

The effect of a latchkey situation on a child's educational success

Elza Venter and Eunice Rambau

ventee1@unisa.ac.za

Self care is one of the options for parents in need of after school care for their children. In certain studies self care is seen as detrimental to development and academic performance, but in other studies children do fairly well notwithstanding their latchkey situation — self care could teach young people a sense of personal responsibility and self reliance. In this article we emphasise the negative influence of self care, especially for primary school children. The after-school hours alone at home can be very risky for children living in low income, dangerous, or disadvantaged environments. Children being left alone for more than three hours often present with low self esteem, low academic efficacy and high levels of depression. They are often not well adjusted and sometimes present with behavioural problems. Educators have expressed concern about the academic adjustment and achievement of self-care children. In this study we looked at the influence of a latchkey situation on children's relationships with parents and educators in connection with educational success. A qualitative research design was used with three cases of latchkey children, where parents, children, and their educators were interviewed.

Keywords: after school care; educational context; educational failure; educational success; educators; latchkey children; parents; relationships; responsibility; self care

Introduction

Latchkey situations are a growing phenomenon globally and are becoming a worldwide concern. It is difficult to estimate how many children take care of themselves on a regular basis in South Africa where this study was conducted. The increasing numbers of mothers in the labour force and increasing numbers of single parents (mostly mothers) who have to work in order to maintain a household may be an indication of why the phenomenon is increasing. In South Africa problems like poverty, parents with less education than their children, as well as economic problems, are some of the many problems that can influence parental assistance for educational achievement. Many children from households with these problems have to care for themselves.

Children are affected by the latchkey situation they find themselves in, as well as by the relationships they have as support structures in the latchkey situation. Children have *inter alia* relationships with the self, parents, peers and educators and these relationships influence the child's development positively or negatively, depending on the kind and quality of the relationship. The focus of this article is on latchkey children's relationships with their educators and their parents emphasising the influence of the latchkey situation on educational development. In addressing the problem of insufficient support for good educational development three cases from a specific primary school in an urban area in South Africa were used whereby three learners, three educators and three parents were interviewed. The outcomes of the qualitative study are then contextualised to a specific urban school in South Africa, but many of these outcomes coincide with examples in the literature.

This study focused on the following specific questions:

1. Who are 'latchkey' children and what are the factors contributing to the latchkey situation?
2. To what extent does the latchkey situation have an effect upon children's relationships with their parents and their educators at school, with special emphasis on educational development?
3. What can be done to help latchkey children attain educational success?

The study was done taking into consideration the ecological systems theory with Bronfenbrenner as the main proponent. When doing this research the researchers expected self-care children to differ according to age, gender and ethnicity (individual differences), as well as family structure, employment and income of parents (family differences) and community context (disadvantaged/poor neighbourhood compared to well established neighbourhoods). After school micro systems would also be expected to impact on school performance and behaviour (Shumow, Smith & Smith, 2009:234). In certain studies self care is seen as detrimental to development and academic performance, but in other studies children do fairly well notwithstanding their latchkey situation — self care could teach children a sense of personal responsibility and self reliance. The influence, however, varies according to personal and contextual conditions (Shumow et al., 2009:237). The complexity of latchkey children's relationships is discussed in this study with the emphasis on relationships with parents and educators as support structures, specifically in the educational context. Therefore the research focuses only on school and parental involvement as mesosystems, because the child's scholastic performance is mostly influenced by parental involvement at home and educators' involvement at school (Berk, 2007:25).

The definition of latchkey children

The label attached to self-care children, namely, 'latchkey' children originated in the west during World War II. Powers and Anderson (1991:49) conclude that the term 'latchkey' came into widespread use during the war to describe children left without adult supervision before and after school hours.

The term 'latchkey' conjures up images of children going home alone with a house key on a chain around their necks. Usually the phenomenon raises concern for the wellbeing of these children, especially those in unsafe environments, where they can engage in risky behaviour (Casper & Smith, 2004:286).

According to Berk (2007:587) latchkey children refers to 'self care' children or those children who look after themselves while their parents are at work and are regularly left unattended after school hours. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (2006:805) defines a 'latchkey' child as a child who is alone at home after school until a parent returns from work. According to Eberstadt (2001:14) in the Census Bureau Literature of the United States of America latchkey children or 'self care' children are defined as children between 5 and 14 who look after themselves outside of school.

The situation of latchkey children started as a Eurocentric phenomenon, but has become a worldwide problem due to, *inter alia*, divorce, single parenting or career requirements (Eberstadt, 2001:6). Social and economic changes have interfered with traditional ways of child rearing. Codrington (1989) mentions that latchkey situations occur in rural and urban South Africa. In rural areas, some parents can still depend on their extended family for help with

supervision of school children, but in urban areas it is becoming a serious problem.

A latchkey situation can have different meanings in different societies and contexts, but in essence it is problematic, especially when a child is still in primary school and brought up in a disadvantaged environment with exposure to risky behaviour and parents not focused on their children's needs. All children need attention and involvement from parents — latchkey situations become problematic in all contexts if parents cannot spend quality time with their children at some time during the day.

Factors contributing to latchkey situations

Factors contributing to latchkey situations may differ in various contexts and in different societies during different time lines, but the consequences are often the same, especially for primary school children who are in need of quality support and attention from their parents and other role players in their lives.

Family structures and dynamics have changed during the latter half of the 20th century in western and African countries (Booth, 2003:257). In most countries the growing number of unsupervised or latchkey children is the result of changes in the economy, family structures, social conditions, labour force, and other factors (Mertens, Flowers & Mulhall, 2003:57; Shumow *et al.*, 2009:235). Arrighetti (2001:66) mentions more factors that contribute to the number of latchkey children, such as a high divorce rate, resulting in single-parent families, an increase in the number of homeless families and competition for limited day-care options. Eberstadt (2001:5) maintains that a significant number of women leave their children at home out of necessity. The author indicates that the reasons for leaving children at home alone may be due to poverty, divorce, failure to marry or low educational attainment. It could, however, also be due to social and cultural changes in the sense that it is not fashionable in specific environments to stay at home looking after your own children. Many mothers from well established environments work, not because they 'must', but because they 'want to'.

According to Vandivere, Tout, Capizzano and Zaslow (2003:4-5) the following factors play a role in parents leaving their primary school children alone at home: (i) family income plays a significant role, although it appears that low income is not of importance, because often high income parents leave their children at home alone as well; (ii) full time employed parents or single parents regularly allow their children to spend some time alone at home; (iii) parents with mental health problems often leave their children in self care; and (iv) young children with teenage siblings are often left at home under sibling supervision. Some other reasons include that parents may struggle to get age or culturally appropriate child care or low income parents may not be able to afford additional supervision for their children. After school care options may not be available in the specific community or school. In the end many parents are forced into self-care options. Parents in low income groups are often worried about leaving their children alone in an unsafe environment, but they are forced to do this, because of a lack of alternatives.

The choice of type of after-school care is a decision that parents have to make. Parents often choose self care after taking into account their child's need for care, the family's budget constraints, the level of maturity of the child and the environment in which the care takes place (e.g. whether it is a safe neighbourhood or not) (Casper & Smith, 2004:286). For instance, parents who perceive their neighbourhood as safe are more likely to use self care (Casper & Smith, 2004:286; Shumow *et al.*, 2009:236).

Western education has been part of Africa since colonial times and it has influenced social structures, including family composition.

“Western schooling has influenced family dynamics as it has depleted homesteads of farm labour, weakened inter-generational communication, and created a labour economy now dependent on formal educational qualifications ... One of the most prominent aspects of that changing home environment is the altered state of parental availability, particularly of men” (Booth, 2003:257-258).

Rural Africa has changed tremendously with fathers migrating for work, leaving wives and children behind. Children became dependent on their extended families for support, which still functions in some rural communities today, but not in urban communities. Ecological factors such as the home environment, culture, and parental availability influence children’s participation in community activities and school achievement (Booth, 2003:260). The presence of non-parental adults, such as aunts, uncles, grandparents and other relatives reduces the number of unsupervised children in rural South Africa. In urban areas the problem is more serious, because of less non-parental adults involved as caregivers for latchkey children and there is an increased need for parents to work longer hours to maintain a reasonable lifestyle or sometimes just to survive in a changed social and economic environment (Belle, 1999:2).

Possible consequences of a latchkey situation

Self care can sometimes be a positive step, but in this article we emphasise the negative influence of self care, especially for primary school children. From a study done by Mertens *et al.* (2003) it does not seem that children need supervision all the time. Some children cope well without supervision when left alone for less than three hours. However, children being left alone for more than three hours often present with low self esteem, low academic efficacy and high levels of depression. They are less well-adjusted compared to their peers and often present with behavioural problems.

Eberstadt (2001:16) maintains that self-care children who show negative feelings are crying out for more parental time and attention. The author uses the term semi-chronic problems to refer to those negative outcomes such as feelings of depression, academic failure, isolation, and hanging around with the wrong children. In other cases latchkey children may show symptoms such as withdrawal behaviour, aggression, and delinquency.

“Children who spend time on their own at younger ages may be setting the stage for increased time spent with other unsupervised children and involvement in risky behaviours as they get older” (Vandivere *et al.*, 2003:5). Peer pressure, television, and older siblings are influential factors in for instance, early sexual involvement and drug experimentation (Eberstadt, 2001:15). When children are at home alone, they are likely to invite friends over or go to a friend’s house. Children who are at home alone are more likely to abuse alcohol, tobacco, marijuana or other drugs (Mertens *et al.*, 2003:57).

Exposure to high risk neighbourhoods could be the cause of poor developmental outcomes and scholastic achievement (Lord & Mahoney, 2007:1322). According to research by Belle (1999:8) educators and parents often blame poor school performance of their children on the lack of care, support and supervision in the after school hours (Belle, 1999:8).

Alston (2005) indicated that latchkey children often demonstrate more academic and social adjustment problems than children in supervised settings. Many teachers in their research believe that being alone at home can be seen as one of the causes of school failure.

Relationships as support structures for scholastic progress in the latchkey situation

As the child grows older, he or she forms relationships with *inter alia* the self, parents, peers, educators, siblings and other people who play a significant role in his or her life (Bergman & Surrey, 2001:21). Because the researchers concentrate on educational support, they will concentrate on relationships with the parents and educators. According to Knight (2004:85-86) relationships are viewed as the very substance of life, which defines who we are. Dunn (2004: 2) defines a relationship as a connection between two people, both affirming it. These relationships are either healthy or unhealthy and could cause either emotional wellbeing or emotional distress.

Parent-child interaction is the first and one of the most crucial reciprocal relations in the young child's life (Ralph & Eddowes, 2002:111). The interaction can be positive or negative. Positive interaction with parents is supportive and gives a child a sense of security and wellbeing, whereas negative interaction with parents is linked to risky behaviours such as delinquency, sexual experimentation, and experimentation with harmful substances and various forms of peer pressure (Eberstadt, 2001:15).

Healthy relationships start at home when the environment is conducive to healthy development, the atmosphere is pleasant and parents offer support, love, comfort and security (Ralph & Eddowes, 2002:61). Positive interaction is characterised by emotional wellbeing in children and social well being at home. Buchanan and Hudson (2000:34-35) maintain that if children experience healthy relationships in childhood, it often results in scholastic success, because of the support given to the child.

According to Sohng (2003:268) supervised children often get more support and help from their parents and other adults than unsupervised children and as a result their scholastic progress improves, while unsupervised children's progress may deteriorate. When parents are less available, children may get less support at home, except if time spent with children is quality time. Parental involvement in the school's activities in general helps children to behave better and be more diligent in their efforts to learn. The involvement of parents with their children, such as helping them with homework, may result in better performance at school.

In unhealthy relationships, where children do not have a supportive environment from their parents and others, children are likely to develop negative responses to the self and others (Ralph & Eddowes, 2002:55). Positive interaction with others is difficult and children may exhibit emotional and behavioural problems (Buchanan & Hudson, 2000:36). If children experience continual feelings of failure in their relationships, they withdraw from the situation and may experience social and emotional distress. Children who experience an unhealthy relationship with their parents are negatively affected and this has a bearing on their scholastic progress, as well as emotional distress in childhood and adulthood. Eberstadt (2001:15) indicates further that negative behaviour happens during the after-school hours in the 'parent-free home'. This implies that parental absence may be damaging to learners' scholastic performance and emotional wellbeing. Eberstadt (2001:17) explains that latchkey children's homework is affected in the absence of parental involvement, because most children need help and supervision with their homework. In many homes there is nobody to provide that kind of support after school. Most children are exhausted by the time their parents arrive home, and adults who do find themselves supervising homework after a long and busy day may be less efficient or patient with their children

The other important relationship, in assisting with educational development, is the child's relationship with his/her educators. Nesser (2007:57) maintains that educators at school can play an important role in prohibiting anti-social behaviour and promoting pro-social behaviour. The most important single factor in determining the nature of the child's experience at school is the educator. Learner's positive relationships with their educators also promote academic motivation (Nesser, 2007:56). The educator-learner relationship is of utmost importance for the learner's academic progress and adjustment at school. One of the tasks of the educator is to guide and support the learner to perceive, understand and make sense of the world (Vrey, 1992:215). The educator's expectations of learners can influence both their cognitive and affective development.

Buchanan and Hudson (2000:161) maintain that children experience schooling as either positively or negatively — for some children the school is a place where they are stimulated, while for others it is a place of fear, failure and alienation. A positive relationship with the teacher is important for the development of the child's self esteem and sense of wellbeing. According to Ralph and Eddowes (2002:55) learners need a sense of stability and security in their lives because, without feelings of wellbeing, stress occurs. Sometimes it is only in the school context where children experience a sense of being cared for, because of unhealthy home circumstances. Vrey (1992:117) concludes that the more positive a child's perception of the teacher's attitude, the higher the scholastic achievement.

When parents and educators are aware, interested and involved in the lives of latchkey children and provide support, they may feel safer within the latchkey situation. The parents and school have, therefore, a very important role to play in the development of the child as a whole, but more specifically in academic success.

We felt that latchkey children were being overlooked in South African society and at school and therefore decided to do a study concerning latchkey children's relationships with parents and educators and its influence on their educational development.

Research method

Research design

Qualitative methodology was used as the research design with three cases selected to address the research problem of how latchkey children can be supported for optimal educational achievement. In this study we define qualitative research as inductive and present data in a narrative mode, unlike in quantitative research where results are presented by numbers (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:1). We used qualitative techniques, namely, interviews, to establish and explore the relationships of latchkey children with parents and educators and its influence on educational development in a specific school setting in an urban area in South Africa. The school specialises in children with learning problems and we felt that some children could achieve more educationally in supportive circumstances.

Participants and setting

Creswell (2002:166) maintains that convenience sampling is used when the researcher selects participants because they are willing, available and accessible. The children in this study were selected based on their availability and accessibility. It was convenient for the researchers to draw a sample of three latchkey children for this study at a primary school known to the researchers. The one researcher was an educational psychologist in training at the school and was

often confronted with problems pertaining to educational achievement. She started exploring possible contributory factors apart from learning difficulties. McMillan and Schumacher (2001:175) maintain that the main purpose of convenience sampling may be not to generalise, but to better understand relationships that may exist. The researchers wanted to study possible causes of scholastic problems with latchkey children who seem to have more potential than indicated in their educational achievement.

The following learners, their parents, and teachers were interviewed:

Case 1

Lutendo is 8 years 9 months old and in Grade 2. He is the second child of three children. He lives with both parents who work long hours. The father is home the earliest, but that is only at half-past five. The mother comes home even later and she still studies as well. He and his older sister spend between three and four hours alone at home. The baby brother is in pre-school.

Case 2

Mashudu is 10 years 11 months old and in Grade 4. He is the older child of two children. Both parents work and arrive at home at about half-past six at night. The two children spend at least 4 hours alone at home.

Case 3

Ambani is 11 years 10 months old and in Grade 6. He is an only child living with his mother and aunt. Both the mother and the aunt work long hours from eight in the morning till seven o'clock at night. He spends at least 4 hours at home alone.

Participants were informed of the nature of the research prior to the interview. Participation in this study was voluntary and respondents' identities remained confidential. The data collected from participants would not be used for disciplinary measures or for any reward purposes. Approval for participation was gained by means of written correspondence from the Department of Education and the school governing body, as well as the parents and learners.

Data collection

In this study data were collected through the use of a literature review and, interviews with various participants in three cases. Unstructured interview techniques were used to collect data from three learners, three educators, and three parents.

Three cases were selected to investigate the phenomenon of a latchkey situation with each case consisting of a child, a parent, and an educator. In order to confirm the findings from the three case studies, triangulation was done by comparing the themes from all participants' interviews and by discussing the final outcomes with the respondents.

Analysis of data

The interviews were transcribed and themes were identified. The various interviews were compared to see whether the same themes appeared in all interviews.

Findings

The findings from the interviews coincide with many of the outcomes from research worldwide

found in literature. The context and the background of the interviewees may differ from some of the studies in the literature review, but the consequences remain the same — children who do not get enough attention at home or at school or are left to their own devices alone at home will rarely achieve optimally in their schoolwork. The different responses of the interviewees show problems with behaviour, school work, and relationships with parents and teachers.

Case study A

Lutendo says: *“I feel sad when my sister is not at home. I stay in the house alone until she or my mother comes back. My mother is busy with her Unisa homework. When she is finished she goes to sleep”*. The mother confirms that she is too busy with her own work to give enough attention to her child’s homework and needs. The father only gives warnings, but does not help with the homework either. Lutendo says: *“I know that it is a mistake not to do my homework. My father gives me warnings and I keep doing what he does not like. He will end up hitting me”*. Both Lutendo and his mother reported that his homework is not done and his scholastic performance is poor. On the other hand, the teacher felt that there was no problem with his school performance. The mother stressed that Lutendo’s performance has dropped as compared to the previous year. She also indicated that his school performance is affected by his diet. Since there is no adult supervision at home, Lutendo eats junk food. In the evening he does not have an appetite, as a result he is not eating properly. Robinson (1986:66) maintains that eating junk food contributes to underweight or overweight, high blood pressure and calcium deficiencies. As a result the child’s schoolwork will be affected, due to a lack of concentration and energy.

Lutendo spends at least three to four hours alone at home and with the parents too tired or busy to give him attention, his school work suffers, as well as his relationships with his parents .

Case study B

Mshudu stated that he does not mind staying at home alone, because his parents must work to earn a living — *“They bring us food ... why should I argue if they work for me and my brother? They are not going to taverns or gambling”*. According to the teacher, Mashudu always fights with teachers and learners. He is scared of everything and always defensive. His mother indicated that Mashudu’s relationship with teachers at school is not so good. His mother said that her son’s problem is not mainly scholastic, but behavioural. The mother indicated that Mashudu is angry about the situation at home, because his parents are continually fighting. She strongly agrees that he carries that anger with him to school. He becomes aggressive at school and clashes with teachers. As a result classes are interrupted and it becomes difficult for learning to take place. The teacher agrees with the mother that Mashudu’s scholastic performance is better than that of other children who are in self-care. She thinks that with support from the parents he can do well. Homework is sometimes not done. His spelling and writing also improved as compared to the first term. The teacher thinks that there is hope that he will proceed to the next grade. Even though there is evidence of a lack of commitment, dedication, and responsibility regarding school tasks, the teacher thinks that he will do well in the next grade.

Case study C

Ambani reveals his need for love, acceptance and nurturance from his mother. He feels isolated

and rejected. “*I am used to being at home alone after school and sometimes on weekends*”. But he is not happy with staying at home alone. He is scared and fears for intruders. The failure to cope with academic tasks due to a lack of parental involvement and supervision is reflected in this case. It is supported by the teacher who indicated that Ambani does not do his homework. The homework is sometimes only done with the help of the mother. Contrary to that, Ambani claims that he does his homework alone at home without adult supervision. In all the interviews of case three it showed that Ambani’s first term school performance was better than the second term. In the second term, it dropped but there is hope of improvement in the third term. The teacher commented that Ambani seems to be improving due to the teacher’s appreciation, motivation and assurance of hope. The mother also agrees with the teacher who indicated that the mother is not involved in the child’s schoolwork. The mother’s work shift appears to affect Ambani’s schoolwork negatively. It seems that lack of adult supervision contributes to poor academic performance.

It is evident that being in a latchkey situation has an impact on children’s scholastic progress. The relationship between latchkey children and educators is often not a healthy one. Children’s homework is affected, because they are unsupervised and if there is no one to provide supervision after school, the homework is not done. Some children are exhausted, by the time their parents arrive home. In case studies A and C, there was an indication that because there is no after-school supervision children perform poorly at school and do not do their homework. In case study B, both the mother and the teacher agreed that Mashudu’s scholastic performance is not bad, but he has a behavioural problem. Mashudu is aggressive at school and clashes with teachers, classmates and other learners. The teacher stressed that his homework is sometimes not done, but there is hope of progressing to the next grade.

Implications

It has emerged from the literature study and the interviews that the problem is serious. This study established that children, parents and teachers in the specific school want the latchkey problem and its consequences to be solved. Steps should be taken to address the problem. The question is how to address the problem of latchkey children.

Children who spend their after school time in an unstructured environment where they for instance merely ‘hang out’ with peers are at a greater risk of negative educational outcomes. Activities that students participate in after school hours affect themselves and their community and consequently, their performance in school (Cosden, Morrison, Gutierrez & Brown, 2004: 222).

The need for after school programmes has increased in recent years. Safe, enriching and high quality programmes could have a positive and significant impact on children and teens (Shaunessey, 2001:71). Research indicates that youth problems ranging from school failure to drug abuse to teen pregnancy can be prevented or addressed by quality after school programmes. After school programmes could enrich educational experiences and could prevent engagement in unhealthy or dangerous behaviour. Young people do need a supportive after school environment supervised by adults to develop their potential. These programmes should be tailored according to the developmental needs of the children (Mertens *et al.*, 2003:57-60; Vandivere *et al.*, 2003:6).

A properly designed after-school programme could have strong positive effects on a child’s academic, social and emotional development, especially those children who are at risk

of failing at school. These kinds of programmes fill gaps in communities, because they complement institutions such as the family and the school (National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2006).

Many parents are stressed, because of their children's homework demands. Parents' involvement in homework is very important, because it models positive attitudes and engagement with the child. After-school homework classes for children of full time employed parents are equally important, but then the parents must become involved in these programmes, so that children can see the interest of their parents in their supervision. After-school homework programmes can provide learners with

"... structure, supervision, academic assistance, and the opportunity to learn study skills. At their best after school homework programs can help students maintain their academic standing, feel more bonded to their school, reduce family stress, and develop attitudes and skills that would facilitate their success in school ..." (Cosden, *et al.*, 2004:222).

Educators can try to help latchkey children deal with homework, boredom, safety and emotions in the following ways:

- Educators are advised to make an arrangement for homework for the whole week to be completed on weekends. In this way parents who work longer hours can have more time to supervise their children's homework.
- The extension of school hours in order to cater for latchkey children is also recommended. The suggestion will help in keeping latchkey children safely at school rather than being alone and vulnerable at home. Home work classes could be an option as mentioned above.
- After-school care facilities as already discussed could be an option, but this usually costs money which parents do not always have.
- Observation of children's emotions. Educators can get a picture of children's emotional states through observing them in different situations. Children's behaviour helps educators to identify and become aware of their feelings, problems, strengths and weaknesses. Educators should also encourage latchkey children to talk about being alone at home. When children share their experiences of self care, they learn that it is normal to feel lonely, afraid and bored and that other children also feel the same way. They should also know that there is somebody to talk to about their feelings.

Conclusion

While self care is not always harmful, research has found that children under the age of 13 who regularly spend time alone at home may be at risk for injuries, social, behavioural and developmental problems, as well as poor academic achievement and school adjustment problems (Vandivere *et al.*, 2003:1).

The study indicated that the issue of latchkey children has not been given sufficient attention and there is a need for a set of systems that would identify latchkey children at schools and set up after-care services for those children. Universities should encourage post-graduate studies in the field to generate more data and create understanding of the problem.

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Authors

Elza Venter is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Teacher Education at Unisa and has 19 years lecturing experience. Her interests are in philosophy of education and psychology of education.

Eunice Rambau is Deputy Chief Education Specialist (Psychologist) at Sedibeng West district office, specialising in learners with barriers to learning and career guidance and counselling..