

**RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF FAMILY DYSFUNCTION:
COPING MECHANISMS AMONG CHILDREN IN IKENNE
LOCAL GOVERNMENT, OGUN STATE**

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ABSTRACT: The primary aim of the study is to explore the coping mechanisms that children from dysfunctional families engage in to survive unpleasant situations and experiences. It also considers the different forms of social support that children from dysfunctional families receive as a promoting factor for resilience. Walsh's family resilience framework was adopted in this study. The literature review revealed three basic styles that children use to cope with difficult and unpleasant situations: seeking support from other people, investing in close friends, providing peer support, seeking belonging, seeking spiritual support and seeking professional help. Additionally, resilient children have a positive attitude towards life and themselves, and they can treat difficulties as a challenge to overcome and an opportunity for a new experience, which in turn helps the development of their cognitive and intellectual functions. The research design that was adopted in this research was the phenomenological research design and a qualitative methodology. A purposive sampling technique was employed, and 25 participants were recruited for this research study. Data was gathered through interviews/focused discussions and was thematically analysed. The study revealed various strategies through which children cope in toxic experiences from dysfunctional families, including speaking to their teachers, who have interests in mind and are committed to extending support (moral support, faith talks and prayers, reaching out to parents, financial aid) to these children. However, it was also noted that some of these children stay away from home/stay with friends as a way of escaping the toxic experiences of their families. Counselling is a strategy that is used to advise and admonish children and students on suitable solutions that can be adopted for problems of dysfunctionality.

Keywords: Coping Mechanism, Family, Family Dysfunction, Resilience, Social Work

INTRODUCTION

The interactions and dynamics of relationships that exist within the context of the family are totalled as the family environment. It includes a range of topics, such as duties and responsibilities, communication styles, values, emotional support, dispute resolution techniques, traditions and the general environment of the family (Kapoor & Sethi, 2024). Roostin (2018) explained that a family's environment has a major influence on its members' behaviour, well-being, and social, emotional, cognitive, and psychological development. The health condition of a family affects not only its personal life alone but also its general state and wellness. The greater the number of individuals who suffer from family situations is, the greater

the degree of well-being issues in a country, and the lower the number of individuals who suffer from family situations is, the greater the degree of reduction in the degree of national well-being issues, ultimately on a global scale (Lambert et al., 2020).

Kapoor and Sethi (2024) reported that the family environment is influenced by factors such as parenting style, family structure, parental influence, family dynamics, and parental mental health. Inasmuch as the family environment is expected to naturally provide adequate provision for the total and complete growth of children and create experiences that promote children's general development, growth, and accomplishment (Omorogiuwa, 2020), negative behavioural patterns in parents can largely influence the lives of their children (Omare et al., 2018). With the understanding of the impact of family on the health of individuals (Michaelson et al., 2021), they stated that specific and unique characteristics of families can be health-threatening or health-promoting for an individual; in other words, factors such as family stability and smooth parental relationships were categorized as health-promoting characteristics, whereas conflicts between parents and an unsupported family were categorized as health-threatening behaviours.

In cases where there are health-promoting characteristics, a functional family develops; however, when there are health-threatening factors, family dysfunction is experienced. The microenvironment for the development of the child becomes disrupted when the family becomes imbalanced, and it tends to impede the psychological enhancement and growth of such a child (Omorogiuwa, 2020). In addition, issues between parents can influence the exhibition of negative actions toward children. Hence, there is a great need for resilience for individual members of families and together as entities to cope with the stressful and difficult situations that arise. However, not all children from dysfunctional family environments experience these adverse effects to the same degree. Some demonstrate remarkable resilience, successfully coping with the challenges posed by their family circumstances and maintaining emotional and psychological well-being.

Despite the growing interest in resilience, there is a lack of comprehensive research focused specifically on the coping strategies employed by children living in dysfunctional family environments. Furthermore, the interplay between individual characteristics, social support networks, and community resources that contribute to resilience in these children remains underexplored, particularly in diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Resilience can be broadly defined as the ability to persevere in the face of adversity (Southwick et al., 2014). In the family context, family resilience refers to the capacity of the entire family unit to be resilient (Walsh, 2012). However, the resilience of individual family members can sometimes culminate in family resilience. The perspective of resilience at the individual level can be systematically translated to the family level (Omorogiuwa, 2017; Herdiana, 2018). While it is easier for some individuals to quickly rise and reflect on the difficulties that they experience, other individuals are 'affected' by the inability to resolve these issues and stress and find it difficult to revive (Herdiana, 2018). Family resilience is a family effort that is followed by adaptability and success in facing pressure; both problems arise in the present and future.

Coping strategies depict the method of resilience engaged by children when they are faced with unpleasant situations from their homes and families. Coping strategies are defined as deliberate and conscious efforts used by individuals to manage emotions, cognitions, and attitudes amidst

other environmental variables in response to stress from family experiences (Rodríguez et al., 2016). With respect to the types of coping strategies, Frydenberg and Lewis as cited by Rodríguez et al. (2016), mentioned that there are three (3) basic styles used to cope with difficult and unpleasant situations. First, focusing on the problem – includes problem solving, focusing on positive aspects, seeking relaxation, looking for diversions and physical recreation. Second, focusing on solutions from others includes seeking support from other people, investing in close friends, providing peer support, seeking belonging, seeking spiritual support and seeking professional help. Finally, nonproductive coping strategies include worrying, ignoring the problem, self-blaming, wishful thinking, reducing tension, and keeping to oneself (Rodríguez et al., 2016).

With respect to the adoption of these strategies, there are individual members who can move forward—resilient families—while others are overwhelmed and do not know how to deal with different stressful situations. How families cope with these stressful situations influences the well-being of their children and their emotional balance (Cantero-García and Alonso-Tapia, 2018). The lack of adequate coping strategies, especially those necessary for emotional self-regulation and resilience, contributes to stress in individuals. For this reason, it is important to evaluate the coping strategies of individuals, especially children from dysfunctional families, and methods of managing stress. Moreover, Pastwa-Wojciechowska et al. (2021) established that resilient children have a positive attitude toward life and themselves and can treat difficulties as a challenge to overcome and an opportunity for a new experience, which in turn helps the development of their cognitive and intellectual functions.

Research Objectives

1. What are the strategies that children adopt to survive family dysfunction?
2. What are the social support strategies for children in dysfunctional families?

Theoretical Framework

As a theory developed by Systems, Walsh (1996), one of the experts who developed family resilience as a concept, emphasized that the family resilience framework is built through a nexus of ecological and developmental perspectives. Although family resilience is a theoretical concept that is used for the family as an entity, it has proven valuable in understanding the actions of the individual members of the family (Walsh, 1996). The ecological perspective considers resilience to be connected to larger individual factors, families and social systems. Individual problems can arise from biological, psychological, social and spiritual orientations. The symptoms of distress experienced by individuals within the family can be biological, such as sickness or disorders. Similarly, problems can also result from the influence of sociocultural variables—poverty and discrimination experienced by families and communities at high risk of social problems.

The distressing symptoms experienced by family members may arise because of events that involve crises, such as abuse, violence, brutality, neglect, tragic loss, or the consequences of disasters on a large scale. The burden of this stress that individual members experience can be aggravated by the failure of the family to overcome the unpleasant situation. Hence, individuals might be predisposed to seek out their survival or way out of these conditions. However, families, peer groups, communities, schools, workplaces and other social systems support resilience. The theory also identifies key resilience factors for the protection and recovery of

individuals and the family as a unit; these factors include positive outlook, spirituality, family member accord cohesion, family communication, and support networks (from individuals, families and the community).

METHODOLOGY

Area of study and Population

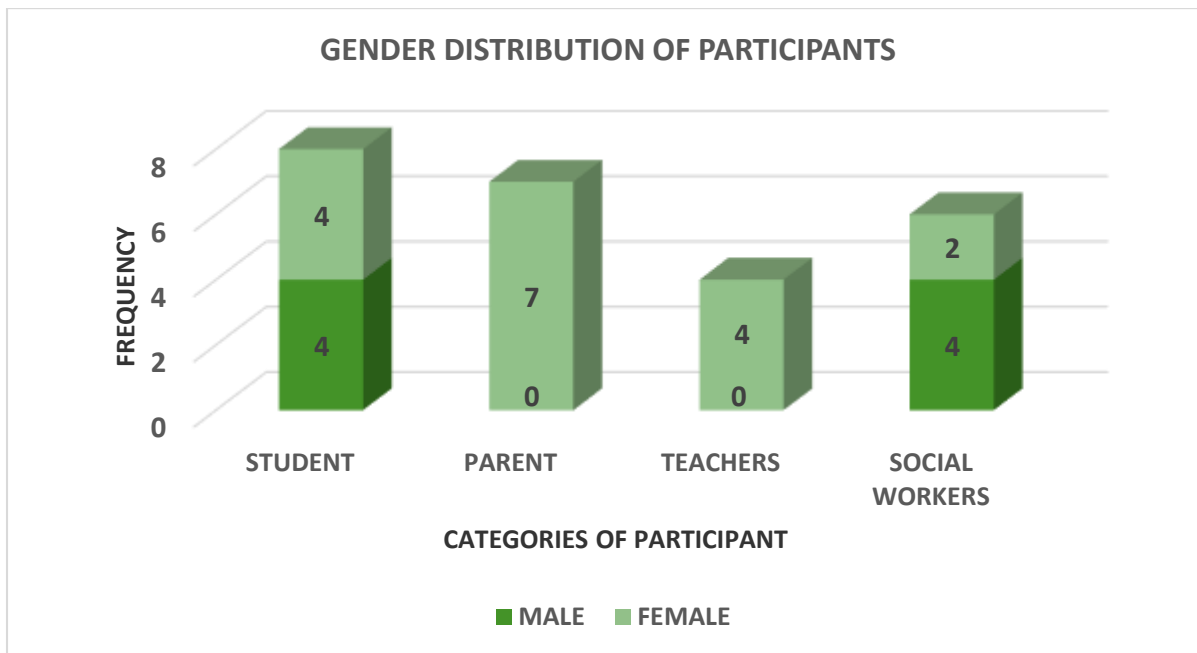
The study setting was the Ilishan-Remo community, the Ikenne local government area, and the Ogun state. The community equidistance lies between Lagos and the Ondo States of Southwest China, Nigeria. It is the fourth largest community in Remo land. Ilishan Remo, which is the selected community as the study area for this research, has a total population of 10,309 (National Population Commission (NPC), 2006), whereas the current projected population of Ilishan Remo is 25,894, with the distribution of males being 13,175 and that of females being 12,719.

Research Design, Sample Size and Technique

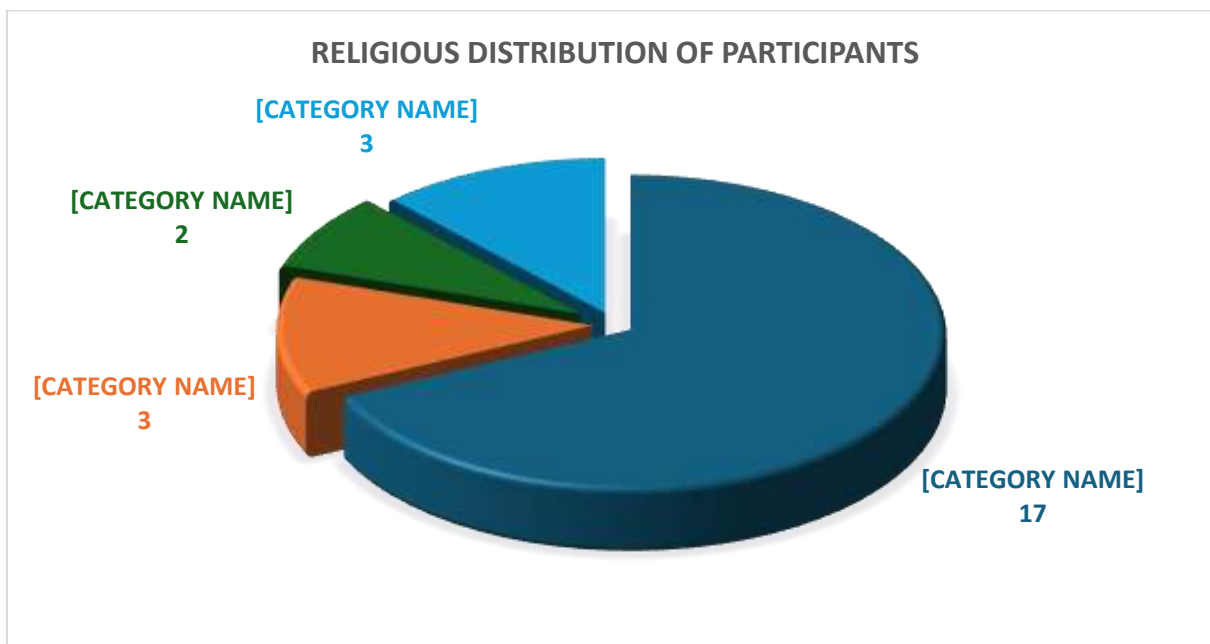
The research design adopted in this research was the phenomenological research design. The study involved two (2) secondary schools in Ilishan Remo, Ogun State, namely, Ilishan High School and Ishanbi Comprehensive High School. With respect to the selection of participants, eight students were chosen from each of the respective schools. A purposive sampling technique was employed for this research study. The purposive sampling technique was utilized for this qualitative study because it complements the preset criteria and allows for purposeful selection of participants. For the study, 25 participants (8 students, 7 parents, 4 teachers and 6 social workers) were interviewed and discussed; in line with the recommendation of Creswell and Creswell (2018), who noted that for phenomenological studies, a sample size between 20–30 participants should be enough to meet the saturation criterion. The sample size of the 25 participants was as follows: 8 children, 7 parents, 6 social workers and 4 teachers, given that the researcher has discretion in determining the number of participants that will be convenient for the study. On data collection, data was gathered from interviews and focused group discussions which were audio recorded so as not to miss out on any details. The data collected was analysed thematically. Permissions were obtained from the Ministry of Women Affairs and the University Health Research and Ethics Committee while consent forms were given to all participants.

RESULTS

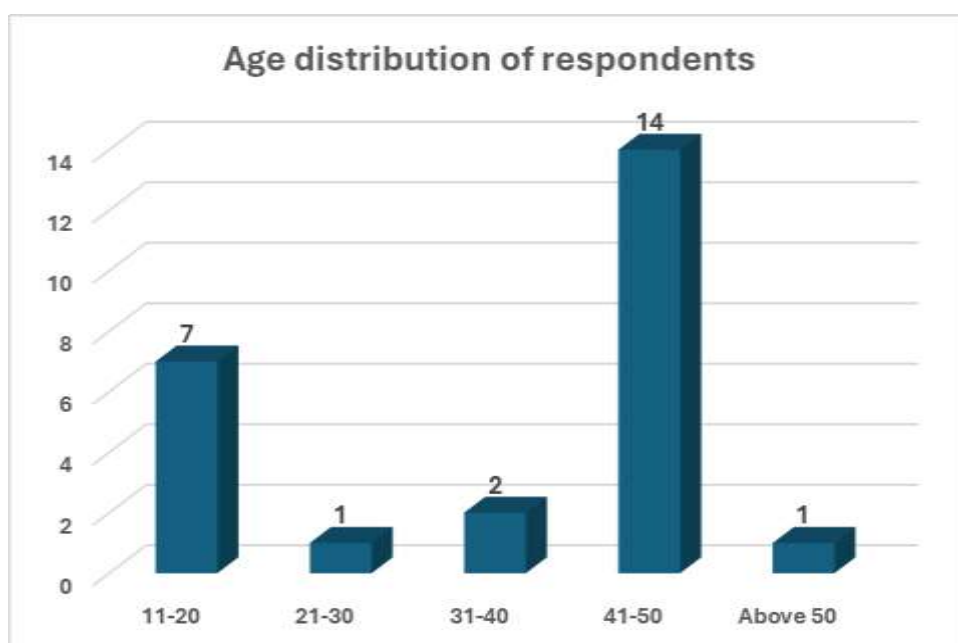
Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents



The distribution of the participants revealed that 17 were females, whereas 8 were males. Additionally, 8 of them were students, 7% were parents, 6 were social workers, and the remaining 4 were teachers.



The majority of the participants were Christians, with a few identifying as practitioners of traditional religions, Muslims, or non-religious



The age demographics of the participants revealed that 14 were between the ages of 41 and 50; however, 7 of these participants were between 11 and 20 years. Those who are within 31–40 years are 2, whereas those who are between 21–30 years old and those who are above 50 years old are 1.

Theme 1 – Coping strategies adopted by children and students

Speaking to Teachers

Speaking to Teachers/Social Workers and matters of confidentiality

Some students/children find solace from their situation by speaking to their teachers, who maintain the confidentiality of their discussion and encourage, advise and render relevant support to them. The interviewed teachers and social workers reported that they make their students comfortable and that the students and clients approach them knowing that they are interested in them. They said:

“My students have confidence in talking to me about their family problems because they now that I will not discuss it with anyone and that I will treat it as confidential. My students are also sure that I will not use their family issue as a topic of jest. Just like the case I mentioned earlier, the student approached me that he does not understand what was taught in class and I admonished that only him can help himself by coming to school regularly.” (MRS O.B./parent/female/43/traditalist/21-08-23)

“Over time in this my teaching profession, my students have found it easier to approach and discuss the troubling experiences that they have in their homes. They know that I have their best interest at heart; I do not use their family issues

to judge them or react to them. I will always look out for them and look for ways to help them, so that is why they always come to me.” (MRS E.O./teacher/female/55/Christian/ICHS/14-08-23)

“Well...to a great extent, my students feel very convenient discussing the experience of what happens in their homes ...based on the fact that their academic and general welfare is important to me. The fact that I show great concern about them makes their mind feel at peace even when they have such matters to discuss with me” (MRS O.B./teacher/female/43/traditional/14-08-23)

“Well...as per being comfortable discussing dysfunctional family patterns, some clients/students are quite comfortable because in most cases when they come, they are usually at their vulnerable stage... so they might be willing to discuss some of the things affecting them at home or in school... that affects them emotionally” (MR A.T./social worker/male/39/Christian/SSDB/18-08-23)

“My clients and students feel comfortable opening up because of the way I communicate...in my first engagement, the first time of assessing them...I made my client more comfortable” (MR D.T./social worker/male/42 yrs/Christian/SSDB/18-08-23)

“I am always very comfortable allowing my clients to discuss their family issues with me because I believe that is the only way by which I can identify and address the problems that have to do with their families” (MR O.S./social worker/male/47 years/Christianity/MW/19-08-23)

Encouraging parents

In certain situations, some children encourage their parents on patience and endurance to cope with the trying situations that they all experience. The interviewees responded thus:

“When they quarrel, I feel deeply sad, and sometimes, I just encourage my mother to be patient with my father, especially in terms of money. I tell her that if he has the money, he will drop it, just like he does at some times.” (MS E.F./student/female/18yrs/Muslim/ICHS/04-08-23)

Staying away from home

In most cases, children stay away from their home to avoid toxic experiences, although this does not resolve the issue. They believe that by staying away from negative experiences in their family (especially in cases of brutality), they would be able to forget their past and put it behind them. They stated thus:

“I will first try to keep my younger ones away from danger first. I do not know why my Daddy always want to fight my mummy. If it is a money issue, we children are ready to manage small things that we have” (MR D.A./student/male/21 yrs/traditionalist/ICHS/05-08-23).

“To escape from this, most times I go to my friends’ house and stay just there because if my mummy is not around and my daddy is around, he will still be shouting on us. So sometimes, I will just take my younger ones out of the house so that they will not be seeing their fight” (MR P.S./student/male/17 yrs/Christian/ICHS/05-08-23)

However, one of the interviewees who happens to be a parent noted that this coping strategy has a negative effect on her children’s upbringing, as she believed that her children are already taking advantage of staying out to act out of parents’ control. The interviewee stated below:

“There is a possibility that my children are already getting used to eating out, staying out and considering that their parents are not necessarily home. I have my elder son and my daughter as his younger sister; I have heard them discussing to take advantage of the fact that myself and their father will not be around to go to an event that I would not have allowed them originally” (MRS A.B/parent/female/41 yrs/Christian/25-08-23)

Staying at a friends’ house

Closely related to staying away from home, some children prefer to stay at their friends when there are disturbing issues at home. Another interviewee who happens to be a parent stated the following:

In my own case, since there is no joy or anything that truly makes them joyful at home, they prefer to stay away from home and play with friends; even sometimes, I am the one who will go and fetch them at night when I return from my shop back to the house. They will just play and sleep at their friends’ house. I feel that the behaviour that this impact is about them not finding comfort at home and thinking that fun can only be gotten outside the home, forgetting that the home is where children and parents find fun and excitement; it is the concerted effort of every family member. It is truly sad” (MRS J.O./parent/female/47/Christian/24-08-23).

Theme 2 - Emotional Support

Encouragement/Esteem

The encouragement that teachers share with students is vital to their self-esteem needs (which are usually affected by family dysfunction issues). This helps such students/children not lose hope in their identities or develop low self-esteem. A social worker stated:

“These children begin to have confidence in themselves...because some of them as a result of the problem they are having at home, they actually have lost of confidence in themselves...their esteem is so low and they feel less of themselves but because you have made them believe in themselves...identifying who they are...now they are identifying who they are...some of them have actually lost hope in their identities...making them believe that they can be back on their toes and be a better person in future” (MR A.T./social worker/male/39/Christian/SSDB/18-08-23)

Faith talks/Prayers

Prayers and encouragement in faith matters also proved to be a strong system of support through which teachers (most especially) engage in assuring the student that ‘all will be well’. These were some of the responses:

“Apart from class interaction with students, I encourage them even on matters of faith” (MRS A.E./teacher/female/42 yrs/Christian/ICHS/13-08-23)

“I feel encouraging and praying for the students consistently. I have been talking to this student since the beginning of the term; I have not observed many changes, as he still comes late to school; however, I notice he is always remorseful when I talk to him. I hope I will start to see changes soon. Well, I would have said that prayers and encouragement are systems of supporting these students, but in cases where they do not have academic materials, I can assist them with that too. Therefore, I feel that giving is an intervention that would go a long way in helping students from dysfunctional homes” (MRS H. A/teacher/female/55 yrs/Christian/IHS/13-08-23)

Moral Support

Moral support was given by teachers to students/children from dysfunctional families so that they could forge ahead in their endeavours without being discouraged by family issues. A teacher stated:

“The moral support asides academics has been positive to them in a lot of way; they know that they are not determined by their situation and the fact that they have been told to focus and believe in them goes a long way. also, when they are aware that someone still believes in them and looks out for them despite their situations is also an encouragement” (MRS O.B/teacher/female/43/traditional/14-08-23).

Through books and the sharing of success stories of people who have similar experiences, teachers help students support students against their experience of toxicity. An interviewee stated that

“I sometimes give them books that will encourage and motivate them. I can as well browse on somebody who had challenges but is now successful and make them read through the stories...and I use to ensure that they remain focused and ultimately successful...when I see a slack in any subject. I speak to other teachers that can assist them as well, if it is not my subject” (MRS O.B./teacher/female/43/traditional/14-08-23)

Financial Support or Aids from Teachers/School

Other support that these students received has come in the form of enrolment in the case of inability to pay. The interviewee stated that:

“There is the case of a boy who stopped coming to school because his father told him that he should start fending for himself; and the boy is not even 20 years old; but upon my interaction with him, I asked him if he is still interested in schooling, and he said yes, so we had to help him. As a follow-up, he has been enrolled and registered for WAEC, as the first stage of collating their information has been concluded. I also asked whether his father could come, but he said that he has a farm in Ayepe and leaves early to work daily” (MRS H. A/teacher/female/55 yrs/Christian/IHS/13-08-23)

Reaching out to the parent

Another interviewee who happens to be a teacher intervenes in the case of a student having academic difficulty by reaching out to the parent and informing them about the negative effect of the experiences they create for the child, and there has been improvement. Below is her statement:

“First, what I do is to ensure that I hear them out, it is not about me talking every time; I just allow them to pour out their mind so that they can feel light about the issue. Then, on the basis of what the situation is, I will approach it to resolve it. There is a case where the father of one of our students used to

beat the mother up, I went to the house of this student because she is even a bright student and I talked to the father about the effects that these troubles on the academics of their child; and I followed up with the family and I learnt that fights have reduced in their house, and we give God glory for this, not anything that I did truly” (MRS E.O/teacher/female/55/Christian/ICHS/14-08-23)

Counselling

Counselling for students and other children who suffer from difficult home issues and situations that they face. A social worker responded thus:

“Interview and counselling have helped me detect issues. My early detection has helped me to help the victim recover from psychosocial effects as a result of the dysfunctionality in their family” (MR O.S./social worker/male/47 years/Christianity/MWA/19-08-23).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Coping strategies are necessary for children to survive the cases of dysfunctionality that exist in families, lest the participants of this study are overwhelmed by the series of incidents that happen in their household. The finding reveals the emotional weight of having no coping measure, rather than being helpless in a dysfunctional family situation. This is in line with the work of Omorogiuwa (2017) who stated that non-productive coping strategies include depression, keeping to oneself, worrying, ignoring the problem, self-blaming, and wishful thinking. In the same vein, Pastwa-Wojciechowska et al. (2021) also established that resilient children have a positive attitude toward life and themselves and can treat difficulties as a challenge to overcome and an opportunity for a new experience, which in turn helps the development of their cognitive and intellectual functions.

In the work of Omorogiuwa (2020) and Rodriguez et. al (2016), it was established that focusing on solutions from others includes seeking support from other people, investing in close friends, providing peer support, seeking belongingness, seeking spiritual support and seeking professional help are ways through which individuals cope with dysfunctionality in families. In assessing the strategies by which children from dysfunctional homes cope, it was found that children who are students speak to their teachers encourage them and provide them with emotional support, as do social workers, who engage them in different assistance sessions. This concurs with the work of Brown (2021), which affirms that many people believe that by staying away from negative experiences in their family, they can forget their past and put it behind them.

In considering the social support network, The finding of this study also reveal that interview and counselling detect issues as well as early detection can help the victim recover from psychosocial effects as a result of the dysfunctionality in their family. This finding is in agreement with the work of Garner et al. (2012) and Omorogiuwa (2016), which established that the first set of people to notice and identify the indicators of dysfunctionality and its effect on a child are social workers including, teachers, coaches, and medical personnel, who also try

to manage it. Similarly, Fatma (2021), stated that, in recent times, teachers, social workers, clergy, therapists, counsellors, social workers, and other professionals, particularly those in the upper and middle classes, are now taking the matter of dysfunctionality seriously.

Conclusion

The resilience of children/students is perceived through various strategies through which they cope in toxic experiences from dysfunctional families, including speaking to their teachers, who have interests in mind and are committed to extending support (moral support, Faith talks and prayers, reaching out to parents, financial aid) to these children. However, it was observed that children employed various coping strategies, such as stay away from home as a way of escaping the toxic experiences of their families. Close to this for some children is staying over at their friends' house. Children sometimes encourage their parents even in difficult situations. One social work remediation strategy is to encourage and develop resilience in child counselling. Counselling is a strategy that is used to advise and admonish children and students on suitable solutions that can be adopted for problems of dysfunctionality.

Finally, coping strategies such as staying away from home and staying at a friend's house are not resolute in nature, rather, they are problem-avoidance mechanism, and this does not alleviate the emotional weight of dysfunctionality. However, strategies such as speaking to teachers/social worker and maximizing help from social support tend to provide succour to children, as they receive help in various forms from the community around them. This tends to give them the confidence, improve their esteem and help them to move on. Future research should investigate the role of extended family, community members, schools, and peer groups in supporting children from dysfunctional families. Understanding how these social support systems contribute to resilience can guide the development of effective interventions.

Recommendations

The local government in Ikenne should establish social welfare and support schemes to alleviate the effects of dysfunctionality on children and students. This initiative can also be supported by empowering teachers in schools in the Ikenne Local Government with training on handling issues arising from students in dysfunctional homes. They can act as the first line of intervention, addressing minor cases and appropriately referring extreme cases to professionals. The efforts of teachers in Ikenne support children through difficult situations and complement the efforts of the government through their social welfare and support initiatives. Ultimately, these concerted efforts support students academically, psychologically, and in their general well-being, aiding them in coping with difficulties experienced in their homes and improving their resilience.

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