

**TEACHERS EMPATHY SKILL AS CORRELATE OF STUDENTS
ACADMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN
ANAMBRA STATE.**

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Abstract

The study determined the correlation between teachers' empathy skills and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. Two research questions guided the study and two hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. The correlational research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study comprised 21,272 senior secondary school students in SS2 in 267 public secondary schools in Anambra State. The population comprised of 9550 male students and 11,722 female students in 267 public secondary schools in Anambra State. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire and Students' Academic Achievement Scores (SAAS). The questionnaire was subjected to face validation. A coefficient value of 0.86 was obtained. The application of Cronbach Alpha reliability method yielded coefficient values of 0.83 and 0.87 for cluster 1 and 2 respectively with an overall reliability coefficient of 0.85. Pearson Product Moment Correlation statistic was used for data analysis. The finding of the study revealed that teachers' cognitive skill and teachers' affective empathy skill have high positive relationship with students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. Findings further revealed that teachers' cognitive skill and teachers' affective empathy skill have significant relationship with students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. Based on these findings, the researchers conclude that teachers' empathy skill has significant relationship with students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. The researchers recommended that principals of public secondary schools should provide teachers with continuous professional development opportunities that focus on enhancing their cognitive empathy skills.

Keywords: Teachers, Empathy Skill, Cognitive, Affective, Academic Achievement

Introduction

Academic achievement is a complex concept that has been extensively studied and defined by scholars across various research disciplines. It encompasses a broad range of skills, abilities and knowledge acquired through formal education and related experiences. Academic achievement is demonstrated by the outcomes and results attained in the classroom, indicating how well a student have met their learning objectives. Academic achievement is reflected in the outcomes produced by students, as evidenced by their achievement on various assessments. Nwanze *et al.* (2021) opined that academic achievement represents the extent to which a student, teacher, or institution has successfully met their educational objectives, whether they are short-term or long-term in nature.

Academic achievement is commonly indicated by scores or marks assigned to students through tests and examinations by their subject teachers. It can be regarded as any representation used to signify a student's scholastic standing. Nyarks and Enang (2020) emphasized that the academic achievement of secondary school students serves as both an indicator of school effectiveness and a crucial determinant of the well-being of individuals and the nation as a whole. Ifelunni *et al.* (2019) stated that academic achievement represents the outcome of a student's learning efforts within the school context, encompassing the overall academic achievement evaluated through teacher assessments and examinations.

Students encounter difficulties in subjects such as Mathematics and other science subjects like physics and chemistry in Anambra State. This seem to have resulted to a noticeable decline in academic achievement, as evidenced by the WAEC results from 2017 to 2019 (Efobi & Okigbo, 2022). It has been noted that some teachers in certain public secondary schools struggle to demonstrate empathy in their interactions with students. For instance, when teachers fail to connect emotionally with their students, it can lead to a diminished sense of belonging and motivation among students. It has been suggested that students'

academic achievement could be influenced by teachers' ability to managing classroom conflicts which is reflected in their abilities to show empathy. Onyinyechi and Wichendu (2021) stated that empathy skills which is an important conflict management skill is essential for teachers to navigate the complexities of classroom interactions and school dynamics.

Empathy skill is defined as an individuals' capability to appreciate and share others' negative and positive emotions. Weisz and Cikara (2021) defined empathy skill as the realization of the opinions, and emotional states of individuals, and attending to their wellbeing. Amicucci *et al.* (2021) also stated that empathy skill can be described as a significant component of interpersonal behaviors. Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright in Zhang (2022) stated that empathic individuals show their effort and persistence to spot others' thoughts and react to them. They maintained that empathy skill, as an inner feeling, helps individuals predict other people's behaviors. Kianinezhad (2023) stated that empathy skill can be categorized into two primary types: cognitive and affective. Cognitive empathy skill pertains to understanding the emotional experiences of others, while affective empathy skill involves sharing their emotional experiences (Grigoropolous, 2019). Although cognitive and affective empathy skill are distinct, research has demonstrated a notable correlation between them (Kianinezhad, 2023). Both the cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy skill are crucial for occupations that involve providing emotional support to individuals within the community. Zhang (2022) stated that empathy skill is an important trait for those in the educational system who face many different challenges and work with students with varying needs. Kianinezhad (2023) opined that when teachers demonstrate empathic traits in performing their other professional roles and responsibilities, students are more likely to view them as supports; contributing to the creation of a caring and supportive school climate where learning is more conducive.

Furthermore, providing high levels of emotional support as indicated by a positive emotional tone in the classroom, sensitive responses to students' emotional, social, and academic needs, and consideration of their interests is one aspect of high-quality classrooms (Kianinezhad, 2023). To achieve this, the ability to read students' (non-)verbal signals—in others words: empathy skill—is vital (Watt *et al.*, 2021). For instance, teachers' cognitive empathy skill will help them better identify from a student's facial expressions if he or she is sad about a bad grade, angry about an argument with friends, or bored with specific learning activities.

Empathetic teachers will know that students may feel anxious when confronted with challenging tasks or embarrassed and frustrated when repeatedly unable to answer the teacher's questions. Having recognized negative affective states in their students, teachers' affective empathy skill should motivate them to react sensitively to their students' emotional needs, provide comfort, and encouragement (Weisz *et al.*, 2020). Zhang (2022) opined that teachers' empathy skill is important for facilitating classroom management. However, the link between teachers' empathy skill and students' academic achievement have not been empirically ascertained in public secondary schools in Anambra State. It is against this background that the researchers sought to determine the correlation between teachers' empathy skills and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State.

Statement of the Problem

The academic achievement of students serves as a critical measure of the extent to which the objectives of secondary education have been fulfilled. However, it appears that students in public secondary schools are struggling with their academic performance in subjects such as Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry, as evidenced by both internal and external examinations. Field interactions with students in public secondary schools in Anambra State suggest that the attitudes of some teachers may hinder students' understanding of certain

concepts. Many students have expressed that rather than fostering a sense of comfort and confidence when tackling challenging topics, some teachers instill a sense of fear. This raises concerns about the potential impact of such teacher dispositions on students' academic achievements. It is against this background that the researchers sought to determine the correlation between teachers' empathy skills and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study was to determine the correlation between teachers' empathy skills and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. Specifically, the study ascertained the correlation between:

1. teachers' cognitive empathy skill and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State.
2. teachers' affective empathy skill and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the relationship between teachers' cognitive empathy skill and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State?
2. What is the relationship between teachers' affective empathy skill and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant relationship between teachers' cognitive empathy skill and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State.

2. There is no significant relationship between teachers' affective empathy skill and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State.

Methods

The study adopted the correlational research design. The study was carried out in Anambra State. The population of the study comprised 21,272 senior secondary school students in SS2 in 267 public secondary schools in Anambra State. The population comprised of 9550 male students and 11,722 female students in 267 public secondary schools in Anambra State. The SS2 students were selected for the study as they were not involved in any external examinations, making them more likely to complete the questionnaires attentively. The sample of the study comprised 400 secondary school students (200 male and 200 female) from the 267 public secondary schools in Anambra State. A multistage sampling technique was applied to determine the study's sample. In the first stage, simple random sampling was used to select two education zones. In the second stage, stratified random sampling was employed to choose five public secondary schools from each education zone, totalling 10 schools. In the third stage, cluster sampling was used, where the first group of SS2 students from the 10 selected schools participated in the study. It was estimated that each SS2 group had approximately 40 students, producing a total sample of 400 students from the 10 classes. The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire on Teachers Empathy Skills which contains 20 items divided in two sections. Section A contained 10 items on teachers' cognitive empathy skill and Section B contains 10 items on teachers' affective empathy skill. The questionnaire was designed using a 4-point rating scale: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The Students' Academic Achievement Scores (SAAS), which consisted of SS2 students' results in English Language and Mathematics, were obtained from the Records Department of the Post Primary School Service Commission (PPSSC), Awka, Anambra State

(2024). English Language and Mathematics were chosen for this study as they are core and compulsory subjects that play a key role in determining students' overall academic performance.

The instrument underwent face validation. Additionally, a pilot test was conducted with 20 principals from public secondary schools in Enugu State to further test the instruments. The application of Cronbach Alpha reliability method yielded co-efficient values of 0.83 and 0.87 for cluster 1 and 2 respectively with an overall reliability coefficient of 0.85. The instrument was administered by the researchers with the help of three research assistants who are teachers in public secondary schools. The instrument was administered to the respondents on the spot and retrieved after completion. In cases where it was impossible to retrieve the instrument immediately, appointment on the date of retrieval was made. This lasted for two weeks. Out of the 400 copies of the instruments administered, 356 copies were retrieved in good condition which amounts to 89% questionnaire return rate. The 356 copies were used for the analysis of data. Pearson Product Moment Correlation statistics was used to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses. The decision rule was based on the following guidelines Price *et al* (2017) provided:

Correlation Coefficient	Interpretations
Plus (+) or minus (-) 0.00 to 0.20	Very Low Relationship
Plus (+) or minus (-) 0.20 to 0.40	Low Relationship
Plus (+) or minus (-) 0.40 to 0.60	Moderate Relationship
Plus (+) or minus (-) 0.60 to 0.80	High Relationship
Plus (+) or minus (-) 0.80 and above	Very High Relationship

While positive coefficient (+) indicate positive relationship between the variables, negative coefficient (-) indicates negative coefficient between the variables. In interpreting the values of the null hypotheses, when p-value is less

than or equal to .05 ($p \leq .05$), the null hypothesis will be rejected. On the other hand, when the p-value is greater than .05 ($p > .05$), the null hypothesis will not be rejected, meaning that there is no significant relationship between the variables.

Result

Research Question One: What is the relationship between teachers' cognitive empathy skill and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State?

Table 1: Summary of Pearson Correlation Analysis on Correlation between Teachers' Cognitive Empathy Skill and Students Academic Achievement in Public Secondary Schools in Anambra State

		Teachers' Cognitive Empathy Skill	Students' Academic Achievement	Remark
Teachers' Cognitive Empathy Skill	Pearson Correlation	1	.740**	High Positive Relationship
	Sig, (2-tailed)		.000	
	N	356	356	
Students' Academic Achievement	Pearson Correlation	.740**	1	
	Sig, (2-tailed)	.000		
	N	356	356	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Data in Table 1 reveals that the Pearson's Correlation Coefficient is $r = 0.740$. This shows that a high positive relationship exists between teachers' cognitive empathy skill and student academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. This implies that teachers' cognitive empathy skill would improve students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. Thus, the Pearson's Correlation Coefficient r of 0.740 indicate that a high positive relationship exists between

teachers' cognitive empathy skill and students' academic achievement of public secondary schools in Anambra State.

Research Question Two: What is the relationship between teachers' affective empathy skill and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State?

Table 2: Summary of Pearson Correlation Analysis on Correlation between Teachers' Affective Empathy Skill and Students Academic Achievement in Public Secondary Schools in Anambra State

		Teachers' Affective Empathy Skill	Students' Academic Achievement	Remark
Teachers' Affective Empathy Skill	Pearson Correlation	1	.709**	High Positive Relationship
	Sig, (2-tailed)		.000	
	N	356	356	
Students' Academic Achievement	Pearson Correlation	.709**	1	
	Sig, (2-tailed)	.000		
	N	356	356	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Data in Table 2 reveals that the Pearson's Correlation Coefficient is $r = 0.709$. This shows that a high positive relationship exists between teachers' affective empathy skill and student academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. This implies that teachers' affective empathy skill would improve students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. Thus, the Pearson's Correlation Coefficient r of 0.740 indicate that a high positive relationship exists between teachers' affective empathy skill and students' academic achievement of public secondary schools in Anambra State.

Hypothesis One: There is no significant relationship between teachers' cognitive empathy skill and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State.

Table 3: Test of Significance of Relationship between Teachers' Cognitive Empathy Skill and Students Academic Achievement in Public Secondary Schools in Anambra State

		Correlation		
		Teachers' Cognitive Empathy Skill	Students' Academic Achievement	Remark
Teachers' Cognitive Empathy Skill	Pearson Correlation	1	.740**	Significant
	Sig, (2-tailed)		.000	
	N	356	356	
Students' Academic Achievement	Pearson Correlation	.740**	1	
	Sig, (2-tailed)	.000		
	N	356	356	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Data presented on Table 3 indicates the correlation coefficient (r) as 0.740 with a p-value = 0.000. Since the P value of 0.000 is less than .05 ($P < .05$), it means that effect teachers' cognitive empathy skill on students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State is statistically significant. This means that there is a significant relationship between teachers' cognitive empathy skill and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant relationship between teachers' affective empathy skill and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State.

Table 4: Test of Significance of Relationship between Teachers' Affective Empathy Skill and Students Academic Achievement in Public Secondary Schools in Anambra State

		Correlation		
		Teachers' Affective Empathy Skill	Students' Academic Achievement	Remark
Teachers' Affective Empathy Skill	Pearson Correlation	1	.709**	Significant
	Sig, (2-tailed)		.000	
	N	356	356	
Students' Academic Achievement	Pearson Correlation	.709**	1	
	Sig, (2-tailed)	.000		
	N	356	356	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Data presented on Table 4 indicates the correlation coefficient (r) as 0.709 with a p-value = 0.000. Since the P value of 0.000 is less than .05 ($P < .05$), it means that effect teachers' affective empathy skill on students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State is statistically significant. This means that there is a significant relationship between teachers' affective empathy skill and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Discussion

The finding of the study that a high positive relationship exists between teachers' cognitive empathy skill and student academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. This implies that teachers' cognitive empathy skill would improve students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. This finding is in agreement with Kianinezhad (2023) who revealed that when teachers demonstrate empathic

traits in performing their other professional roles and responsibilities, students are more likely to view them as supports; contributing to the creation of a caring and supportive school climate which could improve students' academic achievement. Grigoropolous (2019) revealed that teachers' empathy skill predicts students' academic achievement. Furthermore, finding of the study revealed a significant relationship between teachers' cognitive empathy skill and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. This is in line with Kior *et al.* (2021) who reported that teachers who display empathy skill have significant influence on the academic achievement of their students.

The finding of the study that a high positive relationship exists between teachers' affective empathy skill and student academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. This implies that teachers' affective empathy skill would improve students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. This finding is in agreement with Weisz *et al.* (2020) who reported that teachers' empathy skills influence students learning needs and subsequent academic achievement. Zhang (2022) stated that teachers' affective empathy skill motivate them to react sensitively to their students' emotional needs, provide comfort and encouragement towards students. Furthermore, the finding of the study revealed that revealed a significant relationship between teachers' affective empathy skill and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. This is in consonance with Grigoropolous (2019) who stated that teachers who build on empathic cultures in their classrooms, affected their students' academic achievement through improvement in their test results.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher conclude that teachers' empathy skills has a high positive relationship with students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. Furthermore,

teachers' cognitive and affective empathy skills have high positive relationship with students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. It is therefore imperative that measures are put in place to improve teachers' use of empathy skills in secondary schools.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of the study:

1. Principals of public secondary schools should provide teachers with continuous professional development opportunities that focus on enhancing their cognitive empathy skills. Training programmes should be organised to help teachers better understand students' perspectives and thought processes, enabling them to tailor their teaching methods to meet individual learning needs and thereby improve academic achievement.
2. The Post Primary Schools Service Commission in conjunction with principals should implement strategies that encourage teachers to actively engage with students on an emotional level which would foster a supportive and caring classroom environment. Workshops and mentoring programmes aimed at developing teachers' emotional awareness and responsiveness can help strengthen affective empathy which would promote a positive impact on students' academic achievement

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