

JOURNAL OF



ISSN - 978 - 33641 - 2 - X

EARLY CHILDHOOD

ASSOCIATION OF NIGERIA

VOL. 5 (1 & 2)

AUGUST, 2016

JECAN

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Strategies for Improving Parents' Self-efficacy and Involvement in Children's School Readiness

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Abstract

Readiness for school is a developmental task that involves adaptation for both parent and child which is being undertaken unconsciously. The ability of a child to cope and be competent at the point of school entry is embedded in early developmental experiences he/she is exposed to at home, and in the preschool environment. Lack of school readiness in preschool children is often identified as a cause of early academic failure and school misbehaviour, and it has been found to strongly predict employability difficulties, criminality and psychological morbidity as well as short-term academic problems. It is no gain saying that, pre-school experience has positive impact on children's achievement in primary school. In addition to child readiness, good preschool programmes may also intentionally improve parental readiness for school through different teachers' strategies as there is a controversy over how school readiness is being defined; that it cannot be defined as something which only resides in the child but also in the parents. How parents perceive themselves as capable enough to help their child's readiness for school will determine how involved they would be in their child's academic pursuit, thereby meeting the needs of the whole child. Research indicates that, some forms of parental involvement have a positive impact on children's academic success and teachers' strategies are essential to the promotion of parent's involvement.

Key words: School readiness, Parental self-efficacy, Teachers' strategies

Introduction

The place of parental involvement in early development and education of their children is paramount. This is because, early years experiences are crucial to the holistic development of a child, likewise, the preschool years offer important opportunities for the development of parental involvement in children's early education as parents' active involvement in their children's learning have been shown to improve children's academic, behavioural, and social outcomes (Marcon, 1999; Powell, Son, File & San Juan, 2010; Senechal, 2006). In particular, Parental involvement facilitates children's development of pre-literacy skills such as phonological awareness and letter name knowledge (Powell et al., 2010). These skills have been shown to be essential for later school success (Blachman, 1994). A child's first experiences in school are often parents' first experiences as critical stakeholders in their child's formal schooling. Parental involvement during preschool may also allow parents to develop skills in working collaboratively with school personnel, most especially the teacher. Parental involvement may be particularly important for children from low-income families (Reynolds, Weissberg, and Kaspro, 1992). The preschool years are therefore an optimal time to establish parental involvement and to familiarize parents of children at-risk for academic difficulties with the skills which children need to acquire prior to entering formal school.

The concept of school readiness typically refers to the child's attainment of a certain set of emotional, behavioural, and cognitive skills needed to learn, work, and function successfully in school. Unfortunately, this common philosophy of "ready for school" places an undue burden on children by expecting them to meet the expectations of school. A more constructive way to consider school readiness is to remove the expectations from the child and place those expectations on the schools and the families. Young children have wide ranging needs and require support in preparing them for the high standards of learning they will face in formal school. Stated in simple terms, school readiness means that, a child is ready to enter a social environment that is primarily focused on education. Research has suggested that, many aspects of children's lives influence their preparation for formal school learning, including, cognitive, social, emotional, motor development and most importantly,

early home, parental, and preschool experiences. Consideration of school readiness must take into account the range and quality of children's early life experiences. The normal wide variation in young children's development and learning, and the extent to which the school's expectations of beginning children are appropriate and respect individual differences. This brings us to some questions that would provide answers to the following questions bothering our minds:

- i. What does being ready for school imply?
- ii. What is parental involvement?
- iii. Why are parental and teacher involvement important in child's school readiness?
- iv. Are there factors that influence parents' involvement?
- v. How can teachers improve parenting and school readiness?

What Does Being Ready for School Imply?

Children's readiness has been viewed in different ways; parents typically stress pre-academic skills and knowledge (Diamond, Reagan and Bandyk 2000; UNICEF 2004), while primary school teachers tend to stress social and emotional aspects (Dockett and Perry 2003). This variation in emphasis suggests that, a broad range of developmental skills and abilities encompass 'ready for school'. Children's readiness for school refers to all children, especially the vulnerable and disadvantaged ones, including girls, children with disabilities, ethnic minorities and those living in rural areas. In addition, readiness for school is different from readiness to learn. While readiness for school implies being prepared to succeed in a structured learning setting, readiness to learn is a characteristic from birth. All children are born ready to learn (Kagan, 1999). This learning occurs prior to entering school and extends beyond the walls of the classroom to daily life. These two constructs—ready to learn and ready for school—differ greatly. The former applies to students of all ages, the latter primarily applies to young children prior to or at the kindergarten level. In the former, readiness is fostered; in the latter, it is expected.

A child who is ready for school has the basic minimum skills and knowledge in a variety of domains that will enable the child to be successful in school. These minimum skills set the bar for what children

should know and be able to do, so they enter school, ready and eager to learn, thereby enabling a successful transition to a primary school learning environment (Lara-Cinisomo and others, 2004). Success in school is determined by a range of basic behaviours and abilities, including literacy, numeracy, ability to follow directions, working well with other children and engaging in learning activities (Rouse, Brooks-Gunn and McLanahan, 2005). The holistic view of school readiness therefore include five domains linked with later school performance and behaviour, physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition as well as general knowledge, including mathematics (Kagan, Moore and Bredenkamp, 1993).

Aspects of the social and emotional domain include sustained attention, emotional regulation, following directions, social relationships and social cognition (McCabe et al. 2004; Raver 2004). Language and literacy take oral language and emerging literacy into account (Britto, Fuligni and Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Snow, Burns and Griffin 1998; Whitehurst and Lonigan 1998). And math skills include; early understanding of mathematical concepts, measurement logic and pre-numeracy skills (Ginsburg, Lee and Boyd 2008; Sophian, 2004). Attitudes towards learning, such as task persistence, attention, creativity, initiative, curiosity and problem solving, are also known to be important for school readiness. Based on these concepts; school readiness is a holistic way of looking at children's preparedness for school. Not limited to one area of development or functioning, readiness embraces the interrelationships between skills and behaviours across domains of development and learning (Denton 2000; Schoen and Nagle, 2004). More recent data on school readiness stress the importance of understanding the interrelationships between the domains and not just the domains themselves. The implication of the above is that, for a holistic child, school readiness to evolve both the home and preschool environments should play their parts.

Why is School Readiness Important?

School readiness is a powerful framework for improving equity in access to education and in learning outcomes especially and for

marginalized children. Evidence from UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys shows that, the threats to early development are greatest among children living in the poorest households (UNICEF, 2012). Such children are less likely to receive support for early learning at home and up to 10 times less likely to attend early childhood education programmes. The importance of such improvement in equity is evident at the individual and global levels. At the individual level, evidence from multiple perspectives (developmental, economic, social constructivist) implicates school readiness as an important factor in education achievement; children's development and learning, school completion including primary school, and ultimate success in adulthood. At a global level, another claim that can be implied from the school readiness and education research is the instrumental value in sustaining and promoting the social and economic development of a country.

Therefore, the importance of school readiness is presented in two categories as follow:

A. Intrinsic benefits

B. Instrumental benefits

Intrinsic Benefits of School Readiness

Intrinsic benefits address the direct gains to the recipients, i.e., children, families and schools. Under this, the benefits of school readiness are described at three developmental time points: when the transition to primary school is considered complete, typically around Grade 3, or 8 years of age, in high school or adolescence, and during adulthood.

- I. With respect to primary school outcomes: School readiness leads to reduction in dropout rates and increased academic achievement and engagement.
- II. With respect to high school outcomes and academic achievement; School readiness leads to early skills acquisition and later high school completion. High-quality preschool experiences have been linked with improved high school graduation rates (Reynolds et al. 2001).
- II. With respect to adulthood: Similar research has been clear in demonstrating that; children who enter school, ready to learn, and transit smoothly into a primary school learning environment are

more likely to be employed as adults (Rouse, Brooks-Gunn and McLanahan, 2005). Giving children a good start, not only counters the worst effects of poverty, but may also be the most effective means of halting cross-generational poverty.

Instrumental Benefits of School Readiness

Instrumental benefits address gains towards the broader developmental goals of social equity and economic development, mediated by school readiness.

- a) School readiness clearly demarcates the path for individuals to higher education, leading to earning benefits. A greater earning citizenry contributes to the economic growth of a country.
- b) Societal benefits in general, have also been calculated, based on school readiness. In summary, when equity in access to early education and learning is improved, greater economic benefits accrue to individuals themselves and collectively to society. Societal benefits of school readiness include promotion of the universal right of all individuals to education, a greater social justice and social cohesion, a better efficiency of educational systems, better health outcomes, poverty reduction and higher growth. Those societal benefits can only be partially economically valued. Therefore, we would expect the actual social returns on investment to be even higher.

What can Parents Do to Help Prepare Children for School?

A great deal of variability exists in developmental and skill levels within young children. This is normal as many children will not develop to the level of others at the same age. Nevertheless, parents can help their children develop the skills they will need to be ready for school. The following points are collection of activities that parents can do with their children to increase their child's general readiness for school: read books to and with your child; spend time with your child, including; playing, cuddling, and hugging; create and enforce a routine within your home that, your child needs to follow (i.e., times of meals, naptimes, and bedtimes); take time to talk to your child; encourage and answer questions from your child; engage in informal reading and counting activities at home; promote

your child's cognitive development by showing and encouraging your child to think about the world around them; promote play that helps develop literacy skills, problem-solving skills, creativity, and imagination; familiarize children with the alphabet and with numbers; ensure opportunity to develop social skills through playgroups or more formal preschool activities; encourage behaviors that demonstrate respect and courtesy; and encourage children to accept responsibility and build competence through simple chores such as putting toys away and picking up clothes.

Due to the unique ways in which children develop (Pelletier and Brent, 2002), differences in their pre-school experiences in the home and in pre-school, and widely varying skills, knowledge, and levels of preparedness for school, researchers argue that, readiness ultimately depends on two things: (1) whether or not parents believe their child is mature enough for the demands of a formal school setting and (2) the teachers perception of the child's readiness (Ackerman and Barnett, 2005). Indeed, readiness for school is a developmental milestone that requires, not only the child to adapt to a formal school environment, but the parent as well (Pelletier and Brent, 2002). Parents who are ready for the transition tend to become more educationally involved and conduct activities at home and in early childhood settings to directly and indirectly support their children's transition to a formal school environment (Kreider, 2002). Parents are the first and most important teacher in children's lives and they have the potential to provide experiences that foster life, skills, abilities and attitudes that set the stage for school readiness and ultimately underlie school success (Pelletier and Brent, 2002). Thus, it is critical that, we understand why some parents are more "prepared" to adapt to the formal school environment, for example, by becoming involved in their child's learning at home and at school, than others.

What is Parental Involvement?

According to Pelletier and Brent (2002), parents are a child's first and most important teachers, as they are in a position to provide a multitude of experiences that encourage the learning of life skills that will prepare their children for later success. Hyson (1991) refers to parents as "developmental general contractors" who appoint some tasks to others but

have the most control over the developmental process of learning. Although the school setting is highly influential on young children's academic development, much of early learning is also dependent on the home environment provided by the parent (Hair et al., 2006; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, and Sekino, 2004). In fact, some teachers believe that, they can only be effective if they obtain parental assistance on learning activities at home (Epstein, 1986). Parental involvement in the school is equally important.

As is the case with school readiness, there is no clear or consistent operational definition of parental involvement (Fan, 2001; Fan and Chen, 2001). The term has been used to describe a host of parental behaviours, patterns, and practices such as; parent's aspirations for their child's academic achievement, education-related rules in the home, and participation in school activities (Fan and Chen, 2001; Kohl, Lengua and McMahan, 2000). Hill and Tyson (2009) describe it as; parents' interactions with both their child (e.g., engaging in educational activities at home) and the child's school (e.g., volunteering or involvement in school governance) to promote academic success. Similarly, Fishel and Ramirez (2005) define parental involvement as the participation of significant caregivers in the educational process of their children, with the intentions of promoting academic and social well-being.

Although these definitions give us some sense of what parental involvement may look like, they are quite broad. Grolnick et al. (1997) provided a more specific definition of parental involvement. They suggested that, parental involvement was the dedication of resources by the parent to the academic development of the child within one of these three types of domains: (1) behaviour, or parent participation in parent-teacher meetings and other school activities, (2) cognitive-intellectual, or exposing the child to stimulating environments, and (3) personal, or the parent's awareness of where the child is pertaining to their academic development. The authors found that, children whose mothers had high levels of behavioural and cognitive involvement were more likely to feel competent in school.

Epstein (1995) proposed a framework that included six different types of involvement including:

- (1) **Parenting:** Supporting, nurturing, and bringing up the child (by providing a secure and loving environment in which a child can focus on learning both at home and at school).
- (2) **School-to-home and home-to-school communication:** Relating with and reviewing student's progress with school staff.
- (3) **Volunteering:** Providing assistance at child's school (i.e., fundraisers, chaperoning, etc.).
- (4) **Learning at home:** Managing, recognizing, and rewarding the child.
- (5) **Decision making:** Participation in organizations such as PTA/PTO; and
- (6) **Collaborating with the community:** Sharing, giving, and encouraging partnerships with community resources and services.

Parental Involvement and Child Outcomes

Regardless to how parental involvement is defined, there is evidence to support the positive relationship between active parent involvement in the home and school context as well as successful cognitive and academic achievement for all grade levels (Barnard, 2004; Eccles and Harold, 1993; Grolnick et al., 1997; McWayne et al., 2004; Pelletier and Brent, 2002;). According to another study, children whose parents had high levels of participation in the school programmes and a strong relationship with the child's teacher, displayed stronger literacy and social competence skills in comparison to children whose parents do not participate in the school programmes. Similarly, in an evaluation of the Incredible Years of Training Series, a programme for teachers designed to promote school readiness and develop positive parent-teacher relationships, Webster-Stratton et al. (2008) discovered that, parent's involvement (e.g. reading newsletters, assisting with homework activities, etc.) and the ability to work collaboratively with teachers were important predictors of children's school success. In general, the research suggests that, parental involvement, defined in many different ways and marked by a wide range of activities at all grade levels, is critical for future academic success.

Although the importance of parental involvement is well-established, teachers report struggling to get parents involved in their

children education (Eccles and Harold, 1993). The picture is not different from what obtains in the society today, especially in a situation where parents go to work from morning till evening without having ample time to nurture their children. Research has been conducted to determine how and why parents participate in their children's academic success. It has been found that, the level of parents' involvement (i.e., how involved a parent becomes in the child's education) may be dependent on parental self-efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995). Parents who feel confident in their ability to provide their children with efficient academic guidance may be more likely to be involved in both the home and school environment. In contrast, parents who do not feel, as though their contribution will be beneficial to their children's academic success, may not be as involved in the home learning environment and even less likely to be involved in the school environment (Bandura, 1997). According to Waanders et al. (2007), parents often believe that, their children's education is the sole responsibility of the teacher and therefore do not become involved in educational activities because they view the teacher as the "experts" in education. Similarly, Bandura et al. (1996) reported that, parents are not very likely to intrude on learning activities of their children within the school context.

Factors that Can Influence Parents' Involvement

There are many factors that can influence the involvement of parents in their children's education, for example, family and demographic factors have been identified as predictors of parent involvement (Kohl, Lengua, and McMahon, 2000). These include:

- i. **Lower SES:** Parents with lower socio-economic status are generally less involved in their children's schooling in comparison to parents who are middle or high SES (Kohl et al., 2000; Waanders et al., 2007). Poor readiness for school is often associated with poverty.
- ii **Single Parent:** Research suggests that, single parents tend to be less involved in the academic development of their children than married parents (Grolnick et al., 1997; Waanders et al., 2007). Children from stable two parent homes tend to have stronger

school readiness than children from one-parent homes, and from homes where caregivers change frequently in their belief in their parent's belief in their child's school readiness.

iii. Parents' Education: Parental education may also affect how involved parents become in their own children's education (Grolnick et al., 1997; Kohl et al., 2000; Machida et al., 2002). Parents who have higher levels of education are more likely to be involved in their children's learning than are parents with lower levels of education (Grolnick et al., 1997; Kohl et al., 2000; Machida et al., 2002).

iv. Enriched Home Environment: Children from homes where parents talk with their children, engage them in conversation, read to them, and engage in forms of discipline such as time-out that encourage self-discipline have stronger readiness skills.

Finally, ethnic or racial minority status has been associated with lower levels of Parental involvement (Moles, 1993). Clearly, not all parents feel comfortable being involved in their children's education (Pelletier and Brent, 2002). According to Bandura et al. (1997), a parent's decision to become involved in the child's academic development is partly based on the beliefs of how their efforts may impact the child's outcomes. Thus, understanding why parents may not feel confident in their abilities to effectively foster their young children's academic development is critical. This is especially true for very young children because we know little about parental self-efficacy at the transition to formal schooling. They concluded that high-achieving children associated with providing an advanced and challenging environment.

Influence of Parental Self-Efficacy on Children's Development

Self-efficacy is generally defined as a person's belief or perception that, he or she can act in ways that will produce intended or desired outcomes (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 2007). When applied to the domain of parenting, the definition of self-efficacy focuses on a parent's perception of their ability to positively impact his/her child's overall development. Parental self-efficacy has emerged as a powerful predictor of specific positive parenting practices (Coleman and Karraker, 2000). Specifically, parental self-efficacy has been identified as a key determinant of why parents become involved in their children's academic development in both the home (Waanders et al., 2007) and school.

(Grolnick *et al.*, 1997) contexts. Jones and Prinz (2005) define it as; a parent's belief in his/her ability to influence the child as well as the environment in ways that foster the child's positive development and success. Sanders and Woolley (2005), define it as; parents' beliefs in the ability to effectively manage the varied tasks and situations of parenthood. Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, and Brissie (1992) define parental self-efficacy as a parents' belief about their general ability to influence their child's developmental and educational outcomes, their specific effectiveness in influencing the children's school learning, and their own influence, relative to those of their peers and the children's teacher. From the above definitions; it can be deduced that, parent's self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability or capability to help a child become ready for school and succeed at school. This involves parents' comprehensive involvement in their children's care, development and education; before, during and after transition to school.

Parents who are confident in their abilities to effectively parent, can be described as highly efficacious. Parents with a strong perception of self-efficacy who feel as though they can significantly contribute to their children's educational development, will be more likely to become involved in their children's education (Grolnick *et al.*, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 1992; Waanders, Coleman and Karraker, 2000). Coleman and Karraker (2000) conducted a study in which they used several measures to examine parenting self-efficacy among mothers of school-aged children. They concluded that, high parental self-efficacy is associated with providing an adaptive, stimulating, and nurturing environment for a child. This can include; allowing the children opportunities to explore their environment or providing play and learning materials.

Efficacious parents understand the likely effects of their efforts and have great potential in fulfilling the role of their children's primary education (Seefeldt *et al.*, 1999). When parents perceive themselves as highly efficacious and as being their children's first teachers ("My child has learned to do many things with my help", "The kinds of toys and experiences I provide for my child will help him/her to be a successful adult"), they are more involved in cognitive activities (Grolnick *et al.*, 1997; Machida *et al.*, 2002). According to research parents who feel that

their efforts may pay off, are more likely to feel more confident and become involved in their children's education. Conversely, low parental self-efficacy is associated with feelings of hopelessness in the parenting role (Coleman and Karraker, 2000). Parents who feel doubtful about their ability to foster their children's academic development are less likely to take a proactive stance in their children's development and are easily discouraged when their efforts seem detrimental or when they encounter difficulties (Bandura et al., 1996).

It is possible that, low efficacious parents may lack adequate parenting skills and persistence and as a result, might feel a sense of hardship in their role as a parents. Coleman and Karraker (1997) put together a review in which they took a closer look at parental self-efficacy and provide a nice framework with which to explore the construct. Broadly speaking, low self-efficacy beliefs are not likely to impact motivation in a variety of domains, including parenting, such that low efficacious individuals show minimal effort in the face of a challenging task (Coleman and Karraker, 1997). More specifically, when parents do not feel motivated in their parenting role, they are not very likely to put forth a tremendous effort towards their children's academic development. In order for parents in particular to feel efficacious, they must first: (a) understand appropriate child care responses (e.g., limits to establish and enforce), (b) possess confidence in their ability to carry out the task, and (c) believe that, their children will respond to their efforts and that, their efforts will be supported by their family and friends. If parents do not possess these feelings or knowledge, they are more likely to feel burdened by the parenting role (Coleman & Karraker, 1997; Coleman & Karraker, 2000).

Teachers Strategies to Increase Parental Self-efficacy and Child Readiness

The teacher has been identified as the key to facilitating parental involvement in early childhood education programmes (Swick and McKnight, 1989). This implies that, teachers possess certain skills, attitudes, and behaviours that translate into strategies to encourage parents' participation. According to Swick and McKnight (1989), teachers who were educated with regard to the value of parent education and involvement, who were encouraged to remain active through professional organizations, and who were given the essential supports such as; small class size, administrative help, and appropriate working conditions, were the most supportive of parent's involvement in education. Teachers who work with families from different cultures are encouraged to acquire the necessary skills for relating to and involving parents from these groups. There has been concern regarding an overemphasis on "large group" parent involvement; research suggests that, a more successful approach entails increased individual contact among parents and teachers, conferences, small group discussions, and the use of parents' talents and skills (Swick and McKnight, 1989).

Teacher strategies that incorporate this approach encourage parent's involvement and overcoming barriers to communication often perceived by teachers and parents in a culturally diverse context. When parents learn how to talk and interact with teachers, they feel capable of making changes themselves, and realize their own possibilities for involvement. Teachers, in turn, come to recognize these parents as "effective" participants in their children's education (Bernhard, Lefebvre, Kilbride, Chud and Lange, 1998).

Bandura (1995) identified four types of influence that develop people's general beliefs concerning their efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological and emotional states. Teacher's strategies can incorporate the first three types to promote parental self-efficacy.

- I. Mastery Experiences:** Teachers can give parents many opportunities to acquire and master skills to help their children learn in the classroom, and to extend that learning into the home.

II. **Vicarious Experiences:** Teachers provide parents with vicarious experiences through social modeling. When parents observe teachers successfully interacting with their children in academic and social situations, they may come to believe that, they have the capability to master comparable activities (Bandura, 1986).

III. **Social Persuasion:** Teachers who use a positive feedback strategy regarding parents' efforts with their children may be able to persuade parents to try their best and sustain their efforts longer. When parents believe they can do what the teacher does, their efficacy beliefs are raised. Parents may then interpret challenging situations more positively, reducing the stress that can have an impact on physiological and emotional states.

Recommendations

School readiness lays the foundation for educational success and achievement. Consequently, the significance of school readiness is noted both as an intrinsic benefit in improving educational outcomes for children by completing primary school, staying in high school and productivity in later adulthood. In addition, instrumental benefits are noted for society as the result of human capital created through a strong foundational start. Moreover, parental involvement has been a focus of many school interventions. Therefore, it will be of great benefit to educational sector, especially the universal basic education in Nigeria, to understand barriers to parental involvement, particularly parental self-efficacy which is critical. Knowledge of the mechanisms through which parental self-efficacy affects child outcomes will help us create more effective prevention and intervention programmes for parents of young children that will consequently enhance the development of the whole child.

Literature suggests that, parents who perceive themselves as more effective, are more involved in their children's education at the pre-school level and are confident enough to also prepare their children for formal school. It is therefore recommended that, teachers should organize seminars and workshop, for parents where they would be given orientation on the need and how to improve their self-efficacy in spite of their family and demographic limitations.

Furthermore, teacher's strategies are described as a key feature in facilitating parents' involvement and parental self-efficacy. Hence, they should be educated and positively encouraged to be supportive of parents' education and involvement in their children's education.

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