

The Relationship Between Family Conflicts And Students' Academic Engagement: A Case Study Of Selected Secondary Students In Ibadan North Local Government Area, Oyo State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

There has been media and scholarly attention on the factors that may be responsible for falling academic performance of secondary school students in Oyo State, Nigeria. This study contributes to the stream of literature on the role of family conflict as a perceived determinant of students' academic engagement. A total of 245 secondary school students were randomly selected from Ibadan North Local Government Area of Oyo. The students were asked to answer structured questions in a questionnaire. Their responses were analysed and discussed using frequency counts, percentages, means, standard deviations and ANOVA technique. The emerging findings revealed that boundary conflict, whereby the parents create barriers between themselves and their children, was the most common form of family conflict with the consequence ranging from loss of students' attention in learning activities, students' emotional distraught and overall decline in academic interest and then performance in achievement tests. Inevitable and intense family conflicts were also described as contributory to falling students' academic engagement in classroom activities and self-study habits. It is therefore recommended that the educational stakeholders (especially the parents) should recognise the academic fallout of manifesting overt family conflict in the presence of their children. If there would be conflict in any regard, it should be prevented from lingering towards dragging students' emotional collection and their academic engagement in the school and home settings.

Keywords: *family conflict, perceived effect, secondary school students, academic engagement, ANOVA, Nigeria*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Family conflict has been noted to predispose teenagers to poor peer relationships, loss of self-efficacy, violent behaviours, substance abuse and mental health issues (Adetutu and Adebayo, 2021; Wami et al., 2021; Okanume-Onah et al., 2022). The mix of these consequences has also been linked with poor academic performance of students emanating from conflicted homes (Hussain et al., 2022; Okanume-Onah et al., 2022). On the other hand, a counselling perspective pushed forward by Ogunsanwo et al. (2020) stated that students who have been exposed to family conflicts are said to develop autonomy and self-motivation skills early in their lives, making them independent in making life decisions including on their academic pursuits and achievements. The latter argument is, nevertheless, less popular among advocates for functional family relationships. It is therefore noteworthy to re-establish the link between family conflict and academic engagement of teenagers in secondary school. In this context, academic engagement involves measures such as punctuality, class attendance, classroom attentiveness and participation, self-study habits and performance in achievement tests and examinations.

While the relationship between family conflict and engagement of students in learning activities has attracted many researchers, the mediating factors have not been exhaustively explored. Yang et al. (2022) provided evidence of the stance of academic engagement of students who have been affected by parental conflict. Such students are obsessed with thoughts about what could be playing out between their parents (Yang et al., 2022). Previously, Peng and Kievit (2020) commented on the development of academic achievement from cognitive abilities of students in the classroom environment. According to Peng and Kievit (2020), students with unsettled

families cannot maximize knowledge acquisition because they naturally lose concentration in the classroom – while the teachers are leading them on learning instructions, they are mentally occupied with the dysfunction at home.

The arguments of Ogunsanwo et al. (2020) and Yang et al. (2022) can be reconciled by noting that both sets of authors regarded family conflict as not having direct pass-through effect on the students' academic engagement and achievement. It rather first challenges the resilience of the child on their life's skills. Thus, if the child has sufficient resilience, the home conflict may have a marginal effect on their academic performance (Ogunsanwo et al., 2020). In the absence of such resilience, the child may lose academic engagement and develop depressive symptoms, culminating in deficient academic achievement (Yang et al., 2022).

Given the foregoing, the present study intends to add to the bulk of literature on the structure of family conflict as a driver of academic engagement of secondary school students. The study is perception-based as it focuses on the effect of family conflict as may be perceived by the students directly. To this end, family conflict is grouped into three forms (boundary, inevitable and intense). The boundary conflict relates to the sort of barriers and tensions that may develop between the child and their parents, inevitable conflict is somewhat mild as human interaction cannot inherently exist without differences in tastes, ideas and goals. Finally, intense family conflict is that which includes physical and verbal abuse as well as molestation, separation or even divorce.

II. A BRIEF TOUR OF THE LITERATURE

Okesina (2018) explored the effect of family background on children's academic achievement, with focus on the teacher's perspectives. The author adopted a descriptive survey design while purposive and stratified sampling techniques were combined to select 200 respondents from secondary schools in Ilorin metropolis, Nigeria. A self-designed instrument was used for data collection and the author obtained a reliability coefficient of 63% before the final instrument administration. The empirical analysis was anchored by t-test and analysis of variance (ANOVA) at 5% level of significance. Okesina (2018) found that adequate monitoring of children's homework by parents, parental motivation of children and the nurture and care parents give to the children influence the students' academic achievement. However, these correlates cannot manifest in an environment characterised by family conflict (Okesina, 2018). This finding agreed with the earlier submissions of Yusuf (2011) who rather investigated the role of family violence on the academic potentials and achievement of students in Ilorin West Local Government Area of Kwara State, Nigeria.

Kemjika and Obikoya (2017) investigated the propensities of adjustment behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Rivers State, Nigeria. The study adopted correlational design targeted at establishing the relationship between family conflicts, values and school adjustment. A total of 1,000 adolescent students were drawn through multi-stage sampling techniques. Two survey questionnaires were designed and they were quantified on a 4-point scale. The reliability coefficient of the instruments was averaged at 72.5%. The authors applied the Pearson Product Moment Correlation statistic as the analytical tool. The results showed that there is a positive relationship among family conflict, values and school adjustment which are all statistically significant at 0.05 level. It goes that if the family conflict is elevated, there is a breakdown in the value systems of the students, limiting their adjustment to acceptable school behaviours. Previously, Yunus et al. (2014) analysed the adjustment problems among Year One students of the School of Health Technology Keffi, Nasarawa State, Nigeria. The findings of Kemjika and Obikoya (2017) were a semblance of those of Yunus et al. (2014), despite using different sets of samples in two different states and the time lags between both studies. In essence, students find it difficult to demonstrate positive values and sound academic engagement when their parents are known for perpetual conflicts.

A major feature of family conflict is single parenting or that the students live with their grandparents while their parents are alive and live separately. In this light, with the view to discussing the impact of parental separation and family conflict on the academic performance of students, Olayemi (2014) purposely selected a total 260 respondents (250 students, 20 teachers and 10 parents) in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos State, Nigeria. The author emphasised the selection of students who have been raised by single parents or grandparents. A correlational analysis was used as the analytical technique. Olayemi (2014) revealed that while there was no significant difference between the academic performance of students from single parents and those from two-parent families, there was significant difference in the academic engagement of male students from single parent and male students from two-parent families. The author therefore argued that male students from two-parent families had a higher likelihood to perform better than male students raised by single parents. Unruly behaviours were also found to be more pronounced among male students with only a single parent (Olayemi, 2014). When Oba-Adenuga (2020) revisited the research objective of Olayemi (2014) among different respondents at Somolu Local Government Area of Lagos, he echoed existing findings on the subject matter.

Hassan (2016) examined the influence of family stability and instability on school attendance (a measure of academic engagement) and academic performance of secondary school students in Zamfara State, Nigeria. The author employed the descriptive survey and ex-facto research designs. A relatively large sample of 1,200 students

were randomly selected from a population of 182,029 students. Descriptive statistics were combined with t-test to generate inferences from the data. The emerging findings pointed out that family stability and instability affect students' class attendance and academic performance. More specifically, family instability has a negative influence on academic engagement of students. Students from unstable families characterised by constant conflicts between parents scored lower on achievement tests than their counterparts with stable family relationships (Hassan, 2016).

Adeniji and Mabekoje (2019) considered the influence of family functioning on academic engagement of secondary school adolescents in Ogun State, Nigeria. The researchers adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design such that a sample of 1,800 senior secondary school students were selected through the multi-stage stratified random sampling technique from an estimated population of 103,981 senior secondary school students in the 2015/2016 academic year. In difference to the most common methodology in the literature, the authors estimated a multiple regression model that was formulated to characterise the collected data. They obtained findings which signposted a significant influence of family functioning on students' academic engagement. In particular, among the factors of family functioning, problem solving by family members was found to be the most potent contributor to academic engagement. This implies that where the parents lack the skills to solve academic and social problems of their children, they may not expect robust academic engagement and performance of such children. (Adeniji and Mabekoje, 2019).

III. METHODOLOGY

This study has a descriptive design with the intent of bringing into limelight the role of conflict in the students' families on their academic engagement. This design was showcased by the deployment of questionnaires towards obtaining opinion information from the student respondents who were randomly and purposely selected from Ibadan North Local Government Area of Oyo State. Two hundred and forty five students (mostly drawn from senior secondary school 1, SSS 1) participated in the study. The questionnaire administration was aided by the students' teachers and principals who volunteered to ensure that the students were properly briefed of the research purpose and how their responses would be treated anonymously. The respondents and gatekeepers were assured that the collected data would be discarded as soon as the research was completed. This was aimed at making them relaxed enough to release sensitive data regarding the occurrence of family conflicts in their respective families. In the end, the retrieval rate was 100%. The questionnaires contained five sections A to E. Section A obtained brief demographic information of the respondents. Sections B, C and D focused on the prevalence of conflict in the students' families (with the emphasis on their parents). Three measures of conflict (boundary, inevitable and intense) were captured in each section. Finally, Section E asked information on the perceived relationship between family conflict and academic engagement among the students.

While the demographic data were rated using disparate options and interpreted by frequency counts and percentages, data from Sections B to E were screened on four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strong Disagree or SD), 2 (Disagree or D), 3 (Agree or A) and 4 (Strongly Agree or SA). However, respondents were said to be unanimous to disagree on a variable whose mean response was at most 2.4 while they were said to generally agree on a variable if the mean response was at least 2.5. This analytical technique allowed perspectives in the discussion of findings emerging from the data. Furthermore, the difference in the students' responses on the connection between family conflict and academic engagement was analysed using analysis-of-variance (ANOVA) technique. The results were interpreted at 5% level of significance. In standard statistical analyses, where the p-value is less than the level of significance, the statistical coefficient is said to be significant. If the p-value is more than the level of significance, it is concluded that the coefficient is not significant. The STATA software helped in cleaning and analysing the data.

IV. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Description of the respondents

Of the 245 respondents, 50.2% are male while 49.8% are female. The students were mostly drawn from SS 1 classes in arts and commercial divisions. Majority of them (63.7%) claimed to come from monogamous families. A significant part of them (80.5%) reported that they were living with their families, so the collected data would give some idea of the existence of conflict in their families. While only 21.6% of the students' parents are civil servants, the rest are artisans or business persons. Of these parents, only about 8% had post-secondary education, with about 20% having no formal education.

Existence of boundary family conflict

As presented in Table 1, the majority of the respondents claimed that they were not free to relate with either or both of their parents. This general assertion was given by the mean score (2.96) of their responses. The standard deviation of 0.58 interprets that the opinions are not generally divergent from the mean response. Other standard deviations are also low, inducing high levels of statistical confidence on the opinions that were surveyed.

In clear terms, the students asserted some evidence of barriers with their parents regarding expression of feelings (mean response: 3.03) and concerns (mean response: 2.95). However, these feelings and concerns are the threshold of emotional relationships (Peng and Kievit, 2020). If students feel that their feelings are neglected by their parents or that they cannot feel free to raise issues that may be bothering them, they harbour implicit conflict with such parents and psychologically compete with other students with relatively good family bonds (Peng and Kievit, 2020). In effect, they lose emotional balance easily and can be attracted to non-educational activities behind such parents. Furthermore, the respondents believed that their mistakes are rarely forgiven by their parents (mean response: 2.99) and their parents often respond with threats of harm (2.89).

Table 1: Students' perceptions of boundary conflict in their families

Item on the questionnaire	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Standard Deviation
I am not free to relate with my parents	30	180	31	4	2.96	0.58
I am not free to express my feelings to my parents	38	182	19	6	3.03	0.43
I'm afraid to tell my parents any concerns I have	29	184	22	10	2.95	0.40
My parents condemn me for any mistakes I make	33	184	20	8	2.99	0.36
My parents often threaten to harm me	26	179	28	12	2.89	0.47

It follows that a large fraction of the sample respondents associated conflicts with their families. Relating this finding with the educational qualifications and occupations of the parents, it was gathered that the majority of the students who claimed such threats of harm have parents who were businesspeople and artisans; those with parents who were civil servants and had at least post-secondary education declined to associate such threats with their parents. This was consistent with Wami et al. (2021) who argued that boundary family conflict is mostly present among parents with little or no educational attainment. Nevertheless, with the existence of such barriers to family relationships, the present study has got a baseline finding upon which the students' school engagement can be analysed. This is due to the evidence given by Peng & Kievit (2020) and Wami et al. (2021) that students who lack good family bonds tend to lack interest in school activities as they struggle mentally to balance the home with school relationships. Yang et al. (2022) also reported that such students are likely to engage in deviant behaviours in both school and social settings. In an attempt to compensate for the absence of family relationships with peer relationships, given no parental guidance, they cannot filter the shafts on their own. The consequence is unruly behaviours including substance abuse. By extension, Yang et al. (2022) linked high incidence of teenage pregnancy among secondary school students with such boundary conflict between the parents (especially mothers) and their children.

Existence of inevitable family conflict

Additionally, this study recognises that conflict is inevitable in normal family relationships. Thus, inevitable family conflict was also surveyed. The results are presented in Table 2. It was telling that the students gave the general opinion that their parents often returned home late and left very early in the morning (mean response: 3.07). This average opinion relates that the children lacked the normal parental care. This was mostly experienced by children of artisans and businessmen and businesswomen. This result is in tandem with the previous argument of Okesina (2018) that parental care transcends provision of money for learning materials and school upkeep. With the view of enhancing the students' academic performance, parents are required to find time to discuss learning activities with their children (Okesina, 2018). Even when this is achieved by proxy (by private tutorials), the intended improvement in students' academic scores is not as great relative to if the parents directly engage their children (Olayemi, 2014). Furthermore, to validate the earlier claim of parents' unavailability, the respondents also stated that they do not cook food in their house except on weekends (2.92). Given this case, the children hardly bond with their parents, leading to build-up of emotional disconnection. Another measure of inevitable conflict is finance. It is a widely-held disposition that the finance of the home rests majorly on the man. When this role is reversed, for genuine reasons or otherwise, conflict may be inevitable in the home.

Table 2: Students' perceptions of inevitable conflict in their families

Item on the questionnaire	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Standard Deviation
My parents return home late and leave very early	40	180	18	17	3.07	0.55
We cook food at home mostly on weekends	33	175	22	15	2.92	0.67
My mother is the breadwinner in our family	16	168	34	27	2.71	0.82
My parents are very temperamental	21	171	29	24	2.77	0.76
My parents do not really like each other	20	160	32	33	2.68	0.88

As a result, students were asked of the breadwinner in their families. More than 75% answered the mother as the breadwinner, with the mean response being 2.71. This provided evidence that conflict was inevitable in most of the students' homes. While the main reason might be unknown to the children, their mothers and fathers would always be in disagreement if the mother is the long-term provider for the homes. Again, temperament often precedes conflict (Kemjika and Obikoya, 2017). So when 78.4% of the students believed that their parents were temperamental (with the mean response being 2.77), it can be deduced that conflict would be inevitable in their homes. This result re-establishes Kemjika and Obikoya (2017) who found that temperamental parents are in long-term conflict and rarely produce brilliant children. This is because they easily lose focus of the consequence of their conflict on their children's wellbeing and academic engagement. The foregoing led to the students being asked whether their parents like each other. They generally answered "yes" with the mean response of 2.68. Despite the measures of inevitable conflict, the students still argued that their parents liked each other. This suggests that love is a complex phenomenon which is beyond the scope of this research to explore.

Existence of intense family conflict

The next form of family conflict that was surveyed also revealed the discouraging stance of the students' family relationships. They generally opined that their parents sometimes fought with each other in the public (mean response: 2.92). In the absence of physical fight, they abuse and curse each other always (mean response: 2.89). Ogunsanwo (2020) provided the working mechanism by which the parents' overt conflict affects their children in schools. Naturally, children detest witnessing their parents fighting. Thus, when it happens, they are sad and this lingers to influence their concentration in learning activities. Such children are moody, dull and unmotivating (Ogunsanwo, 2020). While this is playing out, they may elicit help from their peers. In effect, they are introduced into unruly behavioural patterns towards helping themselves out of the emotional baggage from home. Consequently, the children lose focus and get derailed on their academic engagement. It follows that family relationships are connected to the students' emotional relationships which in turn are connected to behavioural relationships. For example, in a survey of family structure of secondary school students in Lagos State, Nigeria, Oba-Adenuga (2020) reported that a large fraction of students who are engaged in substance abuse emanate from broken homes where parents fight with each other constantly or have finally separated.

Table 3: Students' perceptions of intense conflict in their families

Item on the questionnaire	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Standard Deviation
My parents do fight with each other in the public	27	178	34	6	2.92	0.49
My parents abuse and curse each other	25	174	40	6	2.89	0.52
My parents do not eat together	19	169	51	6	2.82	0.50
My parents do not take care of each other	18	190	34	3	2.91	0.44
My parents have separated/divorced	5	150	69	21	2.57	0.34

This generates perspectives for further findings in this study. It was also gathered that students' parents did not eat together (mean response: 2.82). By not eating together, parents do not markedly teach how to love and receive love for their children. This lent credibility to another students' opinion that their parents do not take care of each other (mean response: 2.91). This may be interpreted as while living under the same roof, the parents do not interact with each other in a friendly way. To cap these measures of family conflict, 63.3% of the students claimed that their parents have separated or divorced (mean response: 2.57). A critical sorting of the answers supplied by the students showed that all the students in the last measure of intense family conflict filled "agree" or "strongly agree" to all the items on the questionnaire. This demonstrated that the height of family conflict is separation or divorce. In the literature of drivers of students' academic achievement and engagement, family conflict is in the top categories (Okanume-Onah et al., 2022; Ogunsanwo, 2020; Oba-Adenuga, 2020). Therefore, one should not expect robust academic potentials from children who have been significantly affected by parental separation and divorce.

Students' perceived effect of family conflict on their academic engagement

Further on the findings, students were asked of their perceptions on the relationship between family conflict and their academic engagement. Their responses are summarised in Table 4 where it is noted that the students often think about their parents' conflict during classroom activities (mean response: 2.90). As noted previously, children naturally detest seeing their parents in conflict. So when such conflict occurs, they feel let down and consider academic activities as distraction (Hussain et al., 2022). Also, through their parents' conflict, the students believed that they were aware of conflict as being part of life (mean response: 2.89). This realisation has both positive and negative undertones. On the positive note, the children might have seen conflict as inevitable in life and thus lacked the abilities to cope with the shocks that conflict may exude. On the negative note, the

students might have developed deviant behaviours by constantly being in conflict with other people in the society. There is a suspicion that the latter might have been the students' observational knowledge. This was buttressed by another students' opinion that their parents do not provide the needed learning materials for them (the children) as a result of the ongoing family conflict (mean response: 2.89). And that the parents do not really care about them studying at home (mean response: 2.68). Finally, the students agreed that they might have failed some subjects in their last terminal exam due to the conflict in their families (3.01). It therefore implies that the respondent students generally agreed that their limited engagement in school activities is linked to the existence of conflict in their respective families.

Table 4: Perceptions of students on the effect of family conflict on their academic engagement

	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Standard Deviation
I often think about my parents' conflict during classroom activities	41	145	52	7	2.90	0.59
The conflict in my family has taught me that conflict is part of life	46	140	45	14	2.89	0.55
When they are in conflict with each other, my parents do not provide learning materials for me	42	144	48	11	2.89	0.64
My parents do not really care me studying at home	20	141	70	14	2.68	0.72
I think I failed some subjects due to the conflict in my family	34	185	20	6	3.01	0.48

Table 5: Family conflict as a driver of students' academic engagement: ANOVA results

Form of family conflict	No of respondents who agree	No of respondents who disagree	Difference in mean responses	t-ratio	Remark
Boundary family conflict	158 (64.5%)	87 (35.5%)	0.84	4.50	Significant
Inevitable family conflict	144 (58.8%)	101 (41.2%)	0.92	3.23	Significant
Intense family conflict	129 (52.7%)	116 (47.3%)	0.87	2.27	Significant

The perceptions of respondents on the effect of family conflict on their academic composure and engagement were subjected to an ANOVA analysis where the differences in mean responses were further analysed and inferences drawn from them. This analytical approach allowed an inquiry into whether the divergence in the students' opinions was subject to chance or empirical evidence. As put together in Table 5, it was found that inevitable conflict was the most common form of conflict among the students' families. This was followed by boundary conflict and then intense conflict. The t-ratios for the forms of family conflict indicated that the differences in opinions were all significant at 5%. As a rule of thumb, a t-ratio in excess of 2 generally implies that the coefficient of a statistical measure is significant. All the t-ratios in Table 5 are above 2. Nevertheless, boundary family conflict is the most significant measure of conflict, followed by inevitable conflict and then intense conflict. It follows that the likelihood of boundary conflict existing between the parents and their children is high, implying that the students' academic engagement might be in an unimpressive trajectory over the long term. When gaps exist between parents and children, the latter cannot freely discuss their academic challenges. This builds up until the overwhelming horizon is reached. The children then lose focus and their academic aspirations suffer.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has revealed the perceived effect of family conflict on the academic attention and engagement of secondary school students located around Ibadan North Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria. It established that conflict is a major variable characterising most homes of the students. The measures of conflict considered in this study ranged from boundary, inevitable and intense conflicts. It was gathered that boundary family conflict has created distance between the students and their parents, limiting the sort of academic discussions occurring between the two. There was also evidence of transfer of aggression from the parents to their children whenever there was an episode of family conflict. This was indicated by the parents' stance of not adequately providing learning materials due to the ongoing conflict. However, a happy home produces a happy student. As the students feel dejected due to the family conflict, they lose balance to cope meaningfully with their academic pursuits. It was also telling that boundary family conflict is more significant than intense family as a perceived driver of the students' academic performance. This might signal that children from separated parents might have decided coping mechanisms while those suffering from boundary family conflict struggle to adjust to their realities.

As a result, it is recommended that parents should recognise the effect of home conflicts on the emotional balance and academic exhibits of their children. While it may be off-track to advise no-conflict family relationships, the parents should try their best to minimise exposure of children to family conflicts. More particularly, boundaries should close between parents and their children. The children should be able to relate

freely with their parents without fear of ridicule or undue pressure. Finally, the school authorities should constantly remind the parents of their role as major stakeholders in the long-term educational accomplishments of their children. This may be achieved by a vibrant parent-teacher association. Debating societies in school settings should be allowed to discuss the dangers of conflict and appropriate mitigation measures. The government also has a role to play by equipping the school counselling units with required human and material resources. This will allow students from conflicted families to approach trained personnel toward preventing the family conflict from having untold effect on their academic engagement.

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