

STUDENTS' ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE: DOES GENDER MATTER?

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ABSTRACT: *The work used the ex-post-facto design to deepen our understanding of the relationship between gender and students' academic achievements in English Language. The sample comprised 220 Junior Secondary Three (JSS III) students (110 male and 110 female) drawn from three randomly selected Secondary Schools in Calabar South Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. Two instruments were used: Students gender and their end-of-semester examination results in English Language. These items were obtained from English Language Class teachers. The data were correlated and analyzed using independent t-test to derive the research measure. The result showed a no significant relationship between gender and students' achievements in English Language. The paper therefore recommended that teachers go to the classes with unbiased notions of gender among learners in their various disciplines.*

KEYWORDS: Examination Scores, Marginalization Primary Socialization, Stereotype, Women.

INTRODUCTION

Gender is a broad analytical concept which highlights women roles and responsibilities in relation to those of men. It refers to all the characteristics of men and women which a particular society has determined and assigned each sex. Gender, according to Mershall (1994), refers to socially-constructed aspects of differences between men and women. Since its introduction as a social concept, it has been extended to refer not only to individual identity and personality but also at the symbolic level, to cultural ideas and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. The differences in the behaviour of males and females are learned rather than being the inevitable result of biology.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have tried to determine the contribution of students' gender to their academic achievements. Inyang and Archibong (1998) studied effects of gender and order of treatment of related mathematical principles on students' performance in Chemistry Quantitative Problems. The study investigated the effects of exposing senior secondary school students of different gender to selected mathematical principles on their performances in quantitative problems in Chemistry. Subjects were exposed to three different instructional models. Those in the control group were exposed to treatment of chemistry quantitative problems with related mathematical principles; those in experimental Group 1 were exposed to quantitative problems in Chemistry before treatment of related mathematical principles while those in experimental

Group 2 were subjected to related principles before treatment of quantitative problems in Chemistry. Post-test data in Chemistry Quantitative Ability Test (CQAT) collected and analysed using independent t-test revealed that an instructional model in which related mathematical principles were taught first before chemistry quantitative problems was most effective in understanding quantitative problems in Chemistry irrespective of gender.

Akpama (2007) studied the gender influence on perception and attitude to HIV/AIDS prevention among secondary school students in Cross River State, Nigeria. The author formulated the null hypothesis: there is no significant difference between male and female adolescents in terms of their perception and attitude to HIV/AIDS prevention. 900 adolescents (450 males and 450 females) constituted the sample. A 20-item questionnaire was used for data collection. Data collected were analysed using independent t-test. The result showed that males and females did not differ significantly in their perception and attitude to HIV/AIDS prevention. It showed that the knowledge of the means of transmission and prevention was high among both male and female adolescents.

According to Donahue, Veolki, Campbell and Mazzco (1999), some correlations appear to exist between gender and some academic achievement e.g. reading. They noted that disaggregation of the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading results based on gender rather than other variables revealed that females outperformed males in 4th, 8th and 12th grades, as they also did in 1992 and 1994; that at the 4th grade level, the males made a significant gain over their 1994 score while the females remained the same. They reported a similar trend in the North Carolina end-of-grade test administered in grades three to eight of the North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction (2000).

Baharudin and Luster (1998) asserted that in US some of these gender differences could be explained by a national survey of reading attitudes conducted with 18,185 children across country among the first to third grades. They advanced that girls as a group possessed more positive attitude than boys at all grade levels, both towards recreational and academic reading. Similarly, Eccles, Wigfield, Harald and Blumenfield (1993) affirmed in a four-year longitudinal study of elementary school children in Michigan that girls valued reading significantly more than boys. But Baharudin and Luster's study of 1998 using gender as a predictor of Mathematics achievement of six to eight-year-olds emerged again as significant in favour of females sub-group. Females, in general, as reported in a study supported by Campbell and Beaudry's (1998) longitudinal study of American youth data, revealed less confidence in their mathematical ability and greater exertion of effort in mathematical classes than males.

According to Fennema, Carpenter, Jacobs, Franke and Levi (1998), mathematical ways of thinking may differ by gender. This team of researchers studied 82 children as they progressed from first through third grades. They identified gender differences in strategy use that was evident from the beginning of the study and persisted through the end. Girls, they said, tended to use more modelling or counting strategies, while boys tended to use more abstract strategies such as derived facts or invented algorithms. By the third grade, girls used significantly more standard algorithms than did the boys.

Finally, in an analysis of the Delaware student testing programme and the Stanford Achievement Test series 9th edition for students in 3rd, 5th and 10th grades, Zhang and Mangon (2000) found that males had a larger variance in Mathematics scores than females. In this study, it was reported that females tended to outperform males among the low achieving students and males tended to outperform females among the high achieving students.

Vernon (1996) reports that many comparisons show average scores of boys and girls were the same on general intelligence test. The author says that girls do a little better on most verbal tests and on tests involving rote memory and boys, on tests of inductive reasoning and arithmetical ability, though with great deal of overlapping. The average difference, says the author, seldom exceeds about four points of intelligence quotient. Vernon adds that the most marked difference occurs on spatial and mechanical test and wonders if such ability might be attributed to the cultural influences on our civilization which encourages boys to develop physical, constitutional and mechanical interests. The author concludes that many surveys demonstrate that the range or spread of ability is more restricted in girls. Similarly, Dennis and Dennis (1996) report that studies on Mathematics and verbal aptitudes clearly demonstrate that females are generally superior to males in verbal areas while males are superior to females in quantitative areas, particularly numerical reasoning. Discussing the male-female performance differential, Maccoby (1996), asserts that various personality attributes influence performance between males and females and these include anxiety, dependence, aggressiveness, attitude, interest and motivation. The author contends that anxiety and dependency are stronger in girls than boys, whereas aggressiveness is stronger in boys than girls.

Myklebust's (1995) study indicated the manner in which normal children learn and the sexual variations in learning. The author compared boys and girls in a task that required learning Braille with each hand independently and then with both hands but with reverse of the lead-hand. The author concluded that boys appeared to be more independent on non-verbal functions and so were superior in cognitive functions, but girls were more dependent on verbal cognitive processes and thus were superior in this type of cognitive function. Therefore, boys sustained a greater handicap than girls from non-verbal learning disabilities. This means that boys excelled more in computational subjects than girls. Oladele (1998) asserts that boys tend to surpass girls in spatial and mechanical aptitude while girls show definite language superiority from infancy. Girls often read better, spell better and are more proficient in the use of language. More boys are prone to stammering on shuttering. Girls are generally not subjected to the same pressure to achieve. In other words, and by implication, reading comprehension exercises are better accomplished by females since females can read and spell words better, leading to better proficiency in language than the boys.

Ntia (2002), carefully studied preferential pattern of 128 seventh graders of the Junior High School boys and girls and established that in fiction the boys preferred stories of frontier heroes, war of our country stories, the jungle, western adventures and Indian tales, while the girls preferred stories of teenage romance, adventures of girls, funny stories and pioneer life. Girls also take to subjects which involve people, plants and animals whereas boys are keenly interested in subjects involving words of things, the author added.

Preston's (1992) review of nations where sex differentials were found observed that proficiency in reading was greater among the girls than the boys in United States of America but in Nigeria, India, and Germany differences existed in favour of boys. The conclusion drawn by Preston was that the higher performance of boys than girls in Germany could be a result of some elements not easily identified in the culture of the Germans.

According to Emenyonu (1993) girls perform higher than boys in the United States of America and Canada while boys are better in performance than girls in Nigeria and Britain. The Nigerian experience could be explained by the higher premium placed on male education in preference to female. Contrary to the above view, however, Lasisi and Onyehalu (1993), in a study of sex and culture on comprehension in the Nigerian environment take a different stance. They report

that there is no significant difference in performance between males and females. The various biological differences in human make-up such as those between male and female human beings have led people to suspect that one sex may have a learning edge over the other. There are practically no significant differences in the intelligence between a male and female individual which can be traceable to sex difference (Okoye, 1987). This author further argues that the fact that men are regarded as the dominant and even “superior” sex does not mean that they intrinsically have better brains and learn much better than women. This view is premised on psychological studies which had convincingly pointed out that the individual’s cultural and environmental setting impinge on the individual rather than differences in the intelligence make-up of male and female human beings.

With regard to “special mental abilities”, Maccoby (1996), submits that there are differences in different content areas. For example, at the elementary school age, there appears to be no significant difference in academic achievement, but girls, however, tend to perform higher than boys in selected instances in reading, handwriting, vocabulary and verbal fluency. On their part, boys do better than girls in Mathematics, science and manipulations of spatial relations. At the high school stage, (i.e. adolescence), there is a significant difference between boys and girls in Mathematics, sciences and mechanical aptitude. Girls tend to excel in vocabulary, verbal fluency and memory task, e.g. history. The initial higher achievement by girls, according to Okoye (1987), is a result of girl’s over-attachment to their mothers in household chores involving measuring out of food items, quantities of water and liquids, during the period of a particular food needs to boil on fire. Also, cooking involves estimation on how much each person in the family needs and making allowances for some necessary wastages. All these are practical mathematical operations, to which girls are exposed as they understand their mothers, hence their initial higher achievement as asserted by Gessell (1994).

In classificatory and discriminatory tasks, girls do better than boys while boys do better than girls in visual and spatial tasks (Tyler and Hardy, 1987). In a reaction to this, Okoye (1987) argues that girls are usually exposed to arranging chairs in the parlour in accordance with the classes of shapes and colour, carpets and window blinds to match with the colour of the chairs, thus providing the girls with more practical training in the art of classifying, arranging and identifying things according to shapes and colours. Conversely, the boys at the girls’ age level, engage in frolic activities. This gives them an edge over the girls in visual task performances as well as in depth and space identification. Such tasks, when the girls do, are usually greeted with uncomplimentary remarks.

Denga (1986) posits that no evidence is clear as to whether differences exist between males and females in achievement. This author, however, states that girls tend to do better than boys in language arts and music while the boys tend to outperform the girls in Mathematics and sciences. Hetherington and Parker (1999) reported that the girls were superior to boys in verbal abilities even in infancy. According to them, there is marked increase in this superiority in high school years in vocabulary, reading, comprehension and verbal creativity.

The relationship between gender attitudes to science has been a matter of controversy among research workers. While some workers (Menis, 1993; Sjoberg, 1993; Linn and Peterson, 1996; Whitehead, 1996) have reported that males demonstrate more positive attitude towards science, other workers (Wareing, 1991; Hamilton, 1992; Selin and Shringley, 1993; Gyuse, 1986) have reported no statistically significant gender differences in attitudes towards science. It has been reported (Ormorod and Duckworth, 1995) that males tend to be more positive towards physical sciences than females. These disciplines are regarded as masculine disciplines (Vockell and

Labone, 1991; Whitehead, 1996). Studies indicate that subjects or disciplines are stereotyped in such a manner that some are regarded as masculine whereas others are regarded as feminine (Kelly, 1998). Nya (2007) averred that many comparisons showed average scores of boys and girls to be the same on general intelligence tests.

The Problem

In the United Kingdom today, girls and young women are out-performing their male counterparts at every level of the educational system – from primary school to university. That is a dramatic and world-wide change that has happened the last twenty five years. Across cultures and continents from USA to Japan, from Mexico to New Zealand, from Portugal to Korea, girls have reversed the picture that would have been expected twenty five years ago. In the 1970s, the focus of research was on girls' underachievement. Since 1990s it has been "underachieving boys" who have been the focus of gender research in education (Haralambos, Holborn and Heald, 2008). The biological differences between a boy and a girl have led researchers to suspect that one sex is likely to have a learning edge over the other. The problem for this study therefore is: Are there academic differentials among male and female students in English Language as a result of their biological make-up?

This gave rise to the only research question and null hypothesis.

Research Question:

Is there any relationship between students' gender and their academic performances in English Language?

Null Hypothesis

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between students' gender and their academic performances in English Language.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study adopted an *ex post facto* design. It was *ex post facto* in the sense that it was an after fact or after event research (Gay, 1996). Two hundred and fifty students in Junior Secondary Schools selected at random in Calabar South Local Government Area, Cross River State, Nigeria. In the sample were 120 girls and 120 boys. Two instruments were used for the study: students' inventory and their end-of-semester examination results. This information was obtained from the class teacher for English Language. The data thus generated were collated and analyzed using independent t-test. The hypothesis was tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS

The result is presented in the table below:

TABLE: Independent t-test showing the relationship between students' gender and their achievements in English Language

Variable	N	\bar{x}	Sd	Calculated t
Male	120	16.5	1.168	0.286
Female	120	17.5	1.713	
				Critical t = 1.84
P<0.05		df = 238		

The above table shows a calculated t-value of 0.286. This value at 0.05 level of significance and with 238 degrees of freedom (df) was found to be lower than the critical t-value of 1.84. The null hypothesis was thus accepted. This means that this finding joins the rank of studies highlighting the lack of relationship between students' gender and their academic achievements in English Language.

DISCUSSION

The result of the hypothesis in this study showed no significant gender differential in students' academic performance in English Language. It thus adds to the corpus of existing literature on this subject (Vernon 1996, Akpama, 2007, Denga, 1996). It is, however, at variance with Dennis and Dennis (1996) and Oladele (1998). The plausible reason for this is that various personality attributes influence performances and these includes anxiety, dependence, aggressiveness, attitude, interest and motivation. Many girls are, however, denied access to education because the parents of such girls consider girl education wasteful since they would be married. Girls are thus socialized to accept their primary roles as procreation and family management. This obnoxious practice violates the rights of women. Apart from the early socialization which tends to keep women in predominantly female-oriented jobs, women are also constrained by demands on their time and energy by domestic labour and child care. These prevent them from participating in forms of employment for sustainable development. Nigerian women are thus disempowered and forced by the above scenario to come under heavier burden of poverty, inequity and other forms of economic ineptitude. Angya and Okpe (2005) note that the intransigence of cultural beliefs and other related values that put menfolk up there and the women far below has intensified the perpetuation of injustice thus impeding women's contribution to national development even in civilized democracies like the U.S, Britain, France etc. Women are subjugated and made to encounter occupational and attitudinal biases which prevent them from reaching their full potential. The strength of the finding of this research suggests that female students and male students have equal academic potentials and, if given the chance, both male and female can contribute to national development. According to Okeke in Okwoche and Omachi (2008) since women make up more than half of Nigeria's population, no worthwhile development can be achieved without their contribution.

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