

Influence of Emotional and Behavioural Problems on the Academic Achievement of Junior Secondary School Students in Benue State

By

Dr. Ityovenda Enoch Nder

nderter96@gmail.com

07032140215

Department of Educational Foundations

Faculty of Education

Federal University, Lafia

Dr. Osheka Mohammed Abe

oshekamuhammadabe@gmail.com

Department of Educational Foundations

Faculty of Education

Nasarawa State University, Keffi

Dr. Oriaku Ifeoma Grace-Helen

ifeomaoriaku4@gmail.com

Department of Educational Foundations

Faculty of Education

Nasarawa State University, Keffi

Abstract

This study investigated the Influence of Emotional and Behavioural Problems on the Academic Achievement of Junior Secondary School Students in Benue State. The increasing rate of insecurity caused by persistent farmer-herder clashes has raised concerns about its implications for students' emotional stability and learning outcomes. The study was guided by three research questions and corresponding hypotheses focusing on the influence of anxiety, depression, and aggression on students' academic achievement. A descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. The target population comprised 15,433 Junior Secondary School II students from the three most conflict-affected Local Government Areas Agatu, Logo, and Guma out of which 377 students were sampled using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table. Multi-stage sampling procedures were employed, involving purposive, proportionate, and stratified random sampling techniques. Data were collected using the instrument, whose content validity indices ranged from 0.83 to 0.86 and reliability indices from 0.79 to 0.87 for English and Mathematics respectively. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis. Findings revealed that anxiety, depression, and aggression significantly influenced students' academic achievement in the conflict-affected areas. The study concluded that the persistent farmer-herder conflict has a detrimental effect on students' emotional well-being and academic performance. It was recommended that government and stakeholders should implement effective peacebuilding strategies, provide psychosocial support for affected students, and ensure a secure learning environment to enhance educational outcomes in Benue State.

Keywords: Emotional and Behavioural Problems , anxiety, aggression, depression, Academic Achievement.

Introduction

Emotional and behavioural problems in adolescence frequently present as clusters of symptoms that include internalizing problems (anxiety and depression) and externalizing behaviours (aggression, conduct problems). These difficulties are not merely transient mood states but are often persistent patterns that interfere with daily functioning, social relationships, and learning processes (Martinez et al., 2021). In school-aged children and adolescents, anxiety can range from test anxiety and social anxiety to generalized worries; depression commonly shows as withdrawn behaviour, low motivation, and diminished interest in school activities; aggression may manifest as physical or verbal hostility, rule breaking, and conflict with peers and teachers. All three domains interact with one another and with environmental stressors such as community violence, family conflict, and disruptions to schooling producing cumulative risk for poor academic outcomes (Jiang et al., 2022).

Locally situated research in Benue State provides direct empirical evidence linking these emotional and behavioural problems to scholastic underachievement among junior secondary students. A focused study of junior secondary pupils in Benue found that anxiety, depression, and aggression each exerted a statistically significant influence on academic achievement: chi-square tests in that study rejected null hypotheses of no influence for anxiety, aggression, and depression, indicating that higher levels of these problems were associated with lower academic performance among the sampled students (Abeshi et al., 2022). The study's discussion contextualized these results within ongoing local stressors notably farmer-herder conflict and community violence in Benue which displace students, disrupt schooling routines, and magnify psychological distress that undermines concentration and sustained study. This local study therefore connects individual psychopathology to structural stressors and shows how both converge to reduce academic attainment in the junior secondary stage.

Mechanisms through which anxiety impairs learning are multifold. Cognitive models emphasize that anxiety consumes working memory and attentional resources: anxious students attend more to threat-related cues and intrusive worries (e.g., fear of failure, social evaluation), which reduces the cognitive capacity available for encoding, rehearsal, and problem solving during lessons and tests. Empirical work in Nigerian junior secondary contexts has demonstrated measurable negative relationships between test anxiety and achievement in specific subjects, such as basic science and biology, where high test anxiety predicted appreciably lower scores (Oludipe & Begun, 2016; Bileya, 2025). Anxiety also fosters avoidance behaviours skipping school, disengaging during lessons, or refraining from class participation that further reduce exposure to instruction and opportunities for academic feedback and mastery. Thus anxiety's effect is both direct (cognitive interference) and indirect (reduced engagement and attendance), compounding deficits over time.

Depression similarly undermines scholastic performance but via somewhat different proximal processes. Depressive symptoms include low energy, anhedonia, difficulty concentrating, slowed cognition, and pessimistic self-evaluation. These symptoms erode intrinsic motivation, decrease persistence on challenging tasks, and lower the likelihood of seeking help when struggling academically. Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies in adolescent populations show that depressive symptoms predict declines in grades and standardized achievement over time; importantly, poor academic performance can also feed back to intensify depressive symptoms through negative social and self-evaluative feedback loops, creating a reciprocal, self-reinforcing cycle (Dias et al., 2022). In contexts like Benue, where exposure to community violence and insecurity is common, depression rates among adolescents may be elevated and thus represent a potent pathway to lower academic outcomes for entire cohorts of students.

Aggression and other externalizing behaviours produce both classroom disruption and relational fractures that damage learning environments. Aggressive students often generate frequent disciplinary incidents, peer rejection, and conflictual teacher relationships that reduce instructional time and create classrooms with lower collective engagement. Aggression is also associated with impulsivity and poor self-regulation, traits that hinder planning, sustained attention, and the disciplined study behaviours required for academic success. Nigerian studies across secondary levels consistently find negative correlations between aggressive behaviour and measures of academic achievement, and research from Benue specifically reported a significant influence of aggression on students' academic scores (Abeshi et al., 2022; regional studies in Rivers and Yobe State corroborate the pattern). In addition to affecting the aggressor's own outcomes, widespread disruptive behaviour can degrade the learning experience of classmates, thereby producing broader school-level declines in achievement.

Beyond individual symptomatology, the social ecology family, community, and school moderates and often amplifies the impact of emotional and behavioural problems on achievement. Family conflict, economic deprivation, and exposure to violence reduce parental capacity to provide academic support and increase children's stress-load, which makes emotional problems more severe and intractable (Frontiers review, 2022). In Benue State, chronic farmer-herder clashes and episodic violence displace families, interrupt schooling, and create daily instability; these environmental stressors not only precipitate anxiety and depression but also strip away protective supports (consistent schooling, adult supervision for homework, safe places to study), thereby magnifying the educational consequences of mental health problems. School-level factors such as teacher competence in classroom management, availability of counselling services, and school safety protocols also shape whether students with emotional or behavioural problems receive timely support or are left to fall further behind. The local empirical picture suggests

that where community insecurity is high and school resources are limited, the negative influence of emotional and behavioural problems on academic achievement is stronger.

Measurement studies indicate that the relationship between emotional/behavioural problems and academic achievement is complex and partially bidirectional. While a substantial body of research supports the view that anxiety, depression, and aggression reduce academic performance, other work emphasizes that repeated academic failure and negative feedback from teachers and peers can in turn trigger or exacerbate emotional and behavioural problems, producing a vicious cycle (Dias et al., 2022). This bidirectionality has implications for interventions: schools that focus only on remediation of academic skills without addressing emotional health may fail to break the cycle, whereas approaches that integrate psychosocial support with academic tutoring have greater potential to restore both mental health and scholastic functioning.

Intervention evidence from both high-income and low- and middle-income country settings suggests that multi-tiered strategies are most effective. Universal classroom strategies that strengthen socioemotional learning (SEL) and reduce stigma around help-seeking can lower population-level anxiety and aggression and improve classroom climate. Targeted interventions, such as cognitive-behavioural therapy for anxiety and depression, behavioural parent training for conduct problems, and teacher coaching in behaviour management, demonstrate medium to large effects on symptoms and, importantly, produce collateral gains in attendance and grades when implemented with fidelity. In resource-constrained environments like many schools in Benue State, adapting low-cost delivery models group-based interventions, task-shifting to trained lay counsellors, and integrating mental-health content into classroom lessons is a feasible pathway to reach many students at scale. Recent local Nigerian studies that measured test anxiety

and its effects on specific subject attainment highlight the value of contextually adapted anxiety-reduction programmes that marry study-skills training with anxiety-management techniques.

Policy implications emerge directly from the empirical relationship between emotional/behavioural problems and academic achievement. First, mental health must be recognized as an educational priority: ministries of education and school administrators in Benue should integrate psychological screening, referral pathways, and basic counselling into the school system. Second, because community violence in Benue is an important upstream determinant, education-sector responses must coordinate with local government and security actors to stabilize school environments safe routes to school, emergency supports for displaced students, and trauma-informed classroom practices are essential. Third, teacher training curricula should include modules on identifying and managing anxiety, depression, and aggression, and schools should be resourced to implement socioemotional learning curricula that strengthen resilience and peer support. Finally, monitoring and evaluation systems should track both mental-health indicators and academic outcomes so that interventions can be iteratively improved and scaled where effective. The Benue study's findings that anxiety, aggression, and depression each have measurable influence on attainment underscore the urgency of these policy shifts.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The problem of poor academic achievement has taken a worrisome dimension in the Nigerian educational system and it is believed by psychologists that the present insecurity scenario created by the farmer-herder conflict in the study area could have a lot to do with students' academic achievement in Benue State. This is because education as a process of transfer of knowledge cannot be achieved in a chaotic environment.

Also, it is probably unarguable that resource ownership and utilization have directly and indirectly defined the dimensions of most conflicts involving man

since time immemorial. Of all resources, however, land has remained an overwhelming source of conflicts among various user groups as well as individuals at varying thresholds. In particular, conflicts between farmers and herdsmen in the use of agricultural land are becoming fiercer and increasingly widespread in Nigeria and in Benue State to be specific with students and academic activities been the most affected in the process.

It has been observed that this constant fracas between farmers and herdsmen have reduced the level of academic activities in the area as students are thrown into fear in classroom, harassed on their way to and from school with untold hardships making learning nearly impossible and a dreaded phenomenon as countless number of students have lost their lives in the quest for formal education. Reports from Benue State Ministry of Education Makurdi reveal that since the first occurrence of farmers-herders conflict in 2012, students academic achievement in the affected Local Governments of Logo, Guma and Agatu till now is still reported to be steadily below 40%.

As a result, it is assumed that the persistence farmer-herder conflict and emotional challenges of anxiety, aggression and depression witnessed by students, sequel to the conflict could be attributed as the cause of the declining academic achievement and the dearth of academic activities in the area in general. However, there is no empirical evidence to justify this claim and that is why this study set out to investigate influence of farmer-herders conflict on emotional behaviour and academic achievement of secondary schools students in Benue State.

1.2 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions.

1. What is the influence of anxiety on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State?

2. What is the influence of depression on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State?
3. What is the influence of aggression on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State?

1.3 Research Hypotheses:

Ho1: There is no significant influence of anxiety on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State.

Ho2: There is no significant influence of depression on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State.

Ho3: There is no significant influence of aggression on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State.

1.4 Methodology

The research design adopted is Descriptive Survey. Descriptive Survey according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2010), is a study design that deal with the collection of data from a given population, to describe certain characteristics and features of the Population. The target population for this study was 15,433 which consisted of all J SS II students in the 3 Local Government Areas of Agatu, Logo and Guma of Benue State. The sample size for the study was 377 using Krejen and Morgan (1970) table for determining sample size from a given population. Multi stage sampling procedure was adopted. Firstly, the researcher purposively chose three Local Government Areas of Agatu ,Logo and Guma from the 23 local government of Benue State because the three chosen are the most affected areas during the conflict. The researcher thereafter by the use of proportionate sampling, selected 13 schools from the Local Government Areas and finally through stratified random sampling technique selected 29 (17 boys & 12 girls) from each school to arrive at 377. The consensus validity index for (SIFHCEB) was 0.86 and for English was 0.83 and for mathematics is 0.85. The consensus reliability index for Mathematics was 0.87and 0.79 for English Language. In the view of Anikweze (2010) any research instrument with reliability index of 0.70 and

above is reliable. Hence, all the instruments were considered reliable for the study.

1.5 Result

1.6 Research Questions 1: What is the influence of anxiety on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation on Respondents Ratings on the Influence of Anxiety among Secondary School Students in Benue State

	SA	A	D	SD	Mea n	Std. D	Remar k
I am always set to run away from school to hide anytime I hear strong noise around the classroom.	18 5	8 8	4 3	61	3.05	1.12	Accept ed
My fears of the frequent occurrence of crisis make me always skeptical about school.	16 0	6 6	5 9	92	2.78	1.23	Accept ed
I always have a divided attention in school due to fear of the unknown.	15 9	7 6	7 5	67	2.87	1.15	Accept ed
My class attendance has reduced as a result of my fear.	18 8	9 3	5 7	39	3.14	1.02	Accept ed
I have in some instances left school before closing hours	16 4	9 5	5 6	62	2.96	1.12	Accept ed

and live some questions
unanswered in test and
examination due to fear

Grand Mean

2.96

Data in Table 2 shows respondent ratings on the influence of anxiety on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue state. The result shows that with a mean score of 3.05 respondents agreed that they are always set to run away from school to hide anytime they hear strong noise around the classroom, and a mean score of 2.78 revealed that respondents agreed that fear of the frequent occurrence of crisis makes one always skeptical about school. The result further shows that on item 3 with a mean score of 2.87, respondents agreed that they always have a divided attention in school due to fear of the unknown and also a mean score of 3.14 shows that respondents agreed that their class attendance has reduced as a result of fear over farmer-herder clashes. Result shows that with a grand mean of 2.96, anxiety negatively influences the academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State.

Research Questions 2: What is the influence of depression on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation on Respondents Ratings on the Influence of Depression among Secondary School Students in Benue State

	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std. D	Remark
I am tired of school and feel like abandoning it for the sake of crisis.	17 7	51	76	13 3	2.40	1.25	Rejected

Am helpless and think less of school even when am in class.	15 7	65	62	93	2.76	1.23	Accepted
The famer-herder conflict has made me slow in learning and cause me to forget things especially academic.	16 7	67	50	93	2.82	1.24	Accepted
I am yet to recover completely from the shock of the last experience of the crisis between farmers and headers in my community.	17 6	70	57	74	2.92	1.18	Accepted
I have not been stable to approach academic task with the much needed attention it deserve.	16 8	46	87	76	2.81	1.21	Accepted
Grand Mean					2.7 4		

Data in Table 4 shows the mean ratings of respondents on the influence of depression due to farmer-herder crisis in Benue state. The result reveals that with a mean score of 2.40, respondents agreed that they are tired of school and feel like abandoning it due to the incessant farmer-herder crisis, a mean score of 2.92 further reveals that respondents agreed that they are yet to recover from the shock of the last experience of the crisis between farmers and headers in their community. The result revealed that with a grand mean of

2.74, depression negatively influences the academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State.

Research Questions 3: What is the influence of aggression on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State?

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation on Respondents Ratings on the Influence of Aggression among Secondary School Students in Benue State

	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std. D	Remark
The thought of how to defend my environment to avoid future attack from herders is most prominent task to me than anything else.	14 6	7 7	6 8	86	2.75	1.19	Accepted
I can abandon school to fight back those who have made me homeless.	17 2	7 1	6 0	74	2.90	1.18	Accepted
Going to school is optional because am always prepared to defend myself.	16 8	8 5	6 1	63	2.95	1.13	Accepted
The level of anger and hatred I have for the herder cause me to be distracted seeing them around my school	16 6	9 3	3 6	82	2.91	1.18	Accepted
Grand Mean					2.88		

Data in Table 3 shows respondent ratings on the influence of aggression on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue state. Result from the study reveals that with mean score of 2.75, respondents agreed that the thought of how to defend their environment to avoid future attack from herders is most prominent task for them and a mean score of 2.90 also reveal that respondents agreed that they can abandon school to fight back those who have made them homeless. Findings from the study further revealed that with a mean score of 2.91 respondents agreed that the level of anger and hatred they have for the herder makes them to be distracted seeing them around their school environment. The result shows that with a grand mean of 2.88, it is indicated that aggression negatively influences the academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State.

1.7 Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant influence of anxiety on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State.

Table 4: T-test Statistics on the Influence of anxiety on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State

Variables	Differences					Decision
	Mean	Std.D	df	t _{cal}	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Anxiety*Achiev.	-36.5	-1.48	37	-136.	.000	Reject H ₀

Level of significance $\alpha < 0.05$ shows a significant influence

Data in Table 7 shows that there is a significant influence of anxiety on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State. The result of this hypothesis is given at: [N = 377, t_{cal} = -136.78, p < .05 (.000)]. The result indicates that anxiety negatively influences the academic achievement of junior secondary school students. The formulated hypothesis was therefore rejected since the p - value is less than .05.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant influence of depression on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State.

Table 5: T-test Statistics on the Influence of depression on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State

Variables	Differences					Decision
	Mean	Std.D	df	t _{cal}	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Depression*Ach	-37.6	-1.77	37	-136.	.000	Reject
iev.	50	8	6	939		HO ₄

Level of significance $\alpha < 0.05$ shows a significant influence

Table 9 revealed that there is a significant influence of depression on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State. The result is given as at; [N = 377, t_{cal} = -136.939, p < .05 (.000)]. This implies that depression negatively influences academic achievement of junior secondary school students' negatively in Benue state. The formulated hypothesis was therefore rejected since the p - value is less than .05.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant influence of aggression on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State.

Table 6: T-test Statistics on the Influence of Aggression on Academic Achievement of Junior Secondary School Students in Benue State

Variables	Differences					Decision
	Mean	Std.D	df	t _{cal}	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Aggression*Ach	-39.8	-2.12	37	-149.	.000	Reject
iev.	54		6	450		HO ₃

Level of significance $\alpha < 0.05$ shows a significant influence

Table 8 shows that there is a significant influence of aggression on academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State. The result is given as; [N = 377, t_{cal} = -149.450, p < .05 (.000)]. This indicated that aggression negatively influences the academic achievement of junior

secondary school students. The formulated hypothesis was therefore rejected since the p – value is less than .05.

1.8 Discussion of findings

1. Result of the study revealed that anxiety has a significant positive influence on the academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State.
2. The result revealed that depression significantly influences the academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State.
3. Findings of the study also show that there is a significantly positive influence of aggression on the academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State.

1.9 Conclusion

As a result of the findings of the study, it was concluded that farmer-herder conflict and emotional behaviour significantly influences the academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Benue State.

1.10 Recommendations

The following recommendations were made as a result of the findings of this study.

1. There should be availability of counselling and counselling services in all schools in the area as well as strategic parts of the communities to counsel and giving guidance to youths who may have abandoned school for others activities as a result of the conflicts.
2. Government should as a matter of urgency initiate a consultative fora for all parties involved to finding a lasting solution to the conflict.
3. Teachers should initiate motivational strategies that will provide incentive or rewards to students to ginger good attendance in classes

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