

Full Length Research Paper

An assessment of students' connectedness in Tertiary Institutions in Anambra State of Nigeria

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The transition from the confines of the home to higher institutions means a different dimension of life for most students. These students need to feel supported and cared for by the new community or the school family to which they are now part. Students' perception of this condition leads to their connectedness to the school and the school activities. This connection is very important for the reduction of deviant behaviours, increase in learning oriented activities as well as active participation of graduates in the growth of their alma mater. This study looked at the school connectedness of tertiary students as a product of support from the teachers, the staff, the peer group and the school management. A descriptive survey design using questionnaire was adopted in order to answer three research questions and test the three hypotheses. A sample of 772 students which were drawn from a University, a Polytechnic and a College of Education in Anambra State of Nigeria was used for study. The study found, that on the average, the students of these schools are moderately connected to their schools, however they feel more supported by and connected to their school management and hence had highest mean connectedness for the school management while support and connectedness to their teachers had the lowest mean.

Key words: Students' perception, transition, higher institutions, connectedness, school support.

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian higher education has been accused of performing below expectation when judged from both internal and global benchmarks of quality of output, peaceful co-existence on campus, fair conduct of examination, amongst others. The nature of higher education is such that its students are seen by members of campus community as adults who have attained the age of taking full responsibility of their behaviours and students on their part see themselves as those set free from the encumbrances of family control and influences. Indeed the campus environment is one perceived as "everyone to himself/herself". Students' relationship with teachers, fellow students, staff and management appears to be characterized by this attitude despite the fact that both the young and old require to be given a reasonable

measure of care and concern in everyday life. This is even more harmful considering the fact that candidates below the age of 17 are increasingly gaining admission into higher education. This air of dealing with "adults" is so pervasive in the schools that one loses sight of psychosocial environmental affects on students' sense of satisfaction, motivation and learning.

Undoubtedly, everyone needs the right support to achieve. This is very crucial for the undergraduates whose need for closeness with the school community is even more acute considering severance from the familiar home and family support. Students' feeling that members of this community - which he/she is now a part - care and support his/her efforts to socialize and learn is one that pervades his/her attitude to the members of the campus community and the society at large. This perception of support and care on campus is referred to as school or campus connectedness - a feeling that enables students become more involved in school activities with more

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possibilities of academic enhancement and social wellbeing.

Lee and Davis (cited in Summers et al., 2007) defined connectedness as a students' psychological sense of belonging on a campus. A substantial body of empirical researches has given evidence of the effect of students' connectedness on their wellbeing and academic achievement (Karcher, 2003; Blum, 2005). It is therefore important that parents, teachers, educators and educational institutions know how connected the students are to their schools considering that this connection underpins students' wellbeing, academic achievement and success.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to fully understand the nature and impact of students' relationship with the school, many scholars have come up with terms like school bonding, school engagement, school attachment, school membership, school involvement, positive orientation to school, teacher support, school climate and school connectedness amongst others. While each measure has unique elements, nine salient constructs that relate to school connectedness appear: 1) academic engagement, 2) belonging, 3) discipline/fairness, 4) extracurricular activities, 5) liking for school, 6) student voice, 7) peer relations, 8) safety and 9) teacher support (Libbey, 2004).

All these are aimed at understanding how students' relationship with their teachers, staff, their peer and the overall school environment affect their behaviour and academic outcomes. In all, these different terms can be narrowed down to what is known as school connectedness.

School connectedness is a feeling by the students that adults in the school support and care about them both as learners and as individuals. It is students' self-report of adults' support and care within the school context. (Blum, 2005) observed that school connectedness is most crucial at the adolescent period. This view may stem from the fact that adolescents have been described variously by psychologists as a period of "storm and stress". Indeed, developments during the period of adolescence place the youth in a more stressful and vulnerable state. Consequently, they need to be shown care and understanding by those they relate with in the school to be able to strive to attain the expectations from both the home and the school. McNeely and Falci (2004) observed that when young people receive empathy, praise and attention in a clear and consistent fashion, they experience social support. The experience of social support generates a sense of belonging which, in turn, leads to increased engagement and academic motivation. This position has been corroborated by many studies (Battistich, 1995; Shouse, 1996; Solomon et al., 2000; Klem and Connell, 2004), restating that students with caring and supportive interpersonal relationships in

school report more positive academic attitudes and values and more satisfaction with school. These students also are more engaged academically.

Research has shown that when students perceive that they are being supported by their teachers, they exhibit less deviant behaviours. Findings from research have shown that students who are connected to their schools are less likely to engage in risky behaviours like substance use and early sexual activity (McNeely et al., 2002).

In another longitudinal study conducted by Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming and Hawkins (2004) it was discovered that student bonding to their schools was related to lower rate of substance use, gang membership, violence and less academic problems.

Student connectedness measure in higher education

Research has shown that psychosocial factors impact on students' sense of satisfaction and learning. The school psychosocial environment is built by the teachers, students, staff and the school administrators. Indeed, the psychosocial school environment is a product of all non material elements of the school resulting from relationships among the teachers, students, staff and school management. Students' connectedness (attachment/bonding/engagement) to the school is therefore determined by students' perceived support and care of the teacher, fellow students, staff and school management. Wilson (1996) observed minority students' active participation in class and improvement in academic performance as a result of interpersonal interaction with peers and the professor teaching that course and concludes that "when professors really care about their students and when they show that caring in respectful, humane and caring ways, students return that caring and respect in concrete and creative ways." Another study by Seymour and Hewitt discovered inapproachability of professors as one of the reasons undergraduates drop out from science programmes (Agajanian et al., 2006). School connectedness is perceived to be most crucial for the youth. Youth has been classified as people within the age range of 12 - 24 years. However, most re-searches on school connectedness were on elementary, middle and senior high schools. These categories of learners fall within the age range of 6 – 18 years old. Little or no research has been done on school connectedness at the tertiary or higher education level where greater percentage of students fall within the ages of 17 - 25.

The astounding research findings by Klem and Connell (2004) in United States of America, revealed that "by high school as many as 40 to 60% of students become chronically disengaged from school –urban, suburban and rural – not counting those who already dropped out." If half of students in high school who fall within the age range 14 – 18 years old are disconnected from their

schools, what does it say of students in Nigerian secondary and higher institutions where statistics are practically none existent?

One cannot say for certain the percentage of students' disconnectedness in higher education in Nigeria but little picture and statistics available on school dropout, violence, cultism, sexual harassment and low quality of higher education are indications of very unpleasant situation.

Writing on the status of higher education in Nigeria, Saint et al. (2003) observed that institutional statistics are notoriously unreliable and universities do not monitor their dropout rates. However in 2002 National Universities Commission (NUC) attempted to calculate dropout rates within the federal university system. Its preliminary findings suggested that dropout rates may be as high as 50% at six universities. Dropout rates of 10% or less were attributed only to the three Federal Universities at Kano, Maiduguri and Owerri. It is not surprising that Azubuike (2005) attributed "negative attitude of teachers, staff and school heads as one of the causes of students' high rate of dropout in Nigerian schools".

Most higher institutions are breeding grounds for all sorts of corrupt practices and problems ranging from examination malpractice, cult activities, admission racketeering, sexual harassment, industrial unrest, violence amongst others (Rotimi, 2005; Olujuwon, 1999; Denga and Denga, 2004; Ezebube, 2006; Azelama et al., 2005).

In view of the above scenario, what are the feelings of the students about the supportiveness of their teachers, their school administrators and the general school environment? Since disconnectedness from school is related to students deviant behaviour, disengagement from school activities, violence and other health risk behaviour that adversely affect the achievement levels of students, one is persuaded to ask just how connected are the youth enrolled in Undergraduate Programmes in the Colleges of Education, Polytechnics and Universities?

Students' connectedness: age, gender and school size effects

Research has shown that school connectedness is related to age. Reviewing research findings on school connectedness, Whitlock (2003) stated that contrary to gender, that the relationship between age and school connectedness is quite consistent and persistent: the older youth are, the less connected they feel to school. A research conducted a year later also lent support to the report made by Whitlock (Cornell News, 2004).

Research findings have shown that there might be gender dimension to students' connectedness. For instance, Bonnney et al. (2000) found that boys reported feeling more connected to their school than girls. However a more recent study on the campus connectedness of university students by Summers et al. (2007), contrasts with this later finding. They reported that female students

showed more connected feelings than males. These conflicting findings were noted by Whitlock (2003) who observes that researches on relationship between gender and school connectedness have been most inconsistent. School size has also been reported to influence students' feeling of connection to their schools. Specifically, America's National Association of State Boards of Education (2002) found that students in smaller schools feel more connected than students from large schools.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

- (1) What is the perceived level of connectedness of students in colleges of education, polytechnics and universities?
- (2) To what extent are female students' perceptions of their connectedness higher than those of male students?
- (3) To what extent do younger students perceive themselves to be more connected than older students?

HYPOTHESES

Below are the hypotheses proposed for this study: All were to be tested at 0.05 significance level:

- (1) College of education, Polytechnic and university students will not differ significantly on perceived level of connectedness.
- (2) Female and male students will not differ significantly on the perception of their levels of connectedness to school
- (3) Younger students' perception of connectedness will not differ significantly from those of older students.

METHODOLOGY

This work is basically a descriptive survey which utilized questionnaire to gauge students' levels of connectedness to their schools. It is therefore the students self-report of connectedness.

Participants

Three out of the six Higher Institutions in Anambra State of South-East Geopolitical zone of Nigeria were randomly selected for the study. It is comprised of one university, one polytechnic and one college of education. A total of seven hundred and seventy-two (772) students which comprised of 251, 263 and 258 for the University, Polytechnic and College of education respectively were used. The participants' profile is tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants profile.

Participants characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	283	37
Female	489	63
Total	772	100
Age		
Youth (17- 24 years)	637	82.5
Adults (25andAbove)	135	17.5
Total	772	100

Instrumentation

Considering that most of the works on students' connectedness were in elementary and high schools and considering also that students in tertiary institutions have a wider interaction networked community that comprised, the teachers, the other students, the support of staff and the Management, the Students Campus Connected Questionnaire (SCCQ) was developed with resources from literature review which include such works as that of Cunningham et al. (2007), Edens (2006), Libbey (2003), amongst others. The major feature of their instruments is those they measured connectedness of elementary and secondary school students which restricted the instrument to such subscales as; teacher support, peer support, social belongingness and school safety. However, considering that higher students' connectedness is a sum total of all their interactions with all the people within the school community, there was then the need to include these groups that impact on students' stay in the school. Hence, the modification of these instruments to an instrument with a four subscale comprising; connectedness to teacher, to peer, to staff and to school management. These four factors made up the composite factor, school connectedness. The 44-item School connected questionnaire was duly validated and its reliability was assured through a test-retest reliability method which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.86, an indication of sufficient reliability of the instrument. The 44-items were responded to on a five-point-Likert type scale of; all the time - 5, Most of the time - 4, Sometimes - 3, Rarely - 2 and Never - 1. Items negatively worded received a reversed coding such that 5 was the highest score and 1 the least score.

A total of one thousand (1000) copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the respective schools through the help of volunteers who administered, monitored and collected all the completed questionnaires. Of the number distributed seven hundred and seven-two (772) questionnaire were returned and found fit for the study. Mean, standard deviation, t-test and Analysis of Variance were used for the analysis of the data. Hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS

This study looked at the connectedness level of tertiary students in selected tertiary institutions in Anambra State. Results from the data collected and analysed were presented in line with the research questions. The decision rule for the research questions include the following; scores ranging from 5.01 - 3.67 (High Connectedness), 3.66 - 2.33 (average connectedness) and 2.32 - 0.99 (low

connectedness).

Table 2 shows that the mean score for students' connectedness is 3.2920, this falls within the average connectedness scale. This indicates that students are, on the average, connected to their schools. However, college of education students' perception of connection is higher than that of both university and polytechnic students.

The table below (Table 3) shows mean scores for male and female students to be 3.2554 and 3.3131 respectively. Both male and female rating of their connectedness falls within the average connectedness, female students have higher mean scores which is a 1.75% difference between the male and female students perceived connectedness to their schools. Though this difference may appear insignificant, subjecting the mean scores to a test for equality of means would give a better conclusion.

The table below (Table 4) shows that younger students have a higher mean score of 3.3157, a 4.12% difference with older students' mean score of 3.1801. These means fall within the moderate or average connectedness scale. The percentage difference is relatively high, but the extent to which it is significant can be determined by the t-test.

Table 5a below shows F-ratio of 46.047 and a significance value of .000. This significance value is less than the 0.05 significance level set at the beginning of the work. This shows that significance difference exists among the mean scores of the three groups, now a post-hoc test is required to know the direction of this difference. Below is Scheffe test.

Table 5b, showing the post hoc (scheffe) test carried out to find out the direction of the difference, revealed significance value 0.000 for both comparison of College and Polytechnic and College and University. The significance value is less than the significance level 0.05, as such, the hypothesis of no difference was rejected, indicating that there is a significant difference between college students' connectedness (M = 3.4852, SD = 0.30091) and Polytechnic students' connectedness (M = 3.1906, SD = 0.39544) on one hand and between the

Table 2. Mean scores of students' connectedness by institution.

Type of Institution	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
University	251	3.1996	.47610
Polytechnic	263	3.1906	.39544
College of education	258	3.4852	.30091
Total	772	3.2920	.41905

Table 3. Mean score of students' connectedness by gender.

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Male	283	3.2554	.37353
Female	489	3.3131	.44225
Total	772	3.2920	.41905

Table 4. Mean scores of students' connectedness by age.

Age Category	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Youth	637	3.3157	0.40540
Adults	135	3.1801	0.46371

College and the university students ($M = 3.1996$, $SD = 0.47610$) on another.

The comparisons between university and polytechnic show a significant value of 0.967 which is greater than the 0.05 significance level, as such university students' connectedness ($M = 3.1996$, $SD = 0.47610$) do not significantly differ from polytechnic students' connectedness ($M = 3.1906$, $SD = 0.39544$).

The Table 6 shows that t -value = -1.848 and $P = .065$ which is greater than the stated significance 0.05, the null hypothesis of no difference is therefore sustained.

That is, the mean rating of male students on their connectedness to school, ($M = 3.2554$, $SD = 0.37353$) do not differ significantly with the mean scores of female students on connectedness to their schools ($M = 3.3131$, $SD = 0.44225$). This also shows that 1.75% difference observed in mean scores of male and female students on their connectedness was very minute and therefore insignificant. Younger students' perceived connectedness will not differ significantly from that of older students.

Table 7 shows a t -value = 3.439 and $P = 0.001$. This P value is less than the significance level of 0.05. Therefore the null hypothesis of no significant difference was rejected, demonstrating that the younger students' rating of their connectedness ($M=3.3157$, $SD = 0.40540$) differs significantly with the older students' rating of their connectedness to their schools ($M = 3.1801$, $SD = 0.46371$). This further proved that the 4.12% difference

between the mean scores of the youths and the adults on connectedness to their school was statistically significant.

DISCUSSION

Teachers, parents, the community and the entire society have very high expectations of Higher Education Students. This is particularly so because the graduation from this stage marks the transition from dependence to sustenance of self, support for family members and contribution to the growth and development of the society. Schools on their part have mapped out a whole lot of challenging curriculum necessary to achieve these expectations. In order to take advantage of these high expectations, students need the support of people with whom they interact within the school system. The assurance that this is the case, leads to more connectedness to their schools which invariably results in high student commitment to school activities, motivation to learn and increased academic achievement.

This study which seeks to find out the tertiary institutions students' perception of their connectedness to their respective schools shows that students across all gender and age grades are on the average connected to their schools. However a look at the subscale mean scores in appendix II shows that School Management support and students' connectedness to School Management has the highest mean score, while teachers' support and students' connectedness to teachers received the lowest mean score.

However contrary to findings of Summers et al. (2007), gender appears not to be a significant influence on students' connection to their schools. In all, both the male and females have approximately equal feelings of

Table 5a. Analysis of variance for students' connectedness by programme type.

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	P-value
Between groups	14.480	2	7.240	46.047	0.000
Within groups	120.908	769	0.157		
Total	135.388	771			

- a. Degrees of freedom (the number of sample values that can vary after certain restrictions have been imposed on all data values (Triola, 2005, p.300).
- b. F-ratio: Used to test for overall differences in group means (Field, 2009, p.785).
- c. Probability value: Level of Significance actually obtained after the data has been analysed usually compared with the one selected before the test of hypothesis (Gall, Gall and Borg, 2007, p.140).

Table 5b. Post hoc test for multiple comparisons among university, polytechnic and college.

Dependent Variable	Type of Institution (I)	Type of Institution (J)	(I-J) Mean difference	Std. error	P-value
Overall students' Connectedness	University*	polytechnic	0.0090	0.03499	0.967
		College*	-0.2856	0.03515	*0.000
	Polytechnic	university	-0.0090	0.03499	0.967
		College*	-0.2946	0.03475	*0.000
	College*	University	0.2856	0.035	*0.000
		polytechnic	0.2946	0.03475	*0.000

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 6. T-test for students' connectedness by gender.

Gender	Mean	t	df	P-value
Male	3.2554			
Female	3.3131	-1.848	770	0.065

Table 7. T-test for students' connectedness between younger and older students.

	Mean	t	df	P-value
Youth	3.3157			
Adults	3.1801	3.439	770	0.001

connectedness to their respective schools.

Interesting findings which happen to conform to the previous findings in the literature are that the older the students, the more the tendency to become disconnected from their schools (Witlock, 2003). Again data from this study appear to support findings which show more feelings of connection for students in smaller institutions. The mean score of college of education students was significantly higher than the mean score of both the university and polytechnic students. Universities and

Polytechnics are known to have both higher student body, staff and large school area which could lead to students having less attention to their needs and more feelings of obscurity in that big world of people and activities. Colleges of education, on the contrary, have less student population and school area. There is therefore more tendency for the existence of better interpersonal relationship among the students and between the students and the teachers.

Conclusion

Although a lot of attention has been given by many scholars to students' connectedness in elementary and secondary schools, little has been done in higher education and none has been done in Nigeria. This study calls forth more research in this area considering the problems which bedevilled our higher education system. This present study is by no way a representative study as the sample was not randomly selected and does not represent the student population in the three higher institutions sampled.

The conclusions from many studies indicate the positive contributions of connectedness to school by students. Of particular interest is the finding of Allbaugh (2004) which established a relationship between students' connectedness to school and their achievement in the class. Even though one may not infer a cause and

effect situation, it gives one an insight that increasing students' connectedness would improve their achievement

That the students are moderately connected to their schools is not encouraging. Institutions of higher learning, teachers and school administrators need to respond in many different ways in order to increase students' connectedness on campus with particular reference to students' connectedness to their teachers. This calls for programmes which will involve the students more and encourage more teacher-student interactions outside the classroom.

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APPENDIX I

Students' campus connectedness; item by item description.

Questionnaire items	Mean	Std. deviation
My lecturers treat me fairly	3.3307	1.23098
My lecturers carefully guide me through learning	3.0982	1.08294
My lecturers make me have a sense of safety	3.2494	1.13561
I participate in classroom activities	3.7248	1.18003
My lecturers are friendly with me	3.2881	1.14688
I am close to my lecturers	3.6977	1.41935
I am happy with my lecturers	3.3256	.68428
My lecturers make me feel I am part of this school	3.2532	.71245
My lecturers listen to my problems	3.5840	.77145
my lecturers are approachable	3.6718	.89171
I get along well with my lecturers	3.3850	1.04198
My lecturers rules are too strict and rigid	2.0930	1.11168
I feel comfortable sharing my problems and thoughts with my lecturers	3.8000	1.05900
I am proud of my school management	3.3023	3.26439
I feel Management have students' interest at heart	3.4186	.74268
I am happy with my school management	3.6860	1.01777
I would chose again i will choose this school	3.7868	1.01082
I receive fair treatment from staff of this institution	3.0646	1.33554
Staff here are of assistance in my registration and other service	3.0556	1.40716
My interaction with staff gives me feeling of safety	3.0065	1.39346
My lecturers care about me	3.2196	1.39888
staff here have friendly disposition to me	4.0000	1.19399
I am happy with staff services	3.9057	1.14313
Staff make me feel I am part of this school	2.8992	1.53026
My fellow students treat me fairly	3.5917	.96711
staff here listen to my concerns and problems	3.7842	1.19560
staff here a very approachable	2.9690	1.32019
I am proud of staff of this institution	3.8359	1.43427
My peers are no threat to my safety	3.3256	1.18721
My peers help in making me enjoy class/school activities	3.8036	1.12260
I enjoy cooperative learning with my school peers	3.9974	.96511
Staff are responsive to students needs	3.6292	.84854
I feel comfortable sharing my question and opinions with management	3.9031	1.01714
I feel Management care about the students	3.8605	1.01663
Management listens to students concern or problems	3.7636	1.05461
Management policies make me feel I am part of this place	3.5310	1.20303
I maintain good friendship with my peers	2.9522	1.39915
I feel close to my peers	2.9496	1.61535
I am happy with my peers	3.2610	1.03201
My interaction with my peers make feel I belong to this school	2.4548	1.15764
I wish I would have this type of mates after school	2.6227	1.64031
I feel my friends care about me	2.9005	1.66205
I have confidence of fair treatment from my school management	2.6770	1.53580
Management provides safe environment for learning	2.7080	1.46013

APPENDIX II

Students' connectedness subscale; descriptive statistics.

Connectedness subscales	Type of institution	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error
Teacher support and connectedness	University	251	3.1217	.47909	.03012
	Polytechnic	263	3.0725	.35610	.02196
	College of Education	258	3.1287	.19395	.01208
	Total	772	3.1073	.36187	.01301
Peer support and connectedness	University	251	2.8155	.60163	.03797
	Polytechnic	263	2.9901	.52645	.03246
	College of Education	258	3.7527	.69361	.04318
	Total	772	3.1882	.73291	.02638
Staff support and connectedness	university	251	3.5391	.75362	.04738
	polytechnic	263	3.3209	.72384	.04463
	college of Education	258	3.3853	.38058	.02369
	Total	772	3.4137	.64749	.02327
School management support and connectedness	University	251	3.3316	.60154	.03782
	Polytechnic	263	3.3787	.70959	.04376
	College of Education	258	3.6740	.40912	.02547
	Total	772	3.4618	.60597	.02178
Overall students' connectedness	University	251	3.1996	.47610	.03005
	Polytechnic	263	3.1906	.39544	.02438
	College of Education	258	3.4852	.30091	.01873
	Total	772	3.2920	.41905	.01508