



Soft Skills and Students' Academic Achievement

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of soft skills on students' academic achievement. A descriptive survey design was employed in the study using a sample of 536 Principals and Vice Principals (268 Principals and 268 Vice Principals) of 268 public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. The instrument for data collection was a 36-item structured questionnaire titled Principals' Perception of Influence of Soft Skills (PPISS) with a reliability coefficient of 0.89. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while the z-test statistic was used to test the hypotheses of the study at 0.05 level of significance. It was found that students' time management skills, problem-solving skills, communication skills, self-motivation, conscientiousness, willingness to learn influence the academic achievement of students to a high extent. It was recommended among others that governments, school administrators, and all stakeholders should ensure that the development of soft skills is a major aspect of the school curriculum to ensure the enhancement of students' academic achievement and guaranteed success of their chosen careers.

Keywords: Time management skills, problem-solving skills, communication skills, self-motivation, conscientiousness, willingness to learn, academic achievement.

INTRODUCTION

Schools, workplaces, and business environments are becoming more complex and competitive by the day. Most employers are likely to hire, retain and promote persons who are dependable, resourceful, ethical, having effective communication, self directed, willing to work and learn, and having positive attitude (Wats & Wats, 2009). Professional and technical skills alone cannot help achieve organisational goals and objectives. This is because staff will also be involved in different levels of leadership, decision-making activities, effective communication within the organization (with their customers and other stakeholders). Employers usually prefer to see a fine blend of competencies in their staff, and in addition to discipline-based knowledge, adequate levels of soft skills are considered desirable for moving forward in any career (Mitchell, Skinner, & White, 2010).

Hodges and Burchell (2003) investigated the perceptions of employers of the importance of different skills. The study covered 52 different professions with a sample of 8000 managers in the United States. They found that 8 out of top 10 skills were soft skills which included willingness to learn, teamwork and cooperation, interpersonal communication, energy and passion, and problem-solving skills. They further identified soft skills of employees as the major competency in nearly all the professions, even in the technical environments. While it is now a well-established fact that employers are increasingly putting more emphasis on soft skills, it is equally important that students should also adequately appreciate the value of such skills and make deliberate efforts to acquire them.

Soft skills are those personal attributes which enhance a person's interaction with others, boost his learning and increase his overall productivity and make him function optimally (Asuru & Ogidi, 2013). Soft skills are a cluster of personal qualities, habits, attitudes, and social graces that make for excellent scholarly achievement and enable the student to be compatible to work with. Basically, soft skills refer to personalities, attributes, qualities and personal behaviour of individuals. Soft skills include

certain abilities such as time management, problem-solving, communication, self-motivation, conscientiousness, willingness to learn, and decision-making skills (Gupta, 2009).

Time management is the act or process of planning and exercising conscious control over the amount of time spent on specific activities, especially to increase effectiveness, efficiency or productivity. Time management may be aided by a range of skills, tools, and techniques used to manage time when accomplishing specific tasks, projects and goals complying with a due date. Time management is a key to academic success. Students around the world learn this sooner or later. The best students are not necessarily those who are smarter, but those who use their time effectively. Most students start out each new semester or term of school with high expectations. To achieve academic success, students must carefully manage their study time on a daily, weekly, and semester/term basis. Every goal should be grounded within a time frame: Assignments and tests must have due dates attached to their schedules, all school activities, out-of-school and extra-curricular activities must have due dates. With no time frame tied to events and activities, there will be no sense of urgency, and of course, without time frame some activities will be forgotten. Time management helps one to use available time more effectively. It also has health and monetary benefits. If the time is managed properly and wisely then lot of stress can be reduced and greater success is achieved at school, workplace, or anywhere else. According to Nyatyowa (2017), time management will make a student a better student because the student will be more organised, build better reputation, more focused, and have enough time for his social life.

Problem solving in Psychology refers to the process of finding solutions to life problems (Wikipedia, 2019). It is the ability to think creatively or think outside the box. It refers to skill of a person to be able to solve problems from some unexpected perspective. This skill includes the ability to think critically, creatively, analytically and innovatively. According to KIE (2008), problem solving refers to the ability to come up with workable solutions to different problem situations and it involves appreciating the nature of the problem by analysing the causes and looking for possible solutions. Problem solving skills are required to break the barriers, discover new frontiers, develop new tools, and move into new problem solving territories. Problem solving involves defining the problem, generating alternative solutions, evaluating the alternatives, selecting from the alternatives, and implementing the solution. According to Mayer and Wittrock (2006), problem solving is fundamental to education because educators are interested in improving students' success. Thus, it is imperative for parents, teachers, and the school to cultivate in the students sound problem solving skills to enhance students' academic achievement.

Communication skills involve listening and speaking, as well as reading and writing. Communication skills are essential for the successful future career of a student. In today's competitive world, communication skills in business are the most sought after quality of an educated person. Reading, writing, and listening carefully are important communication skills for students. Communication skills help students to learn more from teachers, enhances the quality of friendship with others, enhances teamwork and collaborative attitude, develops professionalism in students, encourages students' social networking, improves students' presence of mind and enhances students' memory. Good communication skills build strong friendships, confidence and are the proof of a well-educated person. Khalidzuoud & Rawyaalshboul (2018) reported that communication skills are vital to increasing students' academic performance. According to Bee (2012), working on the importance of communication and its effect on classroom management, and teacher-student interaction, found that communication skills help students to have success in their academic life.

Motivation refers to inner drive or intention that makes a person to do something or to behave in a certain way. It is a decision making process, through which the individual chooses the desired outcomes and sets in motion the behaviour appropriate to them. Motivation is an inner state of need or desire that activates an individual to do something to satisfy the need or desire. Motivation is the force that accounts for the arousal, selection, direction, and continuation of behaviour. Through motivation an individual chooses a particular set of actions to achieve the desired goal. According to Williams and Burden (2000), motivation is a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, which leads to a conscious decision to act, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal. Motivation is a continuous process which can be positive or negative. Positive motivation can be stimulated by providing positive incentives (good

grades, praises, high pay, power, and many more), while negative motivation implies the use of penalties, punishments, and others to direct a person's actions towards achieving desired goals. Motivation encourages students to persevere at tasks to achieve success. Students with high sense of self-efficacy and self-motivation have the capacity to accept more challenging tasks, higher abilities to organise their time, increased persistence in the face of obstacles, exhibit lower anxiety to adapt with different educational environments (Elmotaleb & Sahalof, 2013) and thus achieve great success.

Conscientiousness is the personality trait of being careful. It implies a desire to do a task well, be efficient, organised and to take responsibility for one's actions. Conscientious people exhibit a tendency to show self-discipline, act dutifully, and aim for achievement (Wikipedia, 2019). They are dependable, systematic, hardworking, reliable, and thorough. One of the central non-cognitive variables to predict school achievement is conscientiousness. In a meta-analysis it has been shown that conscientiousness is the most consistent and stable personality predictor for academic achievement (Poropat, 2009). It combines various traits (self-discipline, ambition, persistence, diligence, and dutifulness) which are crucial for successful learning. Duckworth and Seligman (2005) found that self-discipline accounted for more than twice as much variance as intelligence in school achievement and learning behaviour of eighth-grade students. Conscientiousness is associated with responsibility, persistence, trustworthiness, and being purposeful. Of the big five personality traits (extroversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism), only conscientiousness has consistently been associated with academic achievement (Nofle & Robins, 2007; O'Connor & Paunonen, 2007). Conscientious students achieve higher levels of academic success, both in high school and in university (Preckel, Holling, & Vock, 2006; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2008).

Willingness to learn is a desire, wish, or readiness to acquire new knowledge and develop. It means that a person wishes to be more qualified, wants to keep up with modern trends and tendencies, and desires to upgrade his professional competencies and general education. Successful people never stop learning (Brooks, 2016). The world is changing quickly and steadily, and those who can survive the constant changes are those willing to learn to stay informed of the latest trends and most sought-after skills in the world. Continuous learning is crucial for achieving goals (at school, work, or anywhere), and being successful as knowledge paves way for better jobs, high positions, honours, and more. The more one is willing to learn, the more things one learns, the more new ideas come to mind, and the more he develops the ability and creates situations to make for more learning. Put differently, willingness to learn at school or at work or at any environment whatsoever is a great quality of any individual that desires and values success. A student who is willing to learn tends to pay more attention to the teacher and teaching. He is the one that poses questions to the teacher when the lesson is not clear, he is the one that answers the teacher's questions in class, and he is the one that helps the teacher explain difficult concepts to his classmates. A willing child perseveres at difficult tasks and ensures completion.

Statement of the Problem

It has become established that employers are increasingly putting more emphasis on soft skills. It is thus important that students should adequately appreciate the value of soft skills and make deliberate efforts to acquire them so that when they get employed, they can keep their jobs and grow. Unfortunately, our schools are not paying the needed attention to the development of soft skills by our students. This study, therefore, investigated the extent of influence of soft skills on the academic success of students and recommended possible ways of developing soft skills in our students.

Research Questions

To guide this study are the following research questions on the extent to which soft skills influence the academic performance of students of public secondary schools in Rivers State:

1. What is the extent to which time management influences students' academic performance?
2. To what extent does problem solving influence the academic performance of students?
3. What is the extent to which communication influences students' academic performance?
4. To what extent does self-motivation influence the academic performance of students?
5. What is the extent to which conscientiousness influences students' academic performance?
6. To what extent does willingness to learn influence the academic performance of students?

Hypotheses

1. Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State do not differ significantly in their mean rating of the influence of time management on students’ academic performance.
2. Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State do not differ significantly in their mean rating of the influence of problem solving on students’ academic performance.
3. Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State do not differ significantly in their mean rating of the influence of communication on students’ academic performance.
4. Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State do not differ significantly in their mean rating of the influence of self-motivation on students’ academic performance.
5. Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State do not differ significantly in their mean rating of the influence of conscientiousness on students’ academic performance.
6. Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State do not differ significantly in their mean rating of the influence of willingness to learn on students’ academic performance.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the survey research design. According to Kpolovie (2010) survey research is a developmental field investigation that systematically collects, analyses and synthesises quantitative data on a large representative sample of a given population. The population of this study is 536 Principals and Vice Principals (268 Principals and 268 Vice Principals) of 268 public senior secondary schools in Rivers State (Rivers State Senior Secondary Schools Board, 2018). The sample size for this study is 536 Principals and Vice Principals. The census sampling technique was used. In census sampling, every unit or member of the population is studied. Thus, a total of 268 Principals and 268 Vice Principals participated in the study. The instrument used for data collection was Principals’ Perception of Influence of Soft Skills (PPISS). Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while the z-test statistic was used to test the hypotheses of the study at 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: *What is the extent to which time management influences students’ academic performance?*

Table 1: Mean rating of the extent to which time management influences students’ academic performance (N = 536)

Respondents	N	\bar{X}	S	Decision
Principals	268	3.37	0.85	High Extent
Vice Principals	268	3.31	0.65	High Extent
Total	536	3.34	0.75	High Extent

Below 1.50 = Very Low Extent; 1.50-2.50 = Low Extent; 2.50-3.50 = High Extent; Above 3.50 = Very High Extent

Table 1 shows that Principals have a total mean of 3.37 and standard deviation of 0.85; Vice Principals have total mean of 3.31 and standard deviation of 0.65; and Principals and Vice Principals together have mean of 3.34 and standard deviation of 0.75 on their rating of the extent of influence of time management on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. Both the Principals and Vice Principals have very low standard deviations indicating close cluster of the scores about the mean, and total means that lie between 2.5 – 3.5, implying high extent influence of time management on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary

schools in Rivers State. Thus, time management influence to a high extent, the academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

Research Question 2: *To what extent does problem solving influence the academic performance of students?*

Table 2: Mean rating of the extent to which problem solving influences students' academic performance (N = 536)

Respondents	n	\bar{X}	S	Decision
Principals	268	3.33	0.72	High Extent
Vice Principals	268	3.29	0.87	High Extent
Total	536	3.31	0.80	High Extent

Below 1.50 = Very Low Extent; 1.50-2.50 = Low Extent; 2.50-3.50 = High Extent; Above 3.50 = Very High Extent

In table 2, Principals and Vice Principals have respectively total means of 3.31 and 3.22, and standard deviations of 0.82 and 0.68; and Principals and Vice Principals together have mean of 3.31 and standard deviation of 0.80 on their rating of the extent of influence of problem solving on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. Both the Principals and Vice Principals have very low standard deviations indicating close cluster of the scores about the mean, and means that lie between 2.5 – 3.5, implying high extent influence of problem solving on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. This implies that problem solving influences the academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State to a high extent.

Research Question 3: *To what extent does communication influence the academic performance of students?*

Table 3: Mean rating of the extent to which communication influences students' academic performance (N = 536)

Respondents	n	\bar{X}	S	Decision
Principals	268	3.19	0.83	High Extent
Vice Principals	268	3.32	1.11	High Extent
Total	536	3.26	0.97	High Extent

Below 1.50 = Very Low Extent; 1.50-2.50 = Low Extent; 2.50-3.50 = High Extent; Above 3.50 = Very High Extent

The information in table 3 presents that Principals have a total mean of 3.19, and standard deviation of 0.83; Vice Principals have total mean of 3.32 and standard deviation of 1.11; and Principals and Vice Principals together have mean of 3.26 and standard deviation of 0.97 on their rating of the extent of influence of communication on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. Both the Principals and Vice Principals have very low standard deviations indicating close cluster of the scores about the mean, and means that lie between 2.5 – 3.5, implying high extent influence of communication on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. Thus, communication influences to a high extent, the academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

Research Question 4: *To what extent does self-motivation influence the academic performance of students?*

Table 4: Mean rating of the extent to which self-motivation influences students' academic performance (N = 536)

Respondents	N	\bar{X}	S	Decision
Principals	268	3.25	1.07	High Extent
Vice Principals	268	3.39	0.83	High Extent
Total	536	3.32	0.95	High Extent

Below 1.50 = Very Low Extent; 1.50-2.50 = Low Extent; 2.50-3.50 = High Extent; Above 3.50 = Very High Extent

In table 4, Principals and Vice Principals have respectively total means of 3.25 and 3.39, and standard deviations of 1.07 and 0.83; and together Principals and Vice Principals have mean of 3.32 and standard deviation of 0.95 on their rating of the extent of influence of self-motivation on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. Both the Principals and Vice Principals have very low standard deviations indicating close cluster of the scores about the mean, and means that lie between 2.5 – 3.5, implying high extent influence of self-motivation on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. This implies that self-motivation influences the academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State to a high extent.

Research Question 5: *To what extent does conscientiousness influence the academic performance of students?*

Table 5: Mean rating of the extent to which conscientiousness influences students' academic performance (N = 536)

Respondents	n	\bar{X}	S	Decision
Principals	268	3.35	0.97	High Extent
Vice Principals	268	3.29	0.84	High Extent
Total	536	3.32	0.91	High Extent

Below 1.50 = Very Low Extent; 1.50-2.50 = Low Extent; 2.50-3.50 = High Extent; Above 3.50 = Very High Extent

Table 5 shows that Principals have a total mean of 3.35 and standard deviation of 0.97; Vice Principals have total mean of 3.29 and standard deviation of 0.84; and Principals and Vice Principals together have mean of 3.32 and standard deviation of 0.91 on their rating of the extent of influence of conscientiousness on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. Both the Principals and Vice Principals have very low standard deviations indicating close cluster of the scores about the mean, and means that lie between 2.5 – 3.5, implying high extent influence of conscientiousness on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. Thus, conscientiousness influences to a high extent, the academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

Research Question 6: *To what extent does willingness to learn influence the academic performance of students?*

Table 6: Mean rating of the extent to which willingness to learn influences students’ academic performance (N = 536)

Respondents	N	\bar{X}	S	Decision
Principals	268	3.32	0.77	High Extent
Vice Principals	268	3.41	1.17	High Extent
Total	536	3.37	0.97	High Extent

Below 1.50 = Very Low Extent; 1.50-2.50 = Low Extent; 2.50-3.50 = High Extent; Above 3.50 = Very High Extent

The information in table 6 presents that Principals have mean of 3.32, and standard deviation of 0.77; Vice Principals have mean of 3.41 and standard deviation of 1.17; and Principals and Vice Principals together have mean of 3.37 and standard deviation of 0.97 on their rating of the extent of influence of willingness to learn on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. All the means lie between 2.5 – 3.5, implying high extent influence of willingness to learn on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. Therefore, willingness to learn influences to a high extent, the academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

Hypothesis 1

Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State do not significantly differ in their mean rating of the influence of time management on the academic achievement of students.

Table 7: z-test analysis of the influence of time management on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State

Respondents	N	\bar{X}	s	s ²	z _{cal}	α	z _{crit}	Decision
Principals	268	3.29	0.85	0.72	1.19	0.05	1.96	Retain H ₀ : z _{cal} < z _{crit}
Vice Principals	268	3.21	0.70	0.49				

The null hypothesis is retained: z_{cal} (1.19) < z_{crit} (1.96)

Table 7 shows that 268 Principals have a mean rating of 3.29, standard deviation of 0.85, and variance of 0.72 on the influence of ethics on academic achievement of students. Further, it shows that 268 Vice Principals have a mean rating of 3.21, standard deviation of 0.70, and variance of 0.49 on the influence of ethics on academic achievement of students. The calculated z-value is 1.19, chosen alpha is 0.05 for a two-tailed test, and the critical z-value is 1.96. Since the calculated z-value (1.19) is less than the critical z-value (1.96), the null hypothesis of “no significant difference in the mean rating of Principals and Vice Principals on the influence of ethics on the academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State” is not rejected. In other words, Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State agree that ethics influence students’ academic achievement to a “High Extent”.

Hypothesis 2:

Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State do not significantly differ in their mean rating of the influence of problem solving on the academic achievement of students.

Table 8: z-test analysis of the influence of problem solving on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State

Respondents	N	\bar{X}	s	s ²	Z _{cal}	α	Z _{crit}	Decision
Principals	268	3.31	0.82	0.67	1.39	0.05	1.96	Retain H ₀ : Z _{cal} < Z _{crit}
Vice Principals	268	3.22	0.68	0.46				

The null hypothesis is retained: z_{cal} (1.39) < z_{crit} (1.96)

Table 8 presents that 268 Principals and 268 Vice Principals respectively have mean rating of 3.31 and 3.22; standard deviations of 0.82 and 0.68; and variances of 0.67 and 0.46 on the influence of training on the academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. The calculated z-value is 1.39, chosen alpha is 0.05 for a two-tailed test, and the critical z-value is 1.96. Since the calculated z-value (1.39) is less than the critical z-value (1.96), the null hypothesis of “no significant difference in the mean rating of Principals and Vice Principals on the influence of training on the academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State” is retained. Thus, Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State are in a consensus that training influences students’ academic achievement to a “High Extent”.

Hypothesis 3: Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State do not significantly differ in their mean rating of the influence of communication on the academic achievement of students.

Table 9: z-test analysis of the influence of communication on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State

Respondents	N	\bar{X}	s	s ²	Z _{cal}	α	Z _{crit}	Decision
Principals	268	3.29	0.70	0.49	1.14	0.05	1.96	Retain H ₀ : Z _{cal} < Z _{crit}
Vice Principals	268	3.22	0.72	0.52				

The null hypothesis is retained: z_{cal} (1.14) < z_{crit} (1.96)

Table 9 shows that 268 Principals have a mean rating of 3.29, standard deviation of 0.70, and variance of 0.49 on the influence of ethics on academic achievement of students. Further, it shows that 268 Vice Principals have a mean rating of 3.22, standard deviation of 0.72, and variance of 0.52 on the influence of teamwork on academic achievement of students. The calculated z-value is 1.14, chosen alpha is 0.05 for a two-tailed test, and the critical z-value is 1.96. Since the calculated z-value (1.14) is less than the critical z-value (1.96), the null hypothesis of “no significant difference in the mean rating of Principals and Vice Principals on the influence of training on the academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State” is not rejected. In other words, Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State agree that training influences students’ academic achievement to a “High Extent”.

Hypothesis 4:

Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State do not significantly differ in their mean rating of the influence of self-motivation on the academic achievement of students.

Table 10: z-test analysis of the influence of self-motivation on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State

Respondents	N	\bar{X}	s	s ²	Z _{cal}	α	Z _{crit}	Decision
Principals	268	3.28	0.82	0.67	1.02	0.05	1.96	Retain H ₀ : Z _{cal} < Z _{crit}
Vice Principals	268	3.21	0.76	0.58				

The null hypothesis is retained: z_{cal} (1.02) < z_{crit} (1.96)

The information in table 10 presents that 268 Principals and 268 Vice Principals respectively have mean rating of 3.28 and 3.21; standard deviations of 0.82 and 0.76; and variances of 0.67 and 0.58 on the influence of training on the academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. The calculated z-value is 1.02, chosen alpha is 0.05 for a two-tailed test, and the critical z-value is 1.96. Since the calculated z-value (1.02) is less than the critical z-value (1.96), the null hypothesis of “no significant difference in the mean rating of Principals and Vice Principals on the influence of leadership on the academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State” is retained. Thus, Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State are in a consensus that leadership influences students’ academic achievement to a “High Extent”.

Hypothesis 5:

Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State do not significantly differ in their mean rating of the influence of conscientiousness on the academic achievement of students.

Table 11: z-test analysis of the influence of conscientiousness on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State

Respondents	N	\bar{X}	s	s ²	z _{cal}	α	z _{crit}	Decision
Principals	268	3.20	0.73	0.53	-1.7	0.05	1.96	Retain H ₀ : z _{cal} < z _{crit}
Vice Principals	268	3.31	0.69	0.48	9			

The null hypothesis is retained: z_{cal} (-1.79) < z_{crit} (1.96)

Table 11 shows that 268 Principals have a mean rating of 3.20, standard deviation of 0.73, and variance of 0.53 on the influence of ethics on academic achievement of students. Further, it shows that 268 Vice Principals have a mean rating of 3.31, standard deviation of 0.69, and variance of 0.48 on the influence of recognition on academic achievement of students. The calculated z-value is -1.79, chosen alpha is 0.05 for a two-tailed test, and the critical z-value is 1.96. Since the calculated z-value (-1.79) is less than the critical z-value (1.96), the null hypothesis of “no significant difference in the mean rating of Principals and Vice Principals on the influence of recognition on the academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State” is not rejected. In other words, Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State agree that recognition influences students’ academic achievement to a “High Extent”.

Hypothesis 6: Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State do not significantly differ in their mean rating of the influence of willingness to learn on the academic achievement of students.

Table 12: z-test analysis of the influence of willingness to learn on academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State

Respondents	N	\bar{X}	s	s ²	z _{cal}	α	z _{crit}	Decision
Principals	268	3.44	0.53	0.28	0.41	0.05	1.96	Retain H ₀ : z _{cal} < z _{crit}
Vice Principals	268	3.42	0.59	0.35				

The null hypothesis is retained: z_{cal} (0.41) < z_{crit} (1.96)

The information in table 12 presents that 268 Principals and 268 Vice Principals respectively have mean rating of 3.44 and 3.42; standard deviations of 0.53 and 0.59; and variances of 0.28 and 0.35 on the influence of training on the academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. The calculated z-value is 0.41, chosen alpha is 0.05 for a two-tailed test, and the critical z-value is 1.96. Since the calculated z-value (0.41) is less than the critical z-value (1.96), the null hypothesis of “no significant difference in the mean rating of Principals and Vice Principals on the influence of communication on the academic achievement of students of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State” is retained. Thus, Principals and Vice Principals of public senior secondary

schools in Rivers State are in a consensus that communication influences students' academic achievement to a "High Extent".

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study examined the influence of soft skills on students' academic performance. The study found that skills of time management, problem solving, communication, self-motivation, conscientiousness, and willingness to learn influence students' academic achievement to a high extent. It was found that students' time management skills influence their academic achievement to a extent. Supporting this finding, Nyatyowa (2017) emphasised that time management will make a student a better student because the student will be more organised, build better reputation, more focused, and have enough time for his social life. The implication is enhanced academic achievement.

Students' problem solving skill was found to influence students' academic achievement to a high extent. The finding of Wittrock (2006) that problem solving is fundamental to education because educators are interested in improving students' success is in consonance with the finding of this study. Thus, it is imperative for parents, teachers, and the school to cultivate in the students sound problem solving skills to enhance students' academic achievement.

Communication skills of students were found to influence students' academic achievement to a high extent. This finding is supported by that of Bee (2012), when he emphasised that communication and its effect on classroom management, and teacher-student interaction, found that communication skills help students to have success in their academic life and in today's competitive world. He reiterated that communication skills in business are the most sought after quality of an educated person - reading, writing, and listening carefully are the three most important communication skills for students. Communication skills help students to learn more from teachers, enhance the quality of friendship with others, enhance teamwork and collaborative attitude, develop professionalism in students, encourage students' social networking, improve students' presence of mind and enhances students' memory, all of which influence academic achievement.

The study further found that conscientiousness influences students' academic achievement to a high extent. In consonance with this finding, Poropat (2008), opined that conscientiousness is the most consistent and stable personality predictor for academic achievement. It combines various traits (self-discipline, ambition, persistence, diligence, and dutifulness) which are crucial for successful learning.

Students' willingness to learn was also found to influence students' academic achievement to a high extent. Supporting this finding, Brook (2016) asserted that successful people never stop learning, and that in this ever changing world, those who can survive are those willing to learn to stay informed of the latest trends and most sought-after skills in the world. Continuous learning is crucial for achieving goals (at school, work, or anywhere), and being successful as knowledge paves way for better jobs, high positions, honours, and more.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study have shown that students' academic achievement is influenced to a large extent by students' soft skills of time management, problem solving, communication, self-motivation, conscientiousness, and willingness to learn. It is imperative therefore, that the school curriculum should make provisions that ensure that these skills are cultivated in students which will be useful to them not only in improved academic achievement, but also in their future careers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is the wish of every parent or guardian that their children/wards should graduate in flying colours and eventually be exceptional at their chosen careers. It has been established that soft skills are the keys to superlative graduation and successful careers. If it were possible, parents and guardians would teach their children and wards at home to ensure these soft skills are inculcated. But responsibility lies with the school. Therefore schools must ensure that the teaching of soft skills forms part of their curriculum. This way students' academic achievement is enhanced and success at their chosen careers are guaranteed.

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