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Learning without understanding: Why academic under-achievement persist among students of fine and applied art in Nigeria

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Abstract

Background: Academic achievement is one of the major goals and objectives of education. However, student underachievement is on the increase in Fine and Applied Arts.

Objective: The purpose of this study is to investigate the cause(s) of this prevalent academic underachievement.

Methodology: The study adopted a survey research design using a causal research technic. It involved a population of 263 students, lecturers, and studio technicians. The main instrument used to collect data for the study were two sets of structured questionnaires named the Students Achievement and Underachievement Test (SA&UT) and Teacher's Assessment and Teaching Approach Test (TA&TAT). Frequency count and percentages were used to analyze the data collected.

Result: The results of the analyses established that many students have faulty pre-level knowledge to be able to achieve effectively at the university level. Many of the lecturer's exhibit negligence in conducting a valid assessment, and some need to improve their level of assessment literacy in assessing art. There is also a lack of adequate facilities to conduct reliable and valid practical-oriented assessments.

Conclusion: A combination of lack of facilities and teachers' negligence contribute in the problem of under-achievement among students of find and applied arts.

Unique contribution: This study has deepened our understanding regarding why the problem of academic underachievement has continued to persist among students of fine and applied arts in Nigeria.

Key recommendation: Pre-level institutions should be upgraded and properly examined to adequately prepare students for the higher levels in their academic careers.

Key Words: Practical Oriented Assessment, Read & Write Assessment, Underachievement, Fine and Applied Arts

Introduction

Fine art is practical-oriented. It requires a person to have some level of inherent talents and skills that could be nurtured, developed, and guided to be able to excel in it. Therefore, when a child begins to exhibit certain talents and skills in art-making, such a child will need a proper foundation, direction, and guidance to progress positively in the study and practices of

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art. Talents and skills are like a building, they need a good and solid foundation to stand. The foundation may start from the home, environment, and schools. In the home, the talents and skills are expected to be nurtured and encouraged by the parents and guidance. The environment is expected to positively influence and accept the perception of talent and skill. At the school, teachers are at the forefront of discovering, nurturing, and developing talents and skills in the children using appropriate measures that will provide pre-level or background knowledge as a foundation upon which further educational careers will stand. Lebechukwu and Akpen-Ade (2021) affirm that skill capabilities are needed for meaningful success to be recording in art-making. If the foundation is faulty, the child will continue to underachieve when matched with peers of a standard and solid foundation. The underachievement may worsen when the child manages to get to higher levels of learning and is unfortunate to encounter teachers who lack the ability or are not ready to check the standard of the child's pre-level knowledge to position and prepare him or her to understand and integrate new knowledge. Evidence in the literature (Çakır & Bichelmeyer, 2016; Fischer, & Hänze 2019; Katz, 2015) show that both teachers and the environment are essential in improving learning outcome.

The entry requirements for admission to study Fine and Applied Arts (FAA) at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) through the University Matriculation Examination (UME) is credit passes in at least five subjects. These subjects must include English language and Fine/Applied Arts, technical drawing, painting and decorating, or any other O' level equivalent of fine arts. For admission by direct entry, candidates must also have credit level passes in Fine and Applied Arts in addition to UME requirements (University of Nigeria Nsukka, n.d.). This means all the students studying FAA at the UNN have basic pre-level knowledge in Fine Arts and ought to be able to perform and achieve in conformity with the basic curriculum designed for them to start and progress in their studies. However, many students find it difficult to achieve even with effective teaching in the specialization areas of FAA like drawing, painting, sculpture, textile, ceramics, fashion design, and graphics design.

Academic underachievement among students is a common problem in education that is predominantly discoursed in recent times (Pauneskue*t al*., 2015). Underachievement becomes noticeable when a teacher motivates a capable student to accomplish good work in the classroom, but the student finds it difficult to attain the learning expectations of the teacher. It may be referred to as "Poorer than expected performance" (Renard 2019). It is an inconsistency between the potential of what the child ought to be able to do, and the actual performance in what the child is demonstrating. Hoffmann(2020) view it as a discrepancy between a child's school performance and some index of his or her actual ability, like intelligence, achievement or creativity score, or observational data. Saqr et al. (2017) in a study reported that identifying the causes of students' under-achievement is the first step towards addressing the problem.

When a student is underachieving, it is important to diagnose the sources and causes of the underachievement. Renard (2019) explained that a student's underachievement is caused by different conditions relating to emotional factors like low; frustration tolerance, self-esteem, risk-taking abilities, and influences. Fear of; pressure, failure, acceptance by peer group, hidden learning disabilities, and teachers. Lack of; competitiveness-boredom, rudimentary skills, and learning behaviors, unsuitable educational activities as well as parental support for education. Others are; interested in activities other than school, cumulative shortfalls and belief in failure, and many more. Identifying the causes of underachievement significantly depends on the teacher's knowledge and assessment literacy in the learning processes.

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Teacher's knowledge in assessment and their readiness to apply appropriate valid and reliable methods in the assessment will help in knowing what is to be assessed, why it should be assessed, how best to assess it, challenges, and possible prevention of the challenges of assessing it, expected results from the assessment, and what to do with the result of the assessment (Opateye, 2018). This may require the teacher to have sound metacognition (thinking about one's thinking). Experts use metacognitive strategies to monitor understanding during problem-solving and for performing self-correction (National Research Council, 2001). To determine whether students are achieving, metacognitive skills are required and applied through an ideal assessment to assess the progress of the students and to help them become aware of their strengths and weaknesses as learners (Apken-Ade & Itiav, 2018). Students who know their strengths and weaknesses are more likely to actively measure and monitor their learning strategies, and resources, as well as assess their readiness for particular tasks and performances (Bransford, 2000).

Assessment is one of the foremost measurement tools in education. When it is managed and applied correctly, it produces reliable, valid, and consistent results that the teacher uses to evaluate and judge the relationship between what students know and understand, as well as how far and fast they have progressed compared to other students in the class (St. Thomas University, 2018). Analysis of related studies on assessment all agreed that assessment is an instrument for identifying, diagnosing, evaluating, managing, and possibly eradicating underachievement when used correctly. According to Garba and Agba (2018), one cannot do a better assessment in the university if instruments to be used in assessing students are not known and, that, the wrong usage of an instrument may suggest a wrong result which may not be able to achieve its purpose in education. They, therefore, suggested proper use of tests, observation, interview, checklist, questionnaire, project, and anecdotal records as the assessment instruments that can be used in the university to determine students' achievement. The purpose of the study, therefore, is to investigate the causes of the prevalent academic underachievement among students of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts (DFAA) at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka through the following;

i. What is the standard of pre-level or background knowledge of the students of fine and applied arts?
ii. What is the assessment literacy skills of the teachers in the department and their attitude towards conducting assessment of fine and applied arts?
iii. What is the standard and quality of the facilities available to students of fine and applied arts for conducting reliable and valid practical assessment?

Method

The study adopted survey research conducted in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, (DFAA), University of Nigeria, Nsukka(UNN). The study used a causal research design and explored some elements of exploratory or descriptive research for structuring the research plan. Students, lecturers, and studio technicians were observed in the classrooms, studios, and the learning environment. A survey within the population of the study was conducted using face to face interviews of students, lecturers, and studio technicians.

The population of the study was made up of 48 students in the first year, 52 students in the second year, 47 students in the third year and 58 students in the final year, 43 lecturers and 15 studio technicians across the different areas of specialization (drawing, painting, sculpture, textile, ceramics, fashion design, and graphics design) in the DFAA, UNN. This made up the total population of 263 for the study.

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The sample of the population comprises 39 out of 48 students in the first year, 45 out of 52 students in the second year, 37 out of 47 students in the third year, 40 out of 58 students in the final year. This aggregate to 161 out of 205 students and 35 out of 43 lecturers, 11 out of 15 studio technicians. This aggregate to a sample size of 207 respondents for the study (i.e 161 students, 35 lecturers, and 11 studio technicians). Tables 1, 2 & 3 below show the demographic distribution of the population sample.

Table 1: Demographic distribution of students

Variables	Groups	Frequency	%	Total
Gender	Male	113	70.2	161
	Female	48	29.8	
	NCE Fine Arts	12	7.5	
Pre-level or	OND Fine Arts	7	4.3	161
Background	HND Fine Arts	3	1.8	
Knowledge	O' level/equivalents	139	86.3	
	First-year	30	18.6	
Year or level of	Second-year	45	27.9	161
study in UNN	Third-year	37	22.9	
	Fourth-year	40	24.8	

Table 1 shows the demographic distribution of respondent students. It measures the ratio of male and female students' pre-level knowledge and year or level of study in the department. The result in table 1 indicates that 70.2% of respondents are male and 29.8% are female. 100% of the students have pre-level knowledge in fine arts. The total percentage of respondents' students across the level of study is 94.2% of the total population of students in the DFAA.

Table 2: Demographic distribution of Lecturers

Variables	Groups	Frequency	%	Total
Gender	Male	24	68.6	35
	Female	11	31.4	
	B.A. Fine arts/3	5	14.3	
Qualification/number of	years below	18	51.4	35
years	MFA, Fine arts/5	10	28.6	
in lecturing	years above	2	5.7	
	Ph.D./10 years above			
	Professor/15 years above			
Level of experience	4 years below	5	14.3	35
based on	5 years above	30	85.7	
number of years in lecturing				

Table 2 shows the demographic distribution of respondent lecturers. It measures the ratio of male and female lecturers, the qualification/number of years in lecturing, and the level of their experience based on the number of years in lecturing. The result in table 2 indicates that

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68.6% of respondent lecturers are male and 31.4% are female. 100% of the lecturers have the minimum qualification to teach in Nigerian universities and 85.7% have lectured for over 5 years in the university and only 14.3% have between 1 to 3 years of teaching experience in the university.

Table 3: Demographic distribution of Studio technicians

Variables	Groups	Frequency	%	Total
Gender	Male	8	72.7	11
	Female	3	27.3	
	O'	3	8.6	
Qualification	level/equivalents	0	0	
		1	2.9	
	NCE Fine Arts	2	5.7	11
	OND Fine Arts	4	11.4	
	HND Fine Arts	1	2.9	
	B.A. Fine arts	0	0	
	MFA, Fine arts			
	PhD.			
Level of experience based on Qualification	OND below	4	36.4	11
	HND above	7	63.6	

Table 3 shows the demographic distribution of respondent studio technicians. It measures the ratio of male and female studio technicians, their qualifications, and experience. The result in table 3 indicates that 72.7% of respondent studio technicians are male and 27.3% are female. 63.6% have HND, B.A., and MFA. 36.4% have OND and below.

The study used interviews, observation, and structured questionnaires as instruments for data collection. Few lecturers and studio technicians were interviewed face to face. The interviews were structured to find out the extent and possible causes and effects of underachievement among the students as well as the roles lecturers and technicians play to identify, reduce, and probably eradicate underachievement among students. The researchers likewise observed how the students are thought and assessed in the lecture halls and art studios for some time, to examine the quality of teaching and assessment in the class and the studio. The results from the interview and observation were then, used to develop two types of structured questionnaire template called Students Achievement and Underachievement Test (SA&UT) and Teacher's Assessment and Teaching Approach Test (TA&TAT) to collect data from respondents.

Through SA&UT, the respondents were expected to answer yes or no. It was designed only for the lecturers and studio technicians to give an account of the student's achievements or underachievement, the way and manner they conduct assessments in the department, their literacy level to conduct an assessment in fine art, and the state of the facilities for the instruments required for conducting a reliable and valid fine art assessment in the department. SA&UT was distributed to 38 lecturers and 13 studio technicians who did not participate in the face to face interview within the population of the study. But only 35 were retrieved from the lecturers and 11 from the studio technicians and analyzed for this study.

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TA&TAT was developed strictly for the students to give an account of how they are taught and assessed by lecturers and studio technicians in the lecture halls and art studios respectively, and the state of the facilities required for them to be able to do a reliable and valid fine art assessment in the department. The respondents were also expected to answer yes or no. With TA&TAT, percentages above 70% represent a satisfactory result, 50% to 69% represent a fairly or partially good, and 49% below represent a poor result. The questionnaires were distributed to 175 students, but only 161 were retrieved and analyzed for this study.

Results

The results of the study present the causes of underachievement among FAA students at the UNN, based on the standard of pre-level knowledge of the students, the assessment literacy skills of the lecturers and their attitude towards conducting assessment in the DFAA, and the standard and quality of the facilities available in the department for conducting a reliable and valid practical assessment.

Table 4: Analysis of Teacher's Assessment and Teaching Approach (TA&TA)

Total number of respondents=161

S/N	Items	YES		NO	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%
1	Do you have any pre-level or background knowledge of fine arts before applying to study FAA?	161	100	0	0
2	Did your parents or guardians influence your choice of	9	5.6	152	94.
3	FAA?	132	81.	29	4
4	Do you find it difficult to produce works of art better than	29	9	132	18.
5	your classmates?	132	18.	29	01
6	Do you find it easy to produce works of art after the		01		81.
	lecturer's instruction?	41	81.	120	9
7	Are you usually afraid or scared of failure when producing		9		18.
	work in the class?	40		121	01
8	Do lecturers try to find out your level of achievement or any		25.		
	of your class mate's level of achievement in the class or	40	5	121	74.
	practical?				5
9	Do lecturers give you adequate attention and guide you to	100	24.	61	
	understand whatever they teach as you desire?		8		75.
10	Are you satisfied in general with the methods of teaching	34		127	2
	and assessment in the department?	152	24.	9	
11	Do lecturers constantly criticize your efforts or that of your	102	8	59	75.
12	classmates when you are not performing up to expectations?				2
13	Are your practical assessments more than 50% of what you	11	62.	150	
	do generally in the department?	11	1	150	37.
14	Do you prefer practical oriented assessment over theoretical				8
15	base assessment?	20	21.	141	
	Will you rate the standard of your lecturers above 50%?		1		78.
16	Are your studio technicians giving you adequate and proper	22	94.	139	8
	assistance during studio practices?		4		5.6
17	Will you rate the standard of your studio technicians above	13	63.	148	36.
	50%?	153	4	8	6
18	Were your pre-level institutions' studios standard and	0		161	

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19	adequately equipped to carry out practical works?		6.8		93.
20	Are you satisfied with the standard of the studios here at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka?	154	6.8	7	2
	Is the time allocated to each practical course enough for you to produce your works?		12.		93.
	Are you always occupied with theories assignments?		4		2
	Does the school provide you with art materials for your practical works?		13.		87.
	Have you ever failed to do some assignments due to the lack and cost of art materials?		7		6
			8.1		86.
			95		3
			0		91.
					9
			95.		4.9
			6		100
					4.3

Table 4 shows the result of the student's responses using the Teacher's Assessment and Teaching Approach (TA&TA). The analysis reflects the students agreeing that they all have pre-level or background knowledge in fine arts before applying to study FAA. Still, 81.9% of them find it difficult to produce works of art and are usually scared of failure when producing works of art in the class. 62.1% of the students complained that lecturers rather criticize their efforts when they are not performing up to expectation. Again, 94.4% of the students prefer practical-oriented assessments over theory-based assessments. 63.4% rated the standard of lecturers above 50%. 95% complained that they are always occupied with theory-based assignments. 95.6% say they occasionally fail to do some assignments due to the lack and cost of art materials.

Furthermore, 94.4% of the students established that they were not influenced by their parents or guardians to study FAA. However, 81.9% do not find it easy to produce works of art after the lecturer's instruction. 74.5% reported that lecturers and studio technicians do not try to find out their level of achievement in the class or practical. Hence, 75.2% affirmed that lecturers and studio technicians do not give them adequate attention and guide them to understand whatever they teach when they are dwindling out of concepts. 72.2% are not satisfied with the general methods of teaching and assessment in the department. 78.8% complained that practical-oriented assessments are less than 50% of how they are assessed in the department. 93.2% rated the standard of studio technicians below 50%. 87.6% say their pre-level institutions' studios were not standard or adequately equipped to carry out practical works. 87.6% are not satisfied with the standard of the art studios at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. 86.3% complained that the time allocated to each practical course is not sufficient for them to produce satisfactory works. 91.9% say they are always occupied with theory-based assignments. All the students reported that the school does not provide art materials for their practical works.

Table 5: Analysis of student's achievements or underachievement test (ST&AUT)

Total number of respondents=35

		YES	NO

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S/N	Items	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
1	Are your students always ready to learn and improve?	30	85.7	5	14.2
2	Are you satisfied with your student's attitude towards learning?	29	82.8	6	17.1
3	Do you engage your students with continuous assessments to understand their level of improvement?	35	100	0	0
4	Do you have underachieving students in your class?	35	100	0	0
5	Did you use any majors to discover your underachieving students?	32	100	3	0
6	Are the majors related to assessments?	33	100	2	8.6
i	If yes in number 6. Were the assessments practical in nature (not written)?	2	91.4	33	5.7
ii	Were the assessments in theory form (written)?	33	4	2	94.2
iii	If yes in (i), did the practical yield any good result?	1	94.3	34	5.7
iv	If yes in (ii), did the theory yield any good result?	35	2	0	97.1
7	Do you give your underachieving students special attention?	5	94.3	30	85.7
8	Is the time allocated to your lecture enough to give special attention to your underachieving students?	35	2.9	0	0
9	Do you have standard and adequately equipped studios and lecture halls to carry out practical works and lectures effectively?	7	100	28	80
10	Are you satisfied with the general performance of your students?		14.2		
			100 20		

Table 5 shows the result of the lecturer's responses using the Students Achievement and Underachievement Test (SA&UT). The basic analyses of the results in this table present 85.7% of the lecturers and studio technicians accepting that students are always ready to learn and improve. 82.8% are satisfied with the student's attitude towards learning. All the lecturers said they engage students with continuous assessments to understand their level of improvement. Also, they all agreed of having underachieving students in their class and that they apply certain majors to discover the underachieving students. 91.4% said the majors they apply to check students' achievement and underachievement are related to assessments and 94.2% said the assessments they use are usually practical-oriented (not written). 94.2% claimed they do not use theory-based (written) assessment to assess their underachieving students. 97.1% agreed that theory-based assessment does not yield any good results in trying to help their underachieving students. 94.2% say they found practical-oriented assessments yield better results than theory base assessments. All the lecturers and studio technicians agreed that they give the underachieving students special attention. Also, 85.7% quarried that the time allocated for lectures is not enough to give reasonable special attention to underachieving students. 80% are not satisfied with the general performance of the students. All the lecturers and studio technicians agreed that the department does not have standard and adequately equipped studios and lecture halls to carry out practical-oriented assessments and lectures effectively.

Discussion of Findings

The finding of the study shows that most of the students have poor or faulty pre-level knowledge to depend on to acquire new knowledge and skills in the university. This was in

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agreement with Adeleke & Ariyo (2018) that when the students have faulty pre-level knowledge, it will be difficult for them to learn effectively. This shows that most students are underachieving in the DFAA at UNN due to faulty pre-level knowledge emanating either from the primary, secondary or tertiary institutions that qualified them to study FAA. Most of these institutions do not have art studios and qualified teachers to teach art.

The finding also shows that the way and manner lecturers conduct assessments is poor. This may be due to a lack of assessment literacy in conducting proper assessment in art or negligence. From the findings, most lecturers give assessment questions to the student without staying to direct and guide the underachieving students. 75.2% of the students affirmed that lecturers and studio technicians do not give them adequate attention or guide them to understand what they teach when they are dwindling out of concepts. Also, no one tries to find out their level of achievement or underachievement in the class or studio, rather, their efforts are poorly criticized when they cannot perform up to the teacher's expectations. More so, the students complained that they do not usually have adequate time to complete their practical assessments as theory-based courses also take up their time. The students are, therefore, not satisfied with the general methods of teaching and assessment in the department.

Meanwhile**,** the lecturers' and studio technicians' responses are contradictory to what the students presented. The lecturers and studio technicians accepted that students are always ready to learn and improve. A reasonable percentage expressed their satisfaction with the student's attitude towards learning. They all agreed to have underachieving students in their class, also, that they found practical-oriented assessments yield better results than theory-based assessments in checking and monitoring achieving and underachieving students with special attention. This discrepancy implies that there is a form of cover-up position either on the side of the students or the lecturers and studio technicians.

Furthermore, findings show that the department does not have standard and adequately equipped studios to carry out practical-oriented assessments effectively and the school does not provide art materials for the practical assessments. Therefore, most lecturers find it difficult to conduct practical assessments. Many students occasionally fail to do some assignments due to the lack and cost of art materials.

Conclusion

It is better to face the difficulty in managing underachievement in the DFAA than the negative impact of underachievement in society because the underachieving students today are the unemployed youths of tomorrow (Dean, 1998). Teachers must, therefore, strive to eliminate underachievement to overcome the economic and social disadvantage that it will cause the society in the future as the students are the leaders of tomorrow (Gorard & Smith, 2003).

Due to the varying causes of underachievement, every underachieving student will independently need a different approach and criteria to measure his or her underachievement. The lecturers, therefore, need to spend time through assessments to determine the extent and nature of a student's pre-level knowledge and skills and if inaccurate, help the students to come to terms with their misconceptions before going on with new knowledge (Adeleke, et al. 2018). To identify underachieving students, lecturers could administer a practical-oriented assessment to check the gifted nature of a student or assess the students in groups and observe the declining pattern in the group achievement assessment scores to quickly, identify the underachievers as well as, observe the best students' behaviour and follow-up the changes in their behaviours (Renard, 2019). Practical-oriented assessment cannot achieve any positive

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result without reasonable studio space and studio facilities like an easel for painting, kiln and throwing wheel for ceramics, loom and dye pit for textile design, computers, and printers for graphic design, donkeys and drawing studios for drawing, sewing and designing machines for fashion design.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that:

1. The government and stakeholders in education should adequately find, monitor, maintain, and frequently upgrade the standard of facilities and teachers in the pre-level knowledge institutions like the primary and secondary schools. This will equip their products with the proper foundation to excel in higher levels of their educational career.
2. The heads of departments should frequently be checked and ensure that lecturers and studio technicians are properly administering assessments using appropriate methods and approaches. The school should periodically organize and mandate the lecturers and studio technicians to attend conferences, workshops, and seminars that will equip and upgrade them in current trends in the assessment.
3. The government, school, department, and stakeholders in education should assist in providing standard facilities and materials needed for Practical-oriented assessment.

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