

HURRIED CHILD SYNDROME: A THREAT TO HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Hurried Child Syndrome (HCS) is an emerging developmental and educational concern, particularly in developing contexts like Nigeria, where academic acceleration and early schooling are often promoted under misguided notions of success and social mobility. This paper investigates the underlying causes, manifestations, and far-reaching consequences of HCS in the Nigerian educational context. Drawing on psychological theories of child development and empirical studies, the work establishes that HCS results when children are compelled to perform beyond their emotional, cognitive, or social readiness, primarily through grade skipping, early school enrollment, and over-scheduling. Although academic acceleration may benefit a select group of gifted children, its unregulated and widespread implementation in Nigeria has produced adverse outcomes such as educational burnout, emotional instability, social maladjustment, and a lack of essential life skills. This paper further explores how socioeconomic pressures, weak enforcement of educational policies, digital exposure, and parental misconceptions contribute to this syndrome. It highlights the role of private school proprietors and policy gaps in exacerbating the trend. The paper concludes that the Nigerian education system needs comprehensive reform to prioritize the holistic development of children rather than mere academic milestones. Based on these findings, the paper proposes multidimensional strategies, including stricter policy implementation, parent education, professional deployment of guidance counselors, and community-led sensitization programs. The future of Nigeria's educational and social systems depends on how well they adapt to support natural developmental trajectories over artificial acceleration.

Keywords: Hurried Child Syndrome, Class skipping, Holistic development, Education

Introduction

The desire for children to excel early in life is not new, but recent decades have witnessed an increase in practices that push children beyond their developmental capacity in the name of academic excellence. Hurried Child Syndrome (HCS) has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary education, particularly in Nigeria. Many parents, driven by competition and societal expectations, seek to accelerate their children's academic progress, often pushing them to skip grades in primary school. Such parents are too impatient that if it were possible to enrol an unborn baby in school they would have done that. This practice, though seemingly beneficial to the gifted children, has raised concerns about its long-term implications on children's cognitive, emotional, and social development, particularly when such acceleration is done undeservedly or carelessly as it has been witnessed in Nigeria. Despite the existence of education policies meant to regulate grade progression, the lack of strict enforcement has allowed parents and private schools to dictate educational pathways, sometimes to the detriment of the child. The phenomenon of hurried childhood extends beyond academic acceleration, encompassing premature exposure to complex social and extracurricular responsibilities that exceed the child's developmental readiness.

David Elkind (1981) coined the term *Hurried Child Syndrome* to describe the stress-related outcomes of pushing children into adult-like roles and expectations prematurely. Hurried Child Syndrome (HCS), according to Elkind (1981), refers to the stress and behavioural dysfunctions that arise when children are pushed to act and perform beyond their emotional, intellectual, or social capacities. In Nigeria, this syndrome is increasingly evident as children are rushed through educational stages, often skipping grades/classes in primary school, not out of exceptional ability, but due to societal pressures, parental pride, and weak policy enforcement. In the Nigerian educational landscape, this syndrome is manifested in the growing trend of early school enrollment, skipping grades, especially in primary school, and placing children in competitive academic environments for which they are not developmentally prepared. These practices are prevalent, particularly in private schools in the country.

Parents indulging in hurried child syndrome over schedule their children's lives, push them hard for academic success, and expect them to behave and react as miniature adults Veerabhadrapa and Shivalaleela (2021; Ghorpade, 2021; Ghorpade et al (2022). The pressures imposed on these children often lead to significant psychological and developmental consequences.

Research on Hurried Child Syndrome and academic acceleration presents mixed findings regarding its benefits and drawbacks. Gronostaj et al. (2016) describe skipping a grade as a specific form of acceleration, often applied to gifted students. Bernstein et al. (2021) conducted a longitudinal study on gifted students and found no correlation between academic acceleration and psychological distress. Their research suggested that academically advanced students adapted well in the long run.

Conversely, studies such as those by Halemani (2023) and Okah and Okwor (2024) highlight the detrimental effects of class skipping. They argue that while academic acceleration may boost immediate performance, it often leads to stress, anxiety, and social integration difficulties. Kretschmann et al. (2016) further examined gender differences in academic acceleration, revealing that girls tend to experience greater emotional and motivational challenges than boys after skipping grades. Academic advancement in Nigerian cases often lack adequate assessment and support systems, exposing children to academic and emotional challenges with long-term consequences. Miravete, (2023) advocates for controlled acceleration programs for gifted students.

The indiscriminate proliferation of private schools in Nigeria has contributed to increased cases of class skipping, often without standardized assessments. Okah and Okwo. (2024) identified weak policy implementation, parental pressure, and economic factors as key drivers of this phenomenon. Their findings align with studies by Upashe et al. (2024), which describe how hurried childhood contributes to heightened anxiety and diminished self-esteem in children. The literature indicates a growing consensus on the need for structured interventions that balance academic advancement with social-emotional development. This should be carefully handled in Nigeria in order not to subtly back unregulated practice of class skipping in the country.

Despite Nigeria's well-articulated National Policy on Education, enforcement is lax, allowing for a widespread and often unethical manipulation of educational pathways by parents and private schools. This paper critically examines the specific causes and consequences of Hurried

Child Syndrome, particularly in the context of Nigeria, where class skipping has become alarmingly rampant. The paper further provides recommendations for intervention.

Conceptual Clarification: What is Hurried Child Syndrome?

Elkind (1981; 2001) described Hurried Child Syndrome as a condition that occurs when children are pressured to perform or behave in ways that exceed their developmental capacity. These pressures often stem from societal expectations, competitive parenting, and institutional mismanagement. Children subjected to HCS are typically over-scheduled, expected to achieve academic milestones too early, and deprived of the natural progression of childhood experiences.

Veerabhadrapa and Shivaleela (2021), and Ghorpade et al. (2022), confirm that hurried children are treated as miniature adults, leading to severe emotional, cognitive, and social consequences. Unlike healthy academic acceleration for gifted children (Bernstein et al., 2021), hurried advancement without merit or support is detrimental. It compromises not only the learning process but the child's psychological stability and future adaptability.

Understanding the Nigerian Context

In Nigeria, the rush to complete formal education early has led to widespread class skipping. Practices such as omitting primary five and six or promoting children based on parental influence, rather than academic merit, have become common. Such unregulated transitions to secondary school are increasingly normalised. The manifestation of HCS is driven by both structural inefficiencies and cultural misconceptions. These decisions are often based on false assumptions of readiness, including physical maturity or technological competence, and are exacerbated by the commercialization of education in private schools (News Agency of Nigeria, 2024). According to Okah and Okwor (2024), these practices are particularly prevalent in urban areas where private schools compete for student patronage. Parents frequently demand early advancement for economic reasons, societal recognition, or to meet employment age restrictions. In some cases, children begin formal schooling at age three and reach secondary school by the age of eight or nine. Some school proprietors, mostly lacking formal training in the field of education, accommodate these demands for financial gain. The abolition of primary six in many private schools is emblematic of the system's failure to prioritize developmental appropriateness. This practice neglects the fundamental principle that a child's academic progress should be determined by both chronological age and developmental readiness. The persistence of class skipping is largely attributed to the elite class, who prioritize early completion of education over long-term academic and personal development. The current admission practices by many schools emphasize performance over developmental readiness of students.

Drivers of Hurried Child Syndrome in Nigeria

Oyadeyi, (2024) highlighted some factors fanning the ember of hurried child syndrome in the Nigerian educational landscape thus.

Parental Pressure and Societal Expectations

Many Nigerian parents view early academic success as a badge of honour. Their desire to showcase their children's achievements often lead to unrealistic expectations and decisions that disregard the child's developmental needs (Oyadeyi, 2023). In competitive social environments, educational milestones are erroneously equated with parental success. This pressure often leads to hurried child syndrome, where children are rushed through their education without adequate preparation.

Technological Misinterpretation

Early and extensive exposure to digital media accelerates cognitive engagement, sometimes pushing children beyond typical developmental norms. Children who interact with technology at an advanced level may seem more capable academically, leading parents and teachers to wrongly believe they are ready to skip grades thereby leading to premature advancement.

Physical Maturity and Misconceptions

Children who appear taller or more physically developed are often advanced based on appearance rather than intellectual maturity. This "my child is too big" syndrome is widespread but deeply flawed. Some parents make decisions based on their child's physical appearance rather than academic ability. If a child appears taller, bigger or more mature than their peers, parents may feel pressured to advance them to a higher grade, assuming that their stature is an indicator of academic readiness. However, this overlooks the importance of cognitive and emotional maturity, which are critical for effective learning.

Social and cultural norms that prioritize measurable achievements and status over holistic development create additional pressure. In such environments, rapid academic progression is often seen as the ideal, contributing to the rush of children through the educational system at an accelerated pace.

The Absence of Guidance Counsellors in Nigerian Primary Schools: This is a growing concern in Nigeria. A significant number of primary schools in the country lack guidance counsellors. This shortage leaves parents and school administrators without professional support when making crucial educational decisions for their pupils.

1. Employment Age Restrictions

The age limit set by many employers for job applicants influences some parents to push their children through school prematurely. In an effort to ensure their children graduate early and meet job eligibility criteria, parents may encourage class skipping, disregarding the long-term impact on the child's overall development and preparedness for the workforce.

2. Stress Associated with Primary Six

The final year of primary education, particularly primary six, is often marked by intense pressure. Long school days, sometimes starting as early as 6:30 am and ending at 5:00 pm, along with additional tutoring sessions, leave little room for rest. The highly stressful nature of the ultimate class for both parents and their children prompts some parents to consider class skipping as a relief measure, believing that it is an unnecessary burden.

3. High Costs and Exploitation in Final-Year Classes

Some schools often exploit parents of final-year students by imposing excessive fees for various activities such as extra lessons, graduation ceremonies, special examinations,

students' projects, special donations, among others. In a bid to avoid these financial pressures, some parents encourage their children to skip Primary 6 altogether, thereby bypassing these additional costs.

4. **Social Status and Parental Pride**

Early academic achievement is sometimes used as a status symbol, reinforcing the trend. For some parents, the decision to have their children skip classes is driven by social status rather than academic necessity. The ability to boast that their child completed school early is seen as a mark of prestige, with little consideration for whether the child is genuinely prepared for higher education. This societal pressure further fuels the trend of accelerated schooling, often to the detriment of the child's overall development.

5. **Lack of Educational Expertise**

One of the major issues fueling class skipping is the lack of proper educational knowledge among school owners and parents. Many private school proprietors and their teachers are not trained educationists and lack the expertise required to guide students effectively. As a result, they operate their schools without proper educational direction, allowing students to skip grades indiscriminately. Similarly, some parents who opt for class skipping for their children also lack awareness of the negative effects of hurried-child syndrome and make decisions based on misconceptions rather than informed educational guidance.

6. **Weak Policy Implementation**

Although Nigeria has well-formulated education policies, poor implementation and inadequate oversight and enforcement mechanisms allow schools considerable leeway. Schools are often not properly monitored, allowing school owners to operate as they please. As a result, children as young as eight or nine are allowed to take entrance examinations for secondary school without proper regulation. Okah and Okwor (2024) found that weak educational policy is a cogent causative factor for hurried child syndrome in Nigeria.

7. **Economic Constraints**

Some parents assume that fast-tracking education can reduce long-term costs due to economic hardship in the country. However, this approach can backfire, as children who skip classes may struggle academically later on, necessitating parents to spend extensively on examination fees, special coaching classes and private lessons to help their children keep pace with their new academic level. These hidden expenses often outweigh the perceived savings (Upashe et al., 2024).

8. **Institutional Exploitation**

Some private school owners exploit this syndrome by scrapping final-year classes or offering promotions without merit, prioritizing financial gain over student well-being (News Agency of Nigeria, 2024).

Consequences of Hurried-Child Syndrome

Hurried-child syndrome (HCS) has significant consequences on children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. These effects manifest in various ways and can have long-term repercussions on academic performance, psychological well-being, and future career prospects of the child.

1. Cognitive and Academic Deficiencies

Skipping classes often results in gaps in foundational learning, particularly in critical subjects such as mathematics, science, and literacy. While some children may initially seem to perform well, they frequently struggle with comprehension and retention as they advance to higher levels. The absence of structured learning steps makes it difficult for them to grasp complex concepts, ultimately leading to academic disengagement, weak study habits, and reduced problem-solving abilities (Oyadeyi, 2023, Adedipe, 2014).

2. Increased Risk of Academic Burnout

Children who are rushed through school may experience academic burnout due to the pressure of coping with content beyond their developmental readiness. This can manifest as mental exhaustion, loss of interest in learning, and a decline in academic performance over time. Many of these students find it difficult to keep pace with their older classmates, leading to frustration and, in some cases, withdrawal from academic activities (Oyadeyi, 2023, Halemani, 2023).

3. Emotional and Psychological Stress

The pressure to perform in an environment meant for older peers can be overwhelming, leading to heightened stress and anxiety (Halemani, 2023 & Okah et al. 2024). Many of these children develop perfectionist tendencies, fearing failure and constantly feeling the need to prove themselves. Emotional immaturity can also make them more vulnerable to self-doubt, social isolation, and low self-esteem, as they struggle to adjust to their new academic and social settings.

4. Social Integration Challenges

Skipping classes disrupts the normal social development of children. When placed among older students, they may struggle to fit in due to differences in emotional maturity, communication skills, and social interests. This can lead to identity confusion (Oyadeyi, 2023), loneliness, difficulty forming friendships (Halemani, 2023 & Okah et al. 2024), bullying and social isolation. The inability to connect with peers at an appropriate developmental level can have lasting effects on their interpersonal skills and overall social confidence.

5. Inadequate Life Skills Development

Education is not just about academic learning; it also involves the development of essential life skills such as critical thinking, decision-making, conflict resolution, and teamwork. When children are rushed through school, they often miss opportunities to acquire these skills at the appropriate stages of development. As a result, they may struggle with independent thinking and adaptability in real-world situations, including higher education and the workforce (Okah et al. 2024).

6. Higher Risk of Academic Failure and Dropout

Many children who skip grades find it difficult to sustain their academic performance over time. The pressure to keep up with advanced coursework often leads to poor results, requiring extra tutoring and remedial classes. In extreme cases, children who struggle to adapt may

develop a fear of school or experience significant academic failure, increasing the likelihood of dropping out.

7. Financial Burden on Parents

Although some parents believe that class skipping saves money, it often results in additional financial burdens. Many students require extra coaching to bridge the knowledge gap, and parents end up spending more on private lessons, specialized tutoring, and remedial education. What they initially save by rushing their children through school is often lost in the cost of academic support services (Oyadeyi, 2023).

8. Workplace Adaptation Challenges

Children who complete their education too early often struggle to adapt to professional environments. While they may meet the academic qualifications, their emotional and social immaturity can make it difficult for them to interact effectively with colleagues, handle workplace pressures, and make sound decisions. Employers may also view them as inexperienced or unprepared, limiting their career prospects (News Agency of Nigeria, 2024).

9. Long-Term Psychological Effects

The long-term psychological effects of hurried-child syndrome can be profound. Many individuals who were rushed through school experience regret in adulthood, feeling that they missed out on essential childhood experiences. Some develop impostor syndrome, doubting their abilities because they were constantly forced to "catch up" rather than progress at a natural pace. Others may struggle with long-term anxiety or a deep-seated fear of failure stemming from the unrealistic expectations placed on them during their schooling years (Oyadeyi, 2023).

Conclusion

Hurried Child Syndrome poses a significant threat to the holistic development of Nigerian children. The long-term cognitive, emotional, and social risks far outweigh any perceived academic benefits. The phenomenon highlights the failure of regulatory systems, parental misunderstanding of developmental needs, and the commercialization of education. A sustainable solution requires a cultural and systemic shift toward recognizing that child development is multidimensional and must not be rushed. Hurried Child Syndrome represents a critical threat to the balanced development of children in Nigeria. While academic excellence is important, it must not come at the cost of emotional well-being, cognitive integrity, and social competence. This paper has demonstrated that unregulated academic acceleration, when misapplied, leads to a host of negative outcomes including burnout, emotional distress, and poor career readiness. Addressing this issue requires collective responsibility among parents, educators, school administrators, and policymakers. With proper reforms and awareness, Nigeria can establish an education system that respects the developmental timelines of children and fosters genuine, lifelong learning.

Suggestions

To mitigate the negative effects of hurried-child syndrome (HCS), the following strategies should be adopted:

1. Parents should adopt a balanced approach to education, ensuring that academics, play, and social interactions are given equal priority. Parental orientation programmes must highlight the long-term dangers of rushing children and emphasize balanced development. They should be

made to understand the importance of fostering creativity, emotional intelligence, and resilience in children rather than focusing solely on academic acceleration.

2. Government must enforce regulations on grade progression, mandating developmental assessments before promotion. There is need to emphasize learning quality rather than rapid progression through grade levels. Government agencies must take decisive action to regulate unscrupulous school owners and prevent parents from engaging in unethical class-skipping practices. The enforcement of the National Policy on Education and other relevant education laws should be prioritized to curb this growing trend.

3. Education systems should shift from a rigid, exam-driven model to one that fosters holistic growth. Schools should create environments that nurture problem-solving abilities and emotional well-being alongside academic achievement.

4. Schools must require official transfer certificates to validate a student's academic history and prevent falsified advancement. Schools accepting students without proper documentation should face sanctions. This measure will ensure that students progress through classes based on merit rather than manipulation.

5. There is an urgent need for the digitization of birth records, which would allow authorities to verify the true age of children applying for secondary school entrance examinations. A centralized and easily accessible birth registration system will help prevent underage admissions and fraudulent academic progression.

6. The government should publicly denounce the practice of indiscriminate class skipping, just as the Lagos State government did in the past with positive results. Strict laws should be enacted to discourage this practice, ensuring that schools and parents adhere to proper academic progression standards.

7. In addition to entrance examinations, prospective secondary school students should undergo admission interviews. These interviews to an extent would help assess a child's true age, cognitive ability, and overall readiness for secondary education, preventing premature academic transitions.

8. Private and public schools that permit class skipping for financial gain should face strict penalties. For example, schools found guilty of such practices should risk having their licenses revoked or being subjected to regulatory fines to deter others from engaging in similar misconduct.

9. The general public should be thoroughly educated on the dangers of rushing children through school. The mass media and social media should be leveraged to promote anti-hurried-child syndrome campaigns, raising awareness about the long-term academic and psychological consequences of class skipping. Religious and community leaders should be actively involved in sensitizing their members about the risks associated with hurried-child syndrome. Their influence can help shift cultural perspectives that prioritize early academic completion over well-rounded child development.

10. The government should make it compulsory for every primary school to employ trained guidance counselors. Many schools in Nigeria lack professional counselors, who play a critical role in assessing students' readiness for academic progression and providing necessary guidance to both pupils and parents.

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