



Effect of Academic Anxiety on the Academic Performance of Students with Dyscalculia in Public Secondary Schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State

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Abstract

The study investigated the influence of academic anxiety on the academic performance of students with dyscalculia in public secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State. The study consisted of three research questions and three corresponding null hypotheses. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population consisted of all Junior Secondary School (JSS) students in Obio/Akpor, with a sample of 200 students randomly selected for the study. Data were collected using a self-designed Academic Anxiety Questionnaire (AAQ) and a Mathematics Performance Test (MPT). Responses were rated on a 4-point Likert scale, and the data collected were analysed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions. The findings revealed that high levels of academic anxiety, through test anxiety, fear of failure, and avoidance behaviour, significantly reduced the academic performance of students with dyscalculia. The study provided valuable insights for teachers, school administrators, and policymakers to implement interventions, such as counselling, supportive teaching strategies, and structured learning programs, aimed at reducing academic anxiety and improving students' academic outcomes in mathematics.

Keywords: Academic anxiety, Academic performance, Dyscalculia, Students, Public secondary schools

Introduction

Education is a life-sustaining tool for personal and societal development, as it furnishes individuals with the opportunities, knowledge, and skills needed for great achievement. Nevertheless, not all students find learning easy to comprehend, as some experience challenges that impact their academic performance. Academic performance is a measure of a student's success in school, and it is oftentimes used to ascertain future educational and career possibilities or opportunities. Academic performance refers to the level of accomplishment students achieve in their academic work, typically assessed through grades, test scores, class activities, and overall mastery of subjects. High academic performance is connected with better career prospects, higher self-confidence and self-motivation, and greater personal development (Butterworth et al., 2011). Notwithstanding, diverse factors can determine how well a student performs, including their psychological well-being, cognitive abilities, emotional state, and learning environment. Academic performance can be severely impacted by conditions such as dyscalculia and academic anxiety. Mutlu (2024) added that the main lineament of dyscalculia is inadequacies in mathematical skills that normally begin in the preschool period and can negatively affect the individual's academic performance or daily life as development continues.

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Dyscalculia is a specific learning condition or difficulty that negatively affects an individual's ability to learn, understand and apply numbers and perform mathematical operations (Mutlu, 2024). Dyscalculia is a neurological condition that makes it challenging for students to grasp elementary arithmetic concepts, identify number patterns, puzzle out mathematical problems and understand mathematical concepts, even with consistent instruction and effort (Yoong, 2023). This learning disability could lead to persistent difficulties in mathematics, which is a fundamental subject in the academic curriculum. As a result, students with dyscalculia oftentimes experience lower academic performance, particularly in subjects that require numerical reasoning, such as mathematics, chemistry, physics, statistics, economics and computer science.

The challenge of poor academic performance among students with dyscalculia is further complicated by academic anxiety, which is a psychological condition characterised by excessive nervousness, fear, and stress related to academic activities. Academic anxiety can evidently manifest in diverse ways, such as dodging challenging academic tasks, difficulty concentrating during tests or class activities, and physical symptoms like avoidance of class, headaches, fear, frequently sleeping during mathematics class, and nausea before test or class activities or examinations. Ashcraft and Krause (2021) add that students with learning disabilities, specifically dyscalculia, are at a higher risk of developing academic anxiety due to their struggles with schoolwork, homework and fear of failing.

Academic anxiety could have a profound negative impact on academic performance, especially when students experience high levels of anxiety; the ability to process information stay focused and retain knowledge is significantly reduced. Anxiety triggers the body's fight-or-flight response, which increases stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. The adrenaline and cortisol hormones are helpful in situations that demand immediate physical action, as they can be prejudicial to cognitive processes such as memory retrieval, retention, and logical reasoning, which are constitutive for academic success (Dowker et al., 2019). Academic anxiety is specifically problematic for students with dyscalculia because the difficulty with numerical digits or formulas already places them at a disadvantage thus, the struggle with mathematical problems oftentimes develops or increases the feeling of fear and frustration, leading to a cycle of math anxiety, a specific type of academic anxiety related to mathematics. Math anxiety makes students avoid engaging or participating in numerical tasks, leading to diminished practice, weaker mathematical skills, and ultimately, lower academic performance (Ma, 2018). Witzel et al. (2023) added that incompetent or Unbefitting mathematics education can make it hard for students to understand mathematical concepts and develop mathematical skills (Witzel et al., 2023). In addition, inadequate interaction with mathematical concepts in early childhood learning may initiate the development of dyscalculia (Hughes et al., 2023). Over time, this anxiety could extend beyond mathematics, affecting students' confidence and performance in other subjects.

Carey et al. (2019) revealed that students with high levels of academic anxiety are likely to underperform in school, not because of a lack intelligence, but because of fear of failure, which prevents them from fully engaging in learning activities. Repeated experience of maths struggles, combined with negative feedback and lack of motivation from teachers and peers, reinforces anxiety and further lowers academic performance or achievement of students. Several students in public secondary schools who struggle with dyscalculia and academic anxiety do not receive the necessary support they need. Several factors could contribute to their challenges, including inadequate teaching methods, lack of awareness about dyscalculia among teachers and parents, lack of study habits, and high academic expectations. Many educators are not trained to identify learning disabilities, and as a result, students with dyscalculia are often misunderstood as lazy or unserious. Likewise, parents may put excessive pressure on their children to perform well in mathematics without understanding the difficulties faced by the child. Passolunghi and Costa (2020) added that students with dyscalculia who do not receive proper support and attention are more likely to experience emotional distress, which further contributes to academic anxiety and poor performance.

A poor learning environment in many public secondary schools, such as overcrowded classrooms, limited or no resources, lack of counseling and special education programs, improper guidance, and lack of tailored support and intervention processes, makes it difficult for students with dyscalculia to receive individualized attention (Kadosh & Dowker, 2021). Carey et al. (2019) added that excessive academic pressure contributes to higher levels of stress and anxiety among students with learning disabilities, making it even harder for them to perform well. The constant fear of failure could lead to avoidance of schoolwork, low self-esteem, and in most cases, school dropout. Kaufmann et al. (2003) opined, in accordance with the International Classification of Diseases and Health Problems (ICD-10) criteria published by the World Health Organization, that dyscalculia can be diagnosed when

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there is a significant difference between the average intelligence level of the individual and the subaverage performance in mathematics activities or tests. This diagnostic method highlights the relationship between specific difficulties in mathematical skills and general intelligence level.

To improve academic performance and overall well-being of students with dyscalculia, schools need to implement effective strategies to identify, support, and accommodate students with dyscalculia, ensuring that they receive the necessary assistance to succeed by training teachers to recognise the signs of dyscalculia and academic anxiety, as well as adopting teaching methods that cater to different learning styles. Teachers should be sensitive to the symptoms of dyscalculia observed in students and strategies that could help these students (Sousa, Dias, & Cadime, 2017). Interventions and approaches can be briefly mentioned. Concrete materials and visual aids to visualize numbers and mathematical relationships, breaking mathematical construct into little steps and presenting each step in a clear and structured manner, give clear instructions at each step and allow children to understand the concepts at their own pace, providing students with an interactive and fun learning experience, develop individualized education plans taking into account individual differences, identify strategies that support the student's strengths and improve their weaknesses, adopt a constructive approach to correct their mistakes, provide continuous feedback, utilize technological tools and educational applications to improve calculation and problem solving skills can be effective in assisting a child struggling with dyscalculia. Each dyscalculic child has different challenges and needs (Zhang et al., 2020; Deruaz et al., 2020). Parents also play a vital role in supporting their children; instead of increasing academic pressure, parents could get educated about dyscalculia and anxiety management strategies to help their children cope with learning challenges in a much more positive and supportive manner. Psychological support, such as counselling services and peer mentoring, can also help students manage their anxiety and develop confidence in their academic abilities. Therefore, this study aims to examine the effect of academic anxiety on the academic performance of students with dyscalculia in public secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State.

Normally, students struggle with schoolwork. However, if the frequent struggle comes with some or many visible negative emotional, physical and behavioural actions then it becoming an issue. Learning mathematics may look difficult, but when the skills and tactics are learnt it becomes easy to navigate it with smiles, happiness, joy, peace, etc. Dyscalculia is a learning disability that makes it hard for students to understand numbers, solve mathematical problems, and perform basic calculations. This challenge often leads to frustration, embarrassment, fear, abstinence from activities involving calculations, and low academic performance, especially in subjects that require numerical skills. Many students may improve with extra practice, support and attention to concepts, formulas and steps. However, those with dyscalculia find it hard to grasp mathematical concepts, formulas, and steps no matter how much they study.

A major issue linked to dyscalculia is academic anxiety. It is a feeling that comes with anxiousness in schoolwork or homework, especially in mathematics or numerical activities. Academic anxiety can be portrayed when students begin to avoid study, panic during tests or exams, or feel overwhelmed during classroom activities. Academic anxiety causes stress, which affects the brain's ability to remember information, think clearly, and solve problems. Students with dyscalculia not only struggle with numbers but also experience intense fear and anxiety, along with other emotions whenever they have to deal with number-related tasks. This makes it even harder for them to perform well in mathematics subjects or related numeric topics.

In public secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State, many students with dyscalculia do not receive the support they need to overcome numeric fear or challenges. Most Teachers may not recognise the condition, and students may be labelled as unintelligent or lazy instead of being given the right help. The school environment, teaching methods, and lack of a counselling unit, special education unit or resources may further aggravate their anxiety and poor academic performance. Despite the increasing awareness of learning disabilities and the effects of academic anxiety, there is still limited research on how these issues affect students in Nigeria, particularly those in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area. Many schools do not have proper intervention programs for students with disabilities, especially for dyscalculia, and there is little focus on how academic anxiety affects learning. Students with dyscalculia may continue to struggle, develop low self-esteem, and even drop out of school without proper understanding and support.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore the effect of academic anxiety on the academic performance of students with dyscalculia in public secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State.

This study aimed to examine the influence of academic anxiety on the academic performance of students with dyscalculia in public secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine how test anxiety influences the academic performance of students with dyscalculia in public secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State.
2. Investigate the influence of fear of failure on the academic performance of students with dyscalculia in public secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State.
3. Determine the influence of avoidance behaviour on the academic performance of students with dyscalculia in public secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State.

Based on the objectives of the study, the following research questions are formulated to guide the study:

1. To what extent does test anxiety influence the academic performance of students with dyscalculia in public secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State?
2. To what extent does fear of failure influence the academic performance of students with dyscalculia in public secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State?
3. To what extent does avoidance behaviour influence the academic performance of students with dyscalculia in public secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State?

The following null hypotheses are formulated for this study:

1. There is no significant influence of test anxiety on the academic performance of students with dyscalculia in public secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State.
2. There is no significant influence of fear of failure on the academic performance of students with dyscalculia in public secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State.
3. There is no significant influence of avoidance behaviour on the academic performance of students with dyscalculia in public secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The survey approach helps in identifying patterns, relationships, and trends regarding how test anxiety, fear of failure, and avoidance behaviour influence the academic performance of students with dyscalculia. Descriptive survey attempts to picture current conditions. (Dominick in Inyang, 2022 as cited by Ugorji et al., 2023). The population of the study comprised all Junior Secondary School (JSS) students in public secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, male and female students' inclusive which totals 16,760 (Rivers State Education Board, RSEB, 2024). The sample for the study consisted of 200 junior secondary school students.

The sample was drawn from the entire population of the study. Simple random sampling technique was employed to select students from different public junior secondary schools within Obio/Akpor. Pribadi et al. (2025) opined that the sampling method stratified random sampling (StRS) is one of the probability sampling methods where the population is divided into various subgroups called strata, then in each stratum, the sample is as much n units selected by the simple random sampling. The instruments for this study were a self-designed questionnaire titled "Academic Anxiety and Academic Performance Questionnaire" (AAPQ) and "Mathematics Performance Test" (MPT), which assessed the influence of academic anxiety on the academic performance of Junior Secondary School (JSS) students in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section A collected demographic data such as gender, age, class, school location, and socio-economic background. Section B measured academic anxiety, focusing on test anxiety, fear of failure, and avoidance behaviour. Responses in Section B were rated using a 4-point modified Likert Scale: Very High Extent (VHE) = 4, High Extent (HE) = 3, Low Extent (LE) = 2, and Very Low Extent (VLE) = 1. This structured format ensured an effective assessment of the relationship between academic anxiety and students' academic performance. In order to ascertain the face and content validities of the instrument for the study, the instrument was submitted to two other experts in the mathematics department and measurement and evaluation who went through the content and structure of the instrument. The comments from the experts were used to modify the questionnaire. A reliability coefficient $r = 0.89$ was established using the Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient. The instrument was therefore judged as reliable for the study. The instruments were administered personally by the researcher with the help of two research assistants after obtaining permission from each school

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principal. The researcher retrieved copies of the instrument on the spot after the students had responded to the items. Mean and Standard deviation were used to answer the research questions using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Test Anxiety on Academic Performance of Students with Dyscalculia

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision
Test Anxiety	200	3.21	0.68	High Extent
Academic Performance	200	2.34	0.72	Low Performance

Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation scores of test anxiety and academic performance of students with dyscalculia. The mean score of 3.21 with a standard deviation of 0.68 indicates that students experience a high level of test anxiety during mathematics tests and examinations. This suggests that many of the students feel worried, tense, and fearful when faced with test situations. On the other hand, the mean score of academic performance is 2.34 with a standard deviation of 0.72, which reflects a low level of performance in mathematics. The wide gap between high test anxiety and low academic performance suggests that students who experience intense test anxiety are more likely to perform poorly in mathematics. This shows that test anxiety may interfere with students' concentration, confidence, and ability to recall learned information during examinations.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Fear of Failure on Academic Performance of Students with Dyscalculia

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision
Fear of Failure	200	3.08	0.74	High Extent
Academic Performance	200	2.41	0.69	Low Performance

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation scores for fear of failure and academic performance among students with dyscalculia. The mean score for fear of failure is 3.08 with a standard deviation of 0.74, indicating that fear of failure is high among the students. This means that many students are afraid of making mistakes, failing tests, or disappointing their teachers and parents. The academic performance mean score of 2.41 with a standard deviation of 0.69 indicates that students' performance in mathematics is generally low. The results suggest that fear of failure may reduce students' motivation and willingness to participate actively in learning activities. As a result, students who strongly fear failure may avoid challenging tasks, which negatively affects their academic performance.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of Avoidance Behaviour on Academic Performance of Students with Dyscalculia

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision
Avoidance behaviour	200	3.15	0.71	High Extent
Academic Performance	200	2.29	0.76	Low Performance

Table 3 presents the mean and standard deviation of avoidance behaviour and academic performance. The mean score of avoidance behaviour is 3.15 with a standard deviation of 0.71, showing that avoidance behaviour is high among students with dyscalculia. This implies that students frequently avoid mathematics-related activities such as class participation, homework, and tests. The academic performance mean score of 2.29 with a standard deviation of 0.76 indicates low academic performance in mathematics. The results suggest that avoidance behaviour limits students' exposure to learning opportunities, practice, and feedback. Consequently, students who

frequently avoid mathematics tasks are less likely to develop necessary skills, leading to poor academic performance.

Discussion

The findings of this study are discussed based on the research questions and hypotheses formulated.

The findings of research question one and hypothesis one revealed that test anxiety has a significant influence on the academic performance of students with dyscalculia. The analysis showed that students experienced high levels of test anxiety, while their mathematics performance was low. This suggests that students who feel worried, nervous, or stressed during mathematics tests tend to perform poorly. The high anxiety may interfere with their concentration, memory recall, and ability to solve problems effectively during examinations. This is consistent with previous studies by Zeidner (2018) and Owens et al. (2019), which reported that high test anxiety impairs students' performance across subjects, particularly in mathematics, where accuracy and problem-solving skills are critical.

The findings of research question two and hypothesis two revealed that fear of failure significantly influences the academic performance of students with dyscalculia. Students reported high levels of fear of failure, and their performance in mathematics was relatively low. This indicates that students who constantly worry about failing or disappointing others tend to underperform in academic tasks. Fear of failure reduces motivation and engagement in learning activities and may lead to avoidance of challenging mathematics problems. Similar findings were reported by Rashid and Aziz (2020), who noted that fear of failure negatively affects students' ability to perform optimally due to stress, low confidence, and reduced participation in learning.

Research question three and hypothesis three revealed that avoidance behavior significantly affects the academic performance of students with dyscalculia. The analysis showed that students frequently avoided mathematics-related tasks, including homework, class participation, and test preparation. This suggests that students who avoid mathematics activities receive fewer learning opportunities, practice, and teacher feedback, all of which are essential for skill improvement. Avoidance behavior, therefore, contributes to persistent poor performance in mathematics. Sharma and Saini (2021) also highlighted that avoidance behavior reduces practice and engagement, resulting in lower academic achievement.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that academic anxiety is a major factor influencing the academic performance of students with dyscalculia. High levels of test anxiety, fear of failure, and avoidance behaviour reduce students' engagement, confidence, and ability to perform well in mathematics. This suggests that students' learning difficulties are not only due to cognitive deficits associated with dyscalculia but are also strongly affected by emotional factors. Therefore, addressing academic anxiety is essential for improving academic performance among students with dyscalculia.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Schools should provide regular counselling and psychological support to students with dyscalculia to help them manage test anxiety, fear of failure, and avoidance behaviour. This could include stress management programs, relaxation techniques, and individual or group counselling sessions.
2. Teachers should be trained to identify students experiencing academic anxiety and employ strategies that encourage active participation, provide positive feedback, and reduce fear of failure in mathematics.
3. Schools should develop structured and supportive learning programs that focus on building students' confidence and providing repeated practice in mathematics. This will help reduce avoidance behaviour and improve academic performance.

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