

School Adjustment among Pre-Primary Pupils in a City Setting

H. O. Owolabi

University of Ilorin, Nigeria

R. J. Ogidan

African Council for Distance Education, Nairobi, Kenya

Against the background of rising demand for crèche, nursery and kindergarten centres in most urban settlements in Nigeria, children continue to face school adjustment problems which are associated with early schooling life in most parts of the world. This study investigated school adjustment problems faced by children during their transition between home and school as well as that between pre-primary and primary stages of education in Ilorin, Nigeria. The study aimed to find out what care and supervision are provided for children, whether nursery schools in Ilorin foster a smooth transition from home to school, and the extent to which children in these schools are prepared for the primary level of education. Particular attention was paid to pre-primary educational institutions in Ilorin, the capital city of Kwara State. Information was obtained from four purposively selected nursery schools. The information obtained was subjected to qualitative analysis. An evaluation of the Nursery Education Programme of the sampled institutions in only three out of the eight objectives enumerated in Nigeria's National Policy on Education was carried out. Children admitted into the nursery schools were found to be between two and five years where the rudiments of literacy and numeracy are taught to them. School activities were also found to facilitate both home-school and nursery-primary transition among the children. It was observed that most of the children who attend the sampled nursery and kindergarten schools enter the primary one class somewhere between age 4½ and 5 years. It was thus recommended that schools should conform to the prescribed age of 6 years for children to be enrolled in primary one class.

Keywords: Assessment of school adjustment, Home-school transition

Introduction

Primary education in Nigeria is expected to commence for children that are six years of age. The years immediately preceding these are expected to be spent in pre-primary institutions, if they are available. Whereas primary education institutions could be found in most parts of the country, the same could not be said about crèche, nursery or kindergartens. They tend to be more available in the cities where private and voluntary agencies are involved in their establishment and management under the regulation and supervision of government ministries and departments.

Access to institutions with arrangements and facilities for crèche, nursery or kindergarten education is more widespread in the cities. This development could be linked with the history of education in Nigeria. The first educational institution established in the country was a primary school. Since that development in the 1840s, attempts have

been made to universalize primary education in Nigeria first by the government of Western Region in 1955, followed by the Eastern Region in 1957 (Fafunwa, 1974) and later with the launching of Universal Primary Education (UPE) for the whole country in 1976. Due to the fact that UPE derailed after just three years of its operation, the federal government again launched the Universal Basic Education in 1999. The emphasis in all these has been on primary or basic education and thus the pre-primary education component of early childhood education has suffered a measure of neglect over these years.

The only attention paid by Nigeria's federal government is in giving policy guidelines. The objectives of pre-primary education stated in the National Policy on Education (2004) include:

- 1) Effecting a smooth transition from the home to the school
- 2) Preparing the child for the primary level of education
- 3) Providing adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work
- 4) Inculcating social norms
- 5) Inculcating in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys etc.
- 6) Developing a sense of cooperation and team - spirit
- 7) Learning good habits, especially good health habits and
- 8) Teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc through play.

Despite the lofty objectives, various levels of government tend to overlook education of children at the pre-primary level. Feeble attempts at participation in this level of education have ended just at merging it with primary education. The Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) for example controls thousands of schools nationwide but it is not involved in the provision of pre-primary education. The commission's activities tend to therefore suggest that school based learning is unnecessary for children between the ages of three to five years. It is pertinent to note, however, that this negligence has a tendency to produce serious effects on the educational development of the nation. Melhuish (2001) found that pre-school experience of children significantly affects their cognitive and affective readiness not only for primary education but determines a large number of development outcomes. It is necessary to carry out research to address the issue of limited information on the extent to which the objectives of pre-primary education in the nation's policy on education are achieved.

Commitment of the government to the right of every Nigerian child to education should extend to each of the children whose parents

contribute to the economic sustenance of the country as productive members of the labour force. The fact is that these working class parents are the ones who also pay taxes. They, at the same time, send their children to private nursery and primary schools, which implies that these children are denied the benefit of state support for their education programme at the pre-primary level. Government support and provision of basic education is exclusive to children in public schools and in this wise, it is not universal in application and effect.

It is not clear whether specific financial allocation is made to support the pre-primary education of Nigerian children. The yearly budgets only reel out figures allocated to primary or basic education and since none of the unit of our ministries of education specifically cater for pre-primary education, nothing gets done by way of government involvement of commitment.

Parents may not be able to handle the matter of educating their children like the governments do. Most parents of pre-primary school age children in Nigeria are also young and employees of government ministries, public corporations, private organizations or other enterprises. It should be noted that the demands of work do not preclude the education and training of their children, rather they necessitate it. This, along with increasing urbanization significantly contributes to an upsurge in the demand for pre-school education in the urban areas of Nigeria.

The private sector has picked up the gauntlet by taking the lead in establishing crèches, nursery schools and kindergartens in most urban areas in Nigeria. This development seems to be emerging as a middle class value ostensibly due to the cost implications of sending children to such institutions. The public schools are open to children of primary school age only. Many lower class parents and illiterates residing in Nigerian cities tend to find the cost of pre-school education unaffordable. Some are still at a loss as to why so much money should be expended on children just to keep them somewhere during parents' absence from home. These private nursery institutions are becoming increasingly noticeable and this have the tendency of making significant contributions to educational development in the country.

In the light of the declining productivity of public educational institutions in Nigeria (Fabunmi, 2000), the rise of private pre-primary schools as well as others at the basic, secondary and tertiary levels as viable alternatives is a welcome development. It is in agreement with the Federal Government's Policy of creating an enabling environment for private sector initiative. The blueprint on Universal Basic Education (1999) included in its objectives the readiness of government to

strengthen partnership with the private sector in the provision of basic education through collaboration, cooperation and coordination.

The social environment in which a school is located plays host to the family and the child in particular. One cannot be separated from the others. Nettles, Caughy, and O'Campo (2008) reviewed social influences exerted on school adjustment in the early elementary years. They examined how neighbourhood activities could influence child development, and proposed a guide for community research and intervention. They also indicated that neighbourhood risk factors could moderate the association between school adjustment and family and child risks. In view of this, it is necessary to find out what pre-primary educational institutions have put in place to ensure a smooth home-school transition and to help children to overcome adjustment problems.

Margetts (2003) adopted an ecological approach to school adjustment and from a sample of 212 children from 12 preparatory classrooms across Melbourne, Australia public schools, found that adjustment difficulties are associated with children's ages, care experiences, socio-cultural groups, and school experiences. The study also revealed that school adjustment tends to be easier for children showing confidence in own abilities, taking responsibility for their own actions and manifesting socially valued academic skills and conceptual knowledge, displaying independence and self reliance, concentration and perseverance, the ability to share, take turns, cooperate and follow reasonable instructions. The nature of adjustment problems faced by children in pre-primary educational institutions in Nigeria needs thorough investigation.

Children coming to school for the first time may be faced with distractions which indicate responding to external and internal stimuli such as their own thoughts, daydreams and other neighbourhood activities. Teachers and care givers have more difficulty when children presenting with distractibility also have problems with other children in a classroom or when accompanied with over activity, impulsiveness and serious attention difficulties could even be classified with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Another common problem with children in early childhood relates to non-persistence. This occurs when a child stops attending to a task whenever any stumbling block arises. Such a child persistently asks teachers to explain things instead of making an attempt or putting in an effort. They tend to lose focus if a task lasts longer than some minutes. Margetts (2005) stated that poor academic achievement and behaviour problems at adolescence could be linked to early childhood problems like extreme over activity, inability to sit still,

short attention span, emotional difficulties, and other negative attitudes. She used confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling to identify items that contribute to hyperactivity, internalizing and externalizing behaviours and the relative contribution of each of these items to the adjustment domain of problem/maladaptive behaviour.

Nihira, Mink and Meyers (1986) also studied the relationship between home environment and school adjustment among 104 children with the use of social status, self-concept, and IQ and teacher's ratings of classroom behaviour for measuring school adjustment. They concluded that such home environment factors as harmony and quality of parenting, educational and cognitive stimulation available at home, emotional support for learning and cohesiveness of family members are associated with school adjustment.

The structure of the family that supports a child also plays a significant role in school adjustment. When parents are together sending a child to school, it is not the same as either of them doing this singly. On the other hand, the child may also be under the care of grandparents and this is particularly true in the African setting where the need to earn a living by biological parents tends to be shifting the burden of parenthood to grandparents. Solomon and Marx (1995) examined health and school adjustment of children under the sole care of grandparents from the 1988 National Children's Health Supplement data. They found that children under the sole care of grandparents fare quite well compared to those in single parent families. However, children raised by two biological parents were not significantly different from those raised solely by their grandparents, except in their academic performance.

Social class also plays a role in school adjustment. In the Nigerian setting, most of the children exposed to nursery and kindergarten education are of middle or upper class parenthood. Aharchaou (1995) conducted an extended field study of the educational relationship between home and school and found better educational adjustment among children of high socio-cultural status compared to those from low socio-cultural status. Even though most of the children attending pre-primary educational institutions in Nigeria fall within the middle and upper class of society, it is necessary to find out the home-school transition problems encountered by them.

Research Problem

The policy on education in Nigeria has eight clearly stated objectives on pre-primary education. Most of the existing public institutions provide

primary education while the private sector initiative has many institutions providing pre-primary education at a cost that may not be affordable to the lower class under the regulation of Ministries of Education of the different States in the country. Thus, those in the middle and upper classes residing in cities are the major families whose children have access to pre-primary education. The children are registered in the pre-primary school at a tender age and since this may be their first experience of staying away for long from their family members, especially parents and siblings, it is necessary to find out whether they manifest adjustment problems at the first contact with school and between the end of pre-primary and primary stages. It is also necessary to find out the care and supervision the pre-primary schools have in place for children to be able to cope with the school adjustment problems they may have.

Research Questions

This study is interested in obtaining information for answering the following research questions:

- 1) How do nursery schools in Ilorin ensure smooth transition from home to school?
- 2) What care and supervision do nursery schools provide for children admitted by them?
- 3) What level of preparation for the primary level of education is given to children in these pre-primary schools?

Methodology

This is a survey aimed at gathering information to help draw inferences on the extent to which specific objectives contained in the policy on pre-primary education in Nigeria are achieved. The survey design was adopted in this study. The research approach was to specifically achieve the objectives of discrepancy evaluation. The information obtained from the sampled nursery schools in Ilorin was used to assess the extent to which actual practices in the sampled pre-primary schools agree with the three objectives of pre-primary education stated in the Nigerian National Policy on Education focused by the research questions.

The study was conducted in Ilorin, the capital city of Kwara State. The State is located in the North Central geo-political zone and it shares common characteristics with the rest thirty-five States of the Nigerian federation. A cross section of staff of Ministries and Departments of Government at the Federal level serve in Ilorin and this has thus

brought Nigerian citizens from all the states to the city while the State Civil Service has also attracted citizens from all the Local Government Areas. There is therefore the tendency that a fair representation of both the nation's and the State's populace obtains in Ilorin, the Kwara State Capital where the study was conducted.

For the purpose of this study, the city was zoned into four: City-Centre, Government Reservation, Outer-City and Peri-urban Areas. A school was purposively selected from each of these zones and each selected school was considered representative of schools in the zone. The four sampled schools represented those in the entire city in terms of age of establishment, school population, patronage by community, settlement spread and ownership structure.

Information was obtained from the Head-Teacher of each of the schools through the aid of an interview schedule developed by the researcher. Apart from the background information obtained from school heads, the interview schedule was used to obtain information on the environment in which children are kept, age of children at admission and activities for achieving home-school transition. Information was also obtained on problems relating to school adjustment presented by the children right from their first contacts with the school, care and supervision provided by the school and transition from nursery to primary classes. Children were also observed in the different school settings. Qualitative analysis was used for answering the three research questions.

Results and Discussion

Home-School Adjustment

The first consideration with respect to ensuring smooth home-school transition is the age at which children are brought into the pre-primary institutions. This is because age is considered as an important factor in the adjustment of children to the school environment. It affects the tendency that children will be able to cope with learning experiences provided by schools (Margetts, 2003). Head Teachers of the four schools interviewed were asked to indicate the ages at which children are admitted by them into the pre-primary classes. All of them stated that the minimum age of children admitted into nursery classes was 2 years. In fact one of the School Heads stated that immediately a child is able to speak, she/he could be brought in to the nursery or kindergarten class. Apart from the fact that adjustment may be a problem for these children

at that age, they also will start primary education at an earlier age than six years as contained in the National Policy on Education. Maturation, which is a major consideration for the prescribed age in this policy is thus undermined with majority of children passing through pre-primary education advancing to primary one class before reaching six years.

The first class into which children are admitted is given different names in the different schools. Names given to it include play-group, reception, pre-nursery or preparatory classes by the respective schools. This finding does not agree with the nation's policy statement that pre-primary education is meant for children between three and five years of age (NPE, 2004). The discrepancy may be the result of needs in the different homes for a place to keep their children as parents attend to work and/or business.

The practice of admitting children below three years of age into pre-primary classes however agrees with Bronner's (1996) categorization of 2-6 years as 'pre-school' period for children. A look at what obtains in other countries indicates that the current practice in Nigeria is not out of tune with what obtains in other societies. In Hungary, nursery schools which are named "Bolscode" admit children aged between one and three years while kindergartens called 'oroda' are for children between three and six years. South Africa provides education for children below five years of age but this is white dominated while Japan admits children at age three. In Canada, early childhood services are available and optional for children below school age and nearly all children are enrolled (NARIC, 1991).

The next issue raised in connection with home-school transition was the behaviours indicating adjustment problems usually noticed among the children. School Heads stated that some children display such behaviours as crying, moodiness, failure to respond to instruction and other cues while others were extremely active and eagerly respond to instructions. In addition, it was found that language problems were also prominent because English is used in all the schools as medium of instruction and this happens not to be the children mother tongue. Starting new relationships with teachers, helpers and other children in a classroom setting other become necessary but remains a great challenge to the child. School Heads also indicated that most of the school adjustment problems children have were noticed in the first few weeks of their enrolment. This finding agrees with that of Margaret (2005) who identified problems like over activity, inability to sit still, short attention span, emotional difficulties, and other negative attitudes among children.

School Heads were also asked to state the steps taken to address the problems manifest among the children and ensure smooth home-school transition. They explained that the children are not only grouped according to their but they are also brought into a friendly environment. It was explained that in addition to making schoolrooms attractive, the teacher's initial actions are to create a sense of security, as she/he gets familiar with the child. Each school head explained that teachers first familiarize themselves with the children and use different methods to motivate them to participate in classroom activities and particular attention paid to those who may have special problems after they have been identified. It was particularly noted that children become more enthusiastic about school work as they are engaged in learning activities and experiences which are interesting to them. Though Head Teachers did not specifically state this, it was observed that educational toys and games were made available to help in enlisting children's interest in schooling and fostering home-school transition. Two of the head teachers stated that the use of gifts also motivate the children to overcome problems associated with the home-school transition. It was further observed that each of the sampled schools provided out-door games facilities like swing, merry-go-round, balancing poles and slide in a playground. Steps for ensuring home-school transition and deal with adjustment problems while at the same time promoting learning at this stage of the children's development agree with prescriptions that they be exposed to language acquisition and familiarization with objects in their immediate environment by Ogunlade and Olashinde, (1996).

Care and Supervision

Information was obtained on children's care and supervision provided by these institutions. The researcher personally observed the premises of each of the schools as well as the classrooms in which these children are kept. It was found that each school was fenced and provided with a lock -up gate to prevent random movements in and out of the school and ward-off unwanted visitors. The children were provided with low, comfortable seats and tables to facilitate learning. The classes were manned by female teachers in all these school while female helpers were on hand to support the teachers.

Familiarity of teachers with school children was observed in all the institutions. Food which was supplied by most of the parents to the children in lunch boxes was taken also under the supervision of teachers and helpers. The teachers also watched over children in the play ground. It was found that teachers and care givers took up the roles as

parents to these children to ensure that the care and supervision given by the schools cover all spheres of children's activities within and outside the classrooms (Solomon and Marx, 1995).

Preparation for Primary Education

The School Heads were asked what is expected from the children of pre-primary classes before they could be promoted to the primary one (1) class.

Their responses to this question are summarized as follows:

- 1) Ability to count and recognize numbers 1-100
- 2) Ability to recite and recognize all letters of the alphabet.
- 3) Ability to obey simple instructions and commands given in English.
- 4) Ability to read pictures in recommended textbooks.
- 5) Ability to write numbers 1 - 100 and alphabets a - z.
- 6) Ability to handle schoolroom activities.

The test items used for end of term and session examinations were scrutinized to confirm the claims by the School Heads. It was found that the schools examined the children at the levels stated above. If children are able to learn all these at the pre-primary stage education, then they have a good foundation for primary education. They will not be deficient in the cognitive and affective domains and the fact is that they have already acquired part of the knowledge required of them at the first stage of primary education as designed in the nation's curriculum for primary schools, gives them added advantage. They may indeed be able to accelerate learning and cover the curriculum for primary education i.e. middle basic education, earlier. This may be part of the reason some of the products of private nursery/primary institutions proceed to secondary school at the end of their primary five or even earlier instead of the normal primary six class which marks the end of primary education.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study covered only three of the eight objectives of pre-primary education stated in the National Policy on Education (2004). Result indicates that there is discrepancy between the set objective of age of commencement of pre-primary education and what is practiced by the Nursery schools studied. It was found that the Nursery schools selected for this study have structures which to some extent facilitate home-school transition and contribute significantly to the preparation of

children for primary education. It was also found that Children were exposed to rudiments of literacy and numeracy which have the tendency of giving advantage at the primary education level.

The schools should acquire more educational toys, games and other materials to facilitate effective learning and home-school transition. This will motivate the children and engage their attention to the extent that when they are in school, they will hardly remember home or parents and other siblings until someone comes for him/her. There is need for planners, policymakers and evaluators to ensure that attempts to undermine the recommended commencement age for primary education are controlled.

It is recommended that Teacher and Parent interaction should be encouraged for a midterm review of learners' acquisition of copying skill and adjustment to school environment. Also, further studies should cover all the eight objectives enumerated in the National Policy. The scope of such studies should also be expanded to cover the whole of Kwara State or Nigeria.

References

- Aharchaou El Rhali (1995). The Conflict in Values and the Child's School Adjustment. *Values and Education, Yearbook 3*: Lebanese Association for Education Studies
- Bronner, S. J. (1996) Childhood, In *Collier's Encyclopedia*. New York: P. F. Collier and Sons Ltd, 226
- Fabunmi, M. (2000) The trade off Issues Between Quality and Quantity: Implications for implementation of University Basic Education (UBE) Policy in Nigeria. *African Journal of Educational Management, 8, 2*, 9-17.
- Fafunwa, B. A. (1974) *History of education in Nigeria*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004). *National Policy on Education*. Lagos: NERDC
- Margetts, K. (2003). Personal, family and social influences on children's early school adjustment. *Summary of a paper presented at the AECA Biennial Conference, Hobart*
http://extranet.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/LED/tec/pdf/margetts_aeca_03.pdf. Retrieved 14/7/2011
- Margetts, K. (2005) Children's adjustment to the first year of schooling: Indicators of hyperactivity, internalising and externalising behaviours. *International Journal of Transitions in Childhood, 1*, 36-44

- Melhuish, E. C. (2001) The quest for quality in early day care and preschool experience continues. *International Journal of Behavioural Development*, 25, 1,1-6.
- NARIC, (1991) *International guide to questions in Education*, British council: Book craft Ltd
- Nettles, S. M., Caughy, M. O., & O'Campo, P. J. (2008). School Adjustment in the Early Grades: Toward an Integrated Model of Neighbourhood, Parental, and Child Processes. *Review of Educational Research*, 78, 1, 3-32.
- Nihira, K., Mink I.T., Meyers C. E. (1986). Relationship between home environment and school adjustment of TMR children. *American Journal of Mental Deficiency*, 1, 8-15.
- Ogunlade, A. A. and Olashinde, F. A. O. (1995) *Introduction to Psychology of development*. Ilorin: INDEMAC.
- Solomon, J. C., and Marx, J. (1995) "To Grandmother's House We Go": Health and School Adjustment of Children Raised Solely By Grandparents, *The Gerontologist*, 35, 3, 386-394.