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Influence of Family Communication on Adolescent Students' Learning Processes in Lagos, Nigeria

Thanny, Noeem Taiwo & Baruwa, Olaide Abibat

Abstract

Communicating effectively within the family is highly significant. It is even more significant that relationship between parents and their adolescent children be cordial. Adolescents desire independence as much as educational pursuits, fashion and relationship. There are increasing evidences that students' learning is somehow influenced by interplay of their individual, family and school characteristics. The study seeks to assess the relationship between family communication and adolescents' learning process as well the influence of family communication on adolescents' performances. The Relational Dialects Theory, the Social Learning Theory and the Guided Collaborative Learning Theory were used to frame the study. A descriptive survey of secondary school students who are adolescents and their parents was conducted in Lagos State. Representative samples for the study were selected using the multi-stage sampling involving the five old divisions of Lagos State (Ikeja, Badagry, Ikorodu, Lagos Island and Epe). Two schools (one public and one private) were selected from each of the five divisions using the stratified random sampling from a sampling frame provided by the Lagos State Ministry of Education. Non-Co-educational schools were omitted from the study to ensure that samples drawn cut across sex and reflect family economic status. A sample of 120 respondents made up of 60 secondary school students and 60 parents of the students, twelve each from the selected schools. Data collected from questionnaire and focus group discussion were analysed using simple frequency count and percentage as well as constant comparative method. Findings reveal that a large percentage of respondents express close relationship with their adolescent children contrary to La Poire's (2006) position that there is often a withdrawal in relationship between parents and adolescents due to generational differences. Results further showed that there is a high level of influence of family communication on adolescents' performances in school.

Introduction

THE FAMILY IS A UNIT OF INTERACTING PERSONALITIES LIVING TOGETHER and relating with one another. It is a group of old and young ones living together, sharing common characteristics and whose lives inter-weave with one another. It is also the basic unit of any society. Therefore, to accomplish meaningful transformation in any society or nation, the family should be the primary focus.

Effective communication is highly significant in the family. According to Ekwe (1992) cited by Asonibare and Olowonirejuaro (2006), human beings are always relating to themselves, and as a result, are affecting one another's behavior. Therefore, effective communication is the foundation upon which a stable and cohesive family is built. This view is supported by Kolo (1993) cited by Asonibare and Olowonirejuaro (2006). The view is that a crucial element in a healthy relationship is that communication is used to effectively help in moulding adolescents. This well desired behavior then leads to a happy relationship.

Value system of adolescents is poles apart from those of the adults. This is so because adolescents do not always fall in line with the acceptable norms and values of the society. One of the major desires of the adolescents is the craving for independence which is to live a life that is free from any form of adult control and such a life the parents will not approve of. Other aspects of adolescents' life which demands effective communication between them and their parents include: educational pursuits, expectations and aspirations, choice of career and marriage partner, physique, fashion or dressing, relationship with opposite sex and sexual behavior (Kim, 2008).

According to Ekwe (1992), the period of adolescence is when most parents accuse their teenage children of not listening to parental advice, the instructions and misunderstandings of good intentions parents have for them. The adolescent children on their parts accuse parents and other adults of treating them as things to be seen and not to be heard. They also accuse adults of not taking time to understand their actions and life styles. There is thus, the inability of both generations to communicate and understand each other effectively.

In recent decades, calls for improvement of students' educational outcomes have addressed the need for attention to what best fosters students' learning, especially at their adolescent age. Students' learning is influenced by interplay of their individual, family and school characteristics, thus, family plays a critical role in students' intellectual upbringing. Recognizing that learning hinges on students' experiences both within and outside the classroom, this research study therefore, deals with evaluating the influence of family communication on secondary school students' learning process as it relates to adolescent parenting. This forms the main objective of this study.

While academic research has consistently shown that increased spending does not correlate with educational gains, the research does show a strong relationship between parental influences and children's learning processes, from school

readiness to college completion. It is noted that parents are a child's first and most influential teachers. Therefore, parental supervision is a key to successful performances of children in school. (Kim, 2008)

There are mixed reactions as to who is to blame for, as well as how to curb, the poor performance and improve learning process of students. This is where this study comes in. The researcher intended to find out how to curb students' poor performance and how to improve their learning process, using family communication. The crux of this study, therefore, is to have a clearer look at the influence of family communication on adolescent students' learning process in Lagos State.

Research questions

- i. What is the level of communication between parents and their secondary school children in Lagos State?
- ii. What is the relationship between family communication and secondary school students' learning process in Lagos State?
- iii. What is the influence of family communication on secondary school students' performances in Lagos State?

Conceptual and Theoretical Review

Communication between parents and children

Hundreds of studies show that how parents communicate with their children will have long-lasting consequences on their children's emotional lives. Whether parents treat their children with harsh punishment or empathy, with indifference or warmth, is particularly important. Also, couples who have good emotional intelligence pass these qualities along to their children (Goleman, 1995). As regards to how parents communicate with their children, there has been much more research on mothers than on fathers. Generally, mothers send support or control messages to their children. Support messages (nurturing) make a child feel comfortable and secure in the family relationship. They include praise for the child's competence and reassurance when the child is feeling anxious. Children who get support messages from their mothers have higher self-esteem, engage in less aggressive behavior, and conform more to what their mothers want (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 2003: 201).

Control messages are designed to get children to behave in ways that are acceptable to the mother. Strong control messages have negative effects on children. These messages increase aggression and decrease self-esteem, creativity, and academic achievement (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 2003). Mothers have two styles of responding to undesirable behavior. One style is **reactive**, in which the mother punishes the child when the behavior appears. The other style is **proactive**. In this style, the mother anticipates that the undesirable behavior is coming and

tries to divert the child. Proactive intervention takes more effort from the mother, but the long-term result is better behaviour.

Communication between fathers and children is not well documented because until recently mothers were regarded as the primary caregivers. Fathers have reported distress because work keeps them from spending as much time with their children as they would like. Some studies have shown that men are as good at caretaking as are women. However, it seems that only a few men take total responsibility for the care of a child, their role is much more likely to help out when help is needed (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 2003).

Adolescent girls and boys have more communication with their mothers than with their fathers. Adolescents see their mothers as more interested in their problems, more open and understanding, and more able to negotiate agreements. Fathers, however, are perceived as more authoritarian, more judgmental, and less willing to listen. Because some adolescents see their fathers as stern and rigid, they are more likely to react defensively to fathers than to mothers (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 2003, p. 209).

Parental Involvement and Students' Learning Process

Findings suggest that parents involve themselves in student school activities because they believe that they should be involved, believe that their involvement will make a positive difference, and perceive that their children or children's teachers want their involvement. Parents' involvement activities take many forms, from establishing structures for homework performance to teaching for understanding and developing student learning strategies. Operating largely through modeling, reinforcement, and instruction, parents' homework involvement appears to influence student success in so far as it supports students attributes related to intellectual achievement (e.g., attitudes about homework, perceptions of personal competence, self-regulatory skills).

Parental involvement in children's intellectual efforts appears to influence student learning process because it offers modeling, reinforcement, and instruction that support the development of attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors associated with successful school performance (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005). Parents' involvement activities give children multiple opportunities to observe and learn from their parents' modeling (of attitudes, knowledge, and skills pertinent to learning), to receive reinforcement and feedback on personal performance and capability, and to engage in instructional interactions related to homework content and learning processes.

Although most parents do not know how to help their children with their education, with guidance and support, they may become increasingly involved in home learning activities and find themselves with opportunities to teach to be models for and to guide their children. Also, when schools encourage children to practice reading at home with parents, the children make significant gains in reading achievement compared to those who only practice at school. Parents,

who read to their children, have books available, take trips, guide TV watching, and provide stimulating experiences, contribute to student achievement (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 2003).

Of relevance to this study is the relational dialectics theory which maintains that relational life is characterized by ongoing tensions between contradictory impulses. It pictures relational life as constant progress and motion. People in relationships continue to feel the push and pull of conflicting desires throughout the life of the relationship. Basically, people wish to have both/and, not either/or, when talking about opposing goals. Although this may be confounded, researchers who assert the relational dialectical position believe it accurately depicts the way that life is for people. People are not always able to resolve the contradictory elements of their beliefs, and they hold inconsistent beliefs about relationships. This theory asserts that in any relationship, there are inherent tensions between contradictory impulses, or dialectics. This theory is consistent with this study, for instance, adolescents (secondary school children) experience a dialectical tension between wanting independence and wanting dependence. They want to be grown up and independent, yet they also want the protection of their parents and family members. They want to disclose information to older family members because of their experience, yet they feel more comfortable discussing with their peers.

Closely related to this study is the social learning theory which advocates that people learn new behavior through overt reinforcement or punishment, or via observational learning of the social factors in their environment. Social learning theory focuses on the learning that occurs within a social context. It considers that people learn from one another, including such concepts as observational learning, imitation, and modeling. Even though social learning processes operate throughout the life span, and through observation of virtually any person, their applicability to child learning in the family context is undeniable. So for example, if two or three members of the family are lawyers, children raised in that family will have multiple models to observe, and are consequently very likely to adopt the educational inclination to own a law degree. Little wonder Smith (1982) notes that "we acquire most of our basic values and personal habits by initially observing our parents" behavior and later the behavior of admired friends and reference groups" (201). If the surrounding circumstances are right, these rules may then become prompts for behavior, or inhibitors of behavior, depending of the content of the mental representation. Therefore, they use their families as a benchmark for appropriate conduct.

Undoubtedly, family communication activities appear to influence students' learning process through instructional interactions that range from simple questions to processes intended to develop strategic understanding and problem-solving capacity. Hence, it is paramount to recognize the guided or collaborative learning theory which presents a situation whereby two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together; i.e. it is a joint intellectual effort by

groups of students, or students and teachers, or students and parents in work together in search for understanding, meaning or solutions or development. It depicts that parents' instructional activities appear salient to students" learning of attitudes, skills, and knowledge associated with school success and intellectual development. In collaborative learning, families share information and structure task-related processes in ways that enable the child to learn effectively and assume appropriate personal responsibility for learning. Such instructional activities may include directing child attention to task components, simplifying the task as needed, explaining new information, relating information to similar contexts, or responding to questions. Even when families have less than comprehensive knowledge of content or instructive strategy, they sometimes have advantages over teachers in instructional roles; for example, they tend to respond to their children's unique learning preferences and styles and may thus offer help particularly appropriate to child abilities and understanding.

Material and Method

The study is a descriptive survey that carefully examines the influence of family communication on secondary school students" learning process. Population for this study consists of secondary school students who are adolescents and parents of these students in Lagos state. It is believed that Lagos is a highly sociocultural melting pot and one of the most populous cities in Africa, thus, it is the most appropriate site for the study.

The method of drawing a representative sample for this study was mainly multi-stage. Here, the researcher stratified secondary schools in Lagos according to its five divisions (Ikeja, Badagry, Ikorodu, Lagos Island and Epe). The researchers further decided to pick two schools (a private school and a government school) from each division in the two centers of Lagos, using the stratified random method from a sampling frame of registered school in Lagos State provided by the Ministry of Education.

The researchers used two instruments for data collection in this study. The first is a ten-item FGD guide aimed at drawing responses that will help shape the questionnaire for the study. The second instrument was a 20 item questionnaire which has two parts. The first part contained Biodata information of the participants such as sex, age, educational level, family background, economic status, etc, while the second part asked questions in order to find out the level of communication between parents and students in relation to learning outcomes. Also, the questionnaire was designed in two versions- one for the adolescents and one for parents, in order to achieve desired outcomes. One hundred and twenty copies of the questionnaire were administered.

The data obtained and collated on the research questions were analyzed using frequency counts, simple percentages and tables. These simple statistical tools were preferred over others because they allow for easy comparison and better understanding of facts and findings. On the other hand, responses from the FGD

were analyzed using the constant-comparison method in line with the research questions. In sum, the two basic research approaches—the qualitative and quantitative methods - were used in the study.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Research question one:

1. What is the level of communication between parents and their secondary school children in Lagos state?

To answer this research question, items 6, 8, 9 and 10 on the questionnaire (students) as well as item 5, 7, 8 on questionnaire (parents) were analyzed independently and later put together for the analysis of communication between parents and their children in secondary school.

The analysis above shows that encouragement and counsel are rated slightly higher in the metropolis than suburb by adolescents in terms of the disciplinary actions their parents employ when they fall short of expectation. This finding is also evident in the parents' responses as encouragement and counsel are rated slightly higher in the metropolis than suburb as their adopted disciplinary actions when their children fall short of expectation.

Discussion of Findings

The findings obtained from the data provided address the influence of family communication on secondary school students" learning process in Lagos state. The results of the analysis were of the view of 110 respondents, which include more female respondents (students) in the metropolis than their male counterparts and likewise in the suburb, more female respondents (student) than their male counterparts. However there are more male respondents (parents) in the metropolis than their female counterparts while in the suburb, there are more male respondents (parents) than female.

From the data above, a large percentage of respondents state close relationship with their parents in the metropolis and suburb of Lagos. Likewise from the data presented above, a large percentage of respondents express close relationship with their teenage children as in the metropolitan centre and in the suburb. All the participants in the focus group discussion equally express close relationship with their parents. It is paramount to note that the data obtained here is inconsistent with Le Poire's (2006) position that there is often a withdrawal in relationship between parents and adolescents as the latter attempts to develop a unique and separate identity from the parent and involves more time spent in peer communication and a frequent amount of derogating communication aimed at parents (as their role of authority figure diminishes). Also, the view of Ekwe (1992) is contrary to the findings here as he asserted that there is the inability of parents and adolescents to communicate and understand each other because of generational gap.

As seen in the data, most of the respondents in the metropolis and suburb claim their parents extremely and quite monitor their out-of-home activities. Also, data as seen in the table depict that a large of number of the respondents in the metropolis and suburb claim they extremely and quite monitor their children's out-of-home activities. It is instructive to note that this position is in agreement with the position of many researchers in the area of family communication and learning process. The data particularly reckon with Turner & West's (2006) position that parents involve themselves in their children's education by monitoring their out of school activities.

Relevant data is also contained in questionnaire item 10 (students) which deals with opinions of respondents on whom they feel more comfortable discussing school related issues. The findings here illustrate marked differences in who these young students liaise most with on bothering issues concerning school work. In the suburb, a larger number of the respondents pick mother, followed by selection of peers, and then father. While in the city area, a larger number of the respondents pick mother and an equal number of respondents pick father and peers respectively. Different reasons account for this discrepancy as reflected in part B of the questionnaire item. Some participants in both the metropolis and suburb claim that their mother is more available and understands them better; some prefer their father because he is more capable in solving issues, while another part prefer their peers because they feel more comfortable around them and are readily available when issues need to be addressed.

In order to examine respondents' opinion on effect of family communication on their learning process, findings surprisingly show that there is little difference in respondents' opinion (students) in the metropolis and suburb of Lagos as there is almost an equal view that communication with their parents has a very great effect on their learning process. However, there is a marginal difference in respondents' opinion (parents) in both centres concerning the effect of communication on their children's learning process. Notwithstanding, a substantial percentage of respondents (parents) in both centres agree that the communication between both parties has a very great effect on secondary school students' learning process. This finding is highly significant because it readily supports Shumow and Miller's (2000) assertion that parents' involvement contributes to students' positive attitudes toward school.

While analyzing respondents' view on the effect of reward on performances, it was revealed that respondents (students and parents) in both metropolis and suburb of Lagos generally agree that rewarding a child" effort has direct influence on performances and encourages a child to do better. In the same fashion, participants in the F.G.D. in both centres of Lagos believe that rewarding a child encourages him/her to perform better subsequently as he/she looks forward to greater reward. This confirms the position of Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs (2000) that parental use of rewards and punishments are known to have an effect on student' academic aspirations.

The findings contained in the analysis of questionnaire items directly related to research question two are further supported by Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler's (2005) position that parental involvement in children's intellectual efforts appears to influence students' learning process because it offers modeling, reinforcement, and instruction that support the development of attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors associated with successful school performance. No wonder Catsambis et al (2003) concluded in their study that students tend to do better in school when they report feeling support from home. Thus, the relationship between family communication and secondary school students' learning process in Lagos state is extremely high as it leads to great benefits in terms of successful school performances.

Based on the data analyzed, a combination of assertiveness and cooperativeness dominate as the method parents adopt when communicating expectations (in terms of good grades) with their wards in both metropolitan and suburb parts of Lagos. However, a significantly low percentage in both centres picked assertiveness. This finding is very significant as researchers have often times associated a combination of assertiveness and cooperativeness with better academic outcomes in students. The data correlate with Baumrind (1991), Ginsburg and Bronstein's (1993) assertion that children who experience a combination of both methods were the most cognitively motivated, competent and achievement-oriented, as well as the most intrinsically motivated. Hence, young students here are most likely to demonstrate greater levels of academic adjustment and competence.

The analysis in table shows that encouragement and counsel are rated slightly higher in the metropolis than suburb by students in terms of the disciplinary actions their parents employ when they fall short of expectation. This finding is also evident in the parents' responses as encouragement and counsel are rated slightly higher in the metropolis than suburb as their adopted disciplinary actions when their children fall short of expectation. Following this line, participants in the F.G.D noted in majority that although their parents show disappointment in a number of ways, they end up being counseled and encouraged to perform better subsequently. This confirms the position of Besharat (2003), Courts (2004), Dekovic (2002), Xu and Corno (1998) that a common topic of conversation between children and their parents' centers on academic performance and when these conversations contain elements of optimism and encouragement, children report decreased test anxiety, higher grades, higher rates of homework completion, and greater educational aspirations.

To show respondents' opinion on how their parents show interest in their progress at school, a large percentage of students in the metropolis claim that their parents help out with homework; provide study aids; and discuss the value of good education and possible career options with them. While in the suburb, a large percentage of students claim their parents provide study aids as well as discuss the value of good education and possible career options with them than

they help with homework and arrange for after-school activities. Also to show respondents' opinion on how they show interest in their children's progress at school, a large percentage of respondents in the metropolis claim they provide study aids and discuss the value of good education and possible career options; while half of the respondents claim they stay in touch with teachers as well as attend PTAs. Whereas in the suburb, an almost equal percentage of parents claim they provide study aids, help with homework, discuss the value of good education and possible career options and arrange for after-school activities and supervised care.

Conclusion

This study evaluated the influence of family communication on secondary school students' learning process in Lagos state. The researcher specifically tried to see if families do play an essential communication role in moulding their children's behavior and attitudes toward schoolwork. The researcher also went a notch ahead to observe how well such communication role influence children's intellectual outcomes and readiness to learn.

It was found that a high level of communication exists between parents and their high-school children in Lagos. Relationship between family communication and secondary school students learning process is extremely high as it leads to great benefits in terms of successful school performances. Results showed that there is a high level of influence of family communication on secondary school children's performance in school. Family communication contributes largely to a child's learning process, nevertheless, the combined effort of the family, government and school also goes a long way in contributing to a child's learning process. This is based on experience of guided or collaborative learning.

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