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Sense of Community and Academic Engagement in the Seminary

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the associations of sense of community (SOC) and academic engagement in a seminary. The seminarians (N = 300) completed the Classroom Sense of Community Inventory (CSCI)–School Form, and Utrecht Work Engagement Scale–Student Version. Results showed that a perception that the seminary provided a positive learning community for the young people. For the sense of social community, the participants' rating of the seminary was low. Regression results showed that SOC significantly predicted academic engagement. Suggestions are included on how to foster community spirit to become more psychologically meaningful for holistic education in the seminary.

Introduction

Although the differences between the educational goals of seminary training and secular training of students in schools can be sharp (Lose et al., 2015), the seminary share many characteristics with other all educational institutions. The seminary is a complex social environment where students share beliefs, fears, values, and norms (Hofman, Hofman & Guldemond, 2001), as well as a unique environment where students' "cognitive and affective functioning is shaped by the characteristics of their school and schooling" (Hofman et al., 2001, p. 172). In formal and informal discussions, priests, seminarians and those who have been trained in the seminary often talk of having a "bond." The strength of this bond is dependent on the extent of activities that those persons have perceived were conducted (or are being conducted) with the intention of helping these people develop a spirit of belonging together. The bond is a characteristic of all social environments. It becomes more relevant in seminary education that requires students to "learn a complex body of theological knowledge, engage in the practices of ministry, and develop as persons of faith and vocation" (Cahalan, 2011, p. 343).

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The overarching idea of seminary bond finds its scientific significance in the psychological construct called *sense of community* (*SOC*). In applying the SOC construct in the context of this article, the seminary is seen as an institution with its own personality, and psychological SOC is one assessment criterion of its character. Due to the crucial nature of SOC in the seminary and the evidence of its role in educational outcomes, we decided to examine whether such previous findings can be supported in the seminary environment.

Sarason describes SOC as the fundamental value of community psychology and defined it as the perception:

> that one [is] part of a readily available, mutually supportive network of relationships upon which one [can] depend and as a result of which one [does] not experience sustained feelings of loneliness … it is not merely a matter of how many people one knows (Sarason, 1974, pp. 1–2).

For another definition, McMillan (1996) writes that SOC is:

> a spirit of belonging together, a feeling that there is an authority structure that can be trusted, an awareness that trade and mutual benefit come from being together, and a spirit that comes from shared experiences that are preserved as art (p. 315).

In using the word *trade*, McMillan emphasizes the ingredient of exchange. In such a circumstance, each one comes in with a commodity that will benefit everyone. The four elements of SOC theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) are *membership/belonging, influence, integration/fulfillment of needs*, and *shared emotional connection*. The satisfaction of these inter-related elements indicates the extent of SOC in the social environment.

Stage–environment fit theorists (Eccles, 1984; Eccles et al., 1993) argue that the failure of schools to meet the psychological needs of adolescents often leads to declines in academic motivation and interest, which in turn contributes to poor educational outcomes as adolescents make the transition to secondary and tertiary institutions. A school with a high psychological SOC has as a learning environment where teamwork is prevalent, diversity is incorporated, and individuals care about, trust, and respect each other and share a vision for the future of the school, a common sense of purpose, and a common set of values (Royal & Rossi, 1997). The idea of schools as communities, each with its own school climate and student support system, is particularly important in seminary formation, in which persistence and learning are very relevant.

Moreover, the major seminaries (and tertiary institutions) seem to be facing a future in which their student bodies will reflect the increasing size and diversity of the population in general. Thus, the psychological SOC of seminarians from the minor seminaries of each local church may be one determinant of the quality of outcomes for these seminarians when they eventually enroll into the major seminaries. One of the challenges for educators in the minor seminary should therefore be to determine

how best to nurture and sustain SOC among seminarians, their teachers, and their school system to help foster student persistence and functional learning.

One contention is that the difference between church-based schools and public schools is SOC, and this SOC is related to the religious values and beliefs shared by the majority of the staff, students, and parents (Hess, 1988). It is also possible that such a learning environment is associated with a SOC because of its spiritual climate (Riggers-Piehl & Lehman, 2016). Although it may be argued that the nature of the seminary as a "closed system" where students live and study together may not warrant the challenge of threats to psychological SOC, the reality becomes evident when one observes the possibility of inertia in such environments. The current trend of globalization in the world also entails that the seminary system must develop better means of strengthening the enduring "feeling of being part of a whole," which all who passed through the seminary should always cherish.

Rovai (2002) reports that there are two dimensions of SOC in the school: *sense of learning community* and *sense of social community*. A strong SOC is anchored on the student's feeling of being part of a learning community where the student makes inputs to a common knowledge pool and where community spirit is fostered by means of social interactions (Rovai, Wighting, & Lucking, 2004). Following the views of extant literature (Rovai et al., 2004), this study theorizes that seminarians should feel that they belong and feel safe at the seminary, that they trust others, that they have ready access to others at the seminary, and that they feel that they are supported by the seminary. They should also believe that they matter to other seminarians and to the seminary; that they have duties and obligations to each other and to the seminary; and that they possess a shared faith that their educational/vocational needs will be met through their commitment to the shared goals and values of other seminarians at the seminary.

Relatively recent empirical researches have reported evidence of the positive contributions of connectedness, relatedness, belongingness and integration to student engagement (Juvonen, Espinoza, & Knifsend, 2012; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012; Tovar, 2013; Wang & Eccles, 2013; Wilson et al., 2015). In addition, SOC may be a precursor to academic engagement, enabling it to serve as a protective factor that buffers students from a host of psychopathology and risky behaviors in adolescence, including truancy, gang involvement, delinquency, substance use, and risky sexual behavior (Li & Lerner, 2011; Powers, Shin, Hagans, & Cordova, 2015). Wighting and Liu (2009) also found that school SOC was related to religious commitment among high school students.

Although SOC has been assessed for decades by researchers in the academic setting (Ferrari, Bottom, & Matteo, 2014; Wighting & Liu, 2009)

there is little research interest on seminarians. To fully understand the SOC construct, research is needed in diverse settings such as the seminary. The suggestions by Rovai et al. (2004) for the study of school SOC in other populations and research settings implies that seminarians could be an interesting population and that the seminary a special setting to study. Any previous research on the construct and its outcome in the seminary setting is unknown to the authors of this article. Specifically, we focused on the impact of SOC on academic engagement for two reasons. First, academic excellence is one of the two wings with which a priest must fly. Second, even when people are educated in the seminary but do not become priests, the culture of academic excellence remains with them throughout their lives and has implications for career success.

The seminary in the Nigerian context of Catholicism

Vocations to the Catholic priesthood are pivotal to the growth of Catholicism in Nigeria, and the seminary is the training ground for the priests. With a recent estimated population of 181,562,056 persons (Central Intelligence Agency, 2016), Nigeria stands at the geographic and symbolic heart of the African continent. Religiously, Nigeria straddles the Muslim-dominated Sahelian belt and the Christian-dominated West African coast. Catholics are 15%–20% of the overall Nigeria's population of 170 million, which gives the nation the second-largest Catholic population in Africa (Carney, 2014). Currently, there are nine archdioceses, 43 dioceses, and two apostolic vicariates in Nigeria (www.cbcn-ng.org/dioceses.php). The number of Catholics is growing every day in Nigeria, with approximately 70% of the country's Catholic population from eastern Nigeria. Available statistics in the *Global Directory of Catholic Seminaries* shows that Nigeria has the second highest number of seminaries in Africa (93 seminaries), after the Democratic Republic of the Congo (115 seminaries) (Kramarek, Gaunt, & Sordo-Palacios, 2017).

The Catholic Church in Nigeria maintains two major systems of seminary formation—*minor seminary* and *major seminary*. Most dioceses also have the Spiritual Year seminary in which those who have completed their one-year apostolate after leaving the minor seminary are expected to receive one year of intense spiritual formation before they proceed to the major seminary. There are thousands of *junior seminarians*—those enrolled in minor seminaries—and *senior seminarians*—those enrolled in major seminaries—in the country. Most of the dioceses have minor seminaries (Aihiokhai, 2014). Some prominent religious congregations such as the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Spiritans or Holy Ghost Fathers and Brothers) also have their own minor seminaries. Diocesan churches own the minor seminaries, whereas major seminaries are provincial arrangements. We shall describe

the Catholic minor seminary in Nigeria here because this study was situated in a minor seminary.

The Nigerian Catholic minor seminaries allow students to complete their high school studies (secondary school) in the regimented daily schedule of a boarding school house where they discern and/or prepare for priesthood and/or religious life. All minor seminaries in Nigeria operate the boarding school system whereby the students live in the seminary compound to study, pray, and take part in recreation. The institutions admit young boys who have completed their elementary education (grade school) and enable them conduct their schooling and spiritual growth in an environment that prepares them for possible post-secondary seminary studies. The purpose of Nigerian minor seminaries is to harness candidates for the priesthood at their young impressionable ages and mold their character for the ministerial work. The term *preparatory seminaries* is synonymous for minor seminaries. As observed by Hughes (2016), many boys show promising signs of a priestly vocation during their early teenage years, only to lose interest as they approach their final few years in high school. This loss occurs because even the best-trained boys are strongly influenced by the vicissitudes of life. In the minor seminary, aspirants can preserve their vocation during the -turbulent years of adolescence.

The duration of minor seminary formation in Nigeria is six years—three years of junior secondary education and three years of senior secondary school. In the classrooms, junior seminarians are taught the secular subjects as required in all secondary (high) schools in the country. In addition to these subjects in the official curriculum, most minor seminaries teach other subjects such as Latin, Liturgy, and Religion. Students from minor seminaries write the relevant qualifying examinations such as Junior Secondary School Certificate Examination, organized by the Ministry of Education in each state of the Nigerian Federation. Successful candidates move to the senior secondary classes where they write the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) after three years of class work. The SSCE is the basic requirement for advancing to the major seminary after completing one year of apostolate in the parishes or other ecclesiastical institutions. Those who do not make credit passes in five subjects including English Language and Mathematics are usually given opportunity to rewrite the SSCE exams and meet the requirement before moving to the major seminary.

Part of the formation in the minor seminary is that those who do not meet the minimum standards in character and learning are expelled from the seminary. Those who decide that they do not wish to become priests also have the freedom to leave the seminary voluntarily. As seminarians dwindle in North America and Europe, Nigeria is currently experiencing a vocation boom. Nigerian and other West African priests often serve in American and European Catholic parishes (Aihiokhai, 2014). We believe that the findings of this study

have implications beyond the confines of Nigeria and may be applicable wherever Christians pattern a minor seminary in similarly to this Nigerian case.

Some reformed protestant Christians may view the idea of a minor seminary as a bizarre scheme. However, two decidedly Christian principles about the priestly vocation make sense of the minor seminary and, indeed, rather commend it. First, *the supernatural essence of the "call" or vocation to the sacrificial priesthood*, and second, *God's desire that man freely respond to that calling*. The Reformed, and generally Protestant, view of the calling to the ministry does not necessarily conflict with the idea that God calls whom He wills when He wills, even at an early age (Brown, 2010). Some pastors would admit hearing the Divine Call at age 10 or 12 years. If so called, then it makes spiritual sense to harness such vocations early in life before the pressures and distractions of secular secondary education dissuades them from what may be their blossoming vocation to the priestly ministry. In recognition that God could begin the call to the priesthood at a young age, Anglicans in Nigeria have built minor seminaries and some other Christian denominations currently operate their church-owned schools on variations of the minor seminary model. Thus, our findings could have implications for all of such Christian schools.

Conceptual and theoretical framework on academic engagement

Academic engagement refers to energized, directed, and sustained action in one's academic tasks (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). It is one of the human strengths espoused in positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and a strong predictor of academic performance (Graff, 2006). Based on Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker's (2002) conceptualization, *academic engagement* has three dimensions: *vigor*, *dedication*, and *absorption*.

- *Vigor* represents high levels of energy and mental resilience while studying, the willingness to invest effort in one's studies, and persistence even in the face of difficulties.
- *Dedication* refers to being strongly involved in one's studies and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge.
- *Absorption* describes the state of being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's studies, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties detaching oneself from studies (Schaufeli, Martinez, Marques Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002).

Landau, Oyserman, Keefer, and Smith (2014) conceived students' academic engagement as the degree to which they intend to prioritize and put their best effort into academic activities.

One of the theoretical frameworks for this article is Astin's (1984) theory of involvement, which suggests that students learn more when they are more involved in both the academic and social aspects of the school experience.

Astin defines *involvement* as both the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the school experience. As Rovai et al. (2004) put it, "learning has important social and cognitive dimensions and occurs most effectively when the school provides a positive social environment with a strong SOC" (p. 265). SOC has been correlated in developmental contexts to benefits such as increase in academic strength (Hansen, Larson & Dworkin, 2003). If SOC in the seminary is strong, then the educational journey is likely to be both productive and satisfying for seminarians.

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) upholds that individuals seek experiences that fulfill their fundamental needs and identities through their interaction with the environment. According to this view, engagement in school is influenced by the degree to which students perceive that the school context meets their psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Stage–environment fit and expectancy–value theorists (Eccles et al., 1993; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998) further argue that the failure of schools to meet the psychological needs of adolescents often leads to declines in academic motivation and interest, which in turn contributes to decreased academic engagement and poor academic performance as adolescents make the transition to secondary and tertiary institutions. Authorities and teachers in the seminary must therefore continue to seek to understand and apply specific and well considered, if not agreed-upon, strategies that support engagement in learning. In a knowledge-based economy, the consequences of doing otherwise can be very dire for the society, in which the products of the seminaries will live and lead.

Research on SOC and educational outcomes

An extensive body of research suggests the importance of close, caring teacher–student relationships and high-quality interpersonal relationships for students' academic self-perceptions, school engagement, motivation, learning, and performance (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Juvonen et al., 2012; Ladd, Herald-Brown, & Kochel, 2009; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Pianta et al., 2012; Tovar, 2013; Vidourek & King, 2014). Relatedness to parents, teachers, and peers each uniquely contributed to students' engagement (Dong-il, Solomon, & Roberts, 1995; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Loyd, 2008; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Recent research (Wilson et al., 2015) further supports that belonging is a distinct attribute related to engagement in learning. In addition, SOC may be a precursor to engagement, enabling it to serve as a protective factor that buffers students from a host of psychopathology and risky behaviors in adolescence. including truancy, gang involvement, delinquency, substance use, and risky sexual behavior (Li & Lerner, 2011).

Research hypotheses

The research hypotheses are:
- There will be a high sense of learning community in the seminary.
- There will be a high sense of social community in the seminary.
- Sense of community will positively predict academic engagement even when age, locality, and class are controlled for in the analysis.

Method

Sample and data collection

Participants in this study were 300 seminarians of St. John Cross Seminary, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria. With the approval of the school authorities, the questionnaire forms were completed by seminarians who volunteered to take part in the study in their classrooms. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants. They were requested to adhere strictly to the instructions on each section of the questionnaire with assurances that the information provided by them would be used for research purposes only. None of the seminarians in the class at the time of the visit to their classes declined to participate in the research. Their ages ranged from 9–24 years, with an average age of 14.86 (SD = 2.51) years. The distribution according to classes was as follows: junior class I (64), junior class II (57), junior class III (52), senior class I (49), senior class II (37), and senior class III (41). With regard to the locality of their residence, 44 reported that they were rural dwellers and 256 reported that they lived in urban areas. The study was approved by the relevant institutional review board of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Measures

The Classroom Sense of Community Inventory (CSCI)–School Form, developed by Rovai et al. (2004), was used to assess seminarians' psychological

Table 1. Item response scores for school sense of community (SOC).

Items of CSCI – School Form	Never	Rarely	Some times	Often	Always
1 I have friends at this school to whom I can tell anything	22.33*	18.33	23.33	24.33	11.68
2 I feel that this school satisfies my educational goals	2.33	4.00	6.67	23.00	64.00
3 I feel that I matter to other students at this school	10.00	9.00	24.67	35.33	21.00
4 I feel that this school gives me ample opportunities to learn	1.33	2.00	4.67	17.00	75.00
5 I feel close to others at this school	8.33	9.00	28.67	37.33	16.67
6 I feel that this school does not promote a desire to learn	73.00	11.67	6.00	3.00	6.33
7 I regularly talk to others at this school about personal matters	35.33	24.00	22.33	14.00	4.34
8 I share the educational values of others at this school	6.00	8.33	17.33	38.33	29.65
9 I feel that I can rely on others at this school	33.67	18.33	22.33	20.00	5.70
10 I am satisfied with my learning at this school	3.67	6.00	11.00	27.67	51.66

*Numbers represent percent of respondents for each response option.

SOC. It consists of 10 items scored on a five-point Likert-style scale: 0 (Never) to 4 (Always). Negatively worded items were reverse scored (e.g., item 6 in Table 1). The school form of CSCI was reported to be reliable and valid (Rovai et al., 2004). A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in the present research confirmed the two-factor structure of the scale, namely, sense of social community (Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$) and sense of learning community (Cronbach's $\alpha = 85$). This approach supports the presence of two underlying latent variables that make up the CSCI–school form, with Cronbach's alpha of .82 for the total CSCI. Total scores are calculated by summing up the scores of each respondent on the 10 items, with higher scores indicating higher SOC. The total possible scores for the CSCI range from 0 to 40. In the present study, the participants obtained an average SOC score of 25.95 (SD = 5.55).

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale–Student Version (UWES–S–9) (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003) was used to obtain information on the seminarians' academic engagement. It is a 9-item measure, scored on a 6-point Likert-style response format ranging from 0 (never) to 5 (all the time). It measures the three dimensions of academic engagement: vigor, dedication and absorption. The total scores on all the items were used as indicator of engagement in the present research. Total scores are calculated by the sum of the scores of each respondent on the 9 items; higher scores indicate higher academic engagement. There is adequate reliability and validity for the UWES-S-9 (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Ugwu, Onyishi, & Tyoyima, 2013).

Study design and data analysis

The current research adopted a quantitative methodology to examine the relationships between SOC and academic engagement among seminarians. Percentages were used to examine the responses of seminarians on the school form of CSCI. Pearson's correlations were used to examine the relationships of age, class, locality, school SOC, and academic engagement. Step-wise regression was used to examine the impact of SOC on academic engagement. Age, class, and locality were included in the first step of the regression models in order to know their effects on academic engagement before the addition of SOC in the second step of the regression model. All analyses were carried out using SPSS version 20.

Results

The majority of the participants (64%) felt that the seminary always satisfies their educational needs (item 2, Table 1). Similarly, a substantial number of participants (75%) felt that the seminary always provides them with ample opportunity to learn (item 4) and always promotes a desire to learn (73%, item 6). Item 6 was worded negatively and so was scored in reverse direction.

Table 2. Correlation coefficients for age, class, locality, sense of community, and academic engagement.

Variable	Mean	SD	Age	Class	Locality	SOC
Age	14.86	2.51	—	—	—	—
Class	—	—	.80**	—	—	—
Locality	—	—	.21**	.30**	—	—
SOC	25.95	5.55	.07	.00	.00	—
Academic engagement	31.72	7.59	−.08	−.14*	−.13*	.29**

Note. $^*p < .05$ (2-tailed); $^{**}p < .001$ (2-tailed); Locality (0 = rural, 1 = urban).

By implication, the large number (73%) that responded "never" disagree with the statement. A minority (11.68%) reported having friends to whom they could disclose themselves always (item 1). This finding was also replicated in items 7 and 9, in which a small minority reported talking to others in the seminary about personal matters and having feelings that they could rely on others (4.34% and 5.70%, respectively). Very few of the participants (21%) felt that they always matter to other students (item 3), and similarly, few seminarians (16%) always felt a sense of closeness to others (item 5). A slight majority (51.66%) was always satisfied with their learning (item 10), whereas a few seminarians (3.67%) reported that they were never satisfied with their learning while.

The correlation coefficients in Table 2 showed, as expected, a highly positive and strong relationship between age and class (r = .80, p < .001). Analysis revealed a moderately positive relationship between age and locality (r = .21, p < .001). Age was not significantly related to SOC (r = .07) and academic engagement (r = −.08). Class was positively related to locality (r = .30, p < .001), indicating more participants in the higher classes who reported that they were urban residents. The relationship between class and academic engagement was significantly negative (r = −.14, p < .05), showing that participants in the higher classes had lower scores on academic engagement. Locality was not related to SOC (r = .00), indicating that whether one was from rural or urban setting had no association with the extent of their SOC in the seminary. Locality was negatively related to academic engagement (r = −.13, p < .05), showing that participants from the urban area have lower scores on academic engagement. SOC was found to be significantly and

Table 3. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting academic engagement with age, class, locality and school sense of community.

Predictor	ΔR^2	Beta (β)	p level (Sig)	Beta^2
Step 1	.03			
Age	—	.08	.393	.01
Class	—	−.18	.071	.03
Locality	—	−.09	.129	.01
Step 2	.08	—	—	—
SOC	—	.29	.000	.08
Total R^2	.11	—	—	

positively related to academic engagement ($r = .29$, $p < .001$). This finding showed that individuals who had higher scores on SOC also reported higher levels of academic engagement.

The regression in Table 3 showed that the control variables (age, class, and locality) did not have significant impacts on academic engagement. The change in R^2 (.03) of the control variables in step 1 indicated that 3% of the variations in academic engagement among the participants was contributed by the combined role of age, class, and locality. SOC had a significant impact on academic engagement ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$), meaning that as SOC increases by one standard deviation a .29 increase in academic engagement also occurs. Effect sizes computed in this study were ΔR^2 and Total R^2. The ΔR^2 (.08) showed that SOC contributed 8% of the variations in academic engagement. All the variables in the regression model (age, class, locality, and SOC) contributed 11% (total $R^2 = .11$) in explaining the variations in academic engagement.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to examine the role of SOC in academic engagement of seminarians. The demographic factors (age, class, and locality) were, however, included in the analysis as control variables. There was a positive relationship between SOC and academic engagement. Those who reported higher SOC also reported higher academic engagement. SOC explained a statistically significant proportion of the variations in academic engagement among the seminarians. This finding supported the hypothesis that SOC would contribute to explaining the variations in academic engagement at a statistically significant level. While the finding was statistically significant, the effect size (ES), an indication of practical significance was relatively low: $\Delta R^2 = .08$ and total $R^2 = .11$. These findings are consistent with relatively recent researches that reported evidence of the positive contributions of relatedness, belongingness, and integration to engagement in learning among students (e.g., Juvonen et al., 2012; Pianta et al., 2012; Tovar, 2013; Wang & Eccles, 2013; Wilson et al., 2015). This result could be explained within the framework of Astin's (1984) theory of involvement. Seminarians learn more when they are more involved in both the academic and social aspects of the school experience.

Some other interesting findings also emerged from other aspects of the data analysis in this study. Based on the percentages of the responses of the seminarians on the CSCI–school form, a perception was discovered that the seminary provides a strongly positive learning community for the young people. Large percentages of the participants gave top ratings on statements that assesses how they feel about the learning community provided by the seminary (e.g., I feel that this school gives me ample opportunities to learn).

They felt they were well supported by the seminary in their academic pursuits. Thus, the hypothesis of a high sense of learning community in the seminary was supported. It should be recalled that there are two aspects of the SOC construct: the *learning community* and *social community*. For the items of the CSCI–school form that assesses the social community in the seminary (e.g., I regularly talk to others at this school about personal matters), the rating of the seminary community was relatively low in the areas of promoting feelings of shared emotional connection, trust and camaraderie. The hypothesis that there will be a high sense of social community in the seminary was not supported. The relatively low ratings for SOC could be one reason for the relatively low R^2 results.

The findings, especially the below-average rating of the social community of the seminary, could be explained by the developmental stage of the participants. The majority of the seminarians were adolescents (average age = 14.86 years) who are experiencing the storm and stress of adolescence. Although individual differences exists in the extent of stress they encounter at this critical stage of life, the common thread is that none of them is immune to the challenges of adolescence. Therefore, they have enormous social expectations and may not feel that they are being understood. Like most adolescents, the minor seminarians may not adequately understand why others (including their teachers) behave the way they do, and may lack appropriate ways of expressing their feelings in order for it to be validated by their peers and the authorities.

The seminarians may have also reported a low sense of social community due to the culture of self-preservation or self-protection that may pervade the seminary environment in the Nigerian society. As an institution that brings many young people from various backgrounds together, most of the young persons may not be inclined to freely open up to other people in order not to appear vulnerable. The disclosure of personal information by young persons may also turn to be playing into the hands of some persons who may use it against the individual or to their own personal advantage.

Nevertheless, the average score of the seminarians on overall school SOC (mean = 25.95, SD = 5.55) is similar to the score of male middle school students ($n = 97$) in a previous study by Rovai et al. (2004) who reported a mean score of 25.86 (SD = 6.65). The study by Rovai, Wighting, and Lucking study was conducted using middle school students in the United States. The equivalence of the average score of seminarians and that of the students in a developed western society is a plus to the seminary community. It is possible that when compared to conventional schools in the Nigerian society, the overall SOC in the seminary may be quite commendable.

There was a negative relationship between class and academic engagement. The students in the higher classes were poor in academic engagement. Seminarians in JSS 3 take the Junior Secondary School Certificate

Examination (JSSCE). Those who fail one subject in the JSSCE are withdrawn from the seminary. But the seminary does not solely rely on the JSSCE results in making decisions for promotion to the senior class. Those in JSS 3 also take the third term examination and failure in any of the subjects in the annual results will lead to the withdrawal of such a student. This educational policy appears to offer some clues in understanding the greater engagement in academic tasks among those in the lower classes. It was also found that the students from the rural communities reported greater academic engagement than those from the urban areas. Based on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), the entry of rural students into the seminary, located outside their rural community, may fulfill their psychological need to belong and be a motivation excel academically. Some of them may see their admission into the seminary as a challenge to work harder in order to outshine their peers from the urban area and be able to stand out from their local peers when they go to their rural communities. However, most of the students in the senior classes were urban residents, and it is possible that it was the low academic engagement scores of those in senior classes that explains the pattern of finding with reference to locality.

Implications of the findings

Seminary life is usually designed in such a way that it promotes community building. A number of community-building programs are put in place in the seminary. Some of these programs include the week-long orientation program of activities for new students, sporting competitions, debates, quiz competitions and most importantly, the dormitory practice where seminarians live, pray, eat, study, and work together as a family. However, SOC transcends the geographical proximity of living, reading, eating, working, playing, and praying together. SOC is crystallized in the psychological meaning of the school community climate. Seminarians live together, but it is more important for them to bond together, to have the all-important community spirit. These findings suggest the need for greater efforts in fostering the SOC among the seminarians, especially with regard to social SOC.

Researchers have observed that instructors are instrumental in setting and maintaining the structures upon which school communities are built (Ritter, Polnick, Fink, & Oescher, 2010). In terms of meeting relatedness needs, all relationships are constructed and no person can relate with someone unknown. Teachers should know their students by name and fame. It should be a rule, not an exception. They should identify students' unique interests and discover ways of weaving them into their classroom teaching. Each student has something special, and a good seminary teacher discovers and nurtures it. Every seminarian has an area of strength. In terms of SOC, this special ability/interest is the commodity that the student has the capacity to

add to the pool of knowledge. In handling topics where such abilities should be used for illustration, it is worthwhile to use them, regardless of the subject been taught. This duty may task the creativity of the teacher, but it makes the student have a sense of belonging and helps the students connect to each other. At the beginning of every session, especially if the instructor is new to the seminary, there is usually a general introduction by the instructor and the students, which familiarizes the class. This practice deserves to be sustained. Such a practice may facilitate the enthronement of what has been termed a *living learning community* (Spanierman, Soble, Mayfield, Neville, Aber, Khuri & De La Rosa, 2013), in which seminarians can obtain social and academic support, engage in diverse educational experiences, and become leaders.

When seminarians go on holidays, they are usually expected to help their parents at home and report to their parish priests for possible pastoral duties. Upon their return, some of the language teachers may ask them to write an essay on their holiday experience. This request is not enough and appears very formal. It is important for all teachers to make time for students to share their holiday experiences, both formally and informally, publicly and privately. This simple gesture opens the doors to communication and builds in the seminarians a sense that the teacher cares. It may be done in the classroom and in the hostels (dormitories). The seminarians live in hostels, and their hostel masters can explore such avenues to strengthen the bond of communication with their inmates.

It pays to give the seminarians assignments and duties for which they can work in teams. Interestingly, this is an area in which the seminary appears to be doing well, especially the duties outside the classroom. Morning functions are shared, and most persons must work with others in groups. Effort should be made to devise ways of making them find greater meaning in working together. In the classroom, all teachers must give routine assignments and ensure that each student participates actively. Group collaboration provides an atmosphere for less competition and leads to greater understanding of content and of each other. It creates room for positive social interaction. Teachers should communicate unconditional regard for every seminarian and refuse to allow those who are unduly affected by the stress of adolescence to disengage from school. Mutual respect is the key to unlocking the enormous potential in a growing child. As the teacher demonstrates respect for the student, it will be imbibed by the students who will not only reciprocate the respect but also respect their peers.

Educational practices that enable seminarians to relate the classroom activities to real life situations, which improves their engagement in school. As Brown (2001) says, learning is most effective when it becomes situated in action; it becomes as much social as cognitive, it is concrete rather than abstract, and it becomes intertwined with judgment and exploration. Modern

technology is very vital in the education of seminarians. In an article titled, Unleashing the Future: Educators "Speak Up" About the Use of Emerging Technologies for Learning (Project Tomorrow, 2010), teachers reported that technology increases factors of student engagement, including cognitive, affective, behavioral, academic, and social engagement. This point is especially true in aspects such as taking initiative and responsibility for learning, using resources wisely, time spent on task, and having the interest and desire to pursue information and learn in and beyond classrooms. Although the existing technological equipment (e.g., computer and internet facilities) in the seminary that was the setting for the current study cannot be said to be adequate, effort should be made to ensure that seminarians make the best use of the available ones to improve their social communication and learning.

One contribution of this article is the application of the construct of the SOC in understanding academic engagement in the seminary, which no available study had previously done. The participation rate by the seminarians was also high, indicating that the sample of participants for the study was truly representative of the seminary student population.

Limitations

The findings of this study should be considered in the light its weaknesses. First, it is a cross-sectional study and has the limitations of such on-time data collection and analysis. Second, the variance in academic engagement explained by SOC and the control variables is relatively low ($R^2 = .11$) indicating that there are other factors that influence academic engagement. Third, this study focused on a single minor seminary and did not collect data from another minor seminary or school in Nigeria. Thus, it was impossible compare the responses of seminarians and students from other minor seminaries or other types of schools on the CSCI-school form.

Suggestions for future studies

Future studies should consider these limitations listed and try to correct them. Given the relatively low R^2 found in this study, future studies should be conducted that include additional constructs that may influence academic engagement, especially with regard to possible mediating and moderating mechanisms of observed effects. A study aimed at empirically investigating the effectiveness of intentionally designed activities in building school SOC among seminarians is vital. The study can help the seminary administrators understand the types of community building activities that are the most successful. One way that intentionally designed community-building programs can be measured and related to educational outcomes is through

benefits-based programming (BBP)—a formal framework for schools to implement a measurement plan to track the success of their programs (see Walker, Deng, & Dieser, 2005). The study group practice, if it is still in vogue in the seminary, is one practice that deserves to be evaluated on the basis of BBP.

Conclusion

Psychological SOC has wider implications for the life of every individual who passed through the seminary training. It will make the seminary "pass through them," and if they have a shared emotional connection in (and with) the seminary, it is most likely that they will be committed to its progress. In addition to the role of SOC in their academic pursuits and work, the imprint of the seminary on them will be cherished, supported and preserved for the benefit of future generations. Where this bond of shared connection is strong enough, the society will be the beneficiary.

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