

OPTIMISM AND SELF EFFICACY AS PREDICTORS OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AMONG SPECIAL NEEDS LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This is a correlational research aimed at determining the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predict academic achievement among special needs learners in Port Harcourt, Rivers State of Nigeria. The population consisted 137 special needs learners (hearing (and visually impaired) in a public Special school. A sample of 75 special needs learners (60 hearing impaired and 15 visually impaired) was drawn through proportionate sampling technique. Four research questions and four hypotheses guided this study. Three instruments were used for data collection including Life Orientation Test- Revised (LOT-R) by Scheier, Carver & Brooks (1994), Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (ASES) by Chemers, Hu and Garcia (2001) by Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade (2005) and Student Grades Record (SGR) obtained from the school under study. The LOT-R and ASES are standardized instruments with reliability coefficients of 0.78 and 0.65 respectively. Data analysis for the study was conducted using multiple regression, ANOVA and t-test associated with multiple regressions at 0.05 alpha level. Result got after data analysis indicated that optimism and self-efficacy positively predicted academic performance among special needs learners. It was also found that gender and nature of challenge significantly influenced the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predicted academic achievement among special needs learners. Based on these results, recommendations were made for government to employ educational psychologist and guidance counsellors to special school to help them in their problems, etc.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of individual differences is very important and should be taken seriously by teachers in the classroom. This is necessary because no two learners are exactly the same in terms of personality traits, potentialities, learning capabilities, challenges, etc. Based on these variation in the potentials and capabilities of learners have sometimes necessitated their classifications into healthy normal suffering no challenge/disabled or special need learners, challenged/disabled requiring special support to learn.

Every student in the classroom is does not have the same traits, potentials, and characteristics. Though there may be similar characteristics that are common to most individuals and right to education, the individual differences is a major issue to be considered during classroom instruction if teaching and learning is to be effective. Special needs learners varied in their impairments and challenges ranging from mental impairments, learning disabilities, hearing impaired, physically challenged, including hearing or visual impairment, etc. The gifted learners are also regarded as special learners sometimes.

Regardless of the impairment and challenges faced by special needs learners, they have potentials and they are capable, resourceful and valuable in their own right. One of the aims of education is to develop the innate potentials to optimal level for a functional life by exposing them to knowledge which is acquired in the school setting (Ekeh & Oladayo, 2013).

Despite the various challenges faced by special needs learners, access to qualitative education is a key to the actualization of their potentials which increases their self-confidence and belief that all things being equal, their effort will yield better results which will make life better and easier in their future goals and dreams. This belief that the future holds positive opportunities with successful outcomes is referred to as optimism (Radebe, 2004)

Thompson, Anderson & Bakeman, (2000) posited that optimism is a set of beliefs that lead individuals to approach the world in a proactive manner. For Yates (1999), optimism is a natural and healthy personality attribute which is the belief that positive event outweigh the negative. Optimism as a virtue can find expression in man's endeavours or activities including business, relationship, career, learning, etc. Optimistic learning often translates to holistic academic learning. It also leads to healthy, psychological, physical, social, spiritual and emotional growth of individuals which helps them to achieve their academic goals (Williams & Reils, 2001). In learning therefore, optimistic learners are those who think positively, who plan and work for the best outcomes in any given academic endeavour. They also view favourable events as permanent, pervasive and within their control. This helps them to plan, by determining their goals logically and working assiduously to achieve them. They are proactive, energetic, focused, highly motivated, persistent, innovative, creative, industrious, healthy and result oriented. Optimistic learners live a comfortable, exciting, beautiful, self-control, clean, ambitious, secured life; and are obedient to less important terminal values in life (Radebe, 2004).

They are known to be realistic in their approach to their studies, as they take proactive and constructive steps to solve their problems and they have ability to manage difficult academic situations with little stress. They have inclination to overcome difficulties because they believe that with persistence and motivation, they will always overcome the difficult circumstance. The level of optimism with regards to gender indicates variations between males and females. Males are believed to be more optimistic than females in financial matters (Chang, Tsai, & Lee, 2010; Jacobsen, Lee, & Marquering, 2008). On the contrary, Ickson and Kaplan (2011) found that female college students were more optimistic than the male students. However, Padhy, Rana, and Das (2012), Tusaie (2003), and Sitz and Poche (2002) found out that there was no gender differences in students' optimism.

Also, special needs learners have the capacities and capabilities successfully complete courses of action that are necessary for them to achieve specified aims and objectives which is known as self-efficacy. Akhtar, Ghavas and Adil (2012) posited that self-efficacy believe is one's feeling to perform a task by utilizing one's abilities or action. Self-efficacy is action required to achieve specified degree or level of performance based on one's judgement of his capabilities to do so. Bandura (1997) posited that sources of self-efficacy beliefs includes ability to interpret, evaluate and judges one's competence in attaining designated types of performances. This he stated are reflected in students' success in the academic environment. This view was corroborated by Ogunmakin and Akomolafe (2013) who argued that efficacious learners work harder, persist longer when faced with challenges and have a higher level of achievement. The higher one's level of self-efficacy, the greater the level of one's level of perception of being responsible for one's destiny and be decisive on which direction one wants to go (Bandura, 1995).

With respect to self efficacy, though females are believed to show lower level of self confidence than men, they out-performed men when looking at final grades (Whitt, Pascarella, Elkins-Nesheim, Marth, & Pierson, 2003). Conversely, men approach

achievement situations as a challenge and do not view these situations as a reflection of their abilities (Pomerantz et al., 2002).

Optimism and self-efficacy have been known to have numerous possible and positive relationships with success in one's endeavours in life, especially among normal/healthy individuals. However, the extent to which this assertion applies to special needs persons especially those of them who are learners/students in schools is not certain. Specifically, optimism and self-efficacy influence academic achievement among special needs learners given their impairments and challenges. Therefore, the question that arises is – to what extent does optimism and self-efficacy influence academic achievement among special needs learners? The researchers' desire to answer this question forms the basis for this study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predict academic achievement among special needs learners.

Specifically, the study aimed at determining

1. how optimism and self-efficacy jointly predict academic achievement among special needs learners.
2. the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy independently predict academic achievement among special needs learners.
3. how gender influences the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predict academic achievement of special needs learners.
4. how nature of challenge/disability influences the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predict academic achievement of special needs learners.

Research Questions

The understated research questions guided this study.

1. How do optimism and self-efficacy jointly predict academic achievement among special needs learners?
2. How do optimism and self-efficacy independently predict academic achievement among special needs learners?
3. How does gender influence the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predictive academic achievement among special needs learners?
4. How does nature of challenge/disability influence the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predict academic achievement of special needs learners?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 alpha level.

1. Optimism and self-efficacy jointly do not differ significantly in the extent to which they predict academic achievement among special needs learners.
2. Optimism and self-efficacy when taken independently do not differ significantly in the extent to which they predict academic achievement among special needs learners.
3. Gender does not significantly influence the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predict academic achievement of special needs learners.

4. Nature of challenge/disability does not significantly influence the extent to which optimism and self efficacy predict academic achievement among special needs learners.

Method

The correlational research design was adopted in carrying out this research. The aim of the study was to determine the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predict academic achievement among special needs learners. The study was conducted in Port Harcourt, Rivers State of Nigeria among 137 special needs learners (hearing (and visually impaired) in a public Special school who constituted the population. A sample of 75 special needs learners (60 hearing impaired and 15 visually impaired) was drawn using purposive and proportionate sampling techniques. Three instruments were used for data collection including Life Orientation Test- Revised (LOT-R) by Scheier, Carver & Brooks (1994), Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (ASES) by Chemers, Hu and Garcia (2001) as adapted by Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade (2005) and Student Grades Record (SGR). While the SGR was obtained from the schools under study. The LOT-R and ASES are standardized instruments with reliability co-efficients of 0.78 and 0.65 respectively. Data analysis for the study was conducted using multiple regression, One-Way and Two-Way ANOVA and t-test associated with multiple regressions at 0.05 alpha level.

Results

Results got after data analysis were presented in the tables below. Data analysis was done in relation to the research questions and hypotheses.

Research Question 1: How do optimism and self-efficacy jointly predict academic achievement among special needs learners?

Table 1: Multiple Regression analysis showing how optimism and self-efficacy combined predicted academic achievement among special needs learners

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	SD Error	R Square Change
1	.853 ^a	.870	.728	5.27952	.72

Information in Table 1 showed that optimism and self-efficacy at $p < 0.05$ were significant predictors of academic achievement at Adjusted R Square of 0.72. This implied that optimism and self-efficacy jointly contributed 72% in the prediction of academic achievement among special needs learners. This is considered a positive prediction

Hypothesis 1: Optimism and self-efficacy jointly do not differ significantly in the extent to which they predict academic achievement among special needs learners.

Table 2: One-Way ANOVA analysis of optimism and self-efficacy combined as predictors of Academic Achievement

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Regression	5365.837	2	2682.918	96.254	.000 ^b
	Residual	2006.883	72	27.873		
	Total	7372.720	74			

Table 2 showed that the calculated F-value of 97.254 for optimism and self-efficacy was greater than the Critical F-value of 1.92 at dfs of 2 and 0.05 alpha level. The null hypothesis One was therefore rejected. This implied that optimism and self-efficacy significantly differed in the extent to which they jointly predict academic achievement among special needs learners.

Research Question 2: How do optimism and self-efficacy independently predict academic achievement among special needs learners?

Hypothesis 2: Optimism and self-efficacy when taken independently do not differ significantly in the extent to which they predict academic achievement among special needs learners.

Table 3: Coefficients of optimism and self-efficacy as independent predictors of academic achievement among special needs learners

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	14.486	3.797		3.815	.000
Optimism	1.155	.190	.578	6.091	.000
SelfEfficacy	.283	.082	.326	3.434	.001

Table 3 showed that both optimism and self-efficacy at $p < 0.05$ were significant in the extent to which they independently predicted academic achievement among special needs learners, and this was in favour of optimism.

Research Question 3: How does gender influence the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predictive academic achievement among special needs learners?

Table 4: Mean (\bar{x}), Standard Deviation (SD) and correlation coefficient (r) of gender influence on optimism and self-efficacy prediction of academic achievement among special needs learners

Variable	Variable	N	Mean	SD	r	r ²	%
Male	Optimism	43	30.35	5.23	.88	.77	77
	Self-Efficacy		68.72	10.60	.79	.62	62
	SGR		68.72	10.58			
Female	Optimism	32	28.19	4.45	.77	.59	59
	Self-Efficacy		65.03	11.65	.91	.83	83
	SGR		63.47	8.36			

In Table 4, gender influence on optimism's prediction of academic achievement produced r-values of .88 and .77 for male and female subjects respectively. On the other hand, self-efficacy's prediction of academic achievement due to gender produced r-values of .79 and .91 for male and female subjects respectively. By this result the male gender exerted greater

influence on the extent to which optimism predicted academic achievement among special needs learner with r coefficient of (.88) compared to their female counterpart who obtained r co-efficient of .77. On the other hand, the female gender exerted greater influence on the extent to which self-efficacy predicted academic achievement among special needs learner with r-co-efficient of .91 which is greater than .79 for males.

Hypothesis 3: Gender does not significantly influence the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predict academic achievement of special needs learners.

Table 5: Two-Way ANOVA of gender influence on optimism and self-efficacy in predicting academic achievement among special needs learners.

Sources of Variation	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Remark
Corrected Model	7097.320 ^a	69	102.860	1.867	.251	NS
Intercept	6161.880	1	6161.880	111.880	.111871	S
Gender	395.267	1	395.267	7.176	.044	S
Optimism	277.239	18	15.402	.280	.980	NS
Selfefficacy	1488.586	39	38.169	.693	.769	NS
Optimism*SelfEfficacy	579.057	11	52.642	.956	.561	NS
Error	275.400	5	55.080			
Total	338842.000	75				
Corrected Total	7372.720	74				

a. R Squared = .963 (Adjusted R Squared = .447)

From the Table 5 above, it was observed that the F-calculated values for optimism and self-efficacy were .280 and .693 which were not significant at .980 and .769 level but greater than 0.05 probability level at dfs of 18 and 39 respectively. However, gender F-calculated value of 7.176 was significant at .044 level which is less than 0.05 probability level. This implied that gender significantly influenced the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predicted academic achievement among special needs learners.

Research Question 4: How does nature of challenge/disability influence the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predict academic achievement of special needs learners?

Table 6: Mean (x), Standard Deviation (SD) and correlation coefficient (r) of influence of nature of challenge on optimism and self-efficacy prediction of academic achievement among special needs learners.

Variable	Variable	N	Mean	SD	r	r ²	%
Visually Impairment	Optimism	15	34.53	2.50	.76	.58	58
	Self-Efficacy		78.60	2.95	.88	.77	77
	SGR		82.87	4.57			
Hearing Impairment	Optimism	60	28.15	4.64	.70	.49	49
	Self-Efficacy		59.85	9.61	.83	.69	69
	SGR		62.38	5.89			

Information in Table 6 showed that optimism's prediction of academic achievement due to nature of impairment (visual and hearing impairment) produced r-values of .76 and .70. On the other hand, self-efficacy's prediction of academic achievement due to nature of challenge produced r-values of .88 and .83 for visual and hearing impaired subjects respectively. Visual impairment had greater influence on the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predicted academic achievement among special needs learners (.76 and .88) respectively, compared to hearing impairment which produced r co-efficient of .70 and .83 respectively.

Hypothesis 4: Nature of challenge/disability does not significantly influence the extent to which optimism and self efficacy predict academic achievement among special needs learners.

Table 7: Two-Way ANOVA of visually impaired and hearing impaired influence on optimism and self-efficacy predicting academic achievement

Sources of Variation	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Remark
Corrected Model	7342.720 ^a	69	106.416	17.736	.002	S
Intercept	7275.226	1	7275.226	1212.538	.000	S
Visualhearing impaired	640.667	1	640.667	106.778	.000	S
Optimism	692.026	18	38.446	6.408	.025	S
Selfefficacy	358.426	38	9.432	1.572	.327	NS
Optimism*SelfEfficacy	266.502	11	24.227	4.038	.068	NS
Error	30.000	5	6.000			
Total	338842.000	75				
Corrected Total	7372.720	74				

a. R Squared = .996 (Adjusted R Squared = .940)

In Table 7 above, it was observed that the F-calculated value for optimism for visually and hearing impaired was 6.408 which was significant at 0.025 level which is less than 0.05 probability level at df of 18. This implied that optimism was significant in the extent to which it influenced academic achievement of special needs learners due to the nature of their challenge. However, F-calculated value of 1.572 was not significant at .327 level which is greater than 0.05 probability level. This implied that self efficacy was not significant in the extent to which it influenced academic achievement among special needs learners due to the nature of their challenge.

Also from Table 7 above, it was observed that F-calculated value for optimism and self-efficacy combined among special needs learners due to the nature of their challenge (visual and hearing impairment) was 106.778 which was significant at 0.000 level and less than 0.05 probability level at df of 38. This implied that nature of challenge (visual and hearing impairment) significantly predicted the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy influenced academic achievement among special needs learners.

DISCUSSION

The extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predict academic achievement among special needs learners was investigated in this study. Findings indicated that optimism and self-efficacy positively predicted academic achievement among special needs learners. This

could be because optimism and self-efficacy have tendency to influence performance, achievement or success in different activities and different spheres of human endeavours, including learning, irrespective of whether the learner is able or disabled. This finding corroborates that of (Bressler, & Bressler, 2010; Croson, Rinaldo, Black, & Kelley 2009; Siddiqui, LaSalle-Ricci, Glass, Arnkoff, & Díaz, (2006); McCulloch, 2006; Huan, Yeo, Ang, & Chong, 2006) who found that optimism is positively associated with academic achievement. In the same vein, Klassen, Krawchuk, Rajani (2008) and Ogunmakin and Akomolafe (2013) also found that self-efficacy was a strong predictor of academic achievement.

Findings of this study also showed that optimism and self-efficacy significantly differ in the extent to which they independently predicted academic achievement among special needs learners, with optimism emerging as the greater predictor. This finding was supported by Singh and Jha (2013) who found a significant positive relationship between optimism and academic achievement.

Also, it was found that gender significantly influenced the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predicted academic achievement among special needs learners. The findings further showed that the male gender exerted greater/positive influence on the extent to which optimism predicted academic achievement than the females. The female gender on the other hand exerted greater/positive influence on the extent to which self-efficacy predicted academic achievement than the males. The result of this study as it affects females and self-efficacy is in agreement with the findings of Whitt, Pascarella, Elkins-Nesheim, Marth, & Pierson, (2003) which showed that the females proved more self-confident and out-performed their male counterparts when final grades were compared. However, Singh and Jha (2013) and Yazachew (2013) found no significant gender difference in optimism and self-efficacy respectively.

Nature of challenge (visual and hearing impairment) positively predicted academic achievement among special needs learners. This showed that irrespective of nature of challenge or impairment, optimism and self-efficacy could positively influence academic achievement among special needs learners.

Nature of challenge (visual and hearing impairment) were also found to differ significantly in their influence on the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predicted academic achievement among special needs learners, and this was in favour of visual impairment. This could be because the visually impaired had more direct access to learning than the hearing impaired students: because they could hear the teachers clearly and they could also record what they were being taught as against hearing impaired who have problem hearing clearly what the teachers taught. This may be as a result of variation in traits reflected to optimism and self-efficacy which make learners to have in confidence themselves and become hardworking in achieving better academic results.

CONCLUSION

From the findings, of this study, it was concluded that:

- Optimism and self-efficacy positively predicted academic performance among special needs learners.

- Optimism and self-efficacy differed significantly in the extent to which they predicted academic achievement among special needs learners. The prediction was in favour of optimism.
- Gender significantly influenced the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predicted academic achievement among special needs learners, with the female gender exerting the great influence.
- Nature of challenge significantly influenced the extent to which optimism and self-efficacy predicted academic achievement among special needs learners; with visual impairment exerting greater influence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings it was recommended that:

- Government should employ educational psychologist and Guidance counsellors to help special needs learners achieve enhanced optimism and improved self-efficacy skills for enhance academic achievement.
- Regular workshops and seminars should be organized for teachers in special schools to motivate them and guide towards assisting the students to achieve greater developing optimism and self-efficacy skills needed to excel in their academic endeavours.
- School administrators, educational psychologists, guidance counsellors and parents of special needs learners should work hard to help develop and sustain enhance students' academic self-efficacy by providing all essential conditions and instruments for the students' success in schools.

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