Latchkey Experiences of School-Age Children in Low-income Families in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated the Latchkey experiences of school-age children (5-13 years) from the perspectives of mothers in low-income families in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. A proportionate stratified random sample of 200 was drawn from high density areas of the five strata making up the study area. Data collected were analysed using frequencies, percentages and means and revealed the latchkey arrangement common in the area including, hiding the house key at the backyard or other places for children to gain entrance to the house after school, dropping the key in a neighbour's house or shop, opening the house door through a window, while only two per cent reported giving duplicate keys to their children to take to school. Some of the respondents also reported that even though their children were home alone after school they were closely monitored by neighbours and relatives. Other parents reported that their children remained home alone without any form of supervision till either parent returned home, or were monitored by older siblings. While this social arrangement was not the preferred mode of raising children, a number of positive effects were attributed to it including learning to be independent and responsible, self reliance and competence in household chores for girls.

Key Words: Latch-key children; low-income mothers; After school care

Résumé

Cette étude s'est focalisée sur les cas d'enfants en âge de scolarisation (5-13 ans) rentrant seuls de l'école ou laissés seuls à la maison, sous l'angle des mères issues de familles à faible revenu vivant à Uyo dans Etat d'Akwa Ibom au Nigeria. Il a été établi un échantillon proportionnel et stratifié de 200 individus sélectionnés au hasard dans les zones à forte densité des cinq strates constituant le champ d'étude. Les données collectées ont été analysées, en utilisant les fréquences, les pourcentages et les moyennes et ont permis de découvrir un système généralisé dans la zone où les enfants rentrent de l'école ou sont laissés à la maison tout seuls, la clé de la maison est cachée dans l'arrière-cour ou à

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d'autres endroits pour que l'enfant puisse entrer dans la maison après l'école. Sinon, elle est laissée dans la maison ou la boutique du voisin, ou encore on ouvre la porte d'entrée de la maison en passant par la fenêtre, alors que seulement deux pour cent des personnes interrogées ont déclaré avoir remis des doubles de clés à leurs enfants pour qu'ils l'emportent avec eux à l'école. Certains ont aussi déclaré que même si leurs enfants restent seuls à la maison après l'école, les voisins et les amis veillaient bien sur eux. D'autres parents ont reconnu que leurs enfants restaient seuls à la maison sans aucune forme de surveillance jusqu'au retour de l'un ou l'autre des parents sinon des frères plus âgés veillaient sur eux. Même si cette organisation sociale n'est pas la forme privilégiée pour assurer l'éducation des enfants, on lui prête toutefois un certain nombre de vertus en ce sens qu'elle permet d'apprendre à être indépendant et à assumer des responsabilités, à être autonome et à développer des aptitudes en travaux ménagers pour les filles.

Introduction

Care of school-aged children is becoming a major challenge to many families in Akwa Ibom State as in other parts the world. This is because of the increasing number of dual earner families, with both parents and the single parent, as the case may be, being gainfully employed in formal employment or engaged in various livelihood activities outside the home. As a result, many school-aged children remain home alone and care for themselves after school hours. According to Santrock (2006), latchkey children typically do not see their parents from the time they leave for school in the morning until about six or seven o'clock, that they are usually given the key to their home to take to school, and then use it to let themselves into the home while the parents are still at work. Shumow (2011) explains that 'latchkey child' was a term coined to describe children who wore or carried house keys to school so that they could let themselves into their home when they returned from school, but that currently, the term self care is used to refer to elementary and middle school children who are without adult supervision during the after-school hours whether they are at home, at friends' houses, or in public places.

It is reported that in the United States, about one third of all school-age children, an estimated five million, between ages five and thirteen, are so-called latchkey children (City of Phoenix 2011), while an estimated 40 per cent of children are left home at some time, though rarely overnight (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 2010). Leung, Robson, Cho, and Lim (1996) and Ruiz-Casares and Heymann (2009) argue that self-care might be more common in developing countries because of poverty (poor economic and social environment), women entering the formal labour market, and limited public self-care programmes, while Makungu (2011) confirms that other factors such as a high dependency on women's labour in the agricultural sector and the breakdown of extended families may increase the possibility of self-care arrangements in rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa.

Many school-aged children in both low-income and high-income families in Nigeria in general, and Uyo in particular have had the latchkey experience at various times, not necessarily because they are given the keys to their homes to take to school, but because they return from school to an empty house without either parents and remain without adult supervision and parental care till late in the evening. The economic and livelihood demands on parents have left majority of families with no option than the latchkey arrangements. The trend however appears now to be more rampant in low-income families because a majority of school-aged children in low-income families attend public primary/junior secondary schools often without after-school lessons to keep them in school for extra hours as commonly obtained in private schools. These children therefore return home from school much earlier and remain without parental supervision much longer than those in private schools everyday, and at times for a whole day during holidays. Also, a majority of parents in low-income families lack the financial resources to engage the services of teachers for private lessons for their children at home after school, which is common in high-income families. House helps are also scarce in the state because of the free and compulsory education, and where available not within the reach of low-income earners. Moreover, the absence of structured after-school programmes in the state for children as commonly found in advanced countries, coupled with the disintegration of the extended family system have significantly increased the number of home alone or self-care children.

Many parents in low income families work as artisans, labourers, and other poorly paid jobs, while others engage in farming and petty trading, thereby finishing their from jobs or farms as late as 6:00 pm, while the petty-traders may close as late as 9:00 to 10:00 pm. At times either parent returns home earlier, while in other cases, the children may join both parents or a single parent at their market just before dusk and remain with them till closing time later in the night. Many low-income families reside in high density neighbourhoods in large compounds housing at times upward of six to eight households. This usually allows for interaction between the children from the different households, who may play, watch television, hang out and at times eat together without adult supervision, or at times under the supervision of one or two unemployed adults who may be home in one of the many households in the compound. Some children from households with strict discipline and well-defined rules may, however, remain alone in their apartments and carry out household chores and assignments without much interaction with others in the compound, at times under the care of an older sibling. These arguments support Vandell and Shumow (1999) that after-school programmes are more beneficial for children from low-income

families and for children who live in high-crime neighbourhoods than for children in suburban neighbourhoods and middle-income families. However as Brandon and Hoffreth (2003) observe, many parents, particularly single mothers, enlist the services of neighbours and other relatives to keep an eye on their self-care children, while others monitor them through phones. In these ways the children are less likely to experience the negative effects of self-care (Galambos and Maggs 1991).

Past studies on the effects of latchkey experience or self-care of school-aged children have mostly been done in the United States and other advanced countries and have produced conflicting results. Some report negative consequences including fear, academic under-achievement, poor behavioural development, ill-health and physical injury (Dwyer, Richardson, Danley, Hansen, Sussan, Brannon, Dent, Johnson, and Hay 1990; Leung et al., 1996; Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman, and Llyod 1996).

Research reveals that children who start self-care in the early elementary years are vulnerable to older self-care children in their neighbourhoods who may hurt or even sexually abuse them. These children are also more poorly adjusted in terms of peer relationships and school performance and tend to be less socially skilled and to have behavioural problems (Pettit, Laird, Bates, and Dodge 1997; Bee and Boyd 2007). Posner and Vandell (1994) investigated the effect of unsupervised time with peers and found that the amount of unsupervised time children spent with peers predicted behavioural problems at home and school as well as lower academic functioning.

A study by Mulhall (1996) concludes that young adolescents in self-care use alcohol far more often than young adolescents who are always supervised by an adult after school. In her longitudinal qualitative study of children in Boston, Belle (1999) found that the children were more likely to be lonely, bored, afraid, and unengaged in productive activities during the time they spent in self-care than when supervised.

Family and neighbourhood characteristics have been related to problems of self-care for children. Self-care has been associated consistently with problematic adjustment among children who live in distressed circumstances such as low-income families and dangerous inner city neighbourhoods (City of Phoenix, 2011). A study by Marshall, Coll, Marx, McCartney, Keefe and Ruh (1997) found that children from lower-income families are associated with greater externalizing problems such as conduct disorders, restlessness, disorganisation and hyperactivity and academic problems, while children from middle- and upper-class families are no different than their supervised peers. Moreover, low-income grade-school children in self-care had more trouble, as measured by behaviour problems, than did supervised children, whereas middle-class children in self-care did not (Vandell and Shumow 1999).

It has also been argued that when children/adolescents spend time with each other without adult supervision, they have opportunities to engage in sexual activity (Cohen, Taylor, Martin, and Schuster 2002; Miller 2002). A study in the United states by Roche, Ellen and Astone (2005) showed that adolescents who were in self-care were more vulnerable to early sexual initiation in out-of-school hours than children who remained at home with adults, and in Slovenia the main factor associated with early first heterosexual intercourse among boys was less parental supervision (Klavs, Rodrigues and Hayes 2006). Also a study in Kenya on the prevalence of sexual intercourse among school going adolescents showed that parental supervision was a protective factor among female respondents (Rupatsisikira, Ogwell, Siziya and Muula 2007). It may be argued that parental or adult supervision controls the behaviour and activities of children, limiting their association with high-risk peers which invariably decrease their children's exposure to sexual relationships.

The study by Posner and Vandell (1994), found that children in informal care spent more time watching television or just hanging out. Santrock (2005) confirms that many children spend more time in front of the television set than they do with their parents, and that many nine year olds in the US watch television more than five hours a day. Studies by Padila and Landreth (1989) as cited in Berk (2001) and Leung et al., (1996), also report that self-care children suffer from low self esteem, anti-social behaviour, poor academic achievement and fearfulness. Bee and Boyd (2007) reveal that self-care children are more poorly adjusted in terms of peer relationship and school performance, and without limits and parental supervision, self-care children find their way into trouble more easily; possibly stealing, vandalizing or abusing a sibling; and ninety per cent of the juvenile delinquents are latchkey children (Santrock 2006).

Age also plays a part in the detrimental effects of self-care. Loneliness, boredom and fear are most common for those younger than ten years of age, while there is a greater susceptibility to peer pressure potentially resulting in such behaviour as alcohol abuse, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity and smoking in the early teens (Barlow & Durand, 2008). Positive effects of being a latchkey child include independence and self-reliance at a young age (Leung et al., 1996). Others argue that being left home alone may be a better alternative to staying with baby-sitters or older siblings (Belle, 1999; Ruiz-Casares, 2010). But other studies did not find any developmental benefits associated with self-care as self-care children were not found to be more competent or mature than their counterparts who were supervised (Goyette-Ewing, 2000). Vandell and Shumow (1999) argue that when the time is short, the neighbourhood safe, the child mature and the family rules clear, staying home alone after school could be a good thing.

Most of the studies on latchkey or school-aged children who are left alone to care for selves after school hours have been conducted in USA or other countries outside Nigeria. Very few studies on the subject have been conducted in Nigeria and in Akwa Ibom State in particular (Ekot 2011). The implications of school aged children being left at home alone especially in low-income families as a result of dual-parental involvement in paid employment or livelihood activities outside the home have not been given attention in previous research or media. This study sought to fill this gap by investigating latchkey experiences of school-age children in low-income families in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The study sought to provide an understanding and awareness of the effects of latchkey or self-care experiences on the lives of children and the society as a whole from the perspective of mothers in low-income families and to contribute to the empirical literature on the subject.

Purpose of the Study

The main objective of the study was to investigate the latchkey or self-care experiences of school-age children in low-income Families in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Specifically the study sought to:

(i)   Identify latchkey arrangements commonly made for children in low-income families in the area;

(ii) Establish the factors that parents take into consideration before leaving their children in self-care after school hours;

(iii) Identify the type of arrangement put in place by mothers for self-care children to be supervised in the absence of parents after school hours;

(iv) Find out the percentage of parents who use the phone to monitor the activities of their children after school

(v)   Establish the arrangements made for children to contact parents in case of emergency; and

(vi) Identify the effects of latchkey or after-school self-care of children in low-income families in Uyo.

Research Questions

(i)   What are the latchkey arrangements commonly made for children in low-income families the area?

(ii) What factors do parents take into consideration before leaving their children in self-care after school hours?

(iii) What arrangements are made by respondents for self-care children to be supervised in the absence of parents after school hours?

(iv) Do parents get in touch by phone to monitor the activities of their children after school?

(V) Do parents make arrangements for children to contact them in case of emergency?

(vi) What are the effects of latchkey or after-school self-care of children in low-income families in Uyo?

Design and Area of the Study

A survey research design was adopted for the study focusing on Uyo, the capital city of Akwa Ibom State, one of the oil rich states south-south, Nigeria. Uyo is mostly inhabited by the Ibibio ethnic group who are mostly Christians, a predominantly civil service city with the Government being the major engine of growth and those outside the public sphere being mainly traders, artisans and farmers.

Population and Sample for the Study

The population comprised mothers in low-income families in Uyo metropolis. Proportionate stratified random sampling technique was used in selecting 200 mothers for the study. The area was stratified based on the five major roads leading to the city centre popularly called plaza, which include Abak, Aka, Ikot Ekpene, Oron roads, and Wellington Bassey way. The sample was drawn from high density residential areas of these roads and adjoining streets, and mainly from compounds occupied by many tenants commonly referred to as 'face me, I face you' compounds, from road side petty traders and women found doing odd jobs along the roads. Forty respondents were randomly drawn form each strata, giving a total of 200 respondents.

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire which also served as an interview schedule for non-literate respondents. It was made up of two sections. Section A contained questions on the personal data of the respondents, while section B was based on the objectives of the study. The instrument was validated using Cronbach's Alpha technique to determine the internal consistency of the items using 20 sample subjects, and a co-efficient of 7.6 was obtained, indicating a high reliability of the instrument.

Data Collection and Analysis Techniques

Two hundred copies of the questionnaire were randomly distributed by hand to 200 respondents in the study area with the help of two research assistants. The questions were interpreted into the local dialect to non-literate respondents and their responses ticked in the appropriate columns in the questionnaire.

The instruments were completed and returned on the spot thus recording a 100 per cent return rate, and administration of the instrument to all the five strata lasted three weeks. Data collected were analysed using frequency counts, percentages and mean scores. For the Likert scale questions, a decision mean of above 2.5 was used to accept the responses, while any mean below 2.5 was rejected and considered as unfavourable response by the respondents.

Results

The findings revealed the following results:

The personal information of the respondents showed that 36 per cent of the respondents were school certificate holders, 56 per cent were holders of First school leaving certificates, while eight per cent had no formal education. Forty per cent of the respondents were petty traders, 24 per cent were in low-paid employments, 12 per cent were doing odd jobs, eight per cent were farmers, and 16 per cent were engaged in trades such as hair dressing and tailoring. Over 94 per cent of them had between two and more children, while six per cent presently had one child. The distribution also showed 88 per cent of the respondents indicating that their children finished school between 1-2:00 pm, while the rest (12%) of the children left between 2.01-3:00 pm. Their husbands or other adults returned home at various times between 3:00 pm and 8:00 pm, while majority of the women returned home between 5 and 7 pm, and some of the respondents closing as late as 8 pm.

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Responses on the Latchkey Arrangements Common for School-age Children from Low-income Families in Uyo

Latchkey Arrangements	Frequency	Percentage
Hiding the key at the backyard or other places	96	48
Dropping the key in a neighbours' house or shop	68	34
Opening the door through a window	32	16
Giving the duplicate key to children	4	2

Table 1, shows that the latchkey arrangements that are made for children to gain entrance into the house after school hours include hiding the key at the backyard or other places (48%), dropping the key in a neighbours house or shop (34%), opening the door through a window (16%), while only two per cent of the respondents actually gave duplicate keys to children to take to school and use it to enter the house after school.

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of Responses on the Consideration of Parents before Leaving their Children Alone after School Hours

Parents' considerations	Frequency	Percentage
Age of the children	92	46
Sex of the children	57	28.5
Kind of neighbourhood	45	22.5
Behavioural history	24	12
Matter of necessity	126	63

Table 2 shows that 63 per cent of the respondents considered the self-care arrangement as a matter of necessity, 46 per cent gave consideration to the ages of their children, 28.5 per cent considered the sex of the children, 22.5 per cent considered the kind of neighbourhood they lived in (whether there are other people in the compound), and only 12 per cent considered the behavioural history of the children.

Table 3: Percentage Distribution of Responses on the Type of Arrangement Put in Place for Children to be Supervised in the Absence of their Parents After School

Arrangements made for supervision of Children after School	Frequency	Percentage
Children are supervised and monitored by neighbours	40	20
Children stay alone without adult supervision and monitoring till either parent returns home	96	48
Children stay alone for 1-3 hours before going to hawk or join me at my market shade	36	18
Children are supervised and monitored by oldersiblings or relations in the household	28	14
Total	**200**	**100**

From Table 3, 48 per cent of the respondents indicated that their children stay all alone without adult supervision and monitoring till either parent

returned home; 20 per cent of them revealed that their children are usually supervised and monitored by neighbours; 18 per cent indicated that their children stay alone for one to three hours before going to hawk or join them at their places of business; while 14 per cent claimed that their children are usually supervised and monitored by older siblings or relatives in the household.

Table 4: Percentage Distribution of Responses on whether the Respondents have House Phones for Either Parent to Get in Touch and Monitor the Activities of their Children after School

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	12	6
No	188	94
Total	**200**	**100**

Table 4 shows that only six per cent of the respondents have house phones for either parent to get in touch and monitor the activities of their children after school before returning home in the evening while 94 per cent have none.

Table 5: Percentage Distribution of Responses on How the Mothers expect their Children to Reach Either Parent in Case of Emergency

Emergency arrangement	Frequency	Percentage
Leaving behind phone numbers of parents for children to call in case of emergency.	68	34
One of the children will run to parents shop or place of business	36	18
Rely on intervention by neighbours	25	12.5
emergency anticipated	71	
Total	**200**	**100**

Table 5 shows that 34 per cent of the respondents leave behind their phone numbers for children to call in case of emergency; 18 per cent indicated that one the children would run and call the parents in their places of business; 12.5 per cent said they always rely on the intervention of neighbours; while 35.5 per cent did not anticipate any emergency and did not make any arrangement for such till either parent returns.

Table 6: Mean Rating of Responses on the Negative Effects of Latchkey or After School Self-care of School-age Children as Observed by Mothers in Low-income Families in Uyo.

S/N	Items	Means	Decision
1.	Self-care children usually form anti-social behaviours such as stealing money to buy things, hanging out, etc.	2.7	Agreed
2.	Siblings' fighting and physical abuse of sibling are common among self-care children in low income families	3.2	Agreed
3.	Self-care children in low income families engage in long hours of television viewing after school hours	3.3	Agreed
4.	Sexual abuse of siblings is common among self-care children in low-income families	2.1	Disagreed
5.	There is increased risk of sexual experimentation among younger children and sexual promiscuity among teenagers in self care arrangement	3.1	Agreed
6.	Younger self-care children are vulnerable to sexual abuse by older self-care children in the neighbourhood	3.0	Agreed
7.	Children from dual earner or and only parent earner low -income families have academic under- achievements because of their parents' absence to help them with home work	2.9	Agreed
8.	Self care children from these families suffer from fear and loneliness, e.g. fear of kidnappers and robbers.	3.4	Agreed
9.	Latchkey arrangement makes children more vulnerable to alcohol, smoking and drug experimentation or abuse than those supervised by an adult after school.	3.1	Agreed
10.	Self care children in low income families generally suffer from low self esteem	2.2	Disagreed
11.	Latchkey children from low income families are associated with greater externalizing problems such as conduct disorders, restlessness, and hyperactivity	2.6	Agreed
12.	Initiation of children into witchcraft through eating from neighbours is more common among latchkey children than those supervised by adults especially in low-income families.	2.8	Agreed
13.	Physical abuse of self care children by older children in the neighbourhood is common	2.4	Disagreed

In table 6, the respondents agreed to 10 out of the 13 items on the negative effects of latchkey or after-school self-care of children. The items agreed to were 1(2.7), 2(3.2), 3(3.3), 5(3.1), 6(3.0), 7(2.9), 8(3.4), 9(3.1)11(2.6), 12(2.8); while they disagreed to items 4(2.1), 10(2.2), and 13(2.4).

Table 7: Mean Rating of Responses on the Positive Effects of Latchkey or After School Self-care of School-age Children as Perceived by Mothers in Low-income Families

S/N	Items	Mean	Decision
1.	Latchkey children learn to be independence and self-reliance at a younger age	3.0	Agreed
2..	Girls in self-care achieve competence in household chores much earlier than others	2.9	Agreed
3.	Self-care children in low income families are generally more competent or mature than their counterparts whoare supervised	2.7	Agreed
4.	Being home alone is now a better alternative to staying with housemaids or older relatives	2.2	Disagreed

Table 7 shows that the respondents agreed to three out of four items identified as positive effects of after school self-care of children with a mean score of 2.7 and above, and disagreed to item 4 by scoring a mean score of 2.2 which is below 2.5.

Discussion of Findings

From the results of this study, 88 per cent of respondents indicated that their children leave school between 1-2:00 pm and the rest (12%) of the children leave between 2.01-3:00 pm. Their husbands or other adults returned home at various times between 3:00 pm and 8:00 pm, as majority of the women returned home between 5:00 and 7:00 pm, while some of the respondents left work as late as 8:00 pm. This shows that majority of the children stay alone between 2:00 pm and 6:00 pm – a total of 2 to 6 hours – without adult supervision. This supports Santrock (2006), who argues that some school-age that children are largely unsupervised for two to four hours a day during each school week, and may be unsupervised for entire five days a week during summer months.

Results from the study also reveal that the latchkey arrangements commonly made for children to gain entrance into the house after school

hours include hiding the key at the backyard or other places (48%), dropping the key in a neighbour's house or shop (34%), and opening the door through a window (16%). Only two per cent of the respondents actually give duplicate keys to children to take to school and use it to enter the house after school. This shows that latchkey experiences in Uyo involve school-aged children opening their house doors to enter and taking care of themselves after school without their parents or other adults. This does not imply taking their house keys to school to use in letting themselves into their homes while the parents are still at work. This supports the work of Shumow (2011) that shows that the term latchkey or self-care now refers to elementary and middle school children who are without adult supervision during the after-school hours.

Our research findings also show that 63 per cent of respondents considered the self-care arrangement as a matter of necessity and that the majority of the respondents give little consideration to the age, sex, behavioural history of the children, or the kind of neighbourhood they live in before deciding on latchkey arrangement. Instead, the respondents mostly consider their economic demands contrary to expectations that parents should give consideration to certain factors such as age and sex before deciding on after-school self-care of children (American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry 2010).

From the result of our study we also see that 48 per cent of the respondents indicated that their children stay all alone without adult supervision and monitoring till either parent returned home; 20 per cent of them revealed that their children are usually supervised and monitored by neighbours; 18 per cent indicated that their children stay alone for one to three hours before going to hawk or join them at their places of business; and 14 per cent claimed that their children are usually supervised and monitored by older siblings or relatives in the household. The finding that 42 per cent of the children stay alone in the house corroborates research by other scholars such as Berk (2001), Santrock (2006), and Ekot (2011a).

Results from Table 4 show that only six per cent of the respondents have house phones for either parent to get in touch and monitor the activities of their children after school before returning home in the evening. The use of cell phone is now very common in the state, but many low-income families cannot afford to provide any for their homes, making it impossible for them to call and monitor the activities of their children after school. Consequently this increases their children's vulnerability to the negative effects of self-care.

Other findings of the study show that the respondents agreed to ten out of the thirteen items listed as the negative effects of latchkey or self-care experiences of school- age children in low- income families in Uyo, with the item that self-care children suffer from fearfulness and loneliness, scoring

the highest mean score of 3.4. This may have strong links to the current spate of violence, armed robbery, political killings and kidnapping of children in the state. Another negative effect shown in the study is that of latchkey or self-care children engaging in long hours of television viewing after school hours with a mean score of 3.3. Long hours of television viewing is detrimental to school-age children because it takes them away from home work, makes them passive learners and provides them with violent models of aggression (Santrock 2005). With less parental supervision over periods of time latchkey children also fall into sibling fighting and physical abuse of siblings as was identified by some of the respondents in the study.

Other negative effects rated highly by the respondents include alcohol and drug experimentation/abuse, increased risk of sexual experimentation among younger children and sexual promiscuity among teenagers, academic under- achievements, forming anti-social behaviour such as stealing money to buy things or hanging out, and vulnerability to sexual abuse by older self-care children in the neighbourhood. There were also fears registered by respondents of the initiation of children into witchcraft through eating from neighbours when left unsupervised by adults for long periods of time especially in low-income families. This finding is explained by cases of witchcraft accusation of children, which is rampant in the state. Some children in self-care usually eat food from neighbours who at times may use such opportunity to initiate them into witchcraft, as many of the confessed child witches claim to have been initiated through consuming food from their initiators, and the majority of the cases involve children from low-income or less privilege backgrounds. The state government has however recently enacted the Child's Right Act to protect the interest of accused children and punish offenders, which the researcher hopes will reduce the incidence (Bartholomew 2011; Akwa Ibom News online 2011).

The respondents in the study rejected other negative effects of latchkey or self care of school-age children identified in the literature such as sexual abuse of siblings, physical abuse of self-care children by older children in the neighbourhood, and the believe that self-care children in low income families suffer from low self esteem. These findings are at variance with other findings such as Padila and Landreth (1989) as cited in Berk (2001), and Leung et al., (1996) who reported that self-care children suffer from low self- esteem. The positive effects of latchkey experience as identified by respondents in the study include learning to be independent, responsible and self-reliant, achieving competence in household chores much earlier than others, and being generally more competent or mature than their counterparts who are supervised. These findings support Leung (1996); Belle (1999); Ruiz-Casares (2010) that learning to be independent and self-

reliant at a young age were positive effects of latchkey experience, but disagrees with Goyette-Ewing (2000), who did not find self-care children to be more competent or mature than their counterparts who were supervised. The finding that girls in after-school self-care achieve competence in household chores much earlier than others agrees with Ekot (2011a) who recorded a similar finding, and Rice (1995), who observed that girls in dual income families benefit more from the image of self competence. This also may be because girls in self-care are responsible for cooking or warming food for their male and younger siblings, thereby making them learn and practice cooking and housekeeping earlier than other girls. The respondents in the study also disagreed with the finding that being left home alone may be a better alternative to staying with baby-sitters or older siblings (Belle 1999; Ruiz-Casares 2010). Leung et al (1996) argue that such wide variations in reported consequences in latchkey children might reflect differences in the maturity of the children and in the parent-child relationships prior to entering the latchkey arrangement.

Conclusion

It has become commonplace in Uyo in particular and other parts of Nigeria for children to remain home alone and take care of themselves after school hours, when both parents or single parents take up paid employment, trade, or engage in other income generating activities outside the home. The study investigated the latchkey experiences of school-age children from low-income families in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria This study has shown that latchkey arrangements commonly made for children to gain entrance into the house after school hours involve children staying alone and taking care of themselves after school hours and not necessarily hanging the keys or going to school with the key as previously understood. It has been revealed that many mothers consider latchkey arrangement as a matter of necessity, without much consideration to other important factors as age, sex and behavioural history, and that a good percentage of the children stay all alone at times more than for to six hours without adult supervision and monitoring till either parent returned home. Many of the parents neither contact their homes on phone to monitor their children, nor leave behind their numbers for children to call in case of emergency. The study has also revealed the negative effects of latchkey arrangement, and a few positive effects, showing that latchkey arrangement is not completely bad, though the negative effects outweighs the positive.

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