

Family Dysfunction, Socio-Economic Status and Effective Learning of Tertiary Level Students in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with family dysfunction and Socio-economic challenges facing students and coping strategies to adopt in paving way for effective learning at the tertiary level. The concepts of family dysfunction and Socio-economic status and challenges posed are discussed. Impacts of these factors on students' learning include loss of concentration, poor academic achievement, low self-esteem, indiscipline acts, mental health issues and dropping out of school. Coping strategies proposed for family dysfunction and Socio-economic status challenges include positive mindset, therapy, acquisition of creative skills, cutting costs, and acquisition of entrepreneurial and technology skills. Recommendations made include Self-determination for success, Productive ventures, Provision of adequate school vehicles for transportation and internet connectivity for schools.

Keywords: Family Dysfunction, Socio-economic status, Anti-social behaviours, Learning, Therapy, Coping strategies.

INTRODUCTION

A functional family is a family unit that operates normally by promoting proper nurturing and development of individual members. Attributes such as love, care, support, respect, sense of belonging, security, feeling of importance, high self-esteem, and warm relationships among members, abound in a functional family. On the contrary, when a family unit functions abnormally, it is considered "Dysfunctional."

A dysfunctional family is a family unit with multiple conflicts that negatively impacts on basic needs of family members. Such conflicts include fighting, domestic violence, mental illness, drug/alcohol abuse, extra-marital affairs and gambling (Spears, 2022). Family dysfunction creates an environment that is toxic to child development (Brandwein, 2022). The physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of the child can be impaired. The formative years of the child and the environment in which he/she grows up can influence the latter years' behaviours of the child. Individuals from dysfunctional families may exhibit low self-esteem, inability to trust others, social vices, personality disorders and poor academic performance.

Conflicts at home can affect students' learning processes. Steel (2009) posited that children who experience conflicts between their parents' manifest loss of concentration, aggression, shyness, lack of parental care and poor academic performance. Students who witness frequent quarrels between their parents at home, may be engrossed with flashes and thoughts of such episodes in school, and so lose concentration during lessons in class. Some students may become reserved and unable to actively participate in class. Some may begin to manifest mental health issues like anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation (The Sidney Morning Herald, 2010). These actions are detrimental to successful academic pursuits.

Another factor that can exert adverse influence on students' learning is Socio-economic status (SES). It is a term used to describe the class standing of an individual or group. It is often measured in terms of income, occupation and education (Crossman, 2019). In other words, the dimension of SES, namely, family income, parents' educational level and parents' occupational prestige are determinants of a child's functioning in school. Students from high socio-economic family levels may receive adequate support from parents for their academic needs, thereby contributing to high grades in schools or acquiring books and other learning materials for them. Such children may fall victim of poor grades in school.

Furthermore, the alarming rate of increase in cost of goods (including food items and learning materials) in Nigeria, is of grave concern to stakeholders in Education sector. Low- and middle-class families are facing gross financial challenges and difficulties coping with the trend. Tertiary level students from such homes are sometimes left to fend for themselves in schools. Such students may lack adequate funds for their daily upkeep. Purchase of textbooks and learning materials such as personal laptops and data for internet browsing may become extremely difficult (Akintunde and Eseyin, 2018). These challenges tend to spur such students to seek coping strategies.

However, some attempts at combating the fierce effects of family dysfunction and SES are negative and retrogressive. Some families and students take to anti-social behaviours. In Nigeria, the crime rate is on the increase (Aderounmu, 2021). Teenagers, youths and adults alike engage in anti-social behaviours like substance abuse, rape, kidnapping for ransom, killings for ritual purposes toward wealth acquisition. Some university students engage in "Yahoo Yahoo" crime to dupe unsuspecting rich victims for wealth acquisition. Metu, Kalu and Maduka (2018) posited that poverty and family issues were some factors responsible for high crime rate in Nigeria. Feelings of frustration and stress spur some students into anti-social behaviours like illicit sexual relationships, bribery and campus prostitution (Akintunde and Eseyin, 2018). Some tertiary level students engage in cultism, bullying of other students and examination malpractices. Some eventually become school drop-outs due to inability to cope with the academic demands or because of expulsion for gross misconduct. These issues compound societal problems and should be addressed.

Effective learning at the tertiary level is dependent on stable mental health of learners. Learners facing family dysfunction and SES challenges need support to cope. The need to overcome the challenges and imbibe positive survival strategies is quite significant. It is against this backdrop that this paper focusses on family dysfunction and poor socio-economic status as correlates of ineffective learning as well as proffering positive, pragmatic survival strategies that will pave way for effective learning of tertiary level students in Nigeria.

CONCEPT OF A DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY

A dysfunctional family is a breeding place for abuse, neglect, addiction, secrecy, emotional disturbance among family members and anxious moments (Nittle 2021, Arora 2018). In such a family, there may be toxic husband-wife relationship or parent-child relationship. Also, there could be families with minor dysfunctions and some with major dysfunctions (Spear, 2022). The basic needs of children in such homes are often not met. Children grow up in such families with the erroneous notion that what obtains in the home is normal (based on the limited exposure). However, family dysfunction has adverse effects on the social skills of the child (Omae et al, 2018); physical and emotional development of the child (Brandwein, 2022) as well as the intellectual development. Omae et al (2018) submitted that students, whose parents often quarrel in their presence, have difficulties concentrating on their studies. As such, some students prefer to stay back in school hostel or move in with their friends or relatives during vacation. In the long run, some students discontinue with schooling when their parents separate. Consequently, a dysfunctional family is a threat to effective learning.

CONCEPT OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS (SES)

Socio-economic status refers to the class or social standing of an individual or a group of people. It combines education, income, and occupation of an individual or group (APA, 2022). Income refers to the earnings of an individual such as wages, salaries, investments and savings. Education refers to an individual's level of education, which may influence the earning ability (Crossman, 2019). Occupation refers to an individual's usual or principal work or business through which he or she earns a living. The SES of an individual can exert positive or negative impact on an individual's life. The level of one's SES is often classified as low, middle and high. Students with low SES backgrounds may be plagued by gross financial challenges and poor academic achievement. Scholars proposed that development of academic skills by children is slow (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeir and MacZuga, 2009). As such, low SES can hinder effective learning.

IMPACT OF FAMILY DYSFUNCTION AND LOW SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS ON STUDENTS' LEARNING

Students from a dysfunctional family (DF) or low socio-economic status (LSES) background have diverse challenges hampering their development and learning processes. The challenges relating to academics will be discussed here. Since the challenges from DF and LSES are similar, these will be pooled together and discussed as follows:

Loss of Concentration in Class

Conflicts at home contribute to loss of concentration in class by students (Steel, 2009). Those from LSES backgrounds face similar challenge. The student's mind is not settled and so becomes restless and absent-minded in class. He/she struggles between brooding over the discouraging situation at home and paying attention in class. Such a behaviour impairs learning.

Unmet Basic Needs

Students from DF and LSES have their basic needs neglected. They lack parental support and are left on their own to cater for their needs. Such students lack support in paying their tuition fees as well as upkeep money to feed and transport themselves to school. These needs can impair learning.

Inadequate Learning Resources

Students from DF and LSES face challenges of inadequate learning resources. They are not able to purchase necessary textbooks and other learning resources. Akintunde and Eseyin (2018) found that tertiary level students facing economic hardship are bedeviled by lack of funds for tuition fees and inadequate learning facilities.

Poor Academic Achievement

Students from DF and LSES homes may exhibit poor academic performance or poor grades. Doerschuk et al (2016) posited that the success rate of low-income students in some courses is lower than that of high-income students. Also, frequent parental conflicts in dysfunctional families were found to have negative effects on children's academic performance (Omae et al, 2018). Students from conflict-infested homes have challenges in academic achievement (Cardiff University, 2005).

Low Self-Esteem

Students from DF and LSES backgrounds may experience low self-esteem or low self-confidence (Arora, 2018). They tend to have bad image of themselves which may affect their grades in school. Such students lack motivation to pursue excellence since they feel defeated already.

Dropping Out of School

Students may discontinue with schooling when their parents separate (due to financial constraints). Students from LSES families may also become dropouts. Following separation of parents, children are twice likely to have academic problems compared to children whose parents are staying together (Dalgard, 2007). This is because such students face challenges in adjusting to and coping with the development.

Indiscipline Acts

Students from DF and LSES backgrounds are sometimes found engaging in substance use such as drugs, alcohol, smoking and other delinquent behaviours like becoming bullies, cultists and campus prostitutes. Some students learn such vices from home while some engage in such vices in a bid to survive their home challenges or poor SES. These vices or indiscipline acts are detrimental to learning. Students lacking discipline fail to focus on their academics; are often found lagging behind in attending lectures, submitting assignments or writing tests. Some are given disciplinary measures from time to time, while some are expelled from school for examination malpractices and other misconducts.

Mental Health Issues

Due to faulty family background or poor SES, some students experience mental health issues like depression and suicidal ideation (The Sidney Morning Herald, 2010). Others are anxiety, emotional disturbances, mood and personality disorders. These factors impair effective learning. According to Akintunde, 2017, learning is impaired when learners are emotionally sick, depressed, or anxious.

STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH FAMILY DYSFUNCTION CHALLENGES

Life in a dysfunctional family is emotionally stressful (Brandwein, 2022). Developing healthy coping skills will help tertiary level students from DF backgrounds to learn effectively and achieve academic success. The following coping strategies are proposed:

Having a Positive Mindset

The student should embrace a positive outlook of life in order to have a better future. The student should have the determination to improve his/her situation or forge ahead despite all odds. The student should refuse to be caged by the painful experiences at home but should aspire to use the right tools to have a good turn-around and so achieve great goals in life. Such a positive mindset will propel a tertiary level student from a DF set-up, to seek avenues of surmounting his/her challenges and desire great academic heights.

Seeking Therapy

The student should sit with, open up to and discuss with a mental health provider or therapist about his/her challenges. Within the school system, there are Psychologists and Guidance Counsellors that can help. Outside the school system, there are rehabilitation centres that can handle mental health issues and provide therapeutic assistance to address traumatic experiences. The therapist can guide the student in using healthy coping skills to overcome the challenges. The therapist also guides in helping the student to set boundaries to keep in relating to his/her dysfunctional family.

Studying Self-Help Books

The student needs to study books that can help in acquiring skills that he/she lacks. Books about good parenting, good family relationships, effective communication, boosting self-esteem/self-confidence and how to achieve academic success can be of help. This step helps to complement the assistance received from the therapist.

Avoiding Toxic Environment

The student may need to limit contact with some relatives and family members so as to recover fully. He/she needs to spend less time at home or in conflict-prone environment that aggravates stress or painful experiences. The alternatives are to stay more with relations that have functional families, good friends with functional families or stay in a rented place if financially independent. These steps will help to build new support systems to make progress in life. However, it is not advisable to cut off totally from the original dysfunctional family.

Being Creative

Conflict situations can pave way for creative expressions or initiatives. An adage says, "Necessity is the mother of invention." Students can turn the toxic situation at home around by re-building relationships in positive ways. They can also focus on creative ways of developing their talents and interests to support their financial self-independence and learning in schools.

STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH POOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

The following coping strategies are proposed for tertiary level students from low socio-economic backgrounds:

Optimistic Disposition

Students from low SES families should be optimistic. Being hopeful is a vital tool in surviving economic hardship. It strengthens the individual's resolve to demonstrate resilience in seeking positive survival strategies.

Entrepreneurial Skills

Students should use their leisure time, holidays and/or weekends to acquire entrepreneurial skills to augment their given stipends. Such skills include shoe-making, carpentry, photography/video coverage, cake baking or catering services, fashion designing, technological services and Art works. These can generate additional income for tertiary-level students to cushion the effects of low SES and to cater for their learning needs. However, entrepreneurship thrives with creativity.

Creative Skills

Creativity entails newness, originality, functionality and aesthetics. Students can acquire creative skills to design new, original and attractive products. Such outstanding products may also be based on students' talents and interests. Students can get some cash from marketing such products. Creativity also entails modifying or adjusting old items to become new. For instance, Education students can produce instructional aids from re-cycled materials, for use during teaching practice. Old pieces of cloths can be used to make Bean Bags; plastic bottle covers can be used as counters, empty plastic bottles can be re-designed as beautiful flowerpots, tumblers and pencil/biro containers. These can help to minimize costs.

Technology Skills

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills are also valuable. In this digital era, students can take time to develop their computer skills. They can save costs by typing their assignments on personal laptops and using their phones to browse on the internet via search engine like Google, instead of using the cybercafé. Equipped with Technology skills, students can get legitimate online jobs that can fetch them some amount of money to augment their upkeep stipend.

Cutting Costs

The current economic hardship calls for personal adjustments to be made. Students may need to adjust their purchases to fit their budget realities. With the recent hike in food prices, students may need to forgo expensive food items for cheaper food items, while still maintaining balanced diet, by using more of vegetables and fruits in the locality. Also, it may be more economical to prepare food personally than eating out at restaurants. Sometimes, students may need to walk some distances to school instead of always using taxis. This will help to reduce cost and can also be a way of exercising the body to keep fit. These actions contribute to effective learning.

CONCLUSION

Family dysfunction and low SES are some factors influencing learning among tertiary level students. Stakeholders in the education sector should be concerned about tackling these challenges. This paper discussed the impact of family dysfunction and socio-economic status as well as the survival strategies to imbibe. The painful past of a student does not have to predict

a painful future. Adopting healthy survival tools can bring about a good turn-around for the student and can pave way for effective learning or academic success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Students should have the determination to achieve success despite faulty family experiences and SES challenges. Having this favourable disposition can drive students to seek healthy survival strategies.
- 2) Students should seek therapy from trained professional to overcome their challenges.
- 3) Students can engage in dialogue with parents to instigate favourable changes in the home environment.
- 4) Students should acquire creative, entrepreneurial and technology skills that will help to combat the effects of FD and low SES.
- 5) Students should spend quality time on productive ventures like internet browsing, seeking for learning materials. They should avoid spending time on irrelevancies like pro-longed chatting on social media and taking daily selfie pictures to post on social media.
- 6) School management should provide more vehicles with reduced transportation costs for students, to convey them to and from school.
- 7) Government should provide adequate funding for education. Tertiary institutions should be provided with facilities like computer laboratories and internet connectivity or data that students and staff can use for browsing to promote teaching and learning.

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