Task Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Clinical psychologists recognize social isolates and being rejected as among the most serious of problem cases. Even if this were not true from the stand point of adjustment and mental hygiene, it would be from an academic standpoint; as such children often lose the benefit of much class works because being rejected or isolated makes them not active participants in the learning process [1]. Furthermore, improved social relationships appear to have the following beneficial effects on individual learning. The security that arises from satisfying social relationships frees students of emotional tension and enables them to concentrate more on their assigned learning tasks; the social pressure arising from the feeling of being accepted by classmates increases the

students' motivation to learn which is partly due to students' desire to maintain status in the group and partly due to their feelings of loyalty and responsibility to the group members; the increased social contact accompanying peer acceptance aids in clarifying and reinforcing the students' classroom learning experiences by providing greater opportunity to exchange ideas with age mates; improved morale derived from satisfying social relationships in the classroom helps create in the students a favorable attitude toward the school in general. According to [2] success in educational/instructional activities depends on how well teacher and students know each other.

In affirmation to the above assertion [3] maintained that in schools, students strive to become part of the popular group. Unfortunately, in striving to achieve this,

the teens deviate from their normal ways of acting forgetting their academics which is their supposed pivotal aim of being in school and concentrate in making effort to fit in. [4] equally noted that within a given group, only those who conform to group norms have prestige within that group and that a student who strives to be an outstanding scholar in school may be rejected by the peers who believe that school work is for girls, the inferior and the fake guys. [4] pointed out that many students' relations within the school are jeopardized because the school groups have values that conflict with values held by other groups of which they are members.

A further observation by [4], that students need acceptance by their age mates and adults, they need to feel that they are a part of a group that is, have a sense of belonging. They also need attention and affection, a social structure or other influence that denies these needs create misery and maladjustment. Many of the factors that frustrate these needs are present in schools, such as excessive rivalry, limited reward, favoritism, retardation and many other conditions. A sociometric test in forty sixth-grade classrooms was carried out which proves that the neglecters are individuals who received relatively few choices and the isolates are those who received no choice from their peers and who frequently are social outcasts in the classroom. This clearly behooves the teachers to find out what characteristics are apt to lead to or be associated with popularity and enthusiasm, daring, pleasing appearances and cheerfulness. A further observation reveals that children who are highly chosen by their peers on a sociometric test tend to be intelligent, have higher scholastic achievement, are younger in age, have more pleasing physical appearances, more social and heterosexual interests, more need satisfying personality characteristics, more academically competent than children who receive few or no sociometric choices from their peers.

However, academic competence, as measured by the ACES-College, is defined as a multidimensional construct composed of the skills, attitudes and behaviors of a learner that contribute to academic success. As such, academic competence includes many of the critical skills reading, writing, calculating, solving problems, attending, questioning and studying needed for academic success [5]. It has been revealed that the skills, attitudes and behaviours contributing to academic competence fall into one of two domains: academic skills or academic enablers [6]. Academic skills are the basic and complex skills that are central part of academic curricula at the elementary and secondary levels of education and they play a critical

role in allowing students to learn content specific knowledge at the post-secondary level. Academic enablers are attitudes and behaviours that allow a student to benefit from instruction such as conducive learning environment which social acceptance is one of the major examples.

[7] equally on their sociometric test pointed out that students with low academic competence are either overlooked by their peers (socially neglecter) or are perceived by them as possessing an unpleasant appearance and socially ineffective and aggressive tendencies (socially rejecter) and their peers see them as not conforming to the group norms of behaviour, who retreats from social contact and who attempt to satisfy social needs through the domination of others.

In line with the above assertion [8] indicated that children with high peer acceptance tend to lack such characteristics, as those of low peer acceptance as they tend to participate actively and cooperate socially, whereas those of low peer acceptance do not. Students who are socially rejected by their peers tend to display such undesirable characteristics as showing off, attention seeking, nervousness, emotional instability and restlessness. They also show less favorable teacher ratings, more resentment towards group control, avoidance personality disorder and lack of self-control, as shown by having temper tantrum. Furthermore, the undesirable characteristics of the socially unaccepted are partially the cause of lack of peer acceptance and that peer rejection most likely helps to produce much of the acceptable behaviours. This strongly suggests that one important role of the teacher is to break into the vicious cycle where lack of peer acceptance helps produce unacceptable behaviour which tends to generate peer rejection.

[9] in his own observation pointed out that positive students' perceived academic competence of classmates is likely to be associated with high peer acceptance, high academic competence and are more likely to fully concentrate in their studies and adequately engage in tasks. Students with negative perceived academic competences were more likely to experience lower levels of peer acceptance and to be less engaged in school tasks.

Students' task engagement refers to their engagement in the task of learning. Students' task engagement is the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in the

education. Generally, students' task engagement is predicted on the belief that learning improves when students are inquisitive, interested or inspired and that learning tends to suffer when students are bored, dispassionate, disaffected or otherwise disengaged. However, students' task engagement may also refer to the ways in which school leaders, educators and other adults might engage students more fully in the governance and decision making process in school, in the design of programs and learning opportunities [10]. Teachers also have a role to play in students' engagement in the task of learning [11].

On a similar note, [12] explained students' task engagement as an indicator of successful classroom interaction which evolved from a desirable students' trait in relation to engagement in curriculum design and participation in building school climate. It also embraces a wider range of learning activities including participating in extra-curricular programs. Task engagement is a positive learning behaviours and emotions during learning. It also describes students' engagement as students' willingness to take part in school activities such as attending classes, doing homework and obeying teacher's instruction in class. Task engagement or engagement in learning and high motivation have also consistently been associated with the reduction in the rate of dropout and increased levels of students' success. [13] also opined that students' engagement is important in the learning outcomes because it predicts student academic progress and achievement. [14] believe that students who work individually must compete against their peers to gain praise or other forms of reinforcements. [15] peers have been perceived to play a tremendous role in the learning process.

[16] pointed out that the threat of social rejection lowers self-esteem, which activates the need to regain approval and acceptance. [14] opined that students who work individually compete against their peers to gain praise or other forms of reinforcement. Students that are socially accepted by peers are confident, bringing to new challenges a winning and motivating attitude which leads them to persist longer at tasks, sleep better at night, maintain their independence in the face of peers and are more likely to work towards higher academic competence. In any case, the variety of individual differences that students perceive as acceptable can be developed through an inventory of the skills of each class member and once this is found, opportunity for display of such skills should be given in order to give the needed self-confidence and prestige in the eyes of peer to enable

the students have full concentration in their studies and adequately engage in class tasks [1]. The present study is aimed at addressing the issues and filling the gaps.

Statement of the Pproblem: It has been observed that when students perceive classmates as academically incompetent, it may lead to negative self-image, depression, pessimism about the future and prone to failure. Lacking confidence, they bring to new tasks a losing attitude that traps them in a vicious, self-defeating cycle, that can lead to low self esteem and as a result lead to failure which they normally blame themselves when they fail and worst still less competent. Some researchers suggest that becoming aware of one's own negative attribute adversely affects the activity of certain white blood cells in the immune system, thus compromising the body's capacity to ward off diseases. However, good academic competence is pivotal and peculiar with positive peer acceptance and task engagement as it enhances self-confidence and courage to face difficult and challenging task, which would most likely result in excellent academic grades as they are better able to take part in beneficial academic exchanges with peers and teachers.

Theoretical Framework: The theory backing up this study is the humanistic theory. The humanistic theory by [17] and [18] primary motivational forces is to be self-actualizing, that is to grow or to be the kind of person in actuality that one is potentially capable of being. In [17] hierarchy of need, the love and belongingness needs and esteem need strongly affirm this research study by first explaining that the love need is described as a desire or hunger for affectionate relation with people in general and for a place in the group and the search for recognition, love and belongingness as a unique and worthwhile person, fulfillment of this need is accompanied by feeling of confidence, worth, strength, usefulness and competence which propels one to be perceived as academically competent and as well be highly engagement in academic tasks and accepted by peers.

Purpose of the Study: This study therefore, investigated the influence of students' perceived academic competence of classmates on peer acceptance and task engagement in Nsukka Education zone of Enugu state, Nigeria. In specific terms, the study sought to:

- Identify the nature of students' perceived academic competence of classmates.

- Ascertain the influence of perceived academic competence of classmates on students' peer acceptance.
- Ascertain the influence of perceived academic competence of classmates on students' task engagement.

Three research questions were postulated based on these issues;

- What is the nature of students' perceived academic competence of classmates?
- What is the influence of perceived academic competence of classmates on their peer acceptance?
- What the influence is of perceived of academic competence of classmates on students' task engagement?

The study hypothesized at (0.05) level of significant that there is no significance influence between the mean ratings of:

Ho₁: Positive and negative students' perceived academic competence of classmates.

Ho₂: Influence of perceived academic competence of classmates on students' peer acceptance.

Ho₃: Influence of perceived academic competence of classmates on students' task engagement.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

An ex-post-facto research design was adopted for this study. The design is appropriate since the study sought representative views of secondary school students on the problem of the study. The Population of 10616 senior secondary II students and a sample of 121 SSII students who participated in a sociometric interview conducted by 24 teachers randomly sampled from eight (8) public secondary schools in Nsukka Education zone of Enugu State, Nigeria were used for the study. Stratified random sampling technique was used to draw 121 SSII Secondary school students from public secondary schools in the area of the study.

The instruments for data collection were well structured 37 researcher-developed interview schedule and questionnaire known as Students' Academic and Sociometric Report (SASR) of 3 clusters; 1. Perceived Academic Competence of Classmates (PACCQ), 2.

Peer Acceptance (PAQ) and Task Engagement (TEQ). It was a Likert-type questionnaire of four point rating scale meant to determine students' perceived academic competence of classmates on their peer acceptance and task engagement in Nsukka Education zone, Enugu State, Nigeria. The scale ranged from Strongly Agree (SA) 4 points, Agree (A) 3 points, Disagree (D) 2 points, Strongly Disagree (SD) 1 point. The items in the three sections were developed based on information acquired through review of literature and also based on the researchers' many years of experiences with students as secondary school teachers.

To ensure the validity of the instrument, it was peer reviewed by three experts in educational psychology and one in Arts education all in the faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The inputs of the experts were meaningful and helped in shaping the final version of the instrument. Scores obtained through the trial testing were used in the computation of reliability estimate using Cronbach Alpha Reliability which yielded 0.79, 0.85 and 0.76 respectively. The researchers personally administered the instrument to the respondents with the help of six research assistants. The entire questionnaire were correctly filled and returned. The data collected through the questionnaire was analyzed using standard deviation to answer the research questions while t-test was used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 probability level. The benchmark for acceptance and rejection for each item on the questionnaire was 2.50 cut-off point, for item that scored less than 2.50 was rejected and those above 2.50 was accepted.

RESULTS

Results of the study were presented based on the research questions and corresponding hypotheses.

Table 1 presents the data elicited by research question 1 and hypothesis 1.

The above Table 1 shows that out of a total of 121 respondents 64 were shown through their mean scores to have been perceived positively by classmates to be academic competent, whereas 57 of them were perceived negatively by classmates as negative in their academic competence. The data revealed a mean score of the positively perceived as 3.01 and that of the negatively perceived as 1.39. This shows that the students who were positively perceived scored higher than those that were negatively perceived. The corresponding hypothesis which predicted no significant difference between the positively and the negatively perceived was subjected to

Table 1: Mean scores of respondents showing the nature of students' perceived academic competence by classmates and the t-test statistical analysis of the nature of students' mean difference on nature of students' perceived academic competence by classmates

Students' Perceived							
Academic Competence	No.	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Decision
Positive	64	3.01	0.66	16.319	119	.000	Rejected
Negative	57	1.39	0.42				
	121						

Table 2: Mean scores of respondents showing influence of students' perceived academic competence by classmates on their peer acceptance

Students' Perceived							
Academic Competence	No	Mean	SD	t	df	sig (2-tailed)	Decision
Positive Peer Acceptance	64	3.19	0.47	18.231	119	.000	Rejected
Negative Peer Acceptance	57	1.43	0.52				
	121						

Table 3: Mean scores of respondents showing the influence of students' perceived academic competence of classmates on their task engagement

Students' Perceived							
Academic Competence	No	Mean	SD	t	df	sig (2-tailed)	Decision
High Task Engagement	64	3.11	0.51	16.108	119	.000	Rejected
Low Task Engagement	57	1.38	0.56				
	121						

t-test analysis which revealed a significant level of .000 which is less than 0.05 level of significance at which the null hypothesis was tested. This indicates a significant difference between the positively and the negatively perceived. The null hypothesis 1 is therefore rejected.

As Table 2 shows, the result of the data revealed the mean score for the influence of positively perceived academic competence of classmates on peer acceptance as 3.19 and that of the influence of negatively perceived academic competence of classmates on peer acceptance as 1.43. This shows that the students that were perceived by peers as positive in academic competence scored higher in their mean rating and were more accepted by peers whereas those perceived by classmates as negative in academic competence scored lower in their mean rating and were less accepted by peers. The corresponding hypothesis, which predicted no significant influence of students' perceived academic competence of classmates on their peer acceptance was subjected to t-test. The result indicates that the influence of students' perceived academic competence of classmates on their peer acceptance is significant at .000 which is less than 0.05 level of significance at which the null hypothesis was tested. This result, therefore, reveals a significant influence of students' perceived academic competence on peer acceptance. The null hypothesis 2 is therefore rejected.

Data presented in Table 3 indicates the mean score of the influence of students' positively perceived academic competence of classmates on task engagement is 3.11

while that of the influence of students' negatively perceived academic competence of classmates on task engagement is 1.38. This shows that the students that were perceived by peers as positive in academic competence had higher mean score and were more engaged in tasks whereas those perceived by classmates as negative in academic competence scored lower in their mean rating and were less engaged in tasks. The corresponding hypothesis that predicted no significant influence of students' perceived academic competence of classmates on their task engagement was subjected to t-test. The result revealed significance at .000, which is less than 0.05 level of significance at which the null hypothesis was tested. This indicates that students' perceived academic competence of classmates has a significant influence on the students' task engagement. The null hypothesis 3 is therefore rejected.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data in Table 1 shows the nature of students' perceived academic competence of classmates. The finding shows that the students that were positively perceived by classmates to be positive in academic competence scored higher in their mean rating whereas the negatively perceived are associated with negative academic competence and lower mean score. The finding of the present study is in concordance with that of [7] on their sociometric test that students with low academic competence are either overlooked by their peers

(socially neglecter) or are perceived by them as possessing an unpleasant appearance and socially ineffective and aggressive tendencies (socially rejecter) and their peers see them as not conforming to the group norms of 1212behavior, who retreats from social contact and who attempt to satisfy social needs through the domination of others, Another observation by [3] reveals that students with positive self-perceptions (self-concepts) and higher social skills (social competence) are more likely to succeed in school. For example, levels of self-concept predicted academic achievement. Likewise, socially competent students achieve superior academic grades because they are better able to take part in beneficial academic exchanges with peers and teachers. A critical view of these findings indicates that students with negative perceived academic competence are likely to be pessimistic about the future and lack self-confidence to be fully concentrated in their studies.

This study also found that students with positive perceived academic competence are more accepted by peers and are fully engaged in classroom tasks whereas students with negative perceived academic competence were less accepted by peers and are less engaged in tasks. The Findings of this study shows a significant influence of students' perceived academic competence of classmates on their peer acceptance and task engagement. This shows that the students that were positively perceived by peers as positive in academic competence scored higher in their mean rating and were more accepted by peers whereas those perceived by classmates as negative in academic competence scored lower in their mean rating were less accepted by peers. The result of this study aligns with [4] who observed that students need acceptance by their age mates and adults, they need to feel that they are a part of a group- that is, have a sense of belonging. They also need attention and affection, a social structure or other influence that denies these needs creates misery and maladjustment. There is a clear indication from the findings that students not socially accepted by peers tend to display such undesirable characteristics as showing off, attention seeking, nervousness, emotional instability and restlessness [18].

It was also found that students that were perceived by peers as positive in academic competence had higher mean score and were more engaged in tasks whereas those perceived by classmates as negative in academic competence scored lower in their mean rating and were less engaged in tasks. This agrees with [19], who states

that when students are accepted by peers they become confident, bringing to new challenges a winning and motivating attitude which leads them to persist longer at difficult tasks whereas when students are rejected or less accepted by peers they lack confidence and bring to new tasks a losing attitude that traps them in a vicious self-defeating cycle. Expecting fail and fearing the worst, they become anxious, exert less effort and "tune out" on important challenges.

This study gives more insight and awareness on the challenges faced by students in schools and the best solutions to address the problems that may retard their academic competence. This has implications for students' morale, self-esteem and academic competence. The findings of this study altogether have implications for further studies on the students' self-confidence, prestige and self-worth in eyes of the peers.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, it is important for the parents and teachers to be close and friendly with the children in order to guide, direct them appropriately when necessary. Moreover, they should be encouraged to practice good hygiene in order to have self-confidence. They should equally be encouraged to be involved in academic activities and to actually understand that academics are pivotal to other activities.

Despite the above influences of students' perceived academic competence of class mates on peer acceptance and task engagement, the peers can still be encouraged to regain self-confidence and self esteem in order to challenge some of the positively perceived academic competent students.

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