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Children's Attachment Styles, Academic Achievement and Social Competence at Early Childhood

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Abstract

This is an expost facto research designed to determine the influence of children's attachment styles on academic achievement and social competence of pre-primary school pupils in Owerri metropolis of Imo State. The population consisted of all the 822 pupils in all the 25 Government approved nursery schools in Owerri. However, a sample of 280 pupils within the age bracket of 3 – 5 years in nursery classes 1 and 2 were drawn from 14 nursery schools through random and purposive sampling techniques. Two research questions and two null hypotheses guided the conduct of the study. The instruments used for data collection were "Attachment Styles Assessment Scale" (ASAS), "Social Competence Rating Scale" (SCRS) and "Pupils Academic Report Sheet" (PARS). The ASAS and SCRS were validated by experts in educational psychology and measurement and evaluation. Their reliability co-efficients of 0.79 (ASAS) and 0.83 (SCRS) were determined through test-retest method. The PARS was obtained from the records office of the schools under study. Data collected were analyzed

with Mean (x), Standard Deviation (SD) and One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). Results got after data analysis indicated that securely attached pupils achieved more academically than the insecurely attached ones; securely attached pupils were also found to be more socially competent than the insecurely attached ones; the difference that existed between the securely and insecurely attached pupils in academic achievement and social competence were found to be statistically significant. Based on the these results, recommendations were made including that school should organize seminars and workshops for parents on parenting styles during which the most effective ones are emphasized for adoption by parents.

Introduction

The arrival of a child into a family at birth brings with it joy and happiness to family members especially the mother. The father is also happy to have a child of his own. The extent of affection of parents towards a child at birth can be best explained by them. At birth, the child is very fragile and helpless, he therefore needs the care and support of his parents and significant others in his new environment to survive. This ultimately means that some sort of relationship must begin between the child and the people around him especially the parents. The child depends on the parents for food, shelter, clothing, health care and other needs for proper growth and development. As the child grows up, the bond between him and the parents becomes stronger and vice-versa, depending on the nature of interaction/relationship that exists between them. The parents consciously or unconsciously adopt a style(s) of rearing or parenting the child.

Some of the parenting styles that may be adopted by parents in bringing up their children (Melgosa, 1997), include:- **Authoritarian** parenting - in which the parents are harsh, demanding, exercise power instead of authority over the child and apply punish when their rules are not obeyed. They are also not responsive to their children's needs. Children raised by Authoritarian parents are very fearful, suspicious, unfriendly, timid, and insecure. They are very poor in decision making, as they always wait to get instructions from their parents before actions are taken on issues. In **Authoritative** parenting, the parents exercise authority over their children, but at the same time they are caring and responsive to the needs of their children. They are warm and not over-demanding with respect to rules. The Authoritative parenting produces children who are disciplined, obedient, respectful and friendly. They understand and uphold societal rules as guide to life, act and take appropriate

decisions based on their understanding of the rules and they are able to ask questions and express their views on issues, etc. In **Laisser-faire** or **Permissive** parenting, parents place little or no restriction on their children. They do not have laid down rules on conduct and monitoring. Successful parenting produces a bond between parents and their children. The permissive parenting is known for producing children who are unruly and prone to exhibiting all sorts of anti-social behaviours which may become hindrances to effective execution of personal/civic responsibilities; including social interactions.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that parenting styles, whether (good or bad) influence personality/behaviour formation in children either positively or negatively at the early stage(s) of life. It is also logical to observe here that parenting experiences of children have direct link with the type of bond that develops between them and their parents. This bond that emerges between children and their parents in the course of parenting is referred to as **"attachment".**

Attachment is a deep and enduring affectionate bond that connects one person to another across time and space (Ainsworth 1973; Bowlby in Bergin & Bergin, 2009). It is in effect an affectional bond or tie between an individual and an attachment figure (usually a caregiver). Despite the fact that infants form attachments to any consistent caregiver who is sensitive and responsive in social interactions with them, the biological mother is the usual principal attachment figure (Wikipedia, 2012). Attachment is not a trait inborn in children; it is a relationship as a result of survival instinct of the child to the attachment figure. It is necessitated by the child's need for safety, security and protection, which are paramount in infancy and childhood. Biologically, attachment promotes the child's survival in his physical environment while psychologically, it promotes security.

In attachment relationships, specific behaviours are exhibited by both the children and the adult figures. Attachment behaviours of children (Bergin & Bergin 2009) include preference for or retreating to the attachment figure when threatened or upset and using the attachment figure as a secure base for exploring the world. For the adult figures, the specific attachment behaviours observed include attending to the children's needs, responding to their signals and looking towards them (Bergin & Bergin 2009). It is important to note here that the adult figures must be available for effective attachment. This they can do by being physically present around the children, being open in

communication with them, responding to their need for help and being aware of the needs of the children. The extent to which the adult figures (including parents) exhibit these specific behaviors in parenting relationships determines the style of attachment children adopt in relating with them.

Ainsworth and Bell (1970) identified three styles of children's attachment to adult figures including parents. They include

(1) **Secure**, in which the child uses the attachment figure as a secure base for exploration and seeks contact with him/her after separation. Securely attached children are reported to be friendly to their mates and adults; they exhibit tolerance, play without inhibition and are favourites to their mates. They have also been found to exhibit more flexible and socially appropriate emotional expressions and controls (Cassidy, 1994), they are able to concentrate in class instruction, listen, and participate in classroom activities and may likely performance better than other attachment types. They are believed to be focused, independent, goal-oriented, good team mates in group work than insecure or disorganized–disoriented peers. In similar fashion secure adolescents report more satisfying interpersonal relationships and greater trust in others (Larose & Bernier, 2001). They also exhibit a more positive, integrated view of self, are more prone to positive self-disclosure, and cope more adaptively with stressful situations (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991).

(2) **Anxious-avoidant**, in which infants fail to use the attachment figure as a secure base for exploration and avoid the mother upon reunion or approach her only indirectly. Anxious-avoidant children are inconsistent and impulsive. They appear to be independent of their attachment figures or adults and display no clear preference of attachment for any adult. They demonstrate low level of self-control; they are unpredictable, disobedient and rude, moody, depressed, violent and aggressive with little or low self-esteem. They display no physical or emotional attachment to anyone. They are less socially competent during their childhood period. The avoidant children display cool indifference in order to maintain proximity with any adults who rebuff them (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

(3) **Anxious-resistant** in which the child is unable to use the attachment figure as a secure base and is often angry and pushes her away upon reunion. The resistant children do not derive feelings from their attachment figures. They are touchy, easily angered, passive, whiney, fussy, helpless, or immature, or they may be petulant and resistant towards their attachment

adults (Bergins & Bergins, 2009; Kennedy and Kennedy, 2004). Also, Hodge, Finnegan and Perry (1999) stated that resistant children sometimes express strong need for their attachment figures in stressful situations are difficult to be consoled when upset. They often adopt defense mechanisms such as anger, threat, temper-tantrum, pouting, sullenness or exaggerated display of emotions or helplessness to get the attention of their attachment adults.

In a more recent work (Main & Solomon, 1990) identified the fourth attachment style (**Disorganized–disoriented**) in which the child does not show clear attachment behaviour. Children of this attachment styles demonstrate violent, bad-tempered, quiet, antisocial behaviours. They are not organized in their behaviours to their attachment adults. They are rather apprehensive, timid and undecided most of the time.

It can be inferred, and rightly too, from the foregoing literature that healthy/successful parenting leads to secure attachment of children to parents while unhealthy/unsuccessful parenting leads to insecure attachment of children to parents. Unless infants experience warm nurturing care giving in the first year or so of life, their development will never be optimal. It has also been proven that a child's attachment style to parents influences his overall development especially in the social and educational aspects (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

At early childhood stage of human development (3-5 years of age) some children get exposed to early childhood education. Early childhood education according to FGN (2004) means an education given in an educational institution to children aged three to five years plus prior to entering the primary school. At this stage, the children's styles of attachment to parents (secure or insecure), resulting from parenting experiences must have been fully established. It is not certain whether these already established parental attachment styles of children at home will have any influence on their activities and behaviours in school, including their interactions with others. Specifically, it is not clear if children's parental attachment styles will influence their academic achievement and social competence in school. The question then is: what is the influence of children's attachment styles on academic achievement and social competence at early childhood? This research was therefore designed to answer this question.

Purpose of the study

This study was designed to determine the influence of children's parental attachment styles (secure; anxious/avoidant; anxious/resistant; disorganized-disoriented) on academic achievement and social competence at early childhood.

Research questions

The understated research questions guided this study.

1. How do children's parental attachment styles of secure; anxious/avoidant; anxious/resistant and disorganized-disoriented influence academic achievement among pre-primary school pupils?

2. What is the influence of children's attachment styles (secure; anxious/avoidant; anxious/resistant and disorganized) on social competence of Pre-primary school pupils?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 alpha level.

1. The difference in academic achievement of pre-primary school pupils' due to attachment styles do not differ significantly.

2. There is no significant influence of attachment styles on social competence of pre-primary school pupils.

Method

This is an expost-facto research designed to determine the influence of children's parental attachment styles on academic achievement and social competence of pre-primary school pupils in Owerri metropolis of Imo State. The population of the study consist all the 822 pupils in all the 25 Government approved nursery schools in Owerri. However, a sample of 280 pupils within the age bracket of 3 – 5 years in nursery 1 and 2 were drawn from 14 nursery schools. To obtain this sample, 20 pupils (10 from the nursery one class and 10 from nursery two class) were drawn from each of 14 nursery schools. This sample was obtained through purposive and proportionate random sampling techniques. Two research questions and two null hypotheses guided the conduct of the study. Three research instruments were used for data collection. They included "Attachment Styles Assessment Scale" (ASAS), "Social Competence Rating Scale" (SCRS) and "Pupils

Academic Report Sheet" (PARS). While the ASAS and SCRS were developed by the researcher and utilized to assess the attachment styles and social competence of the subjects, the PARS was obtained from the records office of the schools under study and utilized to assess academic achievement of the subjects. Assessment of academic achievement of the pupils was based on their achievement in four subjects including English Language, Mathematics, Basic Science and Social Studies. The subjects were assessed and rated on Attachment styles and social competence by their parents and teachers respectively. Attachment Styles Assessment Scale" (ASAS), and "Social Competence Rating Scale" (SCRS) were validated by experts in Educational Psychology and Measurement and Evaluation. The resource persons were requested to vet the instruments in terms of suitability and adequacy of the items contained therein. The reliability co-efficents of the two instruments were determined through the test-retest method. Copies of the instruments were administered twice on 20 parents (ASAS) and 20 teachers (SCRS) respectively drawn from schools not included in the sample. Two weeks interval was observed between the first and second administrations of the instrument on the same sample; after which the two sets of scores generated were correlated using Pearson Product Moment statistics, which produced reliability coefficients of 0.79 and 0.83 for ASAS and SCRS respectively. The data collected were analyzed using Mean (x), Standard Deviation (SD), and One Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).

Results

Results got after data analysis were presented in the tables below

Table 1:   Mean (x) and Standard Deviation (SD) of influence of children's attachment styles on academic achievement among pre-primary school pupils

Attachment Styles	N	X	S.D
Secure	118	73.07	8.03
Anxious/Avoidant	54	50.40	4.92
Anxious/Resistant	61	58.07	7.78
Anxious/Disorganized	47	47.54	4.88

Table 1 showed that the securely attached pupils obtained an academic achievement mean (x) score of 73.07, while their counterparts of anxious/avoidant; anxious/resistant and disorganized-disoriented attachment styles obtained mean (x) academic achievement scores of 50.40; 58.07 and

47.54 respectively. By this result the securely attached pupils obtained the highest academic achievement score, followed by pupils of anxious/resistant; anxious/avoidant and disorganized attachment styles respectively. Conclusively, this result shows that the secure attachment style has more positive influence on academic achievement of the pupils compared to the insecure attachment styles (anxious-avoidant, anxious-resistant and disorganized attachment styles)

Table 2: Mean (x) and Standard Deviation (SD) of influence of children's attachment styles on social competence among pre-primary school pupils

Attachment Styles	N	X	S.D
Secure	118	71.85	6.75
Anxious/avoidant	54	50.24	7.03
Anxious/Resistant	61	53.41	11.15
Disorganized	47	40.98	8.24

In Table 2, securely attached pupils obtained social competence mean (x) score of 71.85 while their counterparts of anxious/avoidant; anxious/resistant and disorganized attachment styles obtained mean (x) social competence scores of 50.24; 53.41; and 40.98 respectively. By this result, the securely attached pupils obtained the highest social competence mean (x) score, followed by pupils of anxious/resistant; anxious/avoidant and disorganized attachment styles respectively. The results therefore showed that secure attachment style has more positive influence on social competence among pupils compared to the insecure attachment styles.

Table 3: One-Way ANOVA of difference in academic achievement of pre-primary school pupils due to attachment styles

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares (SS)	Df	Mean Square (MS)	F-ratio	F- critical	Result
Between Groups	32277.985	3	10759.329	219.525	1.38	S
Within Groups	13674.3	276	12.253			
Total	45952.285	279				

Data in Table 3 showed that the calculated F-value of 219.525 is greater than the F-critical value of 1.38 at 0.05 alpha level and dfs of 3 and 276. The null hypothesis one was therefore rejected. This implied that there was significant difference in academic achievement of pre-primary school pupils due to attachment styles, in favour of securely attached pupils.

Table 4: Scheffe' Post Hoc Pair Wise Comparison of Difference in Academic Achievement of pre-primary pupils due to attachment styles

		Secure	Anxious/ Avoidant	Anxious/ Resistant	Disorganized
Attachment Styles		73.07		58.07	47.54
Secure	73.07		*		
Anxious/Avoidant	50.40			*	
Anxious/Resistant	58.07				*

Key * indicates pairs of means which differed significantly at 0.05 alpha level

The data of Table four (4) showed that:

1.   Securely attached and anxious/avoidant pupils differed significantly in their academic achievement, in favour of securely attached pupils.

2.   Anxious/avoidant and anxious/resistant pupils differed significantly in their academic achievement, in favour of anxious-resistant pupils.

3.   Anxious/resistant and disorganized pupils differed significantly in their academic achievement in favour of anxious/resistant pupils.

Table 5: One-Way ANOVA of Difference in Social competence of Pre-Primary School Pupils due to Attachment styles

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares (SS)	Df	Mean Square (MS)	F-ratio	F-critical	Result
Between Groups	40715.053	3	13571.84	202.05	1.38	S
Within Groups	18538.857	276	67.17			
Total	59253.911	279				

From Table 5 above, it was observed that the F-calculated value of 202.05 is greater than F-critical value of 1.38, at 0.05 alpha level and dfs of 3 and 276. The null hypothesis two was therefore rejected. This implied that there was significant influence of attachment styles on social competence of pre-primary school pupils, in favour of pupils of secure attachment style.

Table 6: Scheffe' Post Hoc Pair Wise Comparison of Difference in Social Competence of pre-primary pupils due to attachment styles

		Secure	Anxious/ Avoidant	Anxious/ Resistant	Disorganized
Social Competence		71.85	50.24	53.41	40.98
Secure	71.85		*		
Anxious/Avoidant	50.24			*	
Anxious/Resistant	53.41				*

Key * indicates pairs of means which are significant at 0.05 alpha level

The data of Table six (6) showed that:

1. Securely attached and anxious/avoidant pre-primary school pupils differed significantly in their social competence, in favour of securely attached pupils.

2. Anxious/avoidant and anxious/resistant pre-school pupils differed significantly in their social competence, in favour of anxious-resistant pupils.

3. Anxious/resistant and disorganized pre-primary school pupils differed significantly in their social competence in favour of anxious/resistant pupils.

Discussion

The influence of children's attachment styles on academic achievement and social competence of pre-primary school pupils was investigated in this study. Findings indicated that pupils of secure attachment style rated highest in academic achievement (73.07) compared to their counterparts of anxious/resistant (58.07); anxious/avoidant (50.40) and disorganized (47.54) attachment styles respectively. The securely attached pupils were therefore found to achieve more academically than their insecure counterparts. This difference in academic achievement between securely and insecurely

attached pupils was found to be statistically significant. The reasons for this as observed by Cassidy (1994) include the facts that securely attached children are more independent and goal oriented, concentrate more on class instruction, listen better and participate more actively in class activities than children of other attachment styles.

This result corroborates with the findings of Bergin & Bergins (2009) which indicated that security of attachment predicts academic achievement. The result was further buttressed by Granot and Mayseless (2001); Jacobsen and Hofmann (1997); Pianta and Harbers (1996); Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson (1999) who asserted that insecure children have low mathematics ability, lower verbal ability, inability to comprehend what they read and low overall academic achievement, beside demonstrating less seriousness and curiousity to learning, compared to securely attached children.

In the case of influence of children's attachment styles (secure; anxious/avoidant; anxious/resistant and disorganized) on social competence among pre-primary school pupils, the result showed that pupils of secured attachment style exhibited greater social competence compared to pupils of insecure attachment styles. In the same vein, in hypothesis 2, significant difference existed in social competence of pre-primary school pupils, in favour of pupils of secure attachment style. This result is in line with Miles and Stipek (2006); Wentzel (1993); Granot and Mayseless (2001); Early Child Care Research Network (2006) all of whom found that securely attached pupils demonstrate better social competence, while insecure children tend to possess poor quality friendships and are the most at risk for antisocial behaviour at pre-primary school levels.

Conclusion

From the findings of this study, it was concluded that

- ❖ Securely attached pupils were academically more achieving than the insecurely attached pupils.

- ❖ Securely attached pupils demonstrated greater social competence compared to their counterparts who are insecurely attached.

- ❖ Significant difference existed in academic achievement of pupils due to attachment styles, in favour of securely attached pupils.

- ❖ Significant difference existed in social competence of pupils due to attachment styles, in favour of securely attached pupils.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1.   Children, especially the insecurely attached ones, should be motivated to learn, interact more with people and objects around them so as to develop teamwork spirit towards learning for improved academic achievement.

2.   Schools should provide Counselling services to children with insecure attachment styles.

3.   Insecurely attached pupils should be shown love and understanding by teachers to facilitate positive behaviour change, improved academic achievement and social competence.

4.   Since available literature and experience have indicated considerate link between parenting and attachment styles, unhealthy parenting which may lead to insecure attachment should be discouraged among parents. The schools can achieve this through seminars and workshops for parents; during which the most effective parenting styles are emphasized for adoption by parents.

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