

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

FAMILY CULTURE AND ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE: THE PARADIGM OF IKEMEFUNA AND OFOMA IN EMEKA NWABUEZE'S SPOKESMAN FOR THE ORACLE

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Abstract

The family has been projected by scholars as an important force towards the development of the child. Every family whether consciously or on unconsciously has some established culture that directs the behaviours of the individual members of the society. This paper is a reflection on the influence of the family culture on the academic performance of the child. It examined the impact family culture has on the child as it concerns his academic pursuit. The paper is anchored on Albert Bandura's social learning theory. Using Emeka Nwabueze's Spokesman for the Oracle as a case study, the findings of this paper revealed that established family culture surrounding the life of the child has a great part to play in the academic performance of the child.

Keywords: Family, Culture, Family culture, Academic excellence

Introduction

Recently, scholars have demonstrated much interest in the family and its influence on the members. The family has been projected variously as the primary cell of society. It is the family that has the sole task of bringing together different generations under one fold. Individual family members collect the vast majority of their behaviours from the modelled behaviours of adults in the family. The influence the family has on its members is manifest in every aspect of their lives. According to Isidienu Ifenyinwa, “parents train their children in general behaviour and particularly in socialization which is necessary for comfortable living...this training which starts in the family extends to the society where both parents, elders, and other members of the extended family are involved” (801). Following this, the family situation cannot be detached from the academic performance of the individual. This is because, according to Nweke Dorathy, Ihejirika J. C. and Dee Z. D., “... academic achievement often is motivated by people the child interact within their early stages in life from their homes. (72). It is the family that lays the fundamental moral, intellectual, character and religious foundation for the child.

This paper is anchored on the social cognitive theory propounded by Albert Bandura which suggests that children learn behaviour from interactions with people in their environment through modelling and reinforcement. This is the cognitive formulation of the social learning theory. This theory recognizes the modelling of desirable behaviours by competent role models in the life of the child as opportunities to access the outcome of their behaviour. It revolves around the process of learning directly through the observation of models. Thus the theory further suggests that by observing the behaviours of others, an individual can develop a guide to his subsequent behavioural attitudes. Therefore the academic performance of

students is to a great extent influenced by the motivation the individual receives from the immediate family environment. When children are exposed to an environment that values self-worth, competence, self-reliance and self-efficacy, they will be more eager to accept the risk inherent in learning. The family is always seen as the first agent of socialisation; hence family influence affects the individual's behaviour from childhood to adulthood. According to Ogbugo-Ololube, "the value a parent places on certain issues of life will consequently determine the kind of value the child will place on the same value later in life"(54). Family theorists also believe that every behaviour exhibited by an individual is a developmental part of the family behavioural pattern. Observations also revealed that once a pattern of behaviour is established in a family, the tendency is that the pattern will continue provided that the conditions necessitating the behaviour are maintained by the adult models within the family setting.

Culture is seen as the social environment into which a person is born and in which he or she lives. It is the way of life of a group of people developed to accommodate the challenges in the environment. Culture is projected to be so powerful that it can shape all in its image. It is the very integral pattern of behaviour that embodies the thought, speech, action, etc., of a person. Every society, therefore, has its own culture and is responsible for the transmission of this cultural heritage to its members. Culture is a dynamic concept. According to Chris Abakare, "culture emerges as the need arises, flourishes as long as it meets the need, becomes institutionalized when seen as Indispensable for social well-being, declines when its functional relevance is in doubt, although it hardly disappears because of its resistant supper organic nature" (11). This dynamic nature of culture makes it easily adaptable. A person's cultural orientation directs his perception of life and affects his decision; thus the general assertion that the development of every society relies on the cultural context of its society.

The family is the first agent of socialization, therefore, has it as an obligation to establish its own culture to guide its members. The family is the immediate social setting where the child first experiences love, care and attention that eventually launches him into the larger society. A discourse on Family culture becomes imperative because for the family to have the type of influence it usually has on its members, there ought to be some stipulated rules that are outlined which must be adhered to by all its members, and for sustainable development of the individual members. Family members must exhibit some element of sincerity and trust in maintaining these rules. It is these stipulated rules, normally handed down orally or through imitative actions that are referred to in this paper as a family culture.

Family culture relates to the beliefs, norms and values which members of a family construct and internalise to guide their behaviour, attitude decision and relationships with others. It includes sheared ideologies that help family members to communicate effectively with one another in a common language. Through family culture, standards of behaviour in a family is developed and transmitted. Schein, E. A. defines family culture as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and

internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel about those problems” (12). Family culture directs the behaviour of a person and the quality of values and attitude since it includes the manner and expected behaviour of the individual members of the family. Every family is a unique society. The cultures that are associated with a family govern its perception of the entire society. Thus Isidienu rightly observed that the cultural background in which a child is brought up affects the totality of life activities. Family culture directs the individual towards a defined vision for life. A defined vision in turn unites, provides, focuses and dominates all thoughts. It also inspires ambition and determination which are the catalyst for academic excellence. A family without culture is nothing but a mere gathering of relatives. It is the family culture that gives a person a sense of security, direction and love which are the ingredients needed to usher in inspiration and purpose needed for academic excellence at every level of education. This is possible because it is a culture that fosters values and values direct vision which helps in the definition of a person. A child that upholds the ethical heritage of his family is always seen as one with vision and is equally considered a worthy ambassador of the family.

The cultural expectancy from the family plays a major role in the life of children. This is because it reminds them of the family expectations, thereby directing their interest in their studies. It virtually dictates the behaviour of a person and the quality of values, ideals and attitudes to be imbibed. Family culture influences the psychological, cognitive and social life of child either positively or negatively. As Isidienu rightly stated, children “observe other members of the family as they grow up, they learn how to live, how to do certain things and the importance of traditional, religious and customary laws” (801).

This paper examines the impact family culture has on the child's academic performance. Using the fictional characters of Ikemefuna and Ofoma in Emeka Nwabueze's *Spokesman for the Oracle*, as an example, it comes up with the conclusion that established family culture surrounding the individual can affect his academic performance either positively or negatively.

Synopsis of the play, *Spokesman for the Oracle*.

A spokesman for the Oracle is a play that captures the contemporary family structure of an average Igbo family. Chidi and Onyibo Okafor had adopted Ikemefuna, their only child, whom they loved so dearly. This love has prevented them from revealing the circumstances surrounding the child's birth to the young man. But fate decided to play its trick on them by bringing Nneka, the biological mother of Ikemefuna, into his life in a very complicating circumstance. Despite the love and care being showered on him by his adopted parents, tradition demands that Ikemefuna must go back to his roots. However, the discovery of his biological mother and the events behind this discovery affected the young man adversely. Only a psychologist could salvage the situation but not before the shattering of the dream and aspirations of a promising young man.

The play, therefore, highlights that the dilapidation of values that is currently rampant in the society can be curtailed when family models maintain their loyalty and sincerity to those who look up to them as models. It is of paramount importance that these adults /models show a good example to the younger ones by establishing a culture of truthfulness, love, care and trust within the family circle. This will go a long way in making the younger ones more focused especially as it concerns their academic performances.

Influence of Family Culture on the Academic Performance of Ikemfuna in Nwabueze's Spokesman for the Oracle

Ikemefuna is an Igbo name that literarily means “may my strength never be lost or may my efforts not be in vain”. The meaning inherent in the name points to the cultural attachment that exists in this family. The bearers of such names as Ikemefuna are constantly reminded of the need for them to excel in all their endeavours to uphold the dignity of their names and sustain the aspirations and hopes of their families. For a man to give his son Ikemefuna, he has already set a standard of values and expectations that must guide the child's behaviour.

Ikemefuna, in this play, is a young man of about eighteen years. At this young age, he has advanced excellently as a medical student in the tertiary institution. Achievement of two of his friends from different family cultural orientation is yet to accomplish. One of these friends of his, Ossy, recently gained admission into the tertiary institution while the other one, Ofoma, is still receiving tutorials from Ikemefuna to pass the basic admission requirements into the university. This explains how exceptionally Ikemefuna has excelled in his academic pursuit.

Ikemefuna's academic excellence is always a thing of pride for his parents. Chidi proudly explains to Onyibo, his wife thus:

Chidi: Imagine how I grinned from ear to ear when I met the Dean of faculty of medicine last week and he told me, Ikem was on the Dean's list and will get an award as the best student in the faculty (2).

A close look at Ikemfuna's attitude towards his academic pursuit reveals that the young man is raised in a family that has an established family culture of behaviour. The parents are presented by the playwright to reflect a loving, caring, and highly responsible couple. Chidi, his father, was a Headmaster, who later became a successful businessman. Onyibo, his mother, on the other hand, is a pharmacist by profession and a very observant woman that is very much interested in the academic achievement of their only son.

As the early morning storm rages in the play, the playwright presents a couple that regards the welfare of every member of the family as the utmost importance. The manner the couple ensures the safety of the family shows that it has an established culture for family welfare. They present a family that has its manner of doing things. This established family culture is further illustrated in the conversations below:

Chidi: Are you sure Ikem is alright? Let me check him up right away... Sure his windows are shut?

Onyibo: They are. I shut them myself. I always make sure I shut the windows and switch on the air conditioner before I go to bed (8).

This family culture is seen as an added advantage to the academic excellence of the young Ikemefuna. He is assured that even if he sleeps off in the course of his study that his comfort assured. This type of conducive home environment is needed for the academic excellence of a child.

The family culture of love and understanding also provides a conducive environment for good academic excellence. Conflicts and splits in homes are dangerous influences on the academic excellence of the child. This is because it has been observed that living in a chaotic and unstimulating family environment affects the cognitive function of the child. Psychologists have also confirmed that children growing up in a family that lacks the culture of love are prone to social withdrawal, depression, gang involvement, and other antisocial behaviours that are detrimental to their academic excellence. Thus Amator and Cheandle observed that children caught in this type of loveless family situation develop a feeling of low esteem which is a negative influence on academic excellence. Children without love, therefore, are unbalanced and are prone to frustration. This frustration manifests negatively in their academic pursuit. Hence most incidences of school dropout among youths are traced to lack of love in the family setting. Ikemefuna in this play is surrounded by loving parents with a strong family bond. This relationship impacted positively on the academic achievement of the child. Ikemefuna is so much loved by his parents that they would hardly see him lack. Onyibo explains:

Onyibo: I guard him jealously. He is a fantastic boy Chidi. He is the precious stone of this family... The shining star that brightens our hopes. (8)

To keep him on the right track, Onyibo reminds Ikemefuna of the extent of the love they have for him:

Onyibo: ...Ikem, you know how much we love you. A one-eyed man is very close to blindness. If anything happens to you, your father and I will never survive it... (19-20).

The name was given to the boy also reflects how much he is loved by his parents, who believe that through him, they will get fulfilment as a couple. With such love being lavished on any child, his academic performance is sure to be on the positive side since he would strive not to betray his parents' love with negative distractions. Hence Ikemefuna reciprocates this love by showing great interest in his academic pursuit. This is vividly demonstrated by the young man in the conversation below:

Ikem: Good morning dad.

Chidi: Morning, Son, where are you going?

Ikem: I want to check the bookshop again. They promised to order some new chemistry books which we shall need next term. (22)

The term has not yet started and Ikemefuna is already preparing for it. He has checked the bookshop before and is going to check again for the ordered books. This type of academic interest is exhibited when a child knows that his family cares for his interest.

To highlight the importance of the provision of the basic needs of a child on his academic performance, the playwright presents Ikemfuna's family as one that is able and willing to adequately provide for their son, Chidi in the play prides himself as a father who is ready to give his son the best of life when he states:

Chidi: I want to build an economic empire for my son. Make him self sufficient and make him taste everything wealthy men brag about, quite early.

When Ikem informs his family that he is on his way to the book shop to collect the books his parents ordered for him, this ability and willingness to provide for their son are further demonstrated.

Chidi: Need money?

Ikemefuna: No, dad. Mum gave me money for them last week.

Onyibo: Do you need the car?

Ikem: No, mum. I shall take a taxi.

It is glaring from the conversation above that both parents are able and willing to provide the basic needs of their only son. This is very important for any child's academic performance. A family that fails to provide for the basic needs of its members will not provide socially balanced children. The incidence of school dropout is usually rampant in such homes. Thus Peterson J. posits that "frustration or shame experienced by youths from the poor parental background is a prominent factor that can influence antisocial behaviour" (6). This, in turn, has a negative impact on the academic performance of such children.

Another important family culture that contributed positively to the academic performance of Ikemefuna is his parent's ability to detect external influence on its members. A family with an established family culture is always observant of its individual members' behaviour. By maintaining this culture, such family is given the opportunity to detect, early enough, when a member is being influenced negatively from the outside. Thus Ikemefuna's parents can discover, quite early that one of their son's friends is not having a positive influence on him. Chidi laments thus:

Chidi: ... one thing that bothers me is his association with that mischievous boy.

Onyibo: Ossy?

Chidi: No. Ossy is all right. It is that boy Ofoma. I'm worried about his association with Ikem (11).

Although Onyibo tries to explain to Chidi that the relationship between the two is because Ikemefuna is coaching Ofoma to pass his O'level exams, Chidi maintains that the boy is a bad influence on their son. Onyibo later confirms this:

Onyibo: You know Chidi, I've been thinking about what you said this morning. That boy Ofoma, I think you are right. We shall curtail Ikem's movement with him. He would be a bad influence on the boy (22).

This observation is needed for Ikemefuna to remain focused in his studies. The family is ready to take responsibility and direct him aright from any negative external influence from his peers. This is necessary for the Youngman to attain the desired academic excellence expected of him.

The playwright also demonstrated the importance of communication culture in ensuring the academic excellence of the child. Communication builds confidence and self-assurance. The manner of interaction between parents and their children has a great influence on their academic performance. When children are encouraged to accept responsibility for their deviant or positive behaviour, it enables them to realize the result of their actions and makes them more focused. When Ikemefuna strays after taking alcohol at the party in the play, the courage he demonstrated while apologizing to his mother shows that there is communication culture in the family. His apology is filled with remorse and respect.

Ikem: (Kneels down by her side) Mum, please pardon me. That was my first time. I shall make it the last. I shall never disappoint you again. (Mops his eyes with a handkerchief) (19).

In response, Onyibo does not fail to accept this apology and admonishes him thus:

Onyibo: (Pats his head) Rise Son. I'll take your word for it... (Ikem rises). Don't ever get yourself into this kind of behaviour again. (22).

The tenderness with which the apology is tendered and accepted is an indication that mother and child are used to communicating with one another. Ikem's focused nature is a demonstration of this type of family culture. Everyone is prone to mistake. Nevertheless, the ability for one to learn from his mistake depends on how much is handled by prominent people in the life of the individual. Ikemefuna's sincere resolve not to repeat his mistake is also revealed in his conversation with his friends, Ofoma and Ossy;

Ikemefuna: ... The effect of that party would hunt one forever, even after I've succeeded in making amends with my mum whose trust and pride I punctured ... (55).

The basis for Ikemefuna's academic excellence is founded on the positive cultural background of his family. His family acts as a guide for him and is ready to provide for his needs. They are concerned about his peers and his wellbeing, thereby creating a very conducive environment for the child to develop his academic ability positively.

Family Culture and Academic Performance of Ofoma in the Play

Ofoma is presented in the play as a carefree youth. His academic performance is a big contrast to that of Ikemefuna. As Onyibo explains:

Onyi: ... Ofoma wanted Ikem to take the general certificate examination for him. Ikem got furious about this, but still tried to help him. So instead of taking the examination for him, he's coaching him to pass the examination himself... (11).

Although we are not introduced to Ofoma's family in the play, his utterances and actions reveal a child from a home without and established family culture. He has the leverage to do whatever he wishes without any form of restriction or directives from his family. This is believed to have an adverse effect on his academic performance. Hence while his mates are already studying in the university, he is still struggling to pass his O'level certificate exams. As Anyaegbuna, Ezejiegwu and Moukwe observed, "parents who simply ignore their child and never talk about what happened are inhibiting many self-help skills such as skills and conflict resolution" (26).

Ofoma, unlike Ikemefuna, is a product of a family that lacks communication culture. Because he is not used to parental interaction and communication, he is irked by Ikem's attachment to his parents and their constant inquiry in his affairs. This impression is revealed in the conversation below:

Ofoma: You are always talking about your parents. Don't you know you're already a man? My folks won't be bothered by this at all.

Ossy: That's because they are tired of you.

Ofoma: Lies, they are not tired of me. I'm tired of them (53).

No form of parental guidance or control is exhibited in the character of Ofoma. It is this liberal family culture that permits him to organize such a party that serves only whiskey and beer in his family house without any form of interference from his family members. He has been introduced to this type of life quite early in life. Thus he explains to Onyibo;

Ofoma: ...he is not used to it. There were only two bottles of whiskey and a bottle of rum at the party. If I drank all of them, I could have been saner than he is now. He drank only one can of beer... (15-16).

Ofoma's liberty is further stressed by Ikemefuna:

Ikem: How dare you think I'll invite her here?... You can as well think I can invite any type of person to our house. What do you think my mum would say? She is not like yours who doesn't care. (56).

Nwabueze paints a picture of this family as one that has no stipulated culture of behavioural directives for its members; a family where children are free to plan or not to plan for their future. Ofoma confirms this when Ikem inquires of his plan for the future. He replies:

Ofoma: Plans? I don't believe in anticipation. It makes your future very conspicuous. If you don't have plans, you don't get disappointed.

I have to pass the exams first and then watch which direction the wind blows me (laughs) (54).

This is a glaring indication of a child without an established family culture. There is no firm interest in his affairs from his parents, thus he does not know the direction of his fate. All these are contributors to the problem he is having academically. His relationship with academically successful friends is expected to be a challenge for him to work harder, but because of his family cultural background, he is not perturbed rather he is more interested in trivial issues like alcohol and women.

In addition to this, while Ikem's family demonstrates their love and care for him by providing all his basic needs, Ossy confirms that there is no love between Ofoma and his parents.

Ossy: One needs to love his parents like I.K. does

Ofoma: Or fear them like you do.

Ossy: Or neither love nor fear them like you do (53).

This lack of a family culture of love, communication and respect is reflected in Ofoma's academic performance resulting in lack of direction and focus in his academic life.

Conclusion

The playwright, in this play, maintains that every family has its way of doing things which are translated into the family culture. It is the established culture of the family that is mirrored in the lives of its members. Ikemefuna is exposed in the play to a positive family culture which impacted positively in every aspect of his behaviour. Ofoma, on the other hand, is raised in a family that lacked established family culture; thus his anti-social behavioural displays manifested negatively in his academic performance.

The family is truly the bedrock of society. Being the first social institution the child comes in contact with, it is expected that it should have an established culture that should work as a behavioural guide for its members. It is through the family culture that individuals are imbued with family values, well-defined family mission and focused vision which helps its members to live purposeful lives with healthy habits and thoughts. A child with a well-established family culture, therefore, has greater chances of doing well academically. This is because he will be conscious of the expectations of his family and strives not to disappoint them.

This paper, therefore, recommends that families should strive to have their way of doing things. They should endeavour to have a culture of purpose and value that should act as a guide for the behaviours of its members in all areas of life. Every family should inculcate in their members set rules of behaviour that are valued within the family. This is because this will go a long way in directing, especially the younger ones, in all areas of their life endeavours; as the popular saying goes, train a child on the way to go and he will surely not depart from it.

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