

## Roles of school belongingness and career indecision on academic performance among secondary school students in Southeast Nigeria

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### Abstract

This study examined the roles of school belongingness and career indecision on academic performance of secondary school students. Participants were 1408 secondary school students 581 (41.3%) were females while 827 (58.7%) were males drawn from 11 secondary schools from four states in the South-eastern Nigeria, using purposive sampling technique. Their ages ranged from 13 to 20 years with mean age of 15.50 ( $SD = 1.27$ ). The Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale and the Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire were used for data collection. Data on academic performance were obtained from the students' annual results cumulative usually compiled after third term examinations. Data were coded and analysed using Pearson Moment Correlation Coefficient and Hierarchical Multiple Regression. The result showed that school belongingness ( $\beta = .12, p < .001$ ) significantly predicted academic performance among secondary school students while career indecision ( $\beta = -.06, p < .05$ ) was negatively associated with academic performance among secondary school students. To enhance secondary school students' educational status, plans to increase sense of belonging and reduce career indecision should be at the focus of intervention.

**Keywords:** Academic performance, Career indecision, School belongingness, Secondary school students

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## Introduction

Students' inability to do well in Nigerian schools has increased recently in spite of efforts made by school leaders, teachers, parents and governments to improve the trend. This has remained a major source of concern to parents, teachers, and significant others (Chioke, 2021; Hussain, 2006). This increase is evident in the recurring failures in external examinations conducted by the National Examination Council (NECO) as well as the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and the subsequent widespread cheating in examinations by Nigerian students (Agwu et al., 2022). For instance, the 2021 and 2022 NECO and WAEC results show that there was a 5% decline in students' performance from 81.7% in 2021 to 76.3% in 2022 and a decline of 10.9% from 71.64% in 2021 to 60.74% in 2022 in WAEC and NECO results respectively.

In Nigeria, before external examinations such as NECO and WAEC, students' academic performance are already apparent as students' cumulative average sessional score in their periodic academic records presented in the third term. Academic performance refers to how well students manage their day-to-day studies and different tasks assigned by their teachers. Specifically, academic performance may be referred to as how fast and well students are accomplishing academic tasks assigned to them. Academic performance or achievement are often measured and determined through reports, examinations, research, and sometimes ratings using different scales. Academic performance in secondary schools in Nigeria is anchored on the candidate's achievement of a credit grade or above in at least five subjects, including English language and Mathematics in secondary school examinations that they take at the completion of their secondary school education. However, in the present study, academic performance was assessed as students' performance at the preceding third term examinations, which culminates the session's performance in the regular three terms in Nigerian secondary schools in yearly cycles.

Previous studies have examined the interplay between variables such as cognitive resilience (Alammar et al., 2022), parenting styles (Masud et al., 2019), physical activities (Gasparotto et al., 2020), screen time, working memory (Dubuc et al., 2022) and students' academic performance among high school students in western countries. More so, factors such as school administration (Bassey, 2020), study habits (Bright & Matilda, 2018), and school environment (Gidado et al., 2023; Olubunmi & Kolawale, 2023) have been implicated in academic performance among secondary school students in Nigeria. The links between school belongingness (Capps, 2003), career indecision (Koyuncuoğlu, 2021) and academic performance has also been investigated among university students but not among secondary school students. Besides most of these studies were carried out in Western-European societies (e.g., Koyuncuoğlu, 2021). Relying solely on studies carried out in these societies may provide a myopic view of the situation in developing countries like Nigeria, where context of learning is less technologically driven. It is necessary to study the roles of school belongingness and career indecision on academic performance among secondary school students in Southeast Nigeria in order to gain deeper understanding of the interplay of these variables.

The need to belong has been given more emphasis in the educational environment. Allen et al. (2018) highlighted the need for provision of a loving and supportive educational environment in order to foster a sense of community and belonging among children to thrive in. Sense of belonging is a fundamental human need, and it can help achieve better mental and physical health. The need to belong is prominent in Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of human needs. According to Goodenow (2013), school belongingness refers to how much a student personally feels integrated, appreciated, and empowered in their school social environment.

According to the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), students have innate growth tendencies (such as sense of curiosity) that serve as a motivational basis for their

academic success. Some pupils may lack self-motivation, express dissatisfaction, and act carelessly, according to the notion. As a means of resolving this seeming paradox, the self-determination theory research finds classroom environments that promote and vitalize students' inner motivating resources as enhancing academic performance, and those that disregard, impair, or impede these resources, reducing academic performance (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

It has been demonstrated that a strong sense of school belongingness is positively linked to improved student wellbeing and academic achievement (Ryan & Deci, 2009; Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021). Many motivational metrics, including expectancy of success, the value of schoolwork, and self-reported effort, are strongly and positively influenced by school belongingness (Molinari & Marnett, 2018). An increase in academic performance may be attributed to an increase in a student's sense of belongingness at school (Gillen-O'Neil, 2021). These cluster of findings point to the roles school belongingness play in academic performance.

One other important variable that has probably been a source of concern to school management, teachers, counsellors, academic advisers, parents/guardians and researchers is career decision. This is because the target of every parent and all concerned is to see the children excel in schools and choose a good career that will enable them become independent adults. The school authorities see it as a great achievement when those that passed through their educational system are progressing in life. Making career choices is one of the most difficult challenges that students face when they move from secondary school to university schools.

Adolescents are expected to make a career decision or choice while still in high school, which is an important turning point in their lives. The choices that teenagers make about their educational path and the professions they want to pursue in the future are some of the most significant decisions that they will ever have to make in their whole lives (Tagay, 2014). Despite the importance of this selection, secondary school students have been observed to have difficulty making a career choice (Boye, 2020). The term "career indecision" has been used to describe the inability of many secondary school pupils to make decisions on the job pathways they intend to pursue to achieve their life goals.

Most people, however, face a range of difficulties while deciding on a career choice. These difficulties have a detrimental impact on their career decisions and make them tough to make. The impact of career indecision is one of these problems. When an individual has several options, and is not quick in choosing one, they are said to be indecisive. Even though individuals seek to avoid hesitation, they are frequently confronted with it in their daily lives. Indecision is the inability to choose from a variety of situations, feelings, ideas, wishes, or one another. Many of these choices most times are fundamentally opposed to one another. When faced with a choice between two comparable items, indecision is more common. The more similar the items are, the more difficult it is for the individual to pick; nevertheless, if one element is much more favourable than the other or possesses the necessary traits in its structure, it is favoured (Varlik & Apaydin, 2020).

Burns et al. (2013) described 'career indecision' as an individual's inability to pick or choose an occupation. It has also been described as either a lack of competence to make an occupational decision or the obstacles and problems that arise in making an occupational decision (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). The process of making professional decisions is a multi-dimensional process in and of itself. According to the trait and factor theory (Sharf, 2006), individuals choose careers based on their knowledge of employment and the labour market in addition to their knowledge of themselves. A professional path will be decided upon depending on whether or not the person can successfully integrate the two. Students at senior high schools, on the other hand, do not have the necessary career maturity because they are

still in the learning phase of their lives. As a result, individuals may not have a complete grasp of themselves and employment in many fields in order to find a match and choose a profession. This deficit may ultimately result to career indecision.

In decision making, there are a variety of options to examine, and there are several traits or dimensions to compare. Career decisions, in addition to these qualities, have certain distinct characteristics. To begin with, there are a lot of viable possibilities. Second, there is a vast range of information that can be gathered about any option. Third, a number of dimensions are required to fully represent individuals' occupations and preferences in a thorough and relevant manner. Fourth, uncertainty influences both the individual's attributes and the type of future career options.

Decision paralysis in one's career is a complex problem that can be brought on by numerous circumstances. Individuals who have many options to choose from may be indecisive, while others may be indecisive because they have a low likelihood of making the choice they most desire. More so, some individuals may be indecisive owing to specific personality traits and external conflicts (Igere, 2017), or because they are not yet ready to make decisions, while others may be ambivalent because they can't make up their minds about anything (Vondracek et al., 1990). In its broadest sense, career indecision is a major problem marked by a lack of knowledge about oneself, a lack of self-confidence, and a high level of doubt and worry pertaining to job choices and activities (Goliath, 2012).

Furthermore, individuals may be unable to make healthy judgments due to a lack of awareness of alternative career choices, inadequate understanding of the qualities of alternatives, or inadequate knowledge of the implications of these options (Nyarko-Sampson, 2013; Ukil, 2016; Zhou & Santos, 2007). There are several factors that contribute to an individual's incapacity to make an appropriate career decision, such as a lack of comprehension of their own decision-making process and a lack of resources for gathering crucial information about the process. The capacity to practice in several domains determines the dispersion of talents and interests. Individuals, on the other hand, do not have the chance to practice and test themselves in many professions due to a lack of optional courses in schools and relatively limited extracurricular activities. As a result of this predicament, individuals' true strengths and interests get muddled, thus, people with an approach-approach conflict regarding numerous professional options may have difficulties making career decisions (Kuzgun, 2014).

There are two types of career indecision: developmental indecision and chronic indecision (Bacanli, 2008). Developmental indecision describes a temporary lack of ability to make a decision due to a certain moment or circumstance (Bacanli, 2008). A lack of self-awareness and understanding of one's work environment are the most common causes of this type of professional crisis (Guay et al., 2006). Researchers have found that people who are developmentally indecisive exhibit moderate levels of anxiety about career choice, low levels of generalized uncertainty, high levels of demand for career information, and moderate demand for self-education (Bacanli, 2008; Miller & Rottinghaus, 2014). A chronic state of indecision is not triggered by a single event or moment in time. Chronic indecision is characterized by an inability to settle on a career for an extended period of time (Guay et al., 2006). Chronic indecision, according to Greenhaus et al. (1995), is the inability to formulate long-term career goals. This sort of hesitation is based on personality qualities and may be found in any choice scenario, including choosing a job. Chronic hesitation may be caused by the fact that none of the various profession options are compatible with one's sense of self (Kuzgun, 2014). The present study considered career indecision as a student's general inability to anticipate a choice of career (Gati & Saka, 2001).

During the course of their academic pursuits, adolescents in secondary school are subjected to a number of demands that are connected to their future adult life, including those

that are physical, psychological, social, and organizational (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). When students do not feel secure, wanted and safe in their various homes, it might generally affect their behaviour, including school related involvements, such as academic performance, and they may as well dread going to school or see school as an escape from home rather than an avenue to acquire knowledge. They may thus miss relevant information in school about what could have been their career path. Lack of readiness or confusion in choosing a career path has been suggested to impair students' understanding of subject being taught, poor academic performance (Ebuta & Ekpo, 2014).

If the deterioration in academic performance among Nigerian secondary school students persists, it may affect the development of the country; and be particularly devastating to Southeast Nigeria, which had relied heavily in the school system for its development. Thus, the present study investigated the association of school belongingness career indecision and academic performance of secondary school students in Southeast Nigeria. This study therefore hypothesized that:

1. School belongingness significantly impacts on academic performance among secondary school students in Southeast Nigeria.
2. Career indecision negatively and significantly impacts academic performance among secondary school students.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants in the present study were 1408 senior secondary school students who were drawn from 12 secondary schools from four Southeast states comprising Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi and Enugu states. A multistage sampling technique was adopted in choosing the schools and students for the study. Specifically, the purposive sampling technique was used to select schools that matched the needed profile of participants, which was that the school must be co-educational and must comprise unity schools, state government schools and private schools. Subsequently, simple random sampling was used to select one local government from each state in order to select participants from public and private schools. The simple random sampling technique was also employed to select two secondary schools (one public school and one private school) from the selected local government areas. Afterwards, purposive sampling technique was used to select the Senior Secondary 2 (SS2) class for the study. The SS2 students were chosen from each of their classes using a systematic sampling technique.

Of the total sample of 1408, 581 (41.3%) were females while 827 (58.7%) were males. The ages of the participants ranged from 13 to 20 years, with an average age of 15 years ( $SD = 1.27$ ). A total of 1289 (91.5%) students were living with their biological parents, 64 (4.5%) were living with their relations, 25 (1.8%) were living with non-relations, while 30 (2.1%) did not indicate who they were living with. On students' parental life status, 1128 (80.1%) had both parents alive, 116 (8.2%) had only their father alive, 92 (6.5%) had only their other alive, 35 (2.5%) reported both parents dead, while 37 (2.6%) did not indicate their parental life status.

### *Instruments*

#### *Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale*

The Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale was developed by Goodenow (1993) to measure students' subjective feeling of belonging to their respective school communities. A Likert scale with five-point variations is used to rate each of the measures (from 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree). The PSSM consists of 21 items:

13 items border on the student's sense of belonging to their school community (e.g., "I feel like a true member of this school"), and 8 items assesses the student's feelings of being rejected by their institution (e.g., "It is tough for people like me to be accepted"). A sense of community and belonging at school is reflected in high scores. Goodenow (1993) reported an alpha of 0.85 for the feeling of belonging component of the PSSM, and 0.65 for the sense of being rejected component. A reliability internal consistency of .70 was established for the PSSM in the present study.

#### *Career Decision-making Difficulties Questionnaire*

Participants' career indecision was assessed using the Career Decision-making Difficulties Questionnaire (CDDQ; Gati & Saka, 2001). The CDDQ is a 35-item self-report questionnaire that includes 32 CDDQ-revised items and 3 validity items that are not scored. The first version of the CDDQ consisted of 44 questions and was designed to assess the difficulties associated with making professional decisions across three subscales: insufficient preparation, insufficient information, and inconsistent information (Gati et al., 1996). Summing the results across all domains might potentially yield an overall difficulty score. On a 9-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (does not apply to me) to 9 (does apply to me), participants rate their degree of agreement with each statement (example: 'I find it difficult to make a decision regarding my job since I don't know which elements to consider') (fully applies to me). The CDDQ showed good internal consistency for the subscales of lack of information (.95) and inconsistent information (.89), as well as the overall scale (.94), but low dependability for the subscale of lack of preparation (.63) (Gati & Saka, 1996). A reliability internal consistency of .82 was established for the CDDQ in the present study.

#### *Academic Performance*

Students' school performance was measured using the student's annual cumulative results from the previously conducted examinations covering a whole academic session. This method has been previously used by authors such as Zangmo et al. (2021) to measure academic performance.

#### *Procedure*

The researcher obtained ethical approval and an introductory letter from the Department of Psychology of University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The introductory letter was used to obtain permission and consent from the principals of the schools selected for the study. In all the schools where students were sampled, a teacher was usually assigned to help to organise the students for the study. The students were approached in their classrooms during their break periods. The participants were briefed on what to do before commencing the exercise. For instance, they were informed to read the instructions carefully and not to copy from one another as this was purely based on their individual experiences. After this, the instruments were distributed to the participants in their various classes. Participants were also encouraged to respond to the items as honestly as possible as their personal information would remain confidential. The participants were informed of their right to withdraw from taking part in the study. Each participant received a pen and a packet of biscuit for participating in the study. A total of 1500 copies of the questionnaire were distributed and all the copies of the questionnaire were returned. However, after sorting and cleaning the data, ninety-two (92) returned copies of the questionnaire were considered as invalid (the same response to every question or refusal to complete some parts of the questionnaires) and were therefore excluded, leaving 1408 valid completed copies of the questionnaire that were coded and used for data analysis.

### Design/Statistics

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design. Data were analysed using the Pearson ( $r$ ) and Hierarchical Multiple Regression. This was to enable the researcher to determine the independent roles of school belongingness, and career indecision in academic performance among secondary school students.

### Results

Table 1: Correlations of demographic variables with school belongingness, career indecision, and academic performance

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Gender	-								
2 Age	-.05*	-							
3 Family type	.03	.02	-						
4 Parental status	-.01	.03	.27**	-					
5 Birth order	.05	.05	.07*	.06*	-				
7 School type	.01	.05	.00	.13**	-.06*	-			
7 School belongingness	.00	.03	-.06*	-.09**	.04	-.29**	-		
8 Career indecision	-.01	.01	.02	-.02	-.03	-.13**	-.11**	-	
9 Academic performance	-.00	.01	.04	.04	-.00	-.01	.12**	-.07**	-

Note. N = 1408; \*:  $p < .05$ ; \*\*:  $p < .01$ ; School bel. = School belongingness; Academic per. = Academic performance. Gender was coded as male = 1, female = 2; Family type was coded as biological parents = 1, relation/non-relation = 2; Parental status was coded as both alive = 1, one or both dead = 2; school type was coded as state govt/unity school = 1, private school = 2.

In Table 1, the correlations show that family type was negatively related with school belongingness ( $r = -.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Parental status was negatively related with school belongingness ( $r = -.09$ ,  $p < .01$ ). School type was negatively related with school belongingness ( $r = -.29$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and career indecision ( $r = -.13$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Higher school belongingness was related with decreased career indecision ( $r = -.11$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and increased academic performance ( $r = .12$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Higher career indecision was related with decreased academic performance ( $r = -.07$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These correlations were taken into consideration in the interpretation of results on test of the hypotheses.

**Table 2: Hierarchical multiple regression for predictors of academic performance**

Predictors	Step 1			Step 2		
	B	$\beta$	T	B	B	T
School belongingness	.13	.12	4.54***	.12	.11	4.11***
Career indecision				-.02	-.06	-2.20*
$R^2$	.015			.020		
$\Delta R^2$	.015			.003		
F	20.632(1, 1394)***			9.614(3, 1392)***		
$\Delta F$	20.632(1, 394)***			4.856(1, 1392)*		

Note. \*:  $p < .05$ ; \*\*:  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*:  $p < .001$ ;  $\Delta R^2$  = Change in  $R^2$ ;  $\Delta F$  = Change in  $F$

Results of the hierarchical multiple regressions for the association of academic performance were shown in Table 2. School belongingness was added in the Step 1 of the regression analysis. It was shown that school belongingness was positively associated with academic performance ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $t(1408) = 4.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The unstandardized regression coefficient (B) showed that for every one unit increase in school belongingness, academic performance increases by .13 units. School belongingness accounted for additional 1.4% variance in academic performance and the model was significant,  $F(1, 1394) = 20.632$ ,  $p < .001$ . This result confirms Hypothesis 1.

In step 2, career indecision was added to the regression analysis and it was negatively associated with academic performance ( $\beta = -.06$ ,  $t(1408) = -2.20$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The unstandardized regression coefficient (B) showed that for every one unit increase in career indecision, academic performance decreases by -.02 units. Career indecision accounted for additional 0.3% variance in academic performance and the model was significant,  $F(1, 1392) = 4.856$ ,  $p < .05$ , confirming Hypothesis 2.

## Discussion

This study examined the roles of school belongingness and career indecision in academic performance among secondary school students. The results of the study revealed that school belongingness was positively impacted on academic performance, indicating that a higher level of school belongingness leads to a higher level of academic performance. Thus, hypothesis 1, which stated that school belongingness significantly impacts on academic performance, was supported. The findings of the study are consistent with the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002), which postulates that the fulfilment of three psychological needs, namely competence, autonomy, and relatedness, can cause individuals to be self-motivated and cause them to have a high-performance level. As a result, a sense of belonging can satisfy a student's demand for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which in turn leads to increased academic performance on the part of the student. Furthermore, our finding tends to agree with previous studies (e.g., Carrie, 2017; Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Vaccaro et al., 2015) which found a positive relationship between academic sense of belonging and students' academic performance across different populations. Similarly, the finding of the current study appears to be consistent with Lam et al. (2015), which reported that the feeling of being rejected can have a detrimental impact on academic performance by making one more susceptible to negative emotions and less able to experience pleasant ones. Students who saw their teachers and other significant others in the school environment



creating personal connections with them were more motivated, attained better grades in classes and had lower rate of school drop-out intention.

The results of the current study also revealed that career indecision negatively impacted on academic performance. Hence, hypothesis 2 which stated that career indecision significantly associated with academic performance among secondary school students was supported. This finding is similar to previous studies (e.g., Boye, 2020; Etiubon et al., 2018). Zaini et al. (2021) further reported a reverse effect of academic performance on career decision-making.

### ***Implications of the study***

The current study has both theoretical and practical implications that are not worthy. Theoretically, the present study has extended the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) where students thrived in their academic performance out of sheer effort. The study has also expanded the belongingness and career indecision literature by including data generated from Nigerian samples where previous studies among secondary schools were lacking.

Practical implications were established for counsellors, teachers and other professionals in the education setting. Students' school belongingness should be encouraged in several ways such as introducing team work and enhancing social interaction within classroom. Strategies such as offering emotional support to students, prioritizing high quality teacher-student relationship and learner-centred teacher practices which promote student voices are to be implemented so as to enhance academic performance among secondary school students. Talking with students about their lives outside of school is a one-way teacher can show an interest in and appreciation for students.

### ***Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies***

The study included selected senior secondary school students only in Southeast Nigeria, hence the generalizability of the study is limited. Future studies should endeavour to include samples from other region of Nigeria to enhance the extent to which the study can be generalized. The study adopted self-report by the participants with the use of questionnaires leading to common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Future studies should consider obtaining data from other sources (multiple) such as from the class teachers or classmates to cushion the impact of social desirability biases. More so, there could be bi-directional relationships among the studies variables, but which could not be observed due to the cross-sectional nature of our data. For instance, career indecision and academic performance may be associated with belongingness. Again, the study falls short of establishing causality. Future studies should adopt longitudinal design to be able to establish causality. We also propose that future research concentrate on potential reciprocal relationships.

### ***Conclusion***

The present study examined the roles of school belongingness and career indecision in academic performance among secondary school students in South-eastern Nigeria. The study aimed to add to the existing literature. Counsellors that specialize in career guidance, particularly school psychologists, play a crucial part in supporting students in developing a sense of belonging and in making decisions about future careers that are in their best interests. As a result, educational institutions (secondary schools) should not ignore the importance of career advice and counselling interventions. The findings of the present study have implications for the introduction and facilitation of practical strategies to enhance students' sense of belonging and career decision process. Its implications were also extended to parents and researchers.

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**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare they have no conflict of interest

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