Academic Procrastination-A Neglected Issue in Nigerian Secondary Schools: What Can Counsellors Do?

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Abstract

Academic procrastination as an issue has not significantly been attended to. It is of grave concern as many students' academic performances are negatively affected with attendant consequences on the person of the academic procrastinator. This paper seeks to create an understanding of the concept of procrastination and academic procrastination. It establishes its prevalence in schools, identify possible causes of academic procrastination and suggest some workable strategies that counsellors can adopt to assist and possibly cure academic procrastination among secondary school students in Nigeria with a view of improving their academic performances.

Key words: Procrastination; Academic procrastination; Counselling; To-do-list; Buddying strategy; Parkinson's law

1. INTRODUCTION

Definition of Procrastination

Getting the picture of the concept of procrastination clear, clean and straight will be a good beginning point for this paper. The concept of procrastination has been variously defined based on the theoretical orientations and perspectives of individuals. Traditionally, procrastination has been defined as postponing taking actions on something in favour of doing something else (Zahariades, 2017). This definition seems not to enjoy universal acceptability because it has been critiqued as being non-comprehensive and insufficient. The definition failed to take into cognizance circumstances in which putting task off to do another is sensible and pragmatic. (Zahariades, 2017). Procrastination is commonly viewed as a tendency to delay required task or assignment despite the possible effects, especially the negative effects of the postponed assignment or task on the individual, society and organization. (Lay,1986; Steel, 2007 and Klingsieck, 2013). Besides there seems to be no clarity of what procrastination translate to. (Steel, 2010). It is an area of concern but there seems to be fewer work done on it especially in developing world (Steel, 2010), irrespective of the fact that it's a phenomenon that exists everywhere. In addition, procrastination is defined as a tendency to delay initiation or conclusion of important task (Lay,1980) while Solomon and Rothblum (1984) defined procrastination as the act of delaying task to the point of discomfort. Furthermore, an understanding of procrastination as a behavioural concept will lay the foundation as well as facilitate the comprehension of academic procrastination which is procrastination clothed in academic gown and activities. Procrastination is a dysfunctional, self –effacing behaviour that leads to undesirable outcomes of varying degrees (Choi and Moran, 2019). It is conceptualized as involving arousal, avoidance and decisional delays (Rosental, Benneth,

Forsstrom, Ebert, Anderson and Carlbing, 2018) which can be regarded as dysfunctional delay in carrying out an assignment (Steel, 2010). Earlier Steel (2007) posited that procrastination is an intentional delay of an intended course of action despite expecting to be worst. In procrastination, there is usually action or activity that need to be carried out but it's execution is delayed intentionally not necessarily as a result of laziness. The delay in carrying out an action/assignment is characterized by lack of low motivation that stagnates or delay the execution of an activity or assignment.

Additionally, it is important to point out that procrastination is usually associated with laziness (Wolters and Corkin, 1987). While this may be given some considerations, there could be a claim of relationship if laziness is personified. Since the two concept share the basic idea of leaving a task undone, it could be that they are related but procrastination has mutated to the level of living tasks undone that have negative consequences. Besides, procrastination may not imply laziness but rather delay in carrying out a course that ought to be done first (Torrance, 2020). Procrastination contains the nature of considering whether what should be done is done and in order of priority.

Human beings procrastinate to varying degrees (Torrance, 2020), and maybe in different task situations in life. This may be why there is academic procrastination

2. ACADEMIC PROCRASTINATION

2.1 Meaning of Academic Procrastination

Academic procrastination is an offshoot of procrastination carried out in learning situations. It can be said to be a voluntary and irrational delay of taking actions on academic tasks despite expecting negative consequences of the delay (Steel, 2007). This means that academic procrastination is a deliberate and irrational delay by learners in carrying out assigned academic tasks even the learner knows that his/her deliberate and irrational delay in not executing the assigned tasks have attendant negative consequences on self, academic procrastinator's studies and maybe society.

For the purpose of this paper, academic procrastination should be seen as being " beyond postponing until later" but as intentional delay in taking parts in and finishing activities that are important irrespective of the negative outcomes which tend to potentially outweigh the positives (Zhou and Wangi, 2023).

2.2 Prevalence of Academic Procrastination

Procrastination is a phenomenon that is manifested by human beings in different situations and to varying degrees. The degree of prevalence and activities involved differ from person to person place and in varying degrees. There are evidences that procrastination and specifically academic procrastination is not just being present among learners but to a high degree. In a study that investigated academic procrastination and statistics anxiety, it was found out that there existed issues of academic anxiety among undergraduate students in the areas of writing term papers, studying for exams, completing weekly reading assignments etc. and that academic procrastination results from fear of failure and task aversion (Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Learners at one time or the other postpone carrying out their academic assignments be it in the school or at home. Ozer (2011) acknowledged that learners do demonstrate the propensity of engaging in dilatory behaviours and this propensity is one of the biggest threats to academic performance. It has been documented that 70% of college students do procrastinate on their academic works from time to time (Ellis and Knaus, 1997) and that 50% of college students reported that they procrastinate half of their time (Solomom and Rothblum, !984). Specifically, they also reported that 46% of students procrastinate when writing their term papers; 30% when reading weekly assignments and 28% when preparing for examinations.

In addition to the above evidences of the prevalence of academic procrastination among learners, Ozer (2011), in a study found out that 27% and 38% of high school students and undergraduates procrastinate when faced with writing term papers while 47% and 56% of high school students and undergraduates demonstrate procrastination when studying for examinations. In terms of reading assignments, 40% and 39% of high school students and undergraduates procrastinate respectively do procrastinate (Ozer, 2011), and that academic procrastination tendencies feature significantly among both gender. From the foregoing, academic procrastination tendencies cited above are high enough to be of grave concern in consideration of academic performance of students in Nigeria.

In trying to quantify academic procrastination amongst the students, O'Brien (2002) posited that 80 to 95% of students engage in academic procrastination while Ozer et al (2009) and Solomon and Rothblum (1984) submitted that at least half of all students engage in academic procrastination while the steady growth of academic procrastination among students was noted by Steel (2007).

Academic procrastination is a prevailing common issue among university students (Cavusoglu and Karatas, 2015). They conducted is study that investigated the relationship between motivation, basic psychological needs and academic procrastination as it concerns self-determination theory on their subjects. Using a sample size of 583 undergraduates from different departments and applying structural equation modeling, the result was that procrastination behavior is prevalent and predictable via academic motivation and basic psychological needs. (Cavusoglu and Karatas, 2015). In addition, a meta-

analysis of 33 studies that involved 38,529 participants revealed that procrastination negatively correlated with academic performance (Kim and Seo, 2015). They posited that two academic procrastination phenomenon prevalent among students worldwide are delayed assignments and not studying for examination.

3. CAUSES OF PROCRASTINATION

Some scholars have advanced the causes of procrastination. Senecal, Koestner and Vallerand (1995) studied the role of autonomous self-regulation as a predictor of academic performance on 498 French Canadian junior college students. Using academic motivations scheme, academic procrastination scheme and other instruments for measuring anxiety, self-esteem and depression, the result revealed variables related to fear of failure. The study's results further revealed that students with intrinsic reason for pursuing academic tasks procrastinate less than those with less external regulation and motivation. In addition, regression analysis on the results showed that depression, self-esteem and anxiety accounted for 14% of the variance in academic procrastination while self-regulation variables accounted for 25% (Senecal, Koestner and Vallerand, 1995). This could be interpreted that procrastination including academic procrastination is a motivation challenge that involves more than time management skills or laziness traits. `This result has implication of what should constitute counselling and administrative methods to be used to reduce or cure procrastination tendencies among students.

Furthermore, three psychological explanations have been advanced as causes of procrastination which could be related and extended to academic procrastination. The explanation are indecision (Janis and Mann, 1977), irrational belief about self-worth (Ellis and Knaus,1977) and low self-esteem (Burka and Yuen,1983). In a study, Beswick, Rothblum and Mann (2007) used 245 first year psychology students in their study. The subjects were required to submit three separate assignments that were recorded accordingly with measures of indecision, irrational belief, self-esteem, depression and anxiety. Subjects who self-reported frequency of procrastination were correlated with indecision, irrational belief, self-esteem, depression and anxiety, and small but significant correlation was established between indecision, irrational belief and low self-esteem (Beswick , Rothblum and Mann, 2007). In addition, significant negative correlation was found to exist between self-reported procrastination and final course grade, meaning that procrastination does not favour academic performance. The results of that study also revealed that older students were less likely to procrastinate than younger students of less than 21 years of age.

Another study sought to find out reasons that cause subjects to procrastinate and the activities they pursue while procrastinating (Steel and Kingsieck, 2020). Results of the study were that conscientiousness and its effects were strongest correlates with procrastination. Furthermore, using regression analysis, other personality traits failed to incrementally predict procrastination but the reasons ascribed to procrastination and its off-task activities reflected personality traits. To this effect, Steel and Kingsieck (2020) recommended that persons wanting to help reduce or eliminate procrastination should first address the conscientiousness core of procrastination and subsequently match it with interventions specific to the procrastination types. In another study, Chu and Choi (2005) found a different form of procrastination referred to as active procrastination because it leads to desirable outcomes.
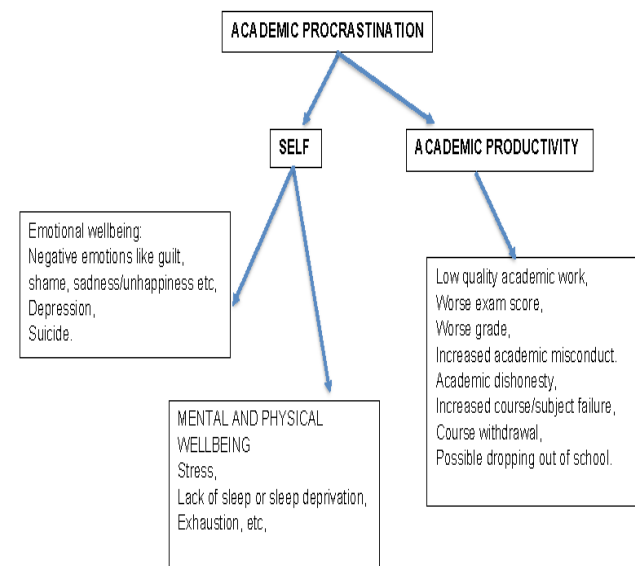

Figure 1
The Conceptual Model of the Effects of Academic Procrastination on Self and Academic Productivity

The above theoretical framework pictures the possible effects of academic procrastination on an academic procrastinator, academic productivity as well as his or her wellbeing. Patrzek, Sattler , Van Veen, Grunschel and Fries (2015) submitted that the effects of academic procrastination reflect on procrastinator's academic productivity in ways like: low quality work, worse examination scores, worse grades, increased academic misconduct which includes using fraudulent excuses, plagiarism, copying from someone else in examination, using forbidden means of examinations, copying part of homework from others, fabrication and classification of data. The above views are shared by Day, Mensink and O' Sullivan (2014).

Similarly, Grunschel, Patrzek and Fries (2013) posited that the negative emotional well-being of academic

procrastinators manifest in their feelings of guilt, shame and sadness. They submitted further that stress, lack of sleep, exhaustion are mental and physical effects of academic procrastination. Day et al (2014) as well as Lisa and Stonebreaker (2018) also acknowledged that the above constitutes some of the negative emotional well-being of academic procrastinators on procrastination. Additionally, Torrance (2020) submits that the consequences of academic procrastination hinders one from making right decisions at the right time as well as taking prompt actions towards achieving specific academic goals. Contributing on the subject matter, Zhou and Wang (2023) opined that academic procrastination affects the mental health, academic performance, and career achievements of an academic procrastinator.. The above effects may have agitated Zack and Hen (2018) to call for the need to study and understand the topic of academic procrastination vis-à-vis its intervention. This paper, in part is a reaction to the call.

4. REDUCTION/CURE OF ACADEMIC PROCRASTINATION TENDENCIES AMONG STUDENTS IN NIGERIA.

There are a few things at the disposal of a counsellor to do to assist an academic procrastinator irrespective of the degree of procrastination. Some of the ways include but not restricted to the following:

4.1 Getting an academic procrastinating client :

A student has to be identified as an academic procrastinator before thinking of ways of assisting him or her. Possible ways of obtaining an academic procrastinator for counselling or providing professional assistance could be by referral or invitation (Ugwuegbulam, 2018 and 1997).

The referral could be done by the teacher who has noticed or suspected emerging and possible academic procrastinating growing tendencies in students. It could also be done by the procrastinator's sincere friend or parents who may have noticed procrastinating tendencies in a learner and shows concern by referring such a student to a counsellor in the school. For any referral to be done, the referring person must have been following up and following through the procrastinator's academic activities. A procrastinating student could also refer self to the counsellor. This can be when the client is aware that the counsellor can be of help to him especially when he/she is feeling the negative effects of academic procrastination. A counsellor could get an academic procrastinating client for counselling if he/she visits classes when they are to submit their tasks and assignments. There is a possibility that as the teacher interacts with students on assigned academic tasks, academic procrastinators could be identified and invited by the counsellor for counselling.

4.2 Welcoming the procrastinator

Having a client come into the counselling room either by invitation or referral, the counsellor has to welcome the client unconditionally and establish potent rapport (Ugwuegbulam, 2018), in a multiplicity of ways which may include verbal, nonverbal and physical attending behaviours (Duru and Maduka, 2001) as well as friendly welcoming eye contacts and good facial expressions. This, it is hoped will situate and assure the client that he/she is in a welcomed place and may start building confidence in the counsellor and the about to beginning process. The mode through which the client came into counselling should be considered and injected as medium to kick starts the professional counseling relationship (Ugwuegbulam, 2018)

4.3 Introducing client's procrastination issue:

The Counsellor should confirm his information about client's academic procrastinating behaviour. The client may not accept such label as an academic procrastinator, maybe because it has a negative connotation. The Counselor has to prove to the client incidences that make the client to be considered as an academic procrastinator. Evidences that client is an academic procrastinator should be laid bare before the client. Proofs from the different teachers with dates and school tasks and possibly results from a valid and reliable academic procrastination assessment instrument either of these or a combination will make the client to admit of his academic procrastinating behaviour. The essence of the above is for the client to admit that he/she is an academic procrastinator. Client's admissions to being an academic procrastinator is the first step in assisting client to overcome academic procrastinating behaviour (Torrance 2020).

4.4 Identifying possible causes/sources of client's academic procrastinating behaviour:

Putting academic activities and assignments off indefinitely or getting distracted is not a healthy lifestyle (Torrance, 2020) in order to succeed academically. The counsellor should probe to identify possible causes/ sources of client's procrastinating behaviour which Tolerance (2020) posits as follows:
- leaving important tasks undone
- Abandoning high priority tasks for something less critical or demanding.
- Client being in the habit of using his or her time for others to his/her own detriment.
- Waiting for the right time, mood or condition before carrying out assigned academic work.
- Not having trust and possibly confidence in self as regards carrying out assigned academic work.
- Having the tendency of giving up easily.
- Not having interest in academic works
- Not being motivated to do the assigned academic work.

• Dealing with personal issues at the expense of assigned academic tasks and projects.

• Not having the skill to tackle the assigned academic tasks/activities.

• Having fear of the volume of the academic assignments and fear of doing it and not getting it right.

• Feeling anxious or overwhelmed, that is, being worried about academic tasks and assignments.

In addition, Zahariades (2007) earlier suggested some reasons why people procrastinate which when viewed from an academic lens will include the following:

a. Fear of failure.

b. Fear of success- this is viewed from an innate worry about ones ability to live up to expectation academically either arising from personal expectation or expectation from others. It could stem from concerns about challenges that success will bring (Zahariades, 2017).

c. Perfectionism.

d. A feeling of being overwhelmed.

e. laziness.

f. Boredom.

g. Negative self-talk.

h. Uncertainty about how and where to start.

i. Inability to make informed decisions about doing assigned academic work in terms of where to begin or even stopped.

j. Absence of immediate consequences for procrastinating, etc.

The counsellor should identify the causes of academic procrastination as maybe agreed by the client. Therefore, the causes will be addressed one after the other. It should be noted that procrastinating clients may demonstrate initial resistance to counselling. The counsellor should try to agree with clients on the effects of academic procrastination on them. This will set the stage for client to want to have it resolved and thereby be actively interested in participating in the strategies the counsellor may expose him/her to.

5. GENERAL STRATEGIES FOR CURING AN ACADEMIC PROCRASTINATOR OF PROCRASTINATION

The essence of identifying the possible causes of procrastination is to predispose the counsellor whether he/she would want to adopt a direct attack on what client points out or agreed to be the cause of his or her academic procrastination tendency. Besides that, there are some strategies extracted from Zahariades (2017) and Torrance (2020) that are eclectically presented below. Some of these could stand alone as cure for academic procrastination or mixed as a cocktail and used. A counsellor is free to

adopt any strategy in so far as he/she is familiar and can use it. The general strategies include but not limited to the following:

5.1 Having a daily "to do list":

Clients should be assisted to compile a "to do lists" of academic assignments and activities. Allot days and times for carrying them out and try to implement them. It's suggested that the "to do list" should be done weekly. This is because there may be urgent and emerging things begging for attention to be done. There may be situations where the weekly "to do list" is long, the client should be assisted to:

a. Shorten the list,

b. Prioritize academic assignments and activities based on impact.

5.2 Taking small steps at a time:

Clients should take small steps at a time because small tasks are easier to complete than larger once (Zahariades, 2017). In doing this, it involves breaking academic tasks/activities down to smaller parts and at the same time prioritizing them. It's suggested that the items on the "to-do list" should be numbered possibly the night before it will be embarked upon. By this, there is lightly not to be any cognitive battle among the academic tasks/activities as to which should come first on the day the tasks/activities are to be carried out. Therefore, each part is treated as a separate task and focused on the completion of each small tasks. Each of the completed small tasks should be crossed out.

5.3 Focus on one task at a time.

There is no need for procrastinator to wanted to get out of procrastination by multi-tasking. It is suggested that the procrastinator should focus on one task at a time till it is done and dusted. Multi-tasking moves the pleasure of procrastination inside the period of work (Zahariades, 2017).

5.4 Get rid of distractions

An academic procrastinator should be urged to get rid of distractions around the area of academic tasks and activities else they will be distracting him/her from what he/she is doing. The distractions could come from the environment or be digital in nature. If the venue of the academic work is clustered with books, perfumes, radio, television, etc, these could distract the academic procrastinator. Digitally, one can be distracted by making or receiving phone calls, getting into social media sites, reading news headlines in the face of doing academic work etc. These have the capacity to distract one who is carrying out an academic task/activities. An academic procrastinator should switch off his/her phone, remove laptop from around where the academic task/ assignment is being carried out unless it's in use for the academic. Besides, it has to be noted that the ability and

willingness of academic procrastinator to get rid of his/ her environmental and digital distractions are where the success lies.

5.5 Identifying and leveraging on one's peak energy time of the day:

This is premised on the idea that there are peak periods when one has higher interest, energy and concentration to carry out academic works or activities. The identification can be done and achieved through self-study and analysis. It is important to identify such times when energy level to carry out academic tasks or activities is high. This is because one's energy level affects his/her tendency to procrastinate (Zahariades, 2017). The times our energy levels are high should be when academic procrastinator should schedule difficult/tasking or unappealing academic tasks/assignments (Zahariades, 2017).

5.6 Purge negative self-thoughts:

Some academic procrastinators talk negatively into themselves that they are unable to carry out the academic tasks or activities assigned to them. This breeds doubt in them and may result in leaving them with a great sense of guilt and making them action less. This may not allow them to tackle their assigned academic work, hence procrastination. In this wise, shining a bright investigative light on negative self-thought causes it to evaporate (Zahariades, 2017); but Torrance (2020) suggests that self-forgiveness of the idea that the procrastinator cannot carry out the assigned academic tasks/activities is a way of defeating negative self-talks that breeds self-doubt and consequently academic procrastination.

5.7 Having a buddy:

Having a buddy is like entering into a social contract. It is a situation where an academic procrastinator subjects self to be accountable to an individual who will prompt and monitor his or her carrying out assigned academic work. The buddy could be a counselor, teacher, friend, parents or siblings who are trusted, feel concerned and interested in the academic procrastinator overcoming his or her procrastination tendencies. It should be a person that the procrastinator is answerable to with a view of boosting his/her morale to completing his academic tasks (Torrance, 2020). Being accountable to someone spurs one to actions (Zahariades, 2017). This may be because one may not want to be seen as a failure and therefore the academic procrastinator puts more efforts, and gets focused to complete his or her academic work early and on time.

5.8 Application of Parkinson's law:

Zahariades (2017) suggested that Parkinson's law can be applied as a strategy to assist in curbing procrastination. The law according to Zahariades (2017) states that work expands so as to feel the time available for its completion. This law tends to suggest that an academic procrastinator should keep to the time schedule for an academic work.

This implies that, the shorter the assigned time to carry out an academic task or activity, the more the academic procrastinator would want to tidy up assignments and other academic tasks within allotted time frame. This time allotted should be reasonable. This is like boxing academic tasks and activities into a time frame thereby giving it structure. In using it, it is suggested that the academic procrastinator should set a time limit, assign specific time for the completion of the task (Zahariades, 2017).

5.9 Audit and reinforce self from time to time for academic achievements made:

One of the strategies of curing academic procrastination is to develop and use a "to do list". It is only proper and informed that there should be a time to check if things in the "to do list" have been done as scheduled. This checking of the things done is a form of auditing and doing it helps to ensure that an academic procrastinator spends time and effort in the academic tasks and assignments given to him/her. The self-audit gives the academic procrastinator a way of actively managing academic tasks and assignments as well as the academic procrastinator to focus time and effort on important academic tasks and assignments (Zahariades, 2017). An academic procrastinator can review its objectives or the extent he or she has achieved his or her assigned academic assignments. This can inform further action. Beside, the academic procrastinator can reinforce his/her efforts to be more productive academically. Self-praise can suffice like the proverbial male lizard that fell from the top of an iroko tree, looked side ways and gave self a nod saying that if nobody praises it for falling from a high iroko tree and still remain alive, it will praise itself.Let the procrastinator praise him/her self.

6. CONCLUSION

Academic procrastination is a phenomenon that happens among learners in connection with their learning tasks and activities. The degree of academic procrastination prevalence differs from learner to learner. The effects are not palatable except in the event of active academic procrastination which is when actions are deliberately postponed in order to use the treasure of a near deadline as motivation to get things done (Chu and Choi, 2005).

Academic procrastination should be cured among learners so that they can achieve optimally the purpose of seeking to acquire education. The Counsellors present in the schools have something to do in this regard. They have choice of strategies at their disposal to use in assisting those learners experiencing academic procrastination. In doing this, they should consider the cognitive age of the learners, their social ability, as well as their freedom to quality time for the acquisition and use of the strategies because it takes about 66 days to acquire a new habit (Steel, 2007).

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