

Enhancing Secondary School Student Academic Performance in Nigeria: the Critical Roles of Teacher Training and Classroom Environment.

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.9010308>

Received: 20 December 2024; Accepted: 24 December 2024; Published: 20 February 2025

ABSTRACT

This study ascertained the critical roles of teacher training and classroom environment on secondary school students' academic performance in Nigeria. The synergy between teacher training, classroom management, and students' academic performance is fundamental to enhancing students' educational performance and shaping educational outcomes in our society. Teacher training refers to the systematic and organized process of preparing individuals to become effective educators by acquiring pedagogical knowledge, content expertise, teaching skills, and professional competencies. This can be achieved through a physical, social, emotional, and intellectual atmosphere that significantly influences students' learning experiences and outcomes. A well-designed classroom environment significantly contributes to students' academic success. Hence, it is necessary to create a supportive classroom environment where students feel valued, understood, and emotionally safe, as it contributes to their overall well-being and academic success. The study therefore concluded that teacher training programs improve instructional methods and equip teachers to establish and maintain positive classroom environments. The classroom environment acts as a mediator between teacher training and student performance, highlighting its pivotal role in the educational process. A positive classroom atmosphere enhances the application of teaching strategies learned during training, leading to improved cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes for students. Hence, it is recommended that secondary school management boards enhance teacher training programs by developing comprehensive programs that cover subject-specific content and a variety of pedagogical strategies. These strategies should include modern teaching methods, differentiated instruction, and techniques for fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Keywords: Teacher Training, Classroom Environment, Student Academic Performance.

INTRODUCTION

In the realm of education, effective classroom management stands as a cornerstone for fostering an environment conducive to learning and academic success. The role of teachers in shaping this dynamic cannot be overemphasized, especially in secondary schools where students are undergoing critical stages of academic and personal growth. Secondary school is a critical stage of personal growth for students as they transition from childhood to adolescence, facing numerous challenges related to identity, social relationships, and self-esteem (Hanewald, 2013). Teachers act as mentors and role models, providing guidance, encouragement, and support to help students navigate these developmental stages successfully. They foster a positive classroom culture that promotes resilience, empathy, self-confidence, and a growth mindset. Therefore, teacher training involves a structured process through which individuals learn the necessary skills, knowledge, and techniques to become effective educators (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust & Shulman, 2005; Richardson, 1999). The classroom environment encompasses the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual atmosphere within a classroom, which significantly impacts students' learning experiences and outcomes.

The teaching profession is generally seen as noble, with teachers and their work in the classroom often likened to the bricklayers of society and the powerhouse of the school system. It is often regarded as a noble profession because educators play a crucial role in shaping the future through the education and guidance they provide to students. They are often seen as foundational to society, laying the groundwork for the success and progress of future generations. According to Vazir and Meher (2010), teachers are not only responsible for imparting knowledge but also for instilling values, fostering critical thinking, and nurturing personal development. Their impact extends far beyond the classroom, influencing the fabric of society itself. Hence, the way they manage the classroom makes a significant difference. Good classroom management is important for effective teaching and learning to take place. Teacher education and the classroom environment enhance students' academic performance in diverse ways. Proper teacher training equips educators with diverse teaching strategies tailored to address students' varying learning styles and needs (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2007). According to Orlich, Harder, Callahan, Trevisan, and Brown (2010), teachers utilize various teaching strategies, such as instructional models, organizational models, and questioning techniques, to maximize student learning. This versatility allows teachers to engage students more effectively, leading to improved understanding and retention of academic material. Teacher training often emphasizes the importance of establishing positive relationships with students. A supportive and encouraging classroom environment fosters trust, respect, and open communication, leading to increased student motivation and willingness to participate in learning activities. Training in classroom management techniques helps teachers create an organized and disciplined learning environment. Clear expectations, consistent discipline, and proactive behaviour management strategies contribute to a focused classroom atmosphere conducive to learning. Ongoing teacher training ensures that students are proficient in integrating technology into their teaching practices. Incorporating educational tools and digital resources enhances student engagement, facilitates interactive learning experiences, and prepares students for a technology-driven world.

A well-designed classroom environment contributes significantly to students' academic success. Factors such as classroom layout, decor, seating arrangements, and the availability of learning materials all play a crucial role in creating a positive and stimulating learning environment that fosters student engagement and achievement. Continuous teacher training and professional development opportunities enable educators to stay updated on the latest educational trends, methodologies, and research-backed practices. This continuous growth and learning enable teachers to constantly refine their teaching approaches, ultimately benefiting students' academic performance. Teacher training often includes strategies for addressing students' social and emotional needs. Creating a supportive and empathetic classroom environment where students feel valued, understood, and emotionally safe contributes to their overall well-being and academic success.

By prioritizing teacher training and fostering a conducive classroom environment, secondary schools can significantly enhance students' academic performance, promote holistic development, and create a positive educational experience for all learners. Within the context of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, it is observed that there are inadequate resources and infrastructure in classrooms, insufficient support and professional development opportunities for teachers, negative classroom environments characterized by factors such as overcrowding, poor classroom management, and limited access to educational materials, lack of comprehensive teacher training programs, and disparities in teaching quality among trained and untrained teachers. Hence, the interaction between teachers' perceptions of effective classroom management and its influence on secondary school students' academic performance emerges as a focal point of inquiry. The study aimed to ascertain the critical roles of teacher training and classroom environment on secondary school students' academic performance in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teacher Training

Teacher training is a structured process through which students acquire the necessary skills, knowledge, and techniques to become effective educators and involves a combination of theoretical learning, practical experience, and professional development aimed at preparing teachers to facilitate learning, manage classrooms, design curriculum, assess student progress, and engage with educational stakeholders effectively. It is the systematic and organized process of preparing individuals to become effective educators by acquiring

pedagogical knowledge, content expertise, teaching skills, and professional competencies (Mohan, 2019). It encompasses formal education programs, workshops, seminars, mentoring, and other structured activities designed to enhance teachers' instructional effectiveness, classroom management abilities, subject matter proficiency, and overall professional development. Teacher training programs often cover areas such as pedagogy, subject-specific content, classroom management, educational technology, and cultural competency (Korthagen, 2016; Tamaro & D'Alessio, 2016). According to Abolade (1996), teaching involves transmitting knowledge and encoding information to enable learners to adjust their behavior accordingly. It encompasses a series of actions aimed at eliciting changes in the learner's behaviour. Some scholars define teaching as guiding the learner through a progression of statements and clarifications regarding a problem or knowledge domain, thereby enhancing the learner's capacity to comprehend, adapt, and apply acquired knowledge. Gagne (1970) defines teaching as the orchestrated sequence of actions aimed at instigating, stimulating, and sustaining learning in individuals. He further suggests that the teacher assumes roles as the architect, overseer, and assessor of learning. Thus, active participation from both the teacher and the learner is imperative throughout the teaching and learning process. Conversely, Penn (1982) advocates for a teaching approach that nurtures genuine learning by fostering curiosity, nurturing an inquisitive spirit, promoting critical questioning, and ensuring that the learner grasps what is personally significant and meaningful. The ultimate goal of teacher training is to equip educators with the competencies and confidence needed to foster positive learning outcomes and contribute meaningfully to students' academic and personal growth. There has been a shift in focus towards assessing teachers' competence based solely on their ability to handle their subject matter, rather than evaluating their professional capacity to effectively manage the classroom and prepare lesson plans and notes. Consequently, there is a pressing need to instill professional skills in our teachers to enable them to proficiently transfer knowledge and contribute to building a great society through the educational institution.

Educational institutions play a crucial role in providing learning experiences that help students progress from a state of ignorance to enlightenment through knowledge. They serve as the foundation for shaping students' understanding and knowledge and are crucial in providing structured learning experiences that help students progress from a state of not knowing or ignorance to a state of enlightenment, where they possess knowledge and understanding. Within these institutions, teachers play a crucial role in facilitating this transformative journey. They are fundamental figures who play a pivotal role in guiding students through this transformative journey. They are not just conveyors of information but also mentors, facilitators, and role models. According to Griffith and Burns (2012), teachers design and deliver lessons, act as facilitators, create engaging learning environments, provide guidance and feedback, and inspire students to explore and discover. The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) (1998) stated in "Quality Concerns in Secondary Teacher Education" that teachers stand as the most crucial component within any educational program. The primary responsibility for implementing the educational process at every stage lies with the teacher. This underscores the critical need to invest in teacher preparation, ensuring the secure future of a nation. Therefore, the importance of skilled teachers in the national school system cannot be overstated. This can yield several benefits, including an improved educational system, enhanced student performance, increased economic development, social and cultural development, and long-term impact. Complex challenges in societies are addressed when educated individuals are better equipped to participate in democratic processes and contribute positively to their communities and the country as a whole.

Classroom Environment

A classroom environment refers to the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual atmosphere that significantly influences students' learning experiences and outcomes. It encompasses various elements such as the physical layout and organization of the classroom, the interactions between teachers and students, peer interactions, instructional materials, classroom culture, norms, and expectations, and the overall tone and ambiance of the learning space. However, Fraser (1986) argued that a classroom environment reflects a shared perception between the students and the teacher in that environment. This suggests that the classroom environment is not solely determined by the physical space or the teacher's actions alone. It is shaped by the combined perceptions and interactions of students and teachers. For instance, if the students perceive the atmosphere as supportive, engaging, and conducive to learning, and if the teacher shares this perception, then the overall classroom environment is likely to be positive. On the contrary, if there is a disconnect between students' and teachers'

perceptions — for instance, if the teacher perceives the environment as welcoming and stimulating while the students find it dull or intimidating — then there might be tensions or challenges within the classroom dynamic.

Harrop (1993) proposed that effective classroom management hinges on the teacher's comprehensive understanding of behavior modification techniques within the classroom setting, along with an appreciation for the myriad decisions involved in student interactions. Dambo (1993) emphasizes that effective teaching requires an understanding of sociological dynamics both within and beyond the classroom. Moreover, outside the classroom, students observe and emulate various behaviors, encompassing those conducive to learning as well as those that may disrupt the lesson. A positive classroom environment is characterized by a sense of safety, respect, inclusivity, and support, where students feel valued, motivated, and empowered to engage actively in learning. It promotes collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and social-emotional development, fostering a conducive setting for academic achievement and personal growth. Effective teachers often cultivate and maintain a positive classroom environment by creating clear expectations, establishing routines, building positive relationships, providing meaningful feedback, addressing individual needs, and promoting a culture of mutual respect and continuous learning. According to Onwuka (1981), the lack of a positive classroom environment leads to disorder, disrupting teaching and learning processes. This may manifest in various issues such as noise, shuffling, disobedience, absenteeism, and tardiness. Bello (1981) asserted that the classroom environment involves the teacher's efforts to maintain order and discipline among students, ensuring that learning proceeds smoothly and without interruption. Okoh (1993) suggested that the classroom environment should involve teachers acknowledging individual differences among students and striving to provide personalized attention whenever possible. It's worth noting that the prevailing conditions in which teaching occurs often lead to teachers dominating the learning environment. Hence, it is crucial to promote a positive classroom environment that enhances students' learning, increases their motivation, and improves their behaviour. A positive atmosphere fosters engagement, curiosity, and enthusiasm, resulting in enhanced academic performance and improved retention of information. Students feel motivated to participate, take risks, and explore new ideas when they feel safe, respected, and supported in the classroom. A supportive environment can lead to improved behaviour and fewer disruptions or disciplinary issues.

Student Academic Performance

Student academic performance refers to the level of achievement or success a student demonstrates in their academic pursuits, usually assessed through grades, test scores, and overall comprehension of the subject matter. It encompasses various aspects of learning, achievement, and development, such as the ability to comprehend and apply concepts, engage in class activities, complete assignments, and perform well on assessments. According to Zeegers (2004), student academic performance is typically seen as the measurement of a student's achievement across various academic subjects. This performance is assessed through a variety of metrics, including grades, standardized test scores, class participation, and other forms of academic assessments. It encompasses a range of cognitive abilities, including knowledge retention, critical thinking, problem-solving, and application of learned concepts. Several factors contribute to students' academic performance, such as innate abilities, study habits, motivation, teacher effectiveness, school environment, and external factors like family support and socioeconomic status (Lamas, 2015). Each student brings a unique set of abilities, interests, and backgrounds to the learning environment. Factors such as intelligence, motivation, self-regulation skills, and socio-economic status can influence their academic performance. More so, the quality of teaching, curriculum design, school resources, class size, and school culture all play critical roles in shaping students' academic performance. Supportive learning environments that foster engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking tend to yield better academic outcomes (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006). Family support and involvement in a student's education have a significant impact on academic performance. Factors such as parental expectations, involvement in homework supervision, access to educational resources at home, and family socio-economic status can influence students' success in school. Peers play an essential role in shaping students' academic attitudes, behaviors, and achievements. Positive peer relationships, peer tutoring, collaborative learning experiences, and a supportive peer culture can enhance academic performance, while negative peer influences may hinder it. Personal factors such as health, well-being, mental health, and extracurricular activities can impact students' academic performance. Physical and mental health issues, stress, anxiety, and a lack of balance between academic and non-academic pursuits can impact learning outcomes. The students' academic performance is

usually assessed using various measures, including grades, standardized tests, attendance and drop-out rates, GPA (Grade Point Average), and teacher evaluations (McKee & Caldarella, 2016; Kelly, 2018; Sulphey, Al-Kahtani & Syed, 2018). Grades in individual subjects provide a quantitative measure of student achievement and progress. Standardized assessments, such as state exams, college entrance exams (e.g., WAEC, NECO, JAMB, NABTEB), and international assessments (e.g., PISA), offer standardized measures of student proficiency in core subjects. Attendance records and dropout rates reflect students' engagement and commitment to their education. The GPA aggregates a student's grades across multiple subjects into a single numerical value, providing an overall measure of academic achievement. Teachers' observations, assessments, and feedback provide qualitative insights into students' academic strengths, weaknesses, and progress. By creating supportive learning environments, fostering positive relationships, and addressing individual needs, secondary schools can promote academic success and overall student well-being.

Teacher Training, Classroom Environment, and Student Academic Performance

Teacher training directly influences the quality of the classroom environment and student academic performance by equipping educators with the knowledge, skills, and mindset needed to create a positive, inclusive, and conducive learning environment for all students. It plays a pivotal role in shaping the classroom environment, influencing everything from instructional strategies to classroom management techniques (Flores & Day, 2006; Emmer & Stough, 2003). Moreover, students are inclined to achieve better academic results when they are instructed by well-trained teachers within a supportive classroom environment. Through teacher training programs, educators learn various pedagogical techniques tailored to different learning styles and student needs. These techniques enable teachers to create engaging lessons that cater to diverse learners, fostering an inclusive and supportive classroom environment. An effective classroom environment is crucial for maintaining a positive learning atmosphere. Teacher training equips educators with strategies for managing student behavior, promoting respect, and resolving conflicts constructively. A well-managed classroom fosters a sense of order, safety, and belonging, enabling students to concentrate on learning without interruptions or distractions. Teacher training emphasizes the importance of differentiated instruction, which involves adapting teaching methods and materials to meet the individual needs of students. By understanding diverse learning styles, abilities, and backgrounds, teachers can create an inclusive classroom environment where every student feels valued and challenged at their appropriate level. In today's multicultural classrooms, teachers must be culturally competent to effectively engage with students from diverse backgrounds. Teacher training programs incorporate cultural competency training to help educators understand and respect the cultural norms, values, and perspectives of their students. A culturally responsive classroom environment fosters mutual understanding, appreciation, and equity among students.

With the increasing role of technology in education, teacher training programs integrate technology tools and resources into curriculum planning and instruction. Teachers learn how to leverage technology to enhance learning experiences, facilitate collaboration, and promote digital literacy in the classroom. A technologically integrated classroom environment fosters innovation, creativity, and 21st-century skills among students. Recognizing the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) in education, teacher training programs incorporate SEL strategies and practices into their curriculum. Educators learn how to cultivate emotional intelligence, empathy, and resilience in students, establishing a supportive and nurturing classroom environment where emotional well-being is prioritized equally with academic achievement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study emphasizes the crucial relationship between teacher training, classroom management, and student academic performance in shaping educational outcomes. Well-trained teachers possess the pedagogical skills, subject knowledge, and classroom management techniques necessary to create effective and engaging learning environments. These environments, characterized by supportive, inclusive, and resource-rich settings, are essential for fostering student engagement, motivation, and academic success. Empirical evidence consistently shows that teacher quality, improved through rigorous training and ongoing professional development, is one of the most significant factors influencing student achievement. Teacher training programs not only enhance teachers' instructional methods but also prepare them to establish and maintain positive classroom environments. Such environments encourage active participation, reduce behavioral issues, and promote a culture of respect

and curiosity, all of which are conducive to learning. The classroom environment acts as a mediator between teacher training and student performance, highlighting its pivotal role in the educational process. A positive classroom atmosphere enhances the application of teaching strategies learned during training, leading to improved cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes for students. More so, the feedback loop created by successful student performance motivates teachers to continually refine their practices and sustain a supportive learning environment.

In conclusion, the synergy between teacher training and classroom environment is fundamental to enhancing secondary school students' academic performance. Educational policies and programs that invest in comprehensive teacher training and prioritize the development of supportive classroom environments are likely to see substantial improvements in student achievement. By recognizing and addressing the interconnectedness of these elements, stakeholders can create optimal conditions for educational success and long-term student development. Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations were proposed:

1. The secondary school management board should enhance teacher training programs by developing comprehensive programs that encompass subject-specific content and a variety of pedagogical strategies. These strategies should include modern teaching methods, differentiated instruction, and techniques for fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
2. They should include comprehensive training modules on classroom management techniques to assist teachers in establishing and sustaining positive and orderly learning environments.
3. They should encourage the creation of emotionally supportive and inclusive classrooms, which can be achieved by training teachers to build positive relationships with students and fostering a culture of respect and collaboration.
4. They should also establish mentoring programs where experienced teachers support new and less experienced teachers, providing guidance and sharing best practices in teaching and classroom management.

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