EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ACADEMIC BURNOUT, SELF-EFFICACY AND ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG NIGERIAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

The level of students' engagement in their academic activities has continued to attract the interest of researchers and education administrators. The need to understand the factors that inhibit or enhance students' academic engagement is therefore necessary especially in developing countries where level of education is generally low. This study explored the relationship between academic burnout, self-efficacy and academic engagement among Nigeria university undergraduates (college students). Two hundred respondents were sampled from five departments of the faculty of social sciences in a state-owned university in North Central, Nigeria. The results of the regression analyses revealed that academic burnout was negatively related with academic engagement. Self-efficacy was positively related with academic engagement. Implications of the findings to learning in Nigerian university context were discussed.

Keywords: academic engagement; self-efficacy; burnout; students; Nigeria

Introduction

Education is the livewire of every nation. It is the core of every form of development, a means by which citizens are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills that will be useful in nation building. The World Bank/UNICEF (1996) reported that education in general, and university education in particular, is fundamental to the construction of the knowledge economy and society in all nations. Thus, every nation of the world has accepted education as the springboard of societal development. However, a badly managed, crisis ridden, and disorganized system of education tend to portend negative consequences on the developmental efforts of nations (Famade, 2012). This seems to be the case in Nigeria. There is a general outcry that the standards of education are falling and morals flagging in Nigeria (Arong & Ogbadu, 2010). Numerous factors have been pointed out. Some blame students for this apparent decline in quality of education and moral values (Famade, 2012). Some think that the decline is due to government inaction on education, that the government has not done enough to help the education sector (Arong & Ogbadu, 2010; Belo-Osagie & Olugbamila, 2010; Famade 2012). Others could feel that the teachers are not doing enough and thus are responsible for the woes in which we have found ourselves. Teachers on the other hand blame parents and the children (Arong & Ogbadu, 2010; Famade, 2012). Some authors (e.g., Famade, 2012) fault policy implementation and frequent changes in government especially during the long military rule as the major cause of decline in the education system in Nigeria.

However, various intervention strategies have been taken to salvage this situation through formulation and implementation of a number of education policies such the Educational Trust Fund (ETF), Tertiary Education Fund (TETFund) and other strategies to revamp this fallen standard and get students back to classrooms and to be more committed, but not much have been achieved. This may suggest that the problem of the education sector in Nigeria may not be entirely due to structural and/or administrative ineptitude. This is because even when the government takes positive steps to lift the standards of education, the results often achieved may not commensurate with the effort put forth. It is out of this concern that the present researchers felt a justified need to look at the individual student to ascertain whether students are over stretched based on workload or not motivated to benefit from education outcome by not being engaged with their academics. Therefore the present study attempts to examine whether academic burnout and self-efficacy will be related with academic engagement among Nigeria university undergraduates.

Not quite long ago, researchers used the term engagement to refer to the quality of effort students expend on educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes (Hu & Kuh, 2002). Generally, academic engagement is viewed as multi-dimensional construct that refers to students' psychological investment of effort toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992). Engagement can be indicated by both emotional and behavioural factors (Newmann, 1992). Some authors (e.g., Finn & Rock, 1997) suggest that there are three levels of behavioural engagement, with the first involving basic school attendance and completion of schoolwork, the second involving participation in class when requested by school officials, and the third involving active participation. Some other researchers (e.g., Connell, Beale-Spencer, & Aber, 1994) have suggested that factors such as how much students like school, how bored they feel in school, and how strongly they feel that they belong in school are emotional engagement. Later Fredericks et al. (2004) added another dimension to the definition of engagement. They indicated that engagement contains behavioural, emotional, and cognitive components. Emotional engagement includes affect, interest, identification with school, and belonging. Cognitive engagement is centred on self-regulation, strategic thinking, and psychological investment. In the present study, we adopt Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá and Bakker's (2001) definition of engagement as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption.

The importance of student engagement in academics has been recognized by educators, as it has been observed that far too many students are bored, unmotivated, and uninvolved, that is, disengaged from academic and social aspects of school life (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008). Suggestions have been made to the fact that although attendance at school is becoming compulsory in many states of Nigeria, laws may regulate the structure of the educational system, to substantially influence academic and social outcomes. There may be no better time to ensure that students are engaged in their academic than now due to enormous social and economic pressure young people now face. There are many positive outcomes of students' academic engagement. Student engagement in school activities promotes academic achievement (Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Connell, 1998), increases graduation rates (Connell, Spencer & Aber, 1994), decreases students' decisions to drop out of school (Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997), improves student performance and increases positive expectations about academic abilities (Skinner et al., 1998).

Understanding what motivates a student to strive for excellence remains a critical issue in education today. Most educators agree that there are numerous factors affecting any given student's level of academic engagement. It is also argued that burnout and self efficacy are factors that diminish or propel academic engagement. However, results on the relationship between burnout, self-efficacy and academic engagement have been very inconsistent. Some researchers found that these constructs are not significantly related to academic engagement (e.g., Abelson, 1979), while others (e.g., Burton & Powling, 2005) established that significant relationship exist between self-efficacy and academic engagement and between burnout and academic engagement. Besides, most of the studies were conducted in Western countries (e.g., Murdock & Anderman, 2006; Staats, Hupp, Wallace & Gresley, 2009) and thus the full understanding of this relationship runs the risk of being culturally biased. Replicating such study in another continent other than Europe and America, especially in developing countries of Africa will likely clear this bias. The present study therefore aims at exploring the relationship between academic burnout, self-efficacy and academic engagement among Nigerian college students.

Academic Burnout and Academic Engagement

Burnout was initially found among human service professionals, that is those in constant interaction with people, like nurses, doctors and teachers, with an emphasis on the interpersonal relationship between provider and recipient (Freudenberger 1974; Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). But due to the pressure of globalization and intensive business competition engendered by economic recession, this concept has been extended to professions that are less people-oriented (Zhang, Gan, & Cham, 2007). Researchers (e.g., Pines and Nunes 2003; Schaufeli, Martinez, Marque´s-Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002) have also observed burnout symptoms in non-occupational contexts, such as marriage, sports and college study.

Burnout is defined as a negative work-related state of mind characterized by exhaustion, a sense of reduced effectiveness, and decreased motivation. Leiter and Maslach (2001) proposed that there are six areas of work where a mismatch with an individual could lead to burnout: workload,

control, reward, community, fairness, and values. When there is a mismatch between the situation and the individual burnout is experienced. This is a subjective phenomenon in that for one person the workload may be excessive, because it does not match their expectations; for another person that same workload may not be a problem, as it may match their expectations.

Academic burnout among college students refers to feeling exhausted because of study demands, having a cynical and detached attitude towards one's schoolwork, and feeling incompetent as a student (Zhang et al., 2007). In contrast, academic engagement refers to a high level of energy and mental resilience when studying, deriving a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration from study, and being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's study, which is antipode of burnout (Schaufeli, Martinez, Marque´s-Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002). In other words, burnout was referred to as an erosion of engagement (Maslach et al. 2001). In particular, vigor and dedication are directly opposite to exhaustion and cynicism, spanning two underlying core dimensions (named activation and identification), whereas absorption was found to be a unique component of engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

The relationship between burnout and academic engagement is rather weak and inconsistent, particularly when objective engagement indicators are used instead of self-reports ratings (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). This also applies to the relationship between student burnout and general academic performance. For instance, Nowack and Hanson (2003) found a weak negative relationship between burnout and other related performance in university students, and McCarthy, Pretty and Catano (2006) found a significant but low negative correlation between students' level of burnout and their grade point average. Recently, using a longitudinal design, Stewart, Lam, Betson, Wong and Wong (1999) found that academic performance during medical school was negatively related to reported stress levels (i.e., anxiety and depression). Garden (2001) also found a negative relationship between burnout and perceived academic engagement of undergraduate students. Students in Nigerian universities seem to experience a lot of stress due to infrastructural deficit as they cope with academic work. It is therefore hypothesized in the present study that academic burnout will be negatively related to academic engagement among college students in Nigeria.

Self-efficacy and Academic Engagement

Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs in their ability to produce desired results to succeed in their chosen career (Wigfield, Byrnes & Eccles, 2006). It also enhances learning and performance (Bandura 1997). Bandura emphasises in social cognitive theory the construct of self-efficacy and its impact on learning, as this belief in one's own ability influences choice of activities and effort (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2006), engagement in the behaviours that are necessary to attain goals (Thomas. 2005), academic interest and motivation (Bandura, 1997), as well as growth of cognitive competencies and accomplished achievement (Pajares,1996; Zimmerman, 2000). Self-efficacy has been found to consistently predict academic achievement (Bong, 2008) because of the fact that it has significant effects on effort and persistence. Students who demonstrate greater senses of self-efficacy are more likely to initiate necessary effort necessary for achieving a desired outcome and persist longer when facing academic challenges (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2006).

Self-efficacy is a person's judgment of their capability to organize and execute the course of action required to attain predetermined types of academic engagement. It is concerned not with the skills one has, but rather with the estimation of what one can attain with the skills one currently possesses (Bandura, 1986). Students who are self-efficacious tend to generate and test alternative courses of action when they do not initially achieve success. They perform better in the classroom because of their elevated levels of efforts and persistence and deal more effectively with problematical situations by manipulating the cognitive and emotional processes related to those situations (Bandura, 1997). An extensive body of research has shown that self-efficacy is directly proportional to undergraduates' grade point average (GPA) (Hackett, Betz, Casas & Rocha-Singh, 1992) and performance (Klomegah, 2007).

The relevance of self-efficacy in students' learning process is thus undeniable. Self-efficacy is important in enhancing students' comfort levels when facing examinations. In fact, changes in efficacy levels are strongly tied to changes in state of well-being such as burnout and engagement (Breso, 2007). Indeed lack of efficacy seems to play an antecedent role in burnout process rather than comprising an integral element of the burnout syndrome (Chemiss, 1993; Salanova, et al., 2003). Students exercise human agency-through intentionality and self-regulation through self-reaction and

self-motivation, and self-effectiveness about their capabilities, the quality of functioning and the meaning of their life and the paths they choose to take (Bandura, 2001).

Efficacy beliefs are the foundation of agency through their impact in the adaptation to our experiences, and their impact on other behavioural determinants (Bandura, 2001). The relationship between self-efficacy and actual academic engagement has been established empirically (e.g., Zimmerman, 1995). It has been found to consistently predict academic achievement (e.g., Bong, 2008) due to its effects on effort and persistence, because students who demonstrate greater senses of self-efficacy are more likely to put forth the necessary effort and persist longer when facing academic challenges (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2006). It regulates students' functioning in four ways: cognitively, motivationally, effectively and socially. Self-efficacy influences the way people face challenges, and perseverance in the face of adversity and lack of success. Efficacious students are likely to use structures as an opportunity and circumvent structural constraints when necessary for effective academic engagement. Thus, it is hypothesized that students' self-efficacy will be related with academic engagement.

Method

Participants

A total of 200 participants comprising 94 male and 106 female final year undergraduate students of Benue State University were randomly selected for the study. Final year students were chosen for the study because it is at this stage in students' academic endeavour that they are most likely to experience the greatest amount of stress, which usually culminates to burnout. Out of this number, 74 were married, 112 were single, 12 were divorced and 2 were widows. Their ages range from 17 to 53 years, with a mean age of 35.6 years. Religious affiliation of participants indicates that 172 of the participants were Christians and only 23 were Muslims while 5 were Orthodox. All the respondents were Nigerians from different ethinic groups. Out of the 200 respondents, 106 were Tiv, 57 were Idoma, 11 were Etulo, 20 were Igede, 5 were Igbo and 1 was Yoruba. Participation was completely voluntary and no incentives were given to encourage participation.

Instruments

The Maslach Burnout Inventory-Student Scale (MBI-SS) developed by Schaufeli, Martinez, Marquez-Pinto, Salanova and Bakker (2002) was adopted to measure burnout among students. The MBI-SS consists of 16 items that constitute the three scales for exhaustion, cynicism and efficacy. All items are scored on a 7-point frequency rating scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always). The authors reported Cronbach's alphas range from .65 to .86 across three nationalities (Schaufeli, et al., 2002). The Cronbach's alpha for the Maslach Burnout Inventor-Student Scale for the present study is .78.

Self-efficacy was assessed with the General Self-efficacy Scale developed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995). The scale is a 10-item scale that assesses a general sense of perceived self-efficacy with the aim in mind to predict coping with daily hassles as well as adaptation after experiencing all kinds of stressful life events. Responses from the scale are made on a 4-point Likert-Type response format ranging from 1= not at all true, 2 = hardly true, 3 = moderately true, to 4 = exactly true. The scale has a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .87 for the present study.

The Utretch Work Engagement Scale-Students version (UWES-S) (short form) was used to measure students' academic engagement. It is a 9-item scale which has 3 subscales. The sub-scales include: vigor, dedication and absorption. The scale is scored on a 4-point Likert-type of 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes and 3 = always. Cronbach alpha for the 3 subscales are .73, .76 and .71 respectively, and .84 for the total 9-item scale.

Procedure

The multi stage sampling technique was adopted to collect data from volunteer participants. In each department selected from faculty of social sciences of Benue State University, the researcher sought permission from lecturers to administer the questionnaire during lecture periods. The questionnaires have an introduction explaining and soliciting students consent to answer the questions and also assuring them of confidentiality of their responses. A total of 227 set of the questionnaires were

administered to the participants, but only 211 were completed and returned representing 92.95% return rate. Out of this number, 11 copies were discarded due to improper completion and only 200 copies were considered for analyses. The participants for the study were predominantly of Tiv extraction of Benue state, Nigeria.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations among study variables

	Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Academic engagement	17.25	4.68	-						
2	Age	27.32	4.70	.02	-					
3	Gender	-	-	-.06	.02	-				
5	Religion	-	-	-.14*	.06	.20*	.10	-		
6	Burnout	45.06	13.32	-.18*	.02	-.06	.05	.07	-	
7	Self-efficacy	30.87	5.49	-.18*	-.05	.10	-.10	-.06	.27**	-

Note: ** = P<.001

* = P<.05

A total of 200 participants completed the questionnaires. Gender (1= male, 2 = female); marital status (1= married, 2 = single, 3 = divorced, 4 = widow); Religion (1 = Christians, 2 = Muslins). Burnout and self-efficacy are coded so that higher scores indicated higher burnout and self-efficacy.

The results of the correlational analyses showed that only marital status (r = -.24), Religion (r = -.14) are the control variables that are related to academic engagement. Burnout was negatively related with academic engagement (r = -.18). The results equally revealed that self-efficacy was positively related with academic engagement (r = .27).

Table 2: Hierarchical regression results

Variables	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Age	.00	.01	.02
Gender	-.07	-.08	-.11
Marital status	-.24***	-.23***	-.21**
Religion	-.10	-.09	-.07
Burnout		-.16*	-.23***
Self-efficacy			.23***
R^2	.06	.06	.12
R^2 change	.07	.03	.05
F change	3.91	5.63	10.59
F value	3.91	4.33	5.55

Note: : * = P<.05; ** = P<.01; *** = P<.001

The results of the hierarchical regression analyses revealed that among the control variables tested in the model, only marital status had a statistically significant relationship with academic engagement. The results equally showed that burnout was a significant predictor of academic engagement (β = -.16, P<.01). Consistent with hypothesis 2, self-efficacy significantly predicted students' academic engagement (β = .23, p <.01).

Discussion

The study investigated the relationship between academic burnout, self-efficacy and academic engagement among Benue State University undergraduates. The results of the present study indicated that academic burnout significantly predicted academic engagement. This result shows that when the resources of students is split, it affects the way they handle various issues including their approach to academic matters. This result is consistent with the findings of Nowack and Hanson (2003), and McCarthy, Pretty and Catano (2006) who in their separate studies found a negative relationship between burnout and other related performance of university students. The result is equally in agreement with that of Stewart, Lam, Betson, Wong and Wong (1999) which found that academic performance during medical school was negatively related to reported stress levels.

The results of the study equally reveal that self-efficacy is positively related with academic engagement. The reason for this result may be that despite other impediments that may stand on the way of a student once they are self-efficacious they could benefit from school by becoming engaged with school activities. The result of the present study is consistent with various previous results on self-efficacy and academic achievement. For instance the result agrees with that of Bandura (1997), Zimmerman (2000) which found that self-efficacy is significantly related with academic interest and motivation, as well as growth of cognitive competencies. The present result is also consistent with the study of Hackett, Betz, Casas, and Rocha-Singh (1992) and Klomegah (2007) which established that self-efficacy is directly proportional to undergraduates' GPA and is also related with academic performance. The result of the present study seems to also agree with that of Bong (2008) which found that self-efficacy predicts academic achievement.

Implications of the Study

The results of the present study have some implications to students, educators and stakeholders. Since academic burnout has been found to be negatively related with academic engagement, it implies that there should be institutional policies and structures that should be designed to cushion the negative effect of burnout to learning. When this is in place the students stress level will be reduced which could make them to be more engaged with their academics. This is important since cognitive evaluation theory Deci and Ryan (1985) have also proposed that environments impact the development of intrinsic motivation. More so, more attention should be paid to recreation, since this enables the students to recuperate from stress, a good measure of it will most likely enhance their chances of focusing on their academics.

The results indicated that self-efficacy is positively related with academic burnout; this also has some implications. Since self-efficacy refers to a person's judgment of their capability to organize and execute the course of action required to attain predetermined types of academic engagement and also concerned with the estimation of what one can attain with the skills one currently possesses. It implies that students who are self-efficacious tend to generate and test alternative courses of action when they do not initially achieve success. This means that students should be encouraged to develop, have or cultivate efficacy attitude. This is important because it could serve as a buffer that may keep the students going despite their experience of burnout.

Limitations of the study

The present study, like other numerous studies, has some shortcomings. First among them is the problem often associated with all survey research (cross-sectional design) that does not allow for causal inferences; experimental or longitudinal studies have been suggested to take care of such challenges. The researchers acknowledge the limitation that causality cannot be claimed based on correlational patterns among the variables.

Another limitation of the study was that all data were collected via self-report measures,

which may lead to the problem of common method bias and inflated the predictive relationships between the study variables. Multiple sources of data will be preferable in that peer or supervisor reports should be able to adjust any bogus data a participant may offer. As such, we cannot draw conclusions regarding the possible changing relations between different dimensions of burnout and self-efficacy on academic engagement among Nigeria university undergraduates.

In conclusion therefore, since academic engagement is important in the overall performance of students in their chosen course of study, it is suggested that academic burnout should be carefully and thoroughly checkmated for students to fully benefit from school outcomes. Otherwise efforts of policy makers, teachers and even parents to encourage and support students to engage in their academics may not yield the desired results. Also, it may be important to include in addition to other academic trainings, programmes aims at helping students develop self-efficacy to enable them become engaged in their academic work.

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