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Effects of Class Size and Peer Influence on Senior Secondary Students' Achievement

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Abstract

The quest to attain the goal of Education for All (EFA) in Nigeria has led to significant increase in school enrollment figures. The implication of this is large class sizes and high student-teacher ratio in most government-owned schools in Nigeria. However, research attention in education, especially in most developing countries, has largely focused on improving students' achievement and the quality of classroom instruction in schools. Efforts aimed at improving students' achievement are mostly on the provision of textbooks, massive construction of classrooms, and teacher training without taking cognizance of the large class sizes and peer influence in such classes. Although these interventions have contributed to the quality of classroom instruction, factors such as class size and peer influence continue to affect teachers' output and students' achievement in public examinations in Owerri Zone I of Imo State. Therefore, this study adopted inferential survey designs to examine the effects of class size and peer influence on students' achievement. Two research questions and one hypothesis were tested in the study. Eighty-five (85) participants from three senior secondary schools were exposed to two research instruments. Results showed main effect of class size on students' achievement, and interaction effects of class size and peer influence on students' achievement. Also, there was no significant difference between the mean ratings of class size and peer influence on students' achievement. Recommendations were made on how to improve the quality of instruction and incorporate controlled-peer-interaction in large class sizes.

INTRODUCTION

Improving students' learning outcomes remains the top priority of any instructional process within or outside the classroom. The concern of all stakeholders in education – government, policy makers, school community, school leadership or management, teachers, parents, and learners – is to ensure that students reach their potentials and show significant improvement in learning outcomes at the post-instructional phase. Studies have shown that expected students' learning outcomes at formative and summative stages vary and they include attitude, interest and satisfaction, achievement, and so on. Several efforts in educational research aimed at improving learning outcomes, especially in the area of students' achievement have largely focused on pedagogical practices and examining the effects of instructional strategies on achievement (Korir & Kipkemboi, 2014; Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018). Although these studies contributed immensely to the field of educational research, students' achievement has not improved significantly in spite of the continued use of learner-centered and innovative instructional packages.

The implication of this is that other variables such as parental involvement, teachers' experience and qualification, class size, peer influence, and verbal ability contribute to students' achievement in a typical classroom. Irrespective of the teacher's knowledge of the subject matter, years of experience, or choice of instructional strategy, classroom dynamics such as class size and peer influence can determine students' achievement after the process of instruction. Every classroom is a miniature

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society comprising different learners with varying personalities, abilities, and characteristics. The nature of the classroom, more often than not, determines the teacher's choice of method and style of teaching.

Notably, classrooms with large numbers of students are likely to be more demanding, unruly, and noisy than in a small class size. Bethel University Online (2019) presents advantages of small class sizes to include better teacher/student relationships, individualized instruction, thorough and in-depth exploration of topics, quality teacher's time or attention, and peer-interaction during the course of instruction. Jepsen (2015) considers class size-related interventions in education as a popular reform strategy for most policymakers who believe that smaller class sizes automatically translate to better learning outcomes. In most developed countries where class size reduction policies have been implemented, significant gains in students' achievement and classroom discipline have been reported. But all the past researches on the effectiveness of class size reductions on students' achievement in schools have one thing in common – they are too expensive. Most scholars have argued that the cost of embarking on such capital intensive reforms outweighs the benefits (Chingos, 2013). However, large class sizes are difficult to manage even for experienced teachers and a lopsided pupil-teacher ratio among other factors remains a classroom-related problem in most developing countries in Africa.

In 2009, the ILO/UNESCO Committee of Experts on the Application of the Recommendations concerning Teaching Personnel (CEART) states that class size and pupil-teacher ratio can affect the quality of education, especially in many developing countries and the report recommends that a reduction in class sizes will improve both teachers' performance and pupils' learning. Similarly, a UNESCO report in 2017 identifies pupil-teacher ratio as one of the criteria for comparing the quality of education and student learning across nations. This is because when class sizes are manageable and pupil-teacher ratios are within realistic limits, instructions become more engaging, personalized, and learner-centered.

In addition, teacher-student or student-student interaction during the process of instruction are more focused on the task at hand because there will be little or no distraction or disciplinary issues. Olagbaju (2014) found that when students are made to work in groups or small class sizes, they are able to receive more corrective feedback as part of formative evaluation during the process of instruction. Chingos and Whitehurst (2011) presented the findings of researches conducted on the effectiveness of class sizes in Texas and Israel. The studies reported that students in small class sizes recorded higher achievement scores than their counterparts in large class sizes. Research findings on the effect of class sizes globally have prompted policy reengineering and massive campaigns for Class Size Reduction (CSR) in the USA and other developed countries. Most states in the US have smaller class sizes with a pupil-teacher ratio of less than 20 pupils to a teacher. In addition, Jepsen and Rivkin (2009) found that the quality of instruction and students' learning improved significantly when class sizes are reduced and more manageable for teachers. However, most of these studies were conducted in developed countries where huge budgetary allocations are made for educational expenses unlike what obtains in most African countries, especially, Nigeria.

According to the UNESCO IBE - World Data on Education (6th Edition) and the federal Government of Nigeria, National Policy on Education (FGN, 2013), the benchmark for the pupil-teacher ratio in Nigeria is 35:1. However, the implementation of this recommendation been very poor, especially in most government-owned secondary schools in Owerri Zone I of Imo State where the classrooms are largely overcrowded with high pupil-teacher ratio. These large class sizes are caused by several factors which include inadequate number of qualified teachers and other personnel, massive infrastructural deficit, poor budgeting on education, school location, urbanization, relocation, and unplanned population growth (Finn et al, 2013). Efforts by school principals and administrators to ensure the optimal use of the dwindling or often limited resources and poor infrastructures have led to unprofessional practices which include allocating more teaching periods or hours, excessive increase in teachers' workload and large class sizes in schools. By default, teachers are overworked and the

implication is that the quality of instruction in schools and students' achievement in private and public examinations continues to fall.

Over the past five years, available statistics on students' performance in WASSCE shows that Imo State has not been able to claim the top spot in the annual state-by-state ranking released by the regional examination body (WAEC). For example, the national ranking in terms of students' performance in Imo State has not been higher than 4th (2016, 2017) and 5th (2015, 2018 & 2019) respectively (Inyang, 2018). Efforts to improve the rating of Imo State on the national log have been in the areas of teacher training, provision of textbooks and other educational materials, rehabilitation of dilapidated classrooms and so on. Although these efforts are commendable, they did not focus on classroom dynamics that can determine students' achievement such as class size and peer influence. Also, there is a dearth of literature on the relationship between class size and students' achievement in schools within Owerri Educational Zone I of Imo State, Nigeria. This necessitated the need to investigate the effects of class size on students' achievement in Owerri Zone I, Imo State.

Apart from class size, peer influence is another classroom-related variable that can determine students' achievement. Peer influence goes beyond what happens only within the confines of a classroom because it is an integral aspect of developmental psychology from childhood to the cradle. Socialization is an important part of a learner's school experience within and outside of the classroom. Instructional delivery in any learner-centered activity based classroom is structured to support interaction of peer groups regardless of the existing pupil-teacher ratio. A peer group is a small group of similar age, fairly close friends, sharing the same activities (Castrogiovanni, 2002). In the views of Filade, Bello, Uwaoma, Anwanane, and Nwangburuka, (2019), peer groups play a significant role in the all-round development of students. Peers are known to share similar levels of exposure, realities, and experiences. Therefore, peer groups often exert influence, either positive or negative, on individuals. Peer influence is the conscious or unconscious control wielded by a peer or peer group of people within the same group or sphere of influence. Peer influence is borne out of association between students. For example, the relationship between a learner with average ability and a gifted or intelligent student can improve achievement and influence the former positively (Olalekan, 2016).

Peer influence plays a prominent role in the way students participate in classroom activities and tasks assigned by teachers during the process of instruction. Although most learners feel at home in the midst of their peers, some students have demonstrated anxiety in the classroom based on the fear of intimidation, ridicule, and possible backlash by other classmates. Factors such as class size and classroom arrangement contribute significantly to interaction among peers and peer influence during instructional delivery. Several studies have reported a significant relationship between peer influence and students' achievement. Temitope and Christy (2015) and Mosha (2017) reported that there is a relationship between peer group and student's academic performance. Also, Filade et al (2019) found a significant influence of peer groups on students' achievement in schools. However, all these studies did not examine the composite influence of class size and peer groups on achievement and that is the concern of this study. Also, most of the studies above were carried out in Southwest Nigeria and Tanzania. Therefore, the study investigated the effects of class size and peer influence on students' achievement in Owerri Zone I of Imo State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Interventions aimed at improving students' achievement in schools in Owerri Zone I of Imo State have largely focused on the use of innovative pedagogies. These efforts, though effective, have not improved students' performance significantly because classroom dynamics such as class size and peer influence were not considered. Studies have confirmed that class size and peer influence can determine students' achievement. However, because of the huge financial implications of such research, most of the studies on class size and peer influence were conducted in developed countries and a few studies on peer influence were carried out in South western Nigeria and other African

countries. Therefore, this study investigated the effects of class size and peer influence on students' achievement in Owerri Zone I of Imo State, Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to further investigate the possible effects of class size and peers influence on students' academic performance in schools within Owerri Educational Zone I of Imo State, Nigeria. Several previous studies showed mixed effects of class size on student learning. The issue has thus remained unresolved, implying that more research is needed. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Examine main effect of class size on students' achievement in Owerri Zone I of Imo State, Nigeria.
2. Find out the interaction effect of class size and peer influence and students' achievement in Owerri Zone I of Imo State, Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. What are the main effects of class size on students' achievement in Owerri Zone I of Imo State, Nigeria?
2. What are the interaction effect of class size and peer influence and students' achievement in Owerri Zone I Imo State, Nigeria?

Hypothesis

H01: There is no significant difference between main effects of class size and peer influence on senior secondary students' achievement in Owerri Zone I, Imo state, Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework: Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory as propounded by Bandura (1977) stated that learning is a product of observation, imitation, and modeling. The theorists explain the process of change in behavior as a continuous mutual interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences because learning occurs through the observation of other peoples' behaviors, attitudes, and the outcomes of those behaviors. Learning takes place when learners are allowed to observe or interact with the model which could be the teacher, peer or chart during the course of instruction. In relation to this study, the aspects of social learning theory on modeling, and imitation through peer interaction or influence and controlled classroom environment during the course of the lesson inform the choice of the theory.

Class size, Peer Influence and Academic Achievement

The classroom is the theatre of instruction in formal education and more often than not, the atmosphere within the classroom can enhance or impede the learning process irrespective of the teacher's level of competence and years of experience. Classroom dynamics such as class arrangement, class size, and class control or management can significantly contribute to teachers' effectiveness and students' learning outcomes. Studies have reported that smaller class sizes are easier to manage and such classes improve the frequency and quality of teacher-student interaction (Jepsen & Rivkin, 2009; Olagbaju, 2014). In all classrooms, depending on the size and arrangement, teachers often use controlled interactions between learners during class activities to improve students' interest, academic achievement and enrich learning experience.

Peer relations are inevitable in everyday classroom experience at all levels of education. Peers often play an important part in every individual's psychological, social, and academic development. Most learners tend to relax and relate better with members of their peer groups and this could have both positive and negative effects. Unlike most adults, learners within the confines of a classroom, tend to spend more time with their peers. Peer influence is a product of peer pressure in and out of the classroom. Peer pressure often takes different forms from aggression to persuasion with some of such pressures include bullying, threats, intimidation, verbal abuse, apathy, physical abuse and so on - all aimed at imposing a change on the victim's behavior. Burns and Darling (2002) describe peer influence as a subtle form of peer pressure because it involves changing one's behavior to meet the perceived expectations of others, especially one's peer group. Korir and Kipkemboi (2014) describe peer groups as important agents of socialization that could determine, to a large extent, the formation of behavior. It is not uncommon for a popular classmate to set trends and influence other members of the class. Pressure from peers can influence a learner negatively by increasing his or her anxiety rate in the classroom. Vices such as drug abuse, truancy, examination malpractice, and other high risk behaviors that affect students' achievement in the classroom are products of negative peer influence.

Also, Van Ryzin and Roseth (2018) suggest that peer groups can promote positive or antisocial behaviors. They noted that negative peer influences have serious implications for achievement, attendance and completion rates in schools. Several studies (Olagbaju, 2014; Jepsen, 2015) have reported that teachers are able to exert more control, individualize their instruction and enforce discipline better in small class sizes or focused group instruction. The use of learner-centered instructions with small groups of learners or in small class sizes can be a friendly experience for both teachers and students because peer influence can be positively channeled and monitored to improve learning outcomes. For example, Van Ryzin and Roseth (2018) suggest that when using collaborative learning strategy, the teacher can assign a task to a group of students to produce a single finished product in order to foster team spirit. Also, positive peer influence can be motivated by assigning learners of different abilities to groups so that they can work collectively on group projects. The findings of a study by Burke and Sass (2008) on classroom peer effects and students' achievement revealed that there were positive and highly significant peer effects within every level of schooling on achievement in reading and math. Other studies (Mosha, 2017; Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018) have found that peer influence contributes significantly to students' achievement without recourse to the size of the classroom.

Similarly, Temitope and Christy (2015) and Filade et al (2019) reported that peer group influence had a significant relationship with students' academic performance at secondary school and undergraduate levels of education respectively. Also, Van Ryzin and Roseth (2018) found that peer learning strategy had a substantial value in terms of improved student behavior, class control and enhanced school climate. Therefore, they concluded that group-based peer-learning activities promote tolerance, social integration, and a beneficial learning atmosphere within the classroom. However, the fact that none of these studies examined the relationship between class size, peer influence and students' achievement in Owerri Zone I of Imo State necessitated this study.

METHOD

The study adopted the inferential survey design. The study was conducted in public senior secondary schools in Owerri Zone I, Imo State, Nigeria. 85 secondary school students were randomly selected out of 18, 413 (SS2 and SS3) students from 61 public secondary schools that make up the zone. The instrument was a 20 item questionnaire structured on a modified four point Likert scale and weighted thus: Strongly Agreed (SD=4 points), Agreed (A=3 points), Disagree (D=2 points), and Strongly Disagree (SD=1 point). The questionnaire was divided into two sections, A and B. the section 'A' dealt with the background information of the respondents while section 'B' focused on the questionnaire items in relation to the research questions.

Eighty-five (85) questionnaires were distributed to respondents in three selected public senior secondary schools in Owerri zone I, Imo state and 100% return rate was achieved. Senior secondary two (SS2) and three (SS3) students were used for the study since they have had more years of learning experience in secondary school, they had more knowledge to answer the questions accordingly. The researchers made use of a rating scale titled “Effects of Class Size and Peer Influence of Students’ Achievement Questionnaire (ECSPISAQ) for the students.

The content validation was done by three specialists, one specialist from Educational Management and Policy, one specialist from Education English and literary Studies, and Educational Measurement and Evaluation. The questionnaires were developed based on the concerns, issues and arguments raised in previous literatures about the topic. The questionnaires were administered by the researchers. The reliability was established using Cronbach alpha with an index of 0.88. In analyzing the data for the study, mean score statistics and standard deviation was used to answer the research questions. Mean scores of 2.50 and above were accepted for decision making while mean scores of less than 2.50 were rejected. Independent sample z-test statistic was used to test the hypotheses at a significant level of 0.05. (Source: Secondary Education Management Board Owerri, Imo state. Secondary school Enrollment, 2018-2019)

FINDINGS

What are the main effects of class size on students’ achievement in Owerri Zone I of Imo State, Nigeria?

Table 1. Mean Response of Students from Owerri Educational Zone 1 on the Main Effects of Class Size on Students’ Achievement

S/N	ITEM STATEMENT	SA	A	D	SD	\bar{X}	STD	DECISION
1	I don’t enjoy private lessons or tutorials	20	54	9	2	3.08	0.66	Accepted
2	I think I will improve as a learner if I have more of my teacher’s attention during lessons.	24	58	3	0	3.25	0.50	Accepted
3	Having too many students in a classroom distracts me.	50	5	36	16	3.1	1.76	Accepted
4	I would ask questions/participate more in a smaller class.	40	5	5	6	3.2	1.70	Accepted
5	I feel teachers don’t give their best in large class sizes.	35	60	59	10	3.1	1.76	Accepted
6	It’s very hard to escape the prying eyes of the teacher in a small class.	21	40	22	2	2.94	0.77	Accepted
7	Large class sizes are too noisy for learning.	30	15	50	11	3.11	1.70	Accepted
8	I think discipline is better enforced in small classrooms.	21	41	20	3	2.94	0.77	Accepted
9	I feel my assignments are not usually marked because we are too many.	51	20	12	2	3.41	0.89	Accepted
10	The silence that heralds small class sizes help me to learn	45	55	6	-	3.3	1.81	Accepted
Criterion mean (\bar{X}) = 2.50								

Table 1 presents detailed result of how class size affects the academic achievement of the secondary school students in Owerri Zone 1, Imo state. The result above shows items 1, 2, 6 and 9 with scores of 3.08, 3.25, 2.94, and 3.41 respectively and standard deviations of 0.66, 0.50, 0.77, and 0.82 respectively. The mean scores were greater than the reference mean of 2.50 and were not rejected. Items 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 10 with mean scores of 3.1, 3.2, 3.11, 2.94, 2.35 and 3.3 with standard deviation

of 1.76, 1.70, 1.776, 1.70, 0.77, and 1.81 respectively and were found to be greater than the reference mean of 2.50 and were not rejected. Therefore ten (10) items were all not rejected, but accepted.

What are the interaction effect of class size and peer influence and students' achievement in Owerri Zone I Imo State, Nigeria?

Table 2. Mean Response of Students on Interaction Effect of Class Size and Peer Influence and Students Achievement

S/N	ITEM STATEMENT	SA	A	D	SD	\bar{X}	STD	DECISION
11	I cannot be compelled to take risks with or by my friends.	22	49	11	3	3.05	0.72	Accepted
12	I support my friends just to keep them happy.	19	53	9	4	3.02	0.72	Accepted
13	It is very difficult for my friends to get me to change my mind.	56	20	9	0	3.55	0.68	Accepted
14	It is better to stand out as an individual than blend with the crowd.	24	58	3	0	3.25	0.50	Accepted
15	I act differently when I am alone from when I am with my friends.	18	47	12	8	2.88	0.84	Accepted
16	It's very easy for my friends to convince me.	26	48	9	2	3.15	0.69	Accepted
17	I will rather support my classmates than make them angry at me.	21	40	22	2	2.94	0.77	Accepted
18	I can do something that is wrong just to keep my friend happy.	13	15	50	1	2.47	0.76	Rejected
19	I say things I do not really believe just to win my friends' respect	52	21	11	1	3.45	0.76	Accepted
20	I change the way I act when I am with my friends.	48	18	16	3	3.3	0.86	Accepted
Criterion Mean (\bar{X}) = 2.50						3.11	0.73	

Table 2 shows that mean scores were found to be greater than the reference mean of 2.50 and were therefore accepted. Item 8 with mean score 2.47 was rejected because it was found to be less than the reference mean of 2.50. Since nine(9) out of the ten (10) items had mean score above the reference mean, it implies that the respondents accepted that interaction has effect on class size and peer influence on students' achievement in Owerri Zone I of Imo State, Nigeria.

Hypotheses Testing

Ho1: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of class size and peer influence on senior secondary students' achievement in Owerri Zone I, Imo state, Nigeria.

Table 3. Z test Analysis of the Difference between the Mean Rating of Class Size and Peer Influence on Senior Secondary Students' Achievement

Respondents	N	\bar{X}	SD	Zcal.	Zcrti.	Decision
SSS-2	41	3.11	0.73	1.00	1.96	Accept Ho
SSS-3	44	3.02	0.74			

Result of Table 3 shows that the calculated value of 1.0, is less than the critical z value of 1.96, at 0.05 level of significance. The acceptance of null hypothesis implies that there is no significant difference in the view of students in senior secondary schools 2 and 3 in Owerri Zone I on the mean rating of class size and peer influence on academic achievement.

DISCUSSION

The findings of research question one revealed that many students feel shy to talk in the classroom. This agrees with the findings of Olagbaju (2014) who indicated that most of the students in large class sizes may not comprehend the concept of what is taught by the teacher as the size deters them from voicing out to ask questions. This could negatively affect the student's achievement in the class. The present finding is also in line with the result of Olalekan, (2016) that it is not the size of the class that helps students' academic achievement rather the quality of the teaching that takes place. He further stresses that when teachers continue to use large class size teaching methods, even when teaching small class size, there is likelihood that learning can take place. However, it is evidential to note that the overall influence of all the test items indicated that the large class size has significant negative influence in on student's achievement in the classroom.

The study also revealed that the level of students' interaction and peer influence is very high in small class size. The implication is that large class sizes promote student's interaction, enhance student-student relationship, and create quality social development that facilitates achievement. This in line with the findings of Finn et al (2013) and Filade et al (2019) that when students are placed in smaller classes, they become more engaged both academically and socially and further argued that with strong social academic engagement, academic achievement improves. The difference in the results may be attributed to social differences between the setting of where they conducted their study and that of the current study. Nigerian teaching techniques embraces, to a large extent, socialization and interaction among students within the classroom. However, most students reported that teachers-student interaction is mostly neglected in the large class sizes. This support the earlier study by Chingos and Whitehurst (2011) that it is not easy for teachers in large class sizes to thoroughly spot issues, give corrections, identify specific needs of the students and gear teaching to meet them, set individual goals for students, and be suggestible in the use of different methods in teaching.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Efforts aimed at improving students' achievement by the most state governments in Nigeria are usually concentrated on classroom construction, teacher training, provision of textbooks and other educational materials, and so on. In spite of these interventions, students' achievement in public examinations has not improved significantly. Students and other stakeholders often complain about the quality of instruction in schools because of the large classes and high teacher-pupil ratio which reduces the quality and depth of teacher-student and student-student interaction in the classroom. Therefore, the study examined the main and interaction effects of class size and peer influence on students' achievement in Owerri Zone I of Imo State, Nigeria.

The result revealed that the two independent variables (class size and peer influence) had main and interaction effects on students' achievement in Owerri Zone I. Also, there was no significant difference between the mean ratings of class size and peer influence on students' achievement in Owerri Zone I of Imo State, Nigeria. The findings of this study confirm that peer relations, interactions and influences are stronger in small class sizes. Also, small class sizes support quality student-student interaction, peer comradeship, and timely and adequate teacher-corrective feedback during instructional delivery which contributes significantly to students' achievement and quality of learning. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Besides the provision of 'educational hardware' such as textbooks, classroom construction and teacher training, the government should pay attention to the quality of instruction in the classroom.
2. Students' classroom experience should be enriched through quality teacher-student and student-student interaction during the process of instruction.

3. There is need for teachers to be trained on how to manage the current large class sizes by leveraging on class influence and working with Constituted Students' Groups (CSG) to enrich learning experiences and improve academic achievement.
4. Teachers should encourage and accommodate controlled-peer-interaction during classroom interaction.

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