Webology (ISSN: 1735-188X)
Volume 19, Number 3, 2022

Rational Emotive Education Approach For Academic Burnout Among Pupils With Special Needs

Uchenna Eugenia Uzodinma[1] , Chiedu Eseadi[2*] , Kennedy Ololo[3] , Lasbrey Anochiwa[4] , Tobechi F. Agbanike[4]

[1]Department of Educational Foundations, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.

[2*]Department of Educational Psychology, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

[3]Department of Sociology, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

[4]Department of Economics and Development Studies, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to determine whether rational emotive education (REE) could reduce academic burnout in children with special needs. REE is a psycho-educational approach that uses the principles of REBT to prevent or solve psychological problems. Thirty students were enrolled in this study, and were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. Students with blindness were selected purposefully for the study. The Elementary School Student Burnout Scale for Grades 6-8 (Aypay, 2011) was used to collect data. It was found that implementing the REE approach helped pupils with special educational needs manage their academic burnout to some degree. This study adds to the limited evidence on the benefits of rational emotive education on academic burnout reduction among special needs pupils.

Keywords: Academic burnout, Pupils, Rational Emotive Education, Special Needs

INTRODUCTION

Children with special educational needs have more difficulty learning than children who do not have these difficulties or disabilities. It could be that they are having difficulties with their schooling, with communication, or with their behavior. The person with special educational needs may have a chronic illness, a physical disability, or be socially disadvantaged (Department of Education, Western Australia, 2022). Academic burnout (being exhausted and disengaged from school) as a result of repeated high stress and difficult academic challenges, is often observed among students who suffer from a series of stressful and difficult experiences in school. There are various student populations that experience academic burnout. A number of empirical studies have shown that REBT interventions can be of help to reduce burnout symptoms among students (Anggreini, Daharnis & Karneli, 2019; Bakare et al., 2019; Ezenwaji et al., 2019; Ezeudu, Attah et al., 2020; Ezeudu, Nwoji, et al., 2020; Igbokwe et al.,

2019; Igbokwe et al., 2020; Ogbuanya et al., 2019; Oloidi et al., 2022), teachers (Anderson, 2000; Nwabuko et al., 2020; Ogakwu et al., 2022; Ugwoke et al., 2018; Ugwu et al., 2021), nurses (Kim & Yoon, 2018), caregivers (Asogwa et al., 2021) and athletes (Ofoegbu et al., 2020; Rafat, Sanatkaran, & Mohammadkhani, 2018). To explain the application of REBT approach to burnout treatment, it is pertinent to note that irrational beliefs are one of the key elements that predict burnout symptoms (see Balevre, 2001; Balevre, Cassells & Buzaianu, 2012; Ogbuanya et al., 2019; Terjesen & Kurasaki, 2009; Turner & Moore, 2016). The rational emotive education (REE) (Knaus, 2004) derived from REBT is a mental health education program that involves a systematic sequence of classes on mental health issues that can be taught by either teachers or mental health professionals. Students can learn critical thinking skills as well as effective problem-solving techniques when they participate in REE program. These skills can be used to cope with the inevitable changes and problems in life. Students who participate in REE can develop resilience, critical thinking skills, coping skills, and general reasoning skills (Knaus, 2004).

There was no evidence from any of the reviewed studies that the REBT program has been effective for reducing academic burnout among students with special needs. To the researcher's knowledge, REBT studies on special needs population have only focused on aggressive behavior (Ogungbade, 2017), psychological wellbeing (Mozaffar Jalali et al., 2014), self-concept (Maxwell, Asodike & Kennedy, 2020), self-esteem (Valizadeh & Emamipoor, 2007), depression (Eseadi et al., 2017; Onuigbo et al., 2019; Ugwu et al, 2021), personal value system (Abiogu et al., 2020), negative self-beliefs (Ede, Okeke, & Chukwu, 2021), irrational and rational beliefs (Laurito, 2021), social and communication skills (Nnamani et al, 2019), adjustment-to-blindness training (Salisbury, 2021), and anxiety management (Saxena, Gupta & Vishvakarma, 2021). The purpose of this study is to fill this existing gap by extending a REBT program to academic burnout management among special needs students. As a result of this, the researcher hypothesized that a rational emotive education approach will reduce academic burnout among Nigerian pupils with special needs.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT)

In 1955, Albert Ellis introduced the theory of rational-emotive behavior therapy (REBT) to teach that people's emotions have a lot to do with their beliefs about activating events rather than with those events themselves (Ellis, 1962). REBT holds that events do not directly influence emotions and behavior. One's perception of events influences one's emotional and behavioral responses. In REBT, this basic premise is integrated into an ABC structure. The ABC structure assumes that activating/external events (A) are not responsible for our emotions and behaviors (C), but beliefs (B), especially irrational beliefs (IB) are (Oltean et al., 2017; Sarracino et al., 2017). REBT is a psychological therapy for supporting the client in detecting and disputing unreasonable beliefs and negative thought patterns that can cause psychological distress (Turner, 2016). The REBT approach to psychological treatment can take a variety of forms, one of these forms being the rational emotive education (REE) model.

The rational emotive education (REE) model

The rational emotive education (REE) model by Knaus (1977) is a cost-effective method derived from the theory of REBT for assisting students in developing mental health skills and to increase their chances of living meaningful and purposeful lives. The REE as a psycho-educational program provides a framework for teaching students rational reasoning skills as well as opportunities for students to refine and improve their sense of reasoning, self-concept, frustration tolerance and personal problem-solving abilities, as well as opportunities for students to apply scientific ways of knowing and doing to tackling life challenges. The goal of REE (Knaus, 1977; Knaus, 2004) is to help pupils improve their behavioral and mental health outcomes. The REE program can help pupils acquire self-acceptance, self-determination, and responsibility, as well as encourage experiential learning (Knaus, 1977). Participants in a REE program have the opportunity to gain understanding of basic and effective human problem-solving skills as well as learn how to approach and cope with their difficulties through experiential learning (Knaus, 2004).

METHOD

The work was approved by the Faculty of Education Committee on Research Ethics at the University of Nigeria. The study was conducted in select schools for special needs children in Southeast Nigeria. 30 special needs pupils were recruited at random from four schools for the study. 15 students were randomized to the REE intervention group and 15 were assigned to the waitlist-control group using a simple random sampling procedure. Academic burnout was measured with the Elementary School Student Burnout Scale for Grades 6-8 (Aypay, 2011). The questionnaire has 26 items on a 4-point Likert-type scaling (1=completely disagree 4= completely agree). This self-report questionnaire captures four dimensions of academic burnout: burnout from school activities (12 items), burnout from family (5 items), inadequacy in school (4 items), and loss of interest in school (5 items).

Students with blindness were selected purposefully for the study. For inclusion in the study, students had to be in either Grade 6 or Grade 7, report a moderate or high burnout score, obtain parental consent, and give informed assent. Before starting the intervention, the researcher briefed four assistants for one month to ensure their understanding of the approach. As part of their training, the research assistants learned about the research goal and evaluated the REE package too. The burnout questionnaire was given to those students who had met the eligibility criteria during the pre-testing phase. There were eight meetings held in the REE program over a period of eight weeks. There was a 2-week follow-up phase, which occurred one month after the end of the treatment period. The study implemented REE approach adapted from Vernon (2004). Based on Vernon's (2004) REE principles, the module is broken into four sub-modules: self-acceptance, feelings, beliefs, and disputing beliefs (Vernon's, 2004). There are 21 tasks that students can do to learn how to discriminate between rational and irrational beliefs, and refute burnout beliefs. The analysis of the data was performed using a repeated measures ANOVA at 0.05 level of significance. The posthoc tests for the effect of Time and Intervention by Time Interaction effect were conducted using Holm's method. The statistical program used for the data analysis was JASP 0.16.1.0.

RESULTS

Table 1: mean scores and standard deviation of academic burnout among pupils with special needs.

	Intervention	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	90% CL
Pretest	Experimental	15	3.5485	.09637	.02488	3.36,3.76
	Control	15	3.5364	.07910	.02042	3.36, 3.66
Posttest	Experimental	15	1.8500	.28578	.07379	1.36, 2.27
	Control	15	2.6455	.54720	.14129	1.73, 3.16
Follow-Up	Experimental	15	1.3879	.05328	.01376	1.27, 1.45
	Control	15	2.0015	.36712	.09479	1.50, 2.68

Table 1 depicts the pretest, post-test, and follow-up test of academic burnout of primary school pupils with special needs exposed to REE and conventional approaches. The data in Table 1 shows that at pretest, there was a similarity in mean academic burnout scores of experimental (M = 3.54, SD= .096) and control groups (M =3.53, SD=.079). At post-test, there was a mean difference in the academic burnout score of pupils with special needs exposed to REE and conventional approaches – experimental (M = 1.85, SD= .28) and control groups (M =2.64, SD=.54)–indicating that academic burnout of pupils in experimental group declined more than control group. Furthermore, follow-up test consistently showed that there was a significant mean difference in academic burnout scores of pupils with special needs in experimental group (M = 1.38, SD= .053) and control groups (M =2.00, SD=.36).

Table 2: Repeated Measures ANOVA for test of significant difference in mean academic burnout of pupils with special needs by Intervention and Time.

Cases	**Sum of Squares**	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**p**	**η²**
Intervention	4.973	1	4.973	55.765	<.001	0.072
Time	53.561 [a]	2 [a]	26.780 [a]	287.519 [a]	< .001 [a]	0.779
Time ✻ Intervention	2.712 [a]	2 [a]	1.356 [a]	14.561 [a]	< .001 [a]	0.039
Time ✻ Gender	0.072 [a]	2 [a]	0.036 [a]	0.388 [a]	0.680 [a]	0.001
Time ✻ Intervention ✻ Gender	0.091 [a]	2 [a]	0.045 [a]	0.486 [a]	0.618 [a]	0.001
Residuals	4.843	52	0.093			

Repeated measure of ANOVA was conducted in Table 2 to test the effect of the approaches used on pupils' academic burnout. The result revealed that there was a significant difference in mean academic burnout of pupils with special needs due to REE treatment approach, $F(2, 78) = 55.765$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.072$. With respect to time, there was a statistically significant difference in mean academic burnout, $F(2, 78) = 287.519$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.0779$. Furthermore, there was a significant interaction effects of time and intervention, $F(2, 78) = 14.561$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.039$. Moreover, there were no significant interaction effect of time and gender, $F(2, 78) = 0.388$, $p < .680$, $\eta^2 = 0.001$; times, intervention and gender, $F(2, 78) = 0.486$, $p < .618$, $\eta^2 =$

0.001. Holm post hoc analysis was further conducted since there are significant differences in academic burnout of pupils.

Table 3: Post Hoc Comparisons - Times

		Mean Difference	**SE**	**t**	**p_{holm}**
Time1	Time 2	1.295	0.077	16.771	< .001
	Time 3	1.848	0.077	23.934	< .001
Time 2	Time 3	0.553	0.077	7.164	< .001

Note. Results are averaged over the levels of: Intervention

Holm post hoc test comparison was conducted to explore the differences in mean academic burnout of pupils with special needs. The mean burnout of pupils with special needs at Time 1 was compared with mean score at Time 2 and Time 3, and there were positive mean difference at Time 2 (MD=1.295; SE=0.077, p=.001) and Time 3 (MD=1.848; SE=0.077, p=.001) indicating that there were significant reduction in academic burnout of pupils with special needs at Time 2 and Time 3 respectively. Furthermore, mean academic burnout of pupils at Time 2 was compared with that of Time 3 (MD= 0.553; SE=0.077, p=.001) and there was a significant reduction in mean academic burnout of pupils with special needs.

Table 4: Post Hoc Comparisons - Intervention ✻ Time

		Mean Difference	SE	T	p_{holm}
Experimental, Time 1	Control, Time 1	0.012	0.109	0.111	0.912
	Experimental, Time 2	1.698	0.109	15.557	< .001
	Control, Time 2	0.903	0.109	8.288	< .001
	Experimental, Time 3	2.161	0.109	19.790	< .001
	Control, Time 3	1.547	0.109	14.198	< .001
Control, Time 1	Experimental, Time 2	1.686	0.109	15.477	< .001
	Control, Time 2	0.891	0.109	8.160	< .001
	Experimental, Time 3	2.148	0.109	19.718	< .001
	Control, Time 3	1.535	0.109	14.058	< .001
Experimental, Time 2	Control, Time2	-0.795	0.109	-7.300	< .001
	Experimental, Time 3	0.462	0.109	4.233	< .001
	Control, Time 3	-0.152	0.109	-1.391	0.336
Control, Time 2	Experimental, Time 3	1.258	0.109	11.542	< .001
	Control, Time 3	0.644	0.109	5.898	< .001
Experimental, Time 3	Control, Time 3	-0.614	0.109	-5.632	< .001

Holm post hoc test comparison was conducted to explore the difference with respect to intervention and times. Experimental Time 1 academic burnout mean score was compared with control Time 1 and there was almost similar mean scores (MD=0.012; SE=0.109, p=0.912) indicating insignificant mean difference between experimental and control at Time 1. Furthermore, experimental time 2 was compared to control Time 2. The data shows that there was significant difference in the mean score of academic burnout of primary school pupils, (MD=-0.795; SE=0.109, p=.001) depicting significant reduction in academic burnout of pupils with special needs at post test. Finally, experimental time 3 was compared to control Time 3. The data shows that there was significant difference in the mean score of academic burnout of primary school pupils (MD=-0.614; SE=0.109, p=.001) indicating consistent significant reduction in academic burnout of the pupils with special needs at follow-up.

DISCUSSION

The effect of a rational emotive education approach on academic burnout among pupils with special needs was investigated in this study. According to our findings, the REBT intervention significantly reduced academic burnout among pupils with special needs. According to analysis of follow-up data, participants who received the REBT intervention sustained the positive outcome of reduction in burnout scores. The findings back up previous REBT research proving the program's effectiveness in reducing burnout (Ezenwaji et al., 2019; Ezeudu, Attah et al., 2020; Ogbuanya et al., 2019; Oloidi et al., 2022). The findings back up previous research by Igbokwe et al. (2020), who found that the REBT program is effective in reducing burnout symptoms in students. Similarly, the effectiveness of REBT programs in managing burnout symptoms has been documented by other studies which is in line with the current study results (e.g., Anggreini, Daharnis & Karneli, 2019; Bakare et al., 2019; Ezeudu, Nwoji, et al., 2020; Igbokwe et al., 2019; Igbokwe et al., 2020). In a previous study, Bakare et al. (2019) found that a REBT psychoeducational program effectively reduced burnout among participants. In another study by Igbokwe et al., (2019), they found that a REBT program reduced the severity of burnout symptoms among participants when compared with a control group. Iremeka et al. (2021) found that learners who participated in a school-based REBT program had significantly lower burnout scores over time than learners who did not. In a study carried out by Ezenwaji et al. (2019), it was shown that the students in the experimental group experienced a statistically significant reduction in burnout symptoms in comparison to students in the control group as a result of exposure to a REBT program.

This study provides useful implications. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no research has been undertaken on the usefulness of a rational emotive education approach on academic burnout among students with special educational needs. The findings of this study contribute to an understanding of academic burnout prevention among special needs pupils. This research may be useful to special needs educators and authorities in developing and implementing educational intervention policies for special needs pupils in order to address and prevent academic burnout in this population. But the study's sample size was small, and it only included special education needs pupils from special schools in Southeast Nigeria. Furthermore, only quantitative data was used to measure the effectiveness of the REE program.

CONCLUSION

The current study added to the existing literature by demonstrating the usefulness of a REE program in reducing burnout among pupils with special needs. According to the finding of this study, a rational emotive education approach was beneficial in reducing academic burnout among students with special needs. The finding of this study is largely consistent with studies that suggest Ellis' rational emotive behavior therapy is effective in treating burnout symptoms in students.

CORRESPONDENCE: The correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Dr Chiedu Eseadi (chiediue@uj.ac.za), Department of Educational Psychology, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

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