



Evaluation of Peer Relationship and Social Adaptation of School-Aged Children in Enugu North Local Government

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Abstract

This study evaluated the peer relationship and social adaptation of school-aged children in Enugu North Local Government Area (LGA), Enugu State. A cross-sectional survey design was employed in a population of 60,780 (29,968 males and 30,812 females) schoolchildren in the LGA. Multi-stage sampling method was employed in the selection of 602 school-aged children from 58 schools who formed the sample for the study. Three research questions guided the study. The reliability of the instrument was ascertained using Cronbach's alpha reliability index and scores of 0.50 and 0.70 for the peer relationship questionnaire for children, and the social adaptation scale respectively were obtained. Statistical Product for Service Solution (IBM-SPSS) software version 23, was used. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (Spearman Rank Order correlation) were conducted, and presented in the form of tables. Most (62.6%) of the respondents showed moderate social adaptation mostly when they are with their families (4.53 ± 2.31). The majority (76.6%) had low peer relationships. A significant positive relationship was found between peer relationships and social adaptation. Governmental and non-governmental organizations should therefore organize programs that will facilitate peer relationships and social adaptation among school-aged children and also educate teachers and parents to be of great help to the children.

Keywords: Peer relationship, Social-adaptation, School-aged, Enugu North

Introduction

According to United Nations (2019) report, 661,761 thousand school-aged children make up the world's population. School-aged according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (2020) comprises individuals in the 6-12 years age group. School-aged children are in the age period commonly referred to as middle childhood. Children start formal schooling at this age. Across the world, by the time a child is entering middle childhood, they are being educated in some form or fashion. Children's cognitive and social skills are evaluated as they enter and progress through school (World Bank, 2021). This implies that school plays a very important role in a child's life. It helps in the overall growth and personality development of a child from positive interaction to widening horizons to character building, communal harmony and social socialization, learning of new things, and social development (Jackie, 2019). In 2018, Nigeria had 22.4 million school-aged children enrolled in public elementary schools and 5.5 million in private schools (Simona, 2021). A report from the Enugu State Ministry of Education (2014) showed that a total of 187,495 enrolled in public schools (56%) while 148,191 enrolled in private schools (44%). In Enugu North, there are 13,341 school-aged children in public schools and 14,484.

Middle childhood which encompasses school-aged children is a stage where children move into

expanding roles and environments. At this stage, more time is being spent on schoolwork and other activities. school-aged children have more and more interactions with their peers, and their peer relationships have become increasingly closer. Peer relationships can be defined as how two or more people of the same rank, value, quality, or ability; talk to, feel, behave, toward and deal with each other. It is a connection between two or more people of the same age, or the same social position or the same abilities or of equal standing. Peer theory and empirical research have shown that peers are an important source of children's social development and an important influencing factor for children's self-concept and healthy personality formation (Wu et al., 2011). Pepler and Bierman (2018) claim that peer interactions offer a singular framework for children to develop a variety of essential social-emotional abilities, including empathy, cooperation, and problem-solving techniques. The impact of peer relationships at school may facilitate the social adaptation of school-aged children.

Sam (2013) describes social adaptation as the process of adjusting to the rules, expectations, and morality of the society in which we all coexist. Social adaptation is a process in which individuals actively regulate their behaviours to achieve a state of balance and coordination with their external environment (Haowen et al., 2021). The

level of social adaptation reflects the social and psychological maturity of an individual. School-aged children are at an important age of psychological maturity in life, and the social adaptation status is not only related to their psychological health development but also affects interpersonal harmony and social stability. The social skills, social awareness, and self-confidence of a child all have a role in how well they can adjust socially. Factors such as the child's self-confidence or social anxiety can affect his or her social adaptation (Encyclopedia of Children's Health, 2021).

According to Boivin (2014), early peer relationship difficulties are correlated with a variety of adjustment problems such as school dropout, delinquency and emotional problems, such as loneliness, depression and anxiety. Yet the evidence for long-term consequences of peer difficulties experienced in the school-age years is limited, as other potential causes (e.g. personal or environmental factors) have not been ruled out. Peer rejection, however, seems to increase the likelihood of maladjustment in young children who already exhibit behavioural and emotional issues. These issues, though usually not fatal, have an impact on children's development, learning, interpersonal connections, and future health and well-being as adolescents and adults. In Nigeria, little is known about the prevalence of peer relationships among school-aged children and the social

adaptation of school-aged children, possibly due to its implicit and subconscious nature. It is therefore imperative to conduct this study.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. determine the peer relationship status of the school-aged children;
2. ascertain the social adaptation status of the school-aged children and
3. evaluate peer relationships and social adaptation of school-aged children.

Methodology

Study design: A cross-sectional survey design was employed in this study, which was selected because it allows the comparison of different variables at the same time from the cross-section of the population.

Study population: The study population comprised school-aged children in Enugu North Local Government Area of Enugu State. According to the Ministry of Education (2019), the population of the study consisted of 60,780 primary school pupils (29,968 males and 30,812 females) in the 290 registered primary schools in Enugu-North Local Government Area in Enugu State, Nigeria.

Sampling Technique/Sample Size

Determination: Multi-stage sampling method was used to select the eligible school-aged children for the study. The first stage involved cluster sampling of the schools into private (240 schools) and public clusters (36 schools). The second stage involved the use of simple

random sampling without replacement to select 5% of schools in each cluster. This gave a total of 15 schools- 3 schools from the public cluster, and 12 schools from the private cluster. The third stage involved the calculation of sample size using the WHO (2013) formula. This gave a total sample size of 602 (252 pupils from the public cluster and 350 from the private cluster). The fourth stage involved proportionate sampling of the school-aged children in each of the selected schools. The final stage involved a random selection of primary five and six children present on the day of the visit whose parents' and teachers' consent has been obtained. These two classes were selected because the children were considered more capable of giving a self-report.

Instrument for Data Collection: A structured questionnaire and two standardized questionnaires were used to elicit information from the respondents. The questionnaire contained items on the socio-economic/demographic characteristics of the respondents. The standardized instruments were the Peer Relation Questionnaire for children (PRQ; Rigby & Slee, 1993), and Social Adaptation Scale (SAS; Robson, 2013). The PRQ is a 20-item questionnaire which contains three subscales: (a) bullying (6 items), (b) victimization (6 items), and (c) pro-social behaviour (4 items); and four filler items. The items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale; never (1), once in a while (2), often (3), and very often (4). Children were

asked to indicate how often the statements apply to them for the various categories. A sample item for bullying others is 'I like to make others scared of me', an item for being victimized by others includes 'I get picked on by other kids', and an item for prosocial behaviour was 'I share things with others'. The SAS consists of 44 items and it was used to assess the children's social adaptation level. The scoring was performed on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. A high score represents high social adaptation. The arithmetic mean above 3.0 was regarded as high social adaptation, while below 3.0 was regarded as low adaptation.

Validity and reliability of the instrument: The reliability of the instruments for the study was ascertained using Cronbach's alpha reliability test. Coefficient scores were 0.50 for the Peer Relation Questionnaire (PRQ) indicating moderate internal consistency, and 0.70 for the Social Adaptation Scale (SAS) indicating high internal consistency of the items.

Method of Data Collection: Data were collected using a questionnaire. A total of 602 questionnaires were shared by trained research assistants to the selected children by hand after written consent was obtained from their parents. The researcher explained the purpose of the study to the respondents and the modalities of answering the questions. Each of the

questions on the questionnaire was read out aloud and explained as the respondents were encouraged to tick the applicable answer. The questionnaires were filled on the spot. Each questionnaire took about 15 minutes to be filled out. Two research assistants assisted in the data collection. The research took 8 weeks to be completed. A total of 594 questionnaires were retrieved with a return rate of 98.7%.

Data and Statistical Analysis: the collected data were sorted and cleaned from errors and missing information. The data collected was coded and analyzed using the computer software known as Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) version 23.0.

For peer relationships, the minimum and maximum obtainable scores are 20 and 80 respectively. Raw scores ranging from 20 to 50 were categorized as low while scores from 51 to 80 were categorized as high. Under the bullying sub-category of peer relationships, the minimum and maximum obtainable scores are 6 and 24 respectively. Scores ranging from 6 to 14 were categorized as low while scores ranging from 15 to 24 were categorized as high. Under the victim sub-category of peer relationship, the minimum and maximum obtainable scores are 6 and 24 respectively. Scores ranging from 6 to 14 were categorized as low while scores ranging from 15 to 24 were categorized as high. Under the pro-social sub-category of peer relationships, the minimum and maximum obtainable scores are 4 and

16 respectively. Scores ranging from 4 to 9 were categorized as low while scores ranging from 10 to 16 were categorized as high.

For social adaptation, the minimum and maximum obtainable scores are 26 and 130 respectively. Raw scores ranging from 26 to 60 were categorized as low, scores ranging from 61 to 94 were categorized as moderate while scores ranging from 95 to 130 were categorized as high. Results were presented as frequencies and percentages, means and standard deviations. Spearman rank order correlation was used to ascertain the relationship between the variables. Significance was accepted at 95% precision ($p < 0.05$). The decision rule for peer relationship, and social adaptation was set at mean scores greater or equal to 2.5, and 3.0 respectively as agreed.

Results

The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents revealed that 41.4% of the respondents were from public schools while 58.6% were from private schools. The females among them were 57.9% while the males were 42.1%. Most (55.9%) of them were within 9-11 years and the least percentage (3.4%) was those in the age range of 6 to 8 years. Most (85.2%) of the children had both of their parents married and living together while a few (4.7%) of them had separated parents. A higher percentage (55.6%) of children had their classmates as their best friends while a lower percentage (5.4%) had their best friend

as their teacher. About half (51.7%) of the school-aged children were in primary six while 48.3% of the children were in primary 5.

Peer Relationship Status of the Children

Table 1 indicates the peer relationship status of school-aged children. Data showed that the majority (76.6%) of the school-aged children had low peer relationships while only 23.4% had

high peer relationship status. In terms of the categorization of the peer relationship status, a greater percentage (95.8%) of the children had low scores on bullying while only 4.2% had high scores on bullying. About 81.6% are less prone to bully while 18.4% had high victim status. Few (17.2%) of the children had low pro-social status while the majority (82.8%) had high pro-social status.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage scores on the Peer Relationship Status of the school-aged children

Variables	<i>f</i>	%
Peer Relationship Status		
Low peer relationship	455	76.6
High peer relationship	139	23.4
Total	594	100
Peer relationship categorization		
Bullying		
Low Bullying	569	95.8
High Bullying	25	4.2
Total	594	100
Victimization		
Low Victimization	485	81.6
High Victimization	109	18.4
Total	594	100
Pro-Social		
Low Pro Social	102	17.2
High Pro Social	492	82.8
Total	594	100

Social Adaptation Level of the Children

Table 2 indicates the level of social adaptation of the children. It can be

seen that the majority (62.6%) of the school-aged children had moderate social adaptation levels, 36.7% had high level of social adaptation, and only 0.7% had low social adaptation.

Table 2: Frequency and percentage score on the social adaptation level of the school-aged children

Variables	<i>f</i>	%
Low social adaptation level	4	0.7
Moderate social adaptation level	372	62.6
High social adaptation level	218	36.7
Total	594	100

Peer Relationship and Social Adaptation of the Children

Table 3 shows the interaction between peer relationships and social adaptation of school-aged children. From the table, peer relationship was positively and significantly related to social adaptation ($r=0.201^{**}$, $p < 0.05$)

although the relationship was weak. This implies that as their peer relationship status is increasing, their social adaptation level is also increasing.

Table 3: Peer relationship and social adaption level of the school-aged children

	Peer Relationship	Social Adaptation
Peer Relationship Status-	Correlation	1
	Coefficient	0.190**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001
Social Adaptation-	Correlation	0.190**
	Coefficient	0.001
	Sig. (2-tailed)	1

** Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed) * correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Discussion

In the study, the status of peer relationships was found to be low (76.6%) among school-aged children. This contradicts the findings of Lu (2020) who revealed that the majority (85.15%) of the students can maintain a relatively stable peer relationship development. This variation could be a result of their relationships at home with parents and siblings, the parent relationship and the family's levels of social support. The children displayed low bullying and low victimization. This could be linked to their family condition as the majority reported having both parents alive. Asides from the majority of the children that had their classmates as their best friends, most of them mentioned their parents as their best friends. This supports the opinions of Jeynes (2008) and Lereya et al (2013) that parents act as both protective factors and resources for the prevention of bullying. The findings of the study also reveal the children's competency in regulating their emotions. High pro-social behaviour was however observed among the children. This affirms the work of Van den Bos et al. (2011) who showed that prosocial behaviour has a positive relationship with age. This is so as the majority of the children were within nine to eleven years. The most outstanding characteristic of school-aged children is being of help to others. Sharing and helping are the two basic prosocial behaviours that start to emerge in early childhood and

eventually become more pronounced in adulthood (Dunfield et al., 2011). According to Jones et al. (2015), pro-social behaviours are a hallmark of social competence in children of all ages and correlate with social adjustment in later life. The finding of this study is therefore not out of place.

The findings of this study revealed moderate social adaptation among school-aged children indicating that the children might not possess the optimal social adaptation skills. This can be due to the interpersonal relationship they have with their classmates and their parents. Interpersonal relationships and coping skills amongst others, have been identified as relevant aspects of social adaptation (Racz et al., 2017). A study carried out by Zaar (2021), which contradicts the findings of this work, shows that children in middle childhood have high social adaptation. They are continuously doing things, making plans, having fun, hanging out with friends, and accomplishing things because they are very busy or hardworking. They are experiencing a lot of activity at this time and are learning how they compare to their friends.

In this study, peer relationships had a weak positive relationship with social adaptation. This implies that as the peer relationship status of the respondents is increasing, their social adaptation level increases equally. This indicates that the interaction school-aged children have with their peers

might have an impact on their ability to adjustment to the demands, restrictions and morals of the society. According to Rubin (2012), one consequence of regularly finding oneself in the company of another person and either interacting (or not interacting) in particular ways with that person is the development of identifiable social relationships. If interactions do take place between peers, the nature of the relationships that the members of the dyad develop may be influenced by the nature of these interactions. Thus, positive interactions (e.g., helping, caring, sharing interactions) may lead one to think and feel positively about the individual with whom such exchanges have taken place, be attracted to that person and look to establish a deep, enduring, and beneficial connection with the person. This study by Rubin affirms that peer relationship among school-aged children has an impact on the way they adapt to their social environment.

Conclusion

The study provided insight into the level of interactions among children and their peers, and how it relates to their ability to adjust to their social

environments. Most of the children interacted positively with their mates. They exhibited high prosocial behaviours and were less involved in bullying and being victimized by other children. Only very few of them showed problematic peer relationships. The high prosocial behaviour may have contributed to their high level of positive peer relationships. The children also showed a moderate level of social adaptation which varied with their peer relationship status. The more they related well with their peers, the more their ability to adjust to the demands, restrictions and morals of society. Social adaptation of children might therefore be considered a function of their relationship with their peers.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of the study it was recommended that programmes like debates, talk shows, e.t.c. that would foster social interactions amongst school-aged children should be encouraged. This is because such programs that promote peer relations can invariably increase one's level of social adaptation.

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