

Determinants of Curriculum Overload and Students' Academic Performance in Secondary Schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District

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Abstract

This study assessed the determinants of curriculum overload and their effect on secondary school students' academic performance in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District. The study focused on examining the relationships between instructional time constraints, teachers' workload and excessive curriculum content as factors influencing students' academic performance. Three research questions and corresponding null hypotheses guided the study. The population comprised 24,066 Junior Secondary 3 students across 89 public secondary schools in 9 local government areas, from which a sample of 478 students was selected using a two-stage random sampling technique. Data were gathered using faced and content instrument validated by three experts titled "Determinants of Curriculum Overload and Students' Academic Performance in Secondary School (DCO- SAPSS) Questionnaire", with Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients of 0.81 for DCO and 0.71 for the SAPSS. Data were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) at a 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed weak but statistically significant positive relationships between instructional time constraints, teachers' workload, excessive curriculum content and students' academic performance, indicating that these variables contributed to curriculum overload and influenced learning outcomes. The study concluded that insufficient instructional time, excessive workload and expanded curriculum scope limited instructional effectiveness and students' concept mastery. The study recommended curriculum streamlining, adequate time allocation, teachers' workload reduction and the adoption of learner-centered teaching strategies to improve academic achievement and instructional quality.

Keywords: Curriculum Overload, Academic Performance, Secondary Schools, Content Duplication, Instructional Time

Introduction

Curriculum planning is universally regarded as a central determinant of educational quality, shaping both the direction and effectiveness of learning outcomes. In contemporary educational research, curriculum is no longer conceived solely as a body of knowledge, but rather as an integrated system of planned and unplanned learning experiences intended to prepare learners for academic, vocational and civic engagement (Stauffer, 2020; Anierobi, Ezeonwumelu, Ufearo & Okika, 2023). Curriculum design and implementation require careful balancing of content volume, instructional time and resource availability, as the misalignment of these factors can significantly weaken attainment of intended objectives

(Chaudhary, 2015; Ejike & Oke, 2018). In Nigeria, persistent structural weaknesses have long undermined curriculum development, with evidence consistently pointing to poor planning, excessive content, incoherent sequencing and limited consideration of contextual realities, which together constrain effective delivery (Kanu & Simon, 2020; Askary et al., 2025).

The most prominent manifestation of these weaknesses is curriculum overload, defined as the accumulation of instructional content and activities that exceed the cognitive, temporal and material capacities of students and teachers (Olugbenga, Yakubu & Ali, 2023). Overload emerges when curricular prescriptions become unrealistic in existing timeframes, when additional themes such as digital literacy or entrepreneurship are added without removal of outdated materials, or when revisions generate duplication across subjects (Israel & Israel, 2019; Dawal & Mangu, 2021). Teacher exclusion from planning exacerbates the problem, as centrally designed curricula often fail to reflect actual classroom realities or resource constraints, thereby complicating implementation (Odey & Opoh, 2015; Ayoko, Araiyegebemi, Victor & Ojochenemi, 2025). Research showed the consequences of overload as wide-ranging and detrimental linked with superficial learning, reduced mastery of basic concepts, reliance on rote memorisation and ultimately declining student performance (Awofala & Sopekan, 2013; Dawal & Mangu, 2021).

Pedagogically, overloaded curricula encourage teacher-centred coverage models that prioritise syllabus completion over critical thinking or problem-solving. Psychologically, students subjected to excessive academic demands often experience stress, fatigue, disengagement and lower motivation, which in turn weaken retention and progression (Uwadileke & Madu, 2019; Eduwem & Ezeonwumelu, 2020). The economic burden of intensified examination preparation, extra classes and additional learning materials places pressure on families, disproportionately affecting those in lower socio-economic groups (Eduwem & Ezeonwumelu, 2020; Kanu & Simon, 2020). These challenges are particularly acute at the secondary education, where overloaded timetables, high subject load and insufficient teacher specialisation converge, undermining the policy objective of developing coherent foundational competencies for subsequent educational stages (Majoni, 2017; Mathew, 2014; Ogba, 2020). Given this gap, this study examined the determinants of curriculum overload and to evaluate their impact on the academic performance of secondary school students in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District.

Statement of the Problem

Curriculum overload is a pervasive structural constraint on secondary education in Nigeria, occurring when prescribed content and pedagogical demands exceed instructional time, teacher capacity and learners' cognitive bandwidth, thereby undermining educational quality and equity (Asaju, 2014; Dawal & Mangu, 2021). Successive revisions have often appended topics rather than removing outdated material, producing cumulative expansion and inter-subject duplication that waste instructional time and dilute coherence (Stenger, 2018). Operationally, overcrowded classrooms, shortages of specialist teachers and inadequate instructional resources make extensive syllabuses impracticable, forcing teachers to prioritise coverage over depth and to rely on teacher-centred methods that favour memorisation over conceptual understanding (Odey & Opoh, 2015). Secondary education is especially vulnerable with heavy subject loads, congested timetables and limited adolescent cognitive maturity constrain meaningful engagement and undermine foundational competencies for later stages (Majoni, 2017).

Research links overload to reduced retention, poor comprehension and lower performance in standardised assessments, while psychosocial consequences include academic stress, fatigue, demotivation and, in severe cases, withdrawal from schooling (Uwadileke &

Madu, 2019). As earlier stated, intensified examination preparation also imposes economic burdens on families via fees for extra lessons and additional materials, exacerbating inequities as affluent households can partially offset overload while disadvantaged learners fall further behind (Eduwem & Ezeonwumelu, 2020; Kanu & Simon, 2020). While researchers acknowledge these issues, district-level studies remain scant on constraints and declining examination outcomes. Policy responses have often been generic and additive rather than targeted, failing to reconcile curriculum scope with classroom realities and resource constraints (Odey & Opoh, 2015). This study therefore determined curriculum overload and their impact on secondary school students' academic performance in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the determinants of curriculum overload and their impact on secondary school students' academic performance in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. determine the relationship between instructional time constraints and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District.
2. examine the relationship between teacher workload and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District.
3. assess the relationship between excessive curriculum content and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between instructional time constraints and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District?
2. What is the relationship between teacher workload and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District?
3. What is the relationship between excessive curriculum content and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District?

Null Hypotheses (HO)

HO₁: There is no significant relationship between instructional time constraints and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District.

HO₂: There is no significant relationship between teacher workload and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District.

HO₃: There is no significant relationship between excessive curriculum content and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District.

Review of Empirical Study

Several empirical studies have examined the implications of curriculum overload on learning outcomes across different educational systems in Nigeria and these provide a strong empirical basis for evaluating how curriculum content, workload and subject duplication influence students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District. Edewem and Ezeonwumelu (2020) conducted an ex-post facto study on the relationship between overloaded curriculum, excessive academic activities and learning effectiveness among 220 Junior Secondary School (JSS) 3 students drawn from 36 public schools in Uyo Education Zone. Two validated instruments the Overloaded Curriculum

Questionnaire (OCQ) and Kirkpatrick Learning Effectiveness Scale (KLES) with Cronbach alpha values of .79 and .87, respectively, were employed. Using Pearson Product Moment Correlation, findings revealed a statistically significant negative association between curriculum duplication, excessive academic workload and students' learning effectiveness, indicating that an overloaded curriculum impairs meaningful learning. The authors recommended curriculum mapping to minimise duplication and ensure efficient delivery of content. This study is highly relevant to the present research as it directly situates the issue in the Akwa Ibom context and empirically establishes how curriculum overload compromises secondary school students' academic performance.

Similarly, Dawal and Mangu (2021), examined whether overloaded curriculum content accounted for persistent underachievement among Junior Secondary 2 students in Basic Science and Technology across Plateau State. Employing a stratified random sample of 60 teachers and 720 students from 15 schools, their findings showed that as much as 72% of curriculum topics remained untreated in the school year due to excessive content. Both teachers and students agreed that overload was a major factor driving underperformance. The authors recommended reducing content to manageable proportions, allocating more instructional time to practical lessons and focusing on mastery of core topics. This study is particularly relevant because it highlights how curriculum size and time constraints interact to limit coverage and comprehension, a challenge that resonates with secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East.

In a study conducted by Olugbenga, Yakubu and Ali (2023) on curriculum overload in Nigerian junior secondary schools, with a focus on its impact on teaching and learning quality, identified consequences such as excessive workload, reduced rest periods and limited engagement opportunities for both teachers and students. The authors proposed merging related subjects, strengthening practical components and using activity-based approaches such as projects and experiments to reduce strain while fostering problem-solving skills. They recommended that the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) expedite meaningful subject integration and ensure production of textbooks reflecting such changes. The relevance of this study to the present investigation lies in its practical solutions, which underscore how effective curriculum reform can mitigate overload and improve students' academic outcomes.

In the same vein, Israel and Israel (2019) analysed the effect of curriculum overload in the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) Minimum Standards on student performance in the South-South geopolitical zone. Drawing data from five colleges of education, involving 500 students and 250 lecturers, the study revealed that excessive compulsory courses significantly hindered students' learning outcomes and reduced instructional effectiveness. The authors concluded that ongoing curriculum reviews should reduce compulsory loads to enhance performance. While situated in higher education rather than secondary schools, this study is relevant because it demonstrates the continuity of curriculum overload problems across Nigeria's educational spectrum, reinforcing the need for systemic interventions at the secondary school level to prevent similar learning bottlenecks.

Methodology

The study adopted a correlational research design. Correlational research design is a quantitative research approach used to examine the relationship or association between two or more variables without manipulating them (Sutradhar, Adhikari, Sutradhar & Sen, 2023). It seeks to determine whether and to what degree, changes in one variable are associated with changes in another. The study was carried out in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District which comprises of nine Local Government Areas (LGAs) and is noted for its dense student population and diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The population of the study consisted

of 24,066 Junior Secondary Three (JS3) students enrolled in 89 public secondary schools across the nine (9) LGAs in the study area. A sample of 481 students was selected for the study through two stages sampling procedure. First, two secondary schools were selected using simple random sampling. Second, four intact classes of JS3 students were drawn from the selected schools, making up the final sample. This approach ensured that all students had an equal chance of being selected while also making the study manageable.

The instrument used for data collection was a researcher-developed questionnaire titled: Determinant of Curriculum Overload and Student Academic Performance in Secondary School (DCO-SAPSS) Questionnaire. The instrument was designed to capture students' perceptions of curriculum overload and their corresponding academic performance. It was structured on a Likert-type scale for ease of response and analysis. The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by three experts. One was from the Department of Test and Measurement and two from the Department of Curriculum and Teaching, University of Uyo. Their corrections and suggestions helped to refine the items to ensure they adequately measured the intended constructs. The reliability of the instrument was established using the Cronbach Alpha method. The coefficients obtained was 0.81 for the DCO scale and 0.71 for the SAPSSQ scale. These values indicated a high level of internal consistency, making the instrument reliable for the study.

Data collection was carried out with the assistance of trained research assistants. The validated questionnaires were administered directly to the selected students during school hours with the permission of their principals and teachers. Completed copies were retrieved immediately after administration to ensure a high return rate. Data collected were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was employed to answer the research questions, providing the correlation coefficients (r-values) between determinants of curriculum overload and academic performance. The null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance, enabling the researcher to determine whether the observed relationships were statistically significant.

Presentation of Results and Data Analysis

Table 1: Research Question 1 and Corresponding Hypothesis 1 on the Relationship between instructional time constraints and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District (N = 478).

Variable	$\sum X$ $\sum Y$	$\sum X^2$ $\sum Y^2$	$\sum xy$	df	r-cal	Decision at P < 0.05	Remark
Instructional time constraints	7334	115158	118272	478	.091	.047	weak relationship
Students' academic performance	7692	126730					

Note: The correlation coefficient $r = .091$ is weak but significant at $p < .05$.

The data presented in Table 1 revealed that there was a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between instructional time constraints and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District, with a calculated correlation coefficient of $r = 0.091$ at $p < 0.05$. This finding indicated that variations in instructional time constraints were slightly associated with changes in students' academic achievement. Although the strength of the relationship was low, its significance suggested that insufficient instructional time exerted a measurable effect on students' learning outcomes. The result implied that when instructional periods were compressed or inadequately allocated, opportunities for concept mastery, revision and reinforcement were limited, thereby constraining students' academic progress. Consequently, the null hypothesis which stated that there was no significant relationship between instructional time constraints

and students' academic performance was rejected, indicating that inadequate instructional time contributed, albeit weakly, to reduced academic achievement among secondary school students in the study area.

Table 2: Research Question 2 and Corresponding Hypothesis 2 on the relationship between teacher workload and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District (N = 478)

Variable	$\sum X$ $\sum Y$	$\sum X^2$ $\sum Y^2$	$\sum xy$	df	r-cal	Decision at P < 0.05	Remark
Teachers' workload	7268	113618	117694	478	.243**	.000	weak relationship
Students' academic performance	7692	126730					

Note: The correlation coefficient $r = .243$ is weak but significant at $p < .05$.

The data presented in Table 2 revealed a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between teacher workload and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District, with a calculated correlation coefficient of $r = 0.243$ at $p < 0.05$. This finding indicated that variations in teacher workload were associated with corresponding changes in students' academic achievement. Although the correlation was weak, its significance suggested that excessive teacher workload exerted a measurable influence on students' learning outcomes. The result implied that as teachers became increasingly burdened with large class sizes, multiple subject responsibilities and administrative duties, their instructional efficiency and ability to provide individualized support to students diminished, thereby affecting learners' academic performance. Based on the result, the null hypothesis which stated that there was no significant relationship between teacher workload and students' academic performance was rejected indicating that heavy teacher workload, though showing a weak correlation, had a statistically significant adverse effect on students' academic achievement in the study area.

Table 3: Research Question 3 and Corresponding Hypothesis 3 on the relationship between excessive curriculum content and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District (N = 478).

Variable	$\sum X$ $\sum Y$	$\sum X^2$ $\sum Y^2$	$\sum xy$	df	r-cal	Decision at P < 0.05	Remark
Excessive Curriculum Content	6477	92513	104684	478	.122**	.008	weak relationship
Students' Academic Performance	7692	126730					

Note: The correlation coefficient $r = .122$ is weak but significant at $p < .05$.

The data presented in Table 3 revealed a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between excessive curriculum content and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District, with a calculated correlation coefficient of $r = 0.122$ at $p < 0.05$. This result indicated that variations in the extent of curriculum content overload were slightly associated with differences in students' academic achievement. Although the relationship was weak, its statistical significance suggested that excessive curriculum content exerted a measurable effect on learning outcomes. The finding implied that when the curriculum contained too many topics in limited instructional time, students experienced cognitive strain, reduced comprehension and lower mastery of key concepts, thereby constraining their academic progress. Consequently, the null hypothesis which stated that there was no significant relationship between excessive curriculum content and students' academic performance was rejected. It was therefore concluded that curriculum

content overload, though weakly correlated, had a statistically significant influence on students' academic achievement in the study area.

Discussion of Findings

The findings for Research Question 1 and Hypothesis 1 revealed a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between instructional time constraints and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District. This implied that limited instructional time influenced learning outcomes, though the effect was modest, indicating that other contextual and pedagogical variables may also contribute to students' achievement levels. The finding supports the reviews that instructional time allocation plays a crucial role in curriculum implementation and academic success (Chaudhary, 2015; Ejike & Oke, 2018). The findings is also in line with the study conducted by Olugbenga, Yakubu and Ali (2023) who stated that when timeframes are compressed, teachers are compelled to emphasize coverage rather than comprehension, limiting opportunities for reinforcement and mastery. Similarly, Edewem and Ezeonwumelu (2020) found that excessive workload and limited instructional time reduced meaningful engagement and retention among secondary school students in Uyo Education Zone. In the same vein, Dawal and Mangu (2021) also confirmed that insufficient time prevented adequate treatment of up to 72% of curriculum content, constraining achievement. The present result therefore supported prior evidence that time-related constraints undermine the depth and quality of learning.

The findings for Research Question 2 and Hypothesis 2 revealed a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between teacher workload and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District. This indicated that increased teacher workload exerted a measurable yet modest effect on students' learning outcomes, implying that overburdened teachers were less able to provide individualized instruction, timely feedback and pedagogical innovation. The result is in line with the previous studies that identified excessive workload as a major factor limiting teachers' instructional effectiveness and student achievement (Dawal & Mangu, 2021; Edewem & Ezeonwumelu, 2020). The literature reviewed established that when teachers managed large class sizes, multiple subjects, or administrative responsibilities, instructional quality declined and students' engagement and comprehension suffered (Olugbenga, Yakubu & Ali, 2023). Moreover, such workload pressures often led to instructional fatigue, reduced lesson preparation and lower motivation levels, thereby indirectly diminishing learning outcomes. However, the weak correlation observed in this study showed that while workload influenced performance, mediating factors such as teacher experience, support systems and student attitudes also played important roles. This contrasted with findings by Israel and Israel (2019), who noted a stronger link between workload and academic achievement, indicating that contextual variations in institutional resources and teacher capacity may have moderated the strength of the relationship in the present study.

The findings for Research Question 3 and Hypothesis 3 revealed a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between excessive curriculum content and students' academic performance in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District. This revealed that curriculum overload influenced learning outcomes, though the effect was modest, indicating that other pedagogical and contextual factors also contributed to students' achievement levels. The result aligned with earlier studies that identified excessive curriculum content as a critical barrier to effective teaching and learning (Dawal & Mangu, 2021; Edewem & Ezeonwumelu, 2020). These researchers emphasized that overloaded curricula often forced teachers to rush through lessons to complete the syllabus, limiting opportunities for student engagement, inquiry-based learning and concept mastery.

Similarly, Olugbenga, Yakubu and Ali (2023) reported that content saturation led to superficial coverage of topics, cognitive fatigue and poor retention among learners, particularly in cognitively demanding subjects. The present finding was also consistent with the literature highlighting the imbalance between curriculum scope and available instructional time in Nigerian schools, as noted in the background and problem statements. However, the weak correlation observed contrasted with studies that found a stronger negative association between content overload and performance (Israel & Israel, 2019), indicating that factors such as teacher adaptability, instructional aids and student motivation may have moderated the adverse effects in the present context.

Conclusion

This study examined the determinants of curriculum overload and their influence on secondary school students' academic performance in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District. The findings revealed that insufficient instructional time, excessive teacher workload and overloaded curriculum content each had weak but statistically significant positive relationships with students' academic achievement, indicating that these factors collectively constrained effective learning. Specifically, limited instructional time reduced opportunities for reinforcement, revision and conceptual mastery, while excessive teacher workload diminished instructional quality and individualized support for students. Similarly, excessive curriculum content exerted cognitive strain, compelling teachers to prioritize completion of topics over deep comprehension and practical application. Although the relationships were modest in strength, their statistical significance demonstrated that structural and pedagogical inefficiencies embedded in the current curriculum framework exert measurable effects on students' academic outcomes. The results further showed that contextual factors such as teacher competence, instructional materials and administrative support moderated the strength of these relationships.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. The curriculum should be streamlined to remove redundant and overlapping topics, ensuring that content aligns with available instructional time.
2. Teacher workload should be reviewed and balanced by employing more qualified teachers and reducing non-instructional administrative duties.
3. Schools should adopt learner-centered teaching strategies that maximize limited instructional time and enhance student engagement.
4. The government and education authorities should provide adequate instructional materials and infrastructure to support effective curriculum delivery and improve student performance.

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