

Mother Tongue, Starting Age, and Child's Response to Schooling in Primary Schools in Lagos State, Nigeria: Implications for Policy and Institutional Administration

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Abstract

The issue of using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction in early childhood and primary education in Nigeria has recently attracted many comments. Similar to this is the adoption of age restriction as a requirement for admissions into all levels of education in Nigeria. It is on these premises that this study examined the nexus among the mother tongue, starting age, and child's response to schooling in the multilingual city of Lagos, Nigeria. Taking into cognisance the shock of transitioning from home to school for the first time, the study investigated how differences in the language of instruction and starting age impacted children's adaptability and enthusiasm at the first entry into school. A descriptive survey research design was used, and the population consisted of all the approved 11,550 Early Childhood Care and Development Centres (ECCDC) with all their 43,309 teachers in Lagos State. A random sampling technique was used to select 578 ECCDC and 2,165 teachers. A set of questionnaires and an open-ended interview were the instruments used for the collection of data. Three hypotheses were tested using regression analysis at 0.05 level of significance, and the results showed that both mother tongue and starting age do not predict a child's response to schooling. The findings provide critical understandings for policy formulation and institutional administration aimed at enhancing children's early educational experiences in multilingual and multicultural contexts. The study, therefore, recommends de-emphasising the use of mother tongue and flexibility in admission policies into all levels of education in Nigeria.

Keywords: admission requirements, mother tongue, multilingual, response to schooling, starting age

1. Background to the Study

Children's response to schooling has always been a major concern for early childhood educators, researchers and school administrators. For example, Perry, Dockett, and Howard (2000) expressed concerns about the types of adjustments a child is expected to make on their first call in school. These adjustments, they reported, may make schooling unattractive to children in the first instance. More children begin the school system by following the state's approved and compulsory school requirements. These requirements are stereotypically founded on a definite chronological age, and they seem to be created more for suitability and supposed fairness than based on what empirical studies have shown about child development. Implicitly, changing from home to school is not always easy for children. The reason for this may not be unconnected with the challenge of leaving all the familiar people for a completely strange environment. At this stage, it may not be easy to acclimatise quickly to the new environment with its new requirements. This partly accounts for the reasons why many children are somehow reluctant to go to school in the first instance. The challenges could be more profound if the child's mother tongue is not the language of instruction in the school. This is quite common in a multilingual city like Lagos (Nigeria). Mother tongue is the first language a child learns or acquires from interaction with their immediate environment, such as the family. Since language and identity are linked, it becomes very difficult for immigrants in a foreign land to drop their native language for a new one and also become fluent in such a language. Mother tongue education refers to the use of a person's native language or first language for teaching at both formal and non-formal levels (Abijo, 2014). Keysar, Hayakawa and An (2012) maintained that adopting a foreign language could be hard as it increases cognitive load and leads to greater reliance on intuitive and affective processes. This may lead to a low response to schooling in children. Since the children already have some challenges to cope with, the issue of coping with a language different from their mother tongue may make it difficult for them to respond well to school.

In Nigeria, the national policy on education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013) stipulates that the mother tongue or language of the immediate environment should be used as a medium of instruction for the first three years in primary schools. During this period, the English language should be taught as a subject. This presents a serious issue in a multilingual city like Lagos. In Lagos, almost all the ethnic groups in Nigeria and Africa are represented. The issue of what constitutes language of the immediate environment, therefore, becomes critical.

Another serious issue in a child's response to schooling is the starting age. In Nigeria, the approved starting age for primary school is six years, which is different from what obtains in the United Kingdom. In the United Kingdom, children usually start primary school at four and must do by five. Piaget's (1936) theory of cognitive development advocates that enrolling a child in school before they are psychologically ready would not be of benefit to him. In this regard, a child may not be considered capable of responding well to school if they have not reached a suitable developmental stage. Against this backdrop, can we then conclude that the inability of some children to respond well to schooling during the initial year is due to mother tongue and starting age? How do the mother tongue and starting age impact on child's response to schooling? All these are the thrust of this study.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The affection between mother and child is (generally) born from nature. From the womb, the mother communicates with the child. When the child is born, the affection continues, and the baby naturally clings to the mother. The baby develops gradually and acquires the language of the mother; hence, it is called the mother tongue. As this cordiality continues, the child is released to school. The first few days or weeks in school are not always easy. This is understandable as the schools present a new set of requirements. The fact that the child is also expected to live independently of the home may be another reason for his unwillingness to go to school. It becomes more difficult if the language of instruction at school is not the same as the mother tongue. Added to this problem is the starting age. This study, therefore, investigated the relationship among mother tongue, starting age, and the child's response to schooling at the primary school level.

1.2. Objectives

The general objective of this study was to investigate the relationship among mother tongue, starting age and the child's response to schooling. Specifically, the study:

1. evaluated the relationship between mother tongue and the child's response to schooling in Lagos State;
2. investigated whether the starting age of a child significantly predicts their response to schooling; and
3. examine the joint correlation among mother tongue, starting age, and the child's response to schooling.

1.3. Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested in this study:

1. Mother tongue and child's response to schooling are not significantly correlated in Lagos State.
2. Starting age will not significantly predict child response to schooling in Lagos State.
3. Mother tongue and starting age do not jointly predict a child's response to schooling in Lagos State.

2. Literature Review

The issue of mother tongue in Nigeria's education system, especially at the primary level, is hinged on the belief that children understand better when taught in their primary language. According to Nishanthi (2000), the mother tongue is defined as the first language a baby learns from their parents. This is otherwise known as the native language.

Recognising the importance of the mother tongue, Awopetu (2016) reiterated that its benefits lie in the fact that it categorises a large part of the child's environment so that objects, actions, ideas, attributes, etc., are given names that are familiar to the learners. This, therefore, makes it easier for them to understand the teacher better.

Ozoemena, Ngwoke, & Nwokolo (2021) conducted a study on the prospects of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in Nigerian primary-level education. Data were collected through a purposive sampling technique from 150 public and private primary school teachers in the Gwagwalada Area Council of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Nigeria. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire. The result of the analysis showed that the multilingual nature of Nigeria and the lack of terminologies for instructional materials and science equipment in the indigenous languages were inhibitions to the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction at the primary level of education in Nigeria.

Awopetu (2016) conducted a study on the impact of mother tongue on children's learning abilities in early childhood classrooms using an experimental research design approach. All preschool children in the Akure South Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria, were used as samples. Two schools were selected, one served as an experimental group, while the second was used as the control group. The study found that the pupils in the experimental group, where the mother tongue was used as the medium of instruction, performed better than those who were taught in English in the control group.

Nishanthi (2000) further reiterated the nexus among mother tongue, critical thinking and literacy skills. He maintained that a child who consciously develops his mother tongue would simultaneously foster his critical thinking ability and literary skills. However, he warned that in many developing countries (Nigeria inclusive), a high proportion of children enter the school system with a deficiency in the language of the classroom. This is because teaching is often carried out in the old colonial languages such as French, English and Portuguese, which they do not speak at home. The end result of this according to Nishanthi is the inability of primary school children to read fluently or write clearly.

Buckley (2003) discovered a gap between mother tongue and language of instruction among children in their early school years. He explained that the consequential effect of this is that the linkage between the home and the school becomes disconnected. Hence, the child may drop out of school before completing the lower primary classes. In concluding his report, he suggested an inquiry into the language vocabularies of the child by the school to see if some of them could be adopted for use in the school.

Ellis (2010) established that children already had some experiences, including knowledge of language, before joining the formal school system. He was, however, worried that the school system does not always bother about the usefulness of those experiences and languages to the smooth take-off of the academic journey.

Skutnabb and Kangas (2000) found that bilingualism, which comprises the mother tongue and language of instruction, which in most cases is English, has a positive relationship with child learning. Implicitly, when a child develops competency in two or more languages, they gain more understanding of the contents of the school curriculum.

Noormohamadi (2008) examined the link between language and cognitive development, he found that language intellectualises thought to a greater degree. He concluded that children who are taught in their

mother tongue learn concepts and intellectual skills that are more relevant for them to function in their entire life than those who are taught with foreign language.

Another crucial variable considered in this study is the school starting age. Starting age, otherwise known as the age of starting school, is the statutory number of years a child must attain before beginning to attend school. This varies from country to country. For example, in Nigeria, the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013) stipulates that a child is qualified to enter pre-primary education at age five, after which he/she will transit to the primary level at age six. By age six, he/she is expected to have completed primary school. Invariably, a child is expected to start Junior Secondary (JS) One at the age of 12 and complete their secondary education (Senior Secondary School) at the age of 17. This accounts for the reason why some universities in Nigeria, especially the University of Lagos, set their entry age at 16. Other countries such as Northern Ireland, England, France, and Finland set their ages of compulsory education at four, five, six and seven, respectively.

Sharp (2002), in a paper presented at the LGA seminar in London on “When should our children start school?” argued that the early year school starting age adopted by the British was to protect the child from exploitation at home and unhealthy conditions on the street. She added that an early school starting age would enable the child to leave school on time and join the labour force at a young age.

Dockett and Perry (2002) listed four conceptions of readiness in a child’s response to schooling. These include maturationist, environmental, social constructivist and interactionist views. Of these four views, only the maturationist view is closely related to age. This is because the maturationists believe that children’s response to schooling is influenced by their inner “time clocks” for development. This means that readiness in children for schooling cannot be controlled. They are ready to learn when they are ready.

Dhuey, Figlio, Karbownik and Roth (2017) investigated the relationship between school-starting age and children’s cognitive development from ages six to 15. They used a regression discontinuity design and large-scale population-level birth and school data from the state of Florida. They reported that children who are older performed better than those who are younger at the start of elementary school.

In another study conducted by Black, Devereux and Salvanes (2011) on the role of school-starting age on long-run outcomes, such as IQ scores at age 18, it was reported that the effect was positive at a younger age but tended to disappear as the child grew older. This means that the younger the age, the lower the level of school achievement and vice versa, at an early age of schooling.

The study of Cascio and Schanzenbach (2007) that investigated the relationship between age and education production function found no evidence of the relevance of age in children's school achievement. However, they observed that disadvantaged children assigned to a classroom where they are among the youngest students are less likely to take college entrance examinations than others of the same biological age.

Cook and Kang (2018) studied the correlation between school-entry age, redshirting patterns, and disparities and achievement. They found that there was a reduction in the male-female achievements of those who had delayed entry.

From the various literature reviewed, it is obvious that issues on mother tongue and school starting age, as they affect children's response to school, are not new. They have received considerable attention from many researchers, as indicated in the review. However, the literature review revealed that there was a population gap in the studies, as the studies were conducted in monoethnic societies. The findings may therefore not apply to a cosmopolitan city like Lagos, where we have over a hundred ethnic groups with diversities in mother tongue and various cultural beliefs about when a child should start school.

3. Methodology

The study used the descriptive survey research design and a mixed-method approach. This enabled an in-depth investigation of the problem using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data were collected, and then qualitative data were used to explain or elaborate on the quantitative results. The rationale for this approach was that the quantitative data provided a general picture of the research problem to explain the general picture of how children respond to schooling in a multilingual society.

The population comprised all the approved 11,550 Early Childhood Care and Development Centres (ECCDC) with all their 43,309 teachers in Lagos State (Universal Basic Education Commission, 2022). A random sampling technique was used to select 578 ECCDC and 2,165 teachers. The choice of Lagos was because it is a multilingual society where almost all ethnic groups in Nigeria can be found. It made it easy to get the impact of mother tongue on early school starters.

Two instruments were used to collect data from the participants. The first one was a Likert-scale type questionnaire entitled “Mother Tongue, School Starting Age and Child’s Response to Schooling Questionnaire”, otherwise known as MTSSACRSQ. The MTSSACRSQ administered to teachers was divided into two parts, namely, part A, which gathered information on the bio-data of participants and part B, which sought information on the independent variables (mother tongue and starting age) and the dependent variable (child’s response to schooling) in the study. The indicators of mother tongue were language background, frequency of use, and proficiency, while cognitive and physical readiness were used as indicators of school starting age. Child’s response to schooling were viewed around academic performance, classroom participation, and relationships with peers. The instrument was validated by two lecturers, one each from the Department of Educational Management and the Department of Psychology. The test-retest reliability method was used to ascertain the reliability of the instrument, and a reliability coefficient of 0.89 was obtained.

The second instrument was an open-ended oral interview administered to the same set of teachers. This solicited information on how well or not a child responded to school at the outset of their school days, and it also complemented the data gathered from the questionnaire. The selected respondents' email addresses and phone numbers were collected, and a Google Form questionnaire was sent to the addresses for ease of administration and collection of the questionnaire. Hypotheses one and two were tested using regression analysis, while hypothesis three was tested with multiple regression analytical tools.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Piaget, 1936). The theory maintains that the level of intelligence changes as the child grows and moves from one developmental stage to the other. He divided the child's developmental stages into four, namely, the sensorimotor stage (from birth to two years), the preoperational stage (from two to seven years), the concrete operational stage (from seven to 11 years), and the formal operational stage (from 12 years to adulthood). The theory equally holds that all children, irrespective of cultural or socio-economic background, go through the stages in the same order. The interpretation of this is that children exhibit behaviours that are peculiar to each stage of development. For example, at the sensorimotor stage, the child learns by exploring the environment and through self-recognition. The child recognises at this stage that even if an object disappears or is hidden, it still exists. At the tail end of this stage, the child begins to acquire language. This starts with a symbolic representation of objects. Proper language acquisition and development are prominent features of the preoperational stage. At this stage, the child uses mental representation to describe and categorise objects. He also tends towards becoming egocentric as he expects everybody to see objects from his perspective.

Serious logical thinking begins at the third stage, that is, the concrete operational stage. The child begins to think logically as he understands the principle of reasoning from specific information to general

principles. He understands at this stage that his thoughts are unique only to him, as others view issues differently.

The last stage, which is the formal operational stage, is characterised by the use of deductive logic or reasoning from general to specific. Concerns about philosophical, moral, ethical, and social issues also feature prominently at this stage.

The relevance of this theory to the study is that different cognitive activities occur at different stages of life. Since no individual can skip any of these developmental stages, it becomes important to expose a child only to activities that are peculiar to each stage. Implicitly, if no serious language acquisition or cognitive reasoning would be achieved at the first stage of development, that is, the sensorimotor stage, it could therefore be more beneficial to keep the child at home at this stage, where the mother tongue could be introduced, rather than being at school.

4. Results

4.1. Hypothesis One

Hypothesis One stated that mother tongue and the child’s response to schooling are not significantly correlated in Lagos State. The regression analysis is presented in Table 1.

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	p-value	95% Confidence Interval (Lower)	95% Confidence Interval (Upper)
Intercept	5.20	0.45	11.56	<0.001	4.30	6.10
Mother Tongue (Yoruba)	0.30	0.15	2.00	0.045	0.01	0.59
Mother Tongue (Igbo)	0.10	0.18	0.56	0.575	-0.26	0.46
Mother Tongue (Hausa)	-0.05	0.20	-0.25	0.803	-0.44	0.34
Mother Tongue (Other)	0.12	0.14	0.86	0.389	-0.16	0.40
R-squared	0.032					
Adjusted R-squared	0.018					
F-statistic	2.87			0.021		
Number of Observations	2165					

Predictor = Mother Tongue

a. Dependent Variable = Child’s Response to Schooling

Table 1: Mother Tongue and Child’s Response to Schooling; source: Original Research

A regression analysis was run to determine the contributions of mother tongue (Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and others) to the child’s response to schooling. The analysis showed that Yoruba had a P-value of 0.045. This showed that children whose mother tongue is Yoruba are more likely to adjust better to schooling, while Hausa, Igbo, and others with P-values greater than 0.05 did not show significant effects on child’s response to schooling. However, the overall model had a low R² value of 0.032. This means that generally, the mother tongue does not explain much of the variance in the child’s response to schooling, as it accounted for only 3.2%. Based on this, it can be concluded that mother tongue does not predict a child’s response to schooling.

Buckley (2003), and Noormohamadi (2008), who discovered a positive correlation between mother tongue and child performance in school. This disparity may be linked to the difficulty in defining what a mother tongue is in a multi-ethnic society like Lagos. For example, a child in Lagos may acquire three to four languages from their mother and neighbourhood. The mother may be a polyglot who speaks two or more languages, all of which may be spoken to the child without clear delineation. Inter-ethnic marriage, which is very common in the Lagos metropolis, may also contribute to why the mother tongue does not significantly influence a child's response to schooling. A Yoruba woman married to an Igbo man may adopt English as the primary medium of communication in the family, making it the child's mother tongue. Since the child acquires this language as a primary means of communication from the mother, adjusting to the formal school setting becomes easier, as there will be synergy between the language spoken at home and at school.

The second finding of this study showed that a child's response to schooling is not determined by the starting age. This finding agrees with the earlier finding of Sharp (2002), who maintained that school starting age does nothing more than protect a child from exploitation and unhealthy conditions on the street. It therefore has nothing to do with adjustment to schooling. However, the study is in disagreement with those of Dockett and Perry (2002), Dhuey, Figlio, Karbownik and Roth (2017), Black, Devereux and Salvanes (2011), Cascio and Schanzenbach (2007), and Cook and Kang (2018). They found a positive correlation between starting age and the child's response to schooling. The disparity in the findings may be due to variation in the child's mental health, cognitive abilities, and behavioural tendencies. Implicitly, a child with good mental health, sound cognitive ability, and positive behavioural tendencies may respond well to schooling regardless of age.

5.1. Implications for Policy and Institutional Administration

The following are the implications of these findings for policy and institutional administration:

Firstly, de-emphasising the use of the mother tongue in basic education in Nigeria: It is high time the provision of Section 1(8g) in the National Policy on Education be reviewed. This section mandates the use of the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment as the medium of instruction in the first four years of basic education in Nigeria. The problem of what constitutes the language of the immediate environment in a multilingual society like Lagos, Port Harcourt, Abuja, etc., renders this policy impracticable. This, therefore, shows that the policy of mother tongue in the National Policy on Education is not relevant to the Nigerian education landscape. Education policy makers and administrators, therefore, need to rethink priorities by focusing on English, which is the official language in Nigeria, instead of the individual mother tongue.

Secondly, flexibility in enrollment policies: Since starting age does not significantly impact a child's response to schooling, the age-based enrollment policy at all levels of education in Nigeria should be abolished. Flexible guidelines that would allow children to start school when they are psychologically ready should be encouraged rather than by age.

6. Conclusion

This study carefully investigated the predictive strength of mother tongue and starting age on a child's response to schooling. The findings showed that neither mother tongue nor starting age predicts a child's response to schooling. It further revealed that the plurality of Nigeria's ethnic structure, with three major and hundreds of minor ethnic groups, makes the country unsuitable for the adoption of mother tongue as a language of instruction at any level of the country's education system. The starting age, which has been a major issue in school admission, especially at the tertiary education level, should be deprioritised. Possession of foundational or basic literacy, numeracy, and socio-psychological readiness in a child should be emphasised rather than the starting age. Since this study was carried out in a multi-ethnic society, it may not be possible to generalise the findings. A mono-ethnic society without the characteristics of Lagos State, Nigeria, may present a different finding. Therefore, further research that will look into the correlation among the variables in a monolingual society is necessary.

7. References

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