

DIFFERENCES IN SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS AND LEARNED HELPLESSNESS AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN A PUBLIC AND PRIVATE UNIVERSITY IN OSUN STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined differences in school connectedness and learned helplessness among students of a private (Redeemer's University, Ede) and public university (Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife) in Osun state, south-west Nigeria. The study utilized an exploratory cross-sectional survey design.

278 under-graduate university students were purposively sampled from both universities using a non-probability sampling method. Instruments include, the Learned Helplessness Scale ($r = 0.86$) and Measurement of School Connectedness (MOSC) questionnaire ($r = 0.72$).

Results show that OAU students had a significantly higher mean score on learned helplessness as opposed to RUN students. OAU students likewise, had significantly lower mean scores on three of the four domains of school connectedness: belonging, communication and connectedness with teachers than RUN students. However, no significant relationship was found between learned helplessness and school connectedness. Further research is recommended to extensively study the variables.

Keywords: *Learned helplessness, school climate, school connectedness, students, IUniversity*

Introduction

In modern day society, the school is a substantial part of an average adolescent's life. Schools provide students with the opportunities to learn life skills, academic skills and form lasting bonds of networks of friendships and influence. It is important to note that the ability of students to bond with their schools and develop effectually is very crucial to their academic and life outcomes (Hargreaves, 2001; Willms, 2002, 2004; Paulus, 2005).

This study is an exploratory study examining the differences in school connectedness and learned helplessness between a private and public university in Osun state, south-west Nigeria. Findings from this work would contribute to literature about the role of school processes and climate in shaping student achievement in different types of schools. School connectedness comprises of a student's experience at school as well as his/her perceptions and feelings about school (Kendziora, Osher, & Chinen, 2008). Several studies have shown that the best predictors of school connectedness are related to school climate (Esselmont, 2014; Cohen, 2006; Center for social & Emotional Education; Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004; Beger, Alamos, Milicic, & Alcalay, 2013; Burdick, 2013).

School climate is related to a student's bond with the school, because without a positive school climate, students are unlikely to experience connectedness. In the psychological aspects, the student's level of school connectedness modulates the association between academic stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms (Resnick et al., 1997; Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002; Cemalcilar, 2010; Liu & Lu, 2011; Liu, 2012). At a behavioural level, low school connectedness is associated with increased cases of sexual risks, aggression, bullying, carrying weapons to school, substance use and gang belonging (McNeely & Falci, 2004; Brookmeyer, Fanti, & Henrich, 2006; Bond et al., 2007; Mehta, Cornell, Dan, & Gregory, 2013; Bradshaw, 2013).

In Nigeria, the university school system is divided into public and private schools. The public universities are owned and funded by the government at the federal or state government levels, while the private universities are owned and funded by a variety of Faith Based Organisations (FBOs), private individuals, corporate ownerships and partnerships (Ahunanya & Osakwe, 2012). The establishment of private universities was enabled by Decree No. 16 of 1985 as amended by Decree No 9 of 1993, with 'licenses to operate' issued in 1999 to four private universities. According to the Education Sector Analysis (2012), the introduction of private universities was enabled by the high rate of unsatisfied demand for university education in Nigeria without any concurrent positive development in the areas of physical growth and infrastructural facilities.

School climate vary greatly in public and private universities. Conway (1994) using the distinction of two kinds of societies put forward by Ferdinand Tonnies, a German sociologist, in 1887, offers an explanation for the more positive view of private schools over public schools. Conway used the German terms *gesellschaft* and *gemeinschaft* to describe the different cultures presented in private and public schools. The public schools are said to have a *gesellschaft* culture, which is based on the relationships that staff and students' form in their quest to accomplish individual goals. The private schools are described as having a *gemeinschaft* culture, which is built on the relationships that develop from shared goals, loyalties, and attitude. Thus, private schools are seen as a more cohesive unit because the staff, students, and parents of the students have common goals and beliefs. The homogeneity of private schools is well documented as private schools have been found to be less diverse than public schools (Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982). The culture of the private schools is also much clearer than that of public schools because of the use of rituals and traditions to share what the school deems important.

It is the opinion of some people, although highly debated, that private schools are better in terms of the availability of human and physical facilities and consequently students' performance than public schools (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006; Braun, Jenkins & Grigg, 2006). An advantage of private education is that the 'objectives' of owners of the schools are much more pronounced and present than in public schools. This is reflected in better management and more flexible and responsive systems. The administration of private universities is concise - students who enrol for a four-year program are sure of completing the programme within the specified period. This is not the case in public universities, with the incessant strikes by the various staff unions within the schools, as well as students' unrest emanating from various challenges being faced within the school environment.

Public universities have very high enrolments. This could be attributed to the size of the school, the variety of courses available, the standard of education due to experienced and highly skilled teachers, and lower fees. The student population of a public university coupled with problems of inadequate infrastructure makes it hard for students to learn and assimilate. Private universities are hardly faced with issues like these because they invest more in facilities and ensure that student population is properly managed.

The staff-to-student ratio in private universities is low compared to that of public universities. Studies have shown that as school size increases, students tend to report lower levels of school satisfaction and more student-teacher alienation (Bowen, Bowen, & Richman, 2000; Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004; Kearney, 2008; Thompson, Iachan, Overpeck, Ross, & Gross, 2006). For teachers in private universities, they feel more committed and connected in their work, and a greater sense of responsibility for ongoing student learning. Research also provide empirical support that as school size increases, students tend to have less

participation in school activities, higher absenteeism, lower levels of academic achievement, and higher dropout rates (Ready, Lee, & Welner, 2004; Jones, Toma, & Zimmer, 2008).

School climate is an important element of school life, given that it shapes the interactions and affects the development of its members. Learned helplessness is a potential human response to a variety of psychological, physiological, and sociological experiences resulting from an inability to influence the outcomes of events felt to be significant to an individual (Collins, 1967; Seligman, 1975; Seligman, & Maier, 1967). Learned helplessness is dependent on interference with escape/avoidance learning following repeated, but failed, attempts at manipulating a situation. As an individual repeatedly fails to effect a change in a situation, the individual learns of his or her response-outcome disconnect. The eventual outcome of this interference with learning is the impairment of behaviour to escape or avoid situations interpreted by an individual to be undesirable (Cunningham, 2002b; Svetaz, Ireland, & Blum, 2002).

This study is guided by the following hypotheses:

1. Learned helplessness will be significantly higher among students of the public university as opposed to students of the private university.
2. School connectedness would be significantly higher among students of the private university as opposed to students of the public university

Methodology

Sample

The study sample consisted of students of Redeemer's University, Ede (RUN; private university), and Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife (OAU; public university), Osun State, Nigeria. A total of three hundred students – 150 from each university- were recruited to participate in the study. These students were selected from 200 – 400 levels of study, and across three colleges/faculties – Humanities/Arts; Management & Social Sciences; Sciences. The reason 200 to 400 levels students were used in this study is because we wanted to objectively measure their level of school connectedness which might be difficult to obtain from 100 level students since they just started school. These were purposively chosen because RUN had only these three colleges at the time of the study, so for the purpose of uniformity, OAU was restricted to these three faculties also. Fifty students were selected from each college /faculty by non-random probability sampling.

Research design

This research adopted a cross-sectional survey research design with the use of a structured questionnaire for data collected, which was used to measure learned helplessness and school connectedness.

Research Instruments

The Learned Helplessness Scale (LHS), was taken from a study that examined learned helplessness (Quinless & Nelson, 1988) and was adopted for this study. The questionnaire examined the cognitive, motivational and emotional components of learned helplessness among the students. The LHS is a 20-item, 4-point Likert scale, with scores ranging from 20 to 80, with higher scores suggesting greater helplessness due to the perception that events are beyond the respondent's control. Cronbach's alpha for this study is $r = 0.86$.

Measurement of School Connectedness (MOSC), questionnaire, by Irina Sugar (2012). The questionnaire contains 24 items written in a 4-point Likert scale format with responses ranging from "strongly agree" (0 points) to "strongly disagree" (3 points). Possible scores range from 0 to 72 with higher scores indicative of a stronger connection with the school by the respondent. Cronbach's alpha was $r=0.72$. Four domains are

included in the MOSC: (1.) being liked by students (9 questions). The questions address student's feelings of being accepted, liked, and connected to fellow students, generally reflecting whether a positive and friendly atmosphere exists within a school community; (2.) belonging (7 questions). Questions in this domain measures the sense of pride students' have about their schools and what it represents to the general public; (3.) communication (4 questions). This domain addresses students' feeling of safety in communication, being able to express themselves, experience appreciation of others, and communicate their needs; (4.) being liked by teachers (4 questions). The fourth domain questions students' feeling of being accepted and respected by their lecturers.

Data Analysis

Standard deviation, mean and frequency tables were used to summarize the participant's scores for gender, age, levels, learned helplessness and school connectedness. Students' sense of school connectedness and learned helplessness are the outcome (dependent) variables in this study while the independent variable is school type – public or private school. Difference between mean scores of both schools was analyzed using the independent t-test.

Results

A total of 300 questionnaires were administered in the course of the study, however, only 278 (92.7%) questionnaires were completed and returned. In RUN, 147 questionnaires were returned for the 150 administered, while for OAU, 131 questionnaires were returned.

Background of Respondents

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample. The age range of the students is between 16 - 30 years with almost half of them aged between 20-24 years (48.6%). More than half are females (51.8%) and are students of RUN (52.9%).

Table 1: Socio-demographic distribution of the respondents

Variable	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	134	48.2
Female	144	51.8
Age		
16-19	74	26.6
20-24	135	48.6
25-30	69	24.8
Institution		
RUN	147	52.9
OAU	131	47.1
Level of Study		
200	89	32.0
300	93	33.5
400	96	34.5

*Frequency total across all variables is 278. Percentage total is 100%.

School differences in School Connectedness and Learned Helplessness

To test the first hypothesis that learned helplessness would be significantly higher in the public university as opposed to the private university, an independent t-test was conducted and a significant mean difference was found between OAU students ($M= 58.61$, $S.D. = 8.66$) and RUN students ($M= 55.58$, $S.D.= 10.58$); ($t(258)= 2.51$, $P= .03$) as shown in Table 2. That is, students of Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) are higher in learned helplessness than students of Redeemer's University (RUN).

Table 2: Independent t-test of school differences in learned helplessness

School	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t	P
OAU	123	58.61	8.68	258	2.51	.03
RUN	137	55.58	10.58			

The second hypothesis tested significant differences in student's school connectedness. RUN students had a significant higher mean score ($M= 31.75$, $S. D.= 10.12$) compared to OAU students ($M=19.17$, $S. D.= 10.55$); ($t= -8.77$, $df = 257$, $P = .01$). That is, students of Redeemer's University (RUN) are higher in school connectedness than students of Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU).

Table 3: Independent t-test of respondents' school difference on school connectedness

School	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t	P
RUN	136	31.75	10.12	257	-8.77	.01
OAU	123	19.17	10.55			

To explore the result further, school differences on the four domains of school connectedness were also considered. Table 4 shows there were significant difference between both schools on all domains of school connectedness except the first domain of "perception of being liked by other students". On the second domain there is a significant difference between OAU ($M = 11.06$, $S.D. = 3.65$) and RUN students ($M = 15.22$, $S.D. = 3.47$) on their sense of belonging to the school ($t(277) = -9.72$, $P = .02$). The result of the third domain shows that there is a significant mean difference between OAU ($M= 5.96$, $S.D. = 2.10$) and RUN ($M = 8.47$, $S.D. = 2.91$) students on how they communicate with others ($t(277) = -8.14$, $P = .01$). Finally, results on the fourth domain also show a significant mean difference between OAU ($M= 5.92$, $S.D. = 2.07$) and RUN ($M = 9.50$, $S.D. = 2.37$) students on their connectedness with teachers ($t(277) = -13.33$, $P = .05$).

Table 4: Independent t-test of respondents' school difference on domains of school connectedness

Liked by students	N	Mean	S.D	df	t	P
OAU	131	16.58	5.58	276	1.36	.29
RUN	147	15.69	5.23			
Belonging						
OAU	131	11.06	3.65	277	-9.72	.02
RUN	148	15.22	3.47			
Communication						
OAU	131	5.96	2.10	277	-8.14	.01
RUN	148	8.47	2.91			
Liked by teachers						
OAU	131	5.92	2.07	277	-13.33	.05
RUN	148	9.50	2.37			

Discussion

The result of the first hypothesis showed that learned helplessness was higher in students of the public university. This could infer that OAU students feel more powerless about unfavourable situations within their school as opposed to their RUN respondents. Thompson et al., (2006) discovered that schools with large number of students tend to report lower levels of school satisfaction and more student-teacher alienation. However, for students in private schools, they feel more committed and connected in their work, and they report higher job satisfaction and a greater sense of responsibility for ongoing student learning. For a school with high level of student-teacher alienation and low school satisfaction, the students are inclined to experience more learned helplessness because encouragement and motivation from teachers to engage and persist on difficult tasks or negative situations will be very low (Crosnoe et al.; Kearney, 2008). In the context in which this study was done, OAU which is a public university has more number of students than RUN, which is a private university. The low staff-student ratio in RUN enables lecturers to be more familiar with their students on a personal basis and provides better opportunities for course advisors and lecturers to monitor the performance of their students for counselling purposes. In other words, the more students are able to engage with their lecturers on a one-on-one basis, the greater the likelihood of their higher motivation towards their academics.

Result of the second hypothesis indicates that students in the private university experience higher school connectedness. These results are consistent with studies (Lubenski & Lubenski, 2006; Libbey, 2004; Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Nichols, 2008) that found the relationship between school connectedness and school environment. RUN has a smaller student population, which makes it easier for students and staff to be familiar with each other. Nigeria's public education system is bedevilled with the challenges of government politics and interference, underfunding and thus, poor infrastructure; inadequate classrooms and teaching aids (projectors, computers, libraries, laboratories etc); poor or polluted learning environment, cultism, incessant strikes leading to disruption of the academic calendar. These myriad of challenges make the school environment hostile to staff and students, thereby affecting their morale and productivity.

The private university system could be seen as a variable alternative to the public universities in the regard of the almost crippling effect of these challenges, most especially in the area of ensuring a regular academic calendar that is not interrupted by constant downing of tools by staff. Private universities have also been much more effective in the prohibition to the barest minimum of staff and student vices. This is made possible because they are mainly founded by Faith-Based Organizations, who entrench their religious doctrines in the running of school affairs. Non-membership of the umbrella body of the staff union of universities, further, makes the management of these institutions to be able to curtail unrest and agitations amongst its staff, which helps in the stability and continuity of the school calendar. A peaceful school environment, where student have access to required facilities to aid their studies, and where they can approach and interact with their lecturers without fear of reproach or recrimination, is guaranteed to foster a sense of pride and positive identity in them.

Conclusion

This study examined public and private school differences on learned helplessness and school connectedness among university undergraduate students. It was hypothesized that OAU students would have significantly higher levels of learned helplessness than their RUN counterparts. Also, it was hypothesized that there would be a significant difference between OAU and RUN students in respect to school connectedness. Of the four domains of school connectedness, there was a significant difference between OAU and RUN in respect to the domains of belonging, communication and students being liked by lecturers. However, there was no significant difference between OAU and RUN students on the domain of perception of being liked by other students.

Schools are in exceptional positions to mediate adolescent connectedness and build on hopefulness in students, especially in preparing them for their future role as productive workers in the economy. In this regard the Nigerian government needs to as a matter of urgency improve the educational standard of universities and schools in general by providing necessary resources and facilities that would make the school climate conducive for teaching and learning, thereby fostering better educational outcomes. School management, lecturers and non-academic staff also have a huge role in fostering a school climate that builds capabilities that ensure bright outcomes from their students.

Limitations

Considering the huge number of universities public and private universities in south- west, Nigeria, the inclusion of a larger sample of private and public universities would have provided more robust results. Future studies should include larger geo-political coverage of universities across the nation. Also, a more

recent measure of learned helplessness and a more exhaustive measure of school connectedness could be used so as to cover questions applicable to current realities. The fact that the research relied on a self-report questionnaire which was not designed for the Nigerian context per se is another limitation of the paper. However, given the exploratory nature of the research, the results are nevertheless valuable for identifying numerous significant differences between the schools.

Future studies should include supporting the present findings with focus group data from students to better explore their understanding of school connectedness and learned helplessness, as well as how significant others enhance their feeling of belongingness to the school community. There is also a need to explore student connectedness not only to school, but also to family and community.

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