



THE EFFECTS OF ADULT SEPARATION ON CHILDREN'S ACADEMIC AND PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLBEING AT SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY OF SENGA PRIMARY SCHOOL IN GWERU, ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigated the lived experiences of children from a primary school in the Gweru region of Zimbabwe, whose parents were either separated or divorced. The study was undertaken to ascertain how these learners are psychologically and academically affected by their family situations. The data were gathered using narrative stories, personal narrative diary entries, and interviews. The study was qualitative in nature and aimed to achieve an in-depth understanding of the topic through studying 12 participants, who were purposely sampled. The data were transcribed and analysed using the open-coding technique and thematic analysis. The results revealed that even though the effects of the divorce and separation varied, the participants shared similarities with regard to their emotional states. They invariably experienced feelings of sadness, distress, abandonment, anger, helplessness, and stress. The results also indicated that divorce had a significant impact on the participants' academic behaviour, school lives and integration at school. The researchers made recommendations which would improve the children's plight.*

KEYWORDS: Divorce, separation, Children, Psycho-social wellbeing, Academic effects



INTRODUCTION

Separation, divorce and life in a one-parent family are in fact increasingly becoming a common experience in the lives of many children across the globe (Crowley, 2018). There is no hesitation in the mind that when two people who were previously married separate or divorce, the consequences are usually more far-reaching than anticipated. The process of adult separation or divorce involves two adults, but it also has a significant impact on the children. Many children go through difficult times when their parents divorce, whether the actual process is sudden, unexpected or drawn out. These may include all or some of the following outcomes: potential changes in homes, weakening of bond with parents, changes in socio-economic status and possible exposure to violent conflict. It is also frequently accompanied by other stressful incidents that add up over time, such as parental arrest, deportation, or loss of parental rights (Reiter, Hjørlesfsson, Breidablik, & Meland, 2013). Whatever specific adversarial outcomes follow divorce, children tend to be acutely susceptible to family systems stressors and developmentally vulnerable to being separated from one or both of their primary caregiver. Some of the serious consequences of separation can affect minor children's living situations, socioeconomic status, psychological health, behavioural patterns, and academic performance (Potter, 2010). For school-going children, the impact can manifest in both emotional problems and negative behavioural patterns of coping both at home and at school. In many cases, rather than being considered as reflecting their broken families, such outcomes are interpreted in a simplistic fashion as mere child mischief. It is essential in this regard that these children's issues are recognized for what they are and addressed through the proper channels, otherwise they overwhelm the child's limited coping capacities and well-being (Fagan & Churchill, 2012).

According to Van Zyl (1997), a parent's divorce is a stressful experience for children and frequently has a more profound impact on them than it does on parents. It is essential to consider the effects that the separation and divorce of the parents may have in order to comprehend how the psychological health of students at school is affected. Numerous pieces of literature (e.g. Ahrons, 2007; Amato, 2000) suggest that an ongoing process of adult separation has an effect on the whole family, with the children suffering negative repercussions that can include emotional, behavioural, academic implications. Further evidence that divorce and the initial separation are stressful events for children comes from McConnell and Sim (Garriga & Pennoni, 2022), who pointed out that they must deal with a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, academic and social problems. Siegel (2007) notes that the family is more likely to experience an acute crisis during the early separation stage of parental divorce. The family daily routines must be rethought in regards to this shift in family structure. As a result, families headed for or involved in divorce are more likely to contain disturbed children than the more stable families. Lees (2006) emphasizes that children who undergo pain from parental separation or divorce have greater behavioural issues, psychological maladjustment symptoms, worse academic outcomes, more social challenges and worse self-concepts. In the long term, parental divorce or separation can be a significant event in the autobiographies of these children.

According to Robinson, Butler, Scanland, Douglas and Murch (2003), most children go through an emotional shock when their parents' divorce or separate. As soon as the child learns that their parents are divorcing, they get emotionally involved in the process to some extent. They frequently become involved in parental disputes and are occasionally compelled to choose sides, which has a ripple effect of worsening the parent-child bond and undermines the



stability of the family as a whole. They view parental separation as degrading and feel ashamed of it. The children can even end up questioning the morality of their parents.

Hence, many children from divorced or separated families show a noticeable degree of emotional imbalance (Lansford, 2009). The author stresses that the children experience negative emotions including fear, rage, and distress in response to inter-parental antagonism. According to Emery, Sbarra and Grover (2005), such children also face a variety of mental issues like decreased self-esteem, depression and anxiety depression, which may cascade into a plethora of behavioural problems and delinquency, child pregnancies, lowered academic excellence, and even increased utilization of mental services.

As the separation solidifies into divorce, their suffering further crystallises (Fox, 2001). According to Jeynes (2002), the manner of parental divorce or separation usually results in an imbalance in a family setup, which plants a feeling of family betrayal in the child. The children are inherently put in the centre of the course of separation. When parents ultimately separate or divorce ultimately, each parent goes their separate way, leaving the child at an uncomfortable nexus of the ensuing psychological crises. To exacerbate matters, parental support declines if the remaining parent experiences exceedingly high levels of stress, which is usually the norm.

Additionally, Van Zyl (1997) asserts that children from divorced households frequently report behavioural issues and aggressive behaviour. These children might exhibit clinging, reclusive, or delinquent behaviour, which will ultimately cause their academic performance to suffer. Amato (2000) offers a somewhat different perspective, contending that children are only victims of circumstances and that these negative traits are the result of parental modelling of verbal and physical aggression. The author stresses that the parents should not explicitly teach their children that fighting is a suitable way of resolving conflicts.

A single-parent household may lead to the child receiving less attention as a result of the various duties that the single parent may have. Ahrons (2007) adds that the presence of the step parent and a lack of parental oversight may also contribute to the already complicated situation, eventually leading the child to turn to alcohol, drugs or some other form of delinquency as a cry for attention. The author observes that single-parent mothers lament that once their husbands leave the home, their children become more obstinate, rebellious, and difficult to control. Adam (2010) raises a critical point that children who suffer the separation or divorce of their parents tend to feel that they have lost control of their lives, which makes them to act suicidal or else in anti-social ways.

Furthermore, numerous studies suggest that the complex interplay of psychological and behavioural problems emanating from the parents' divorce usually has a deeply adversarial impact on a learner's academic success. According to Jeynes (2002), divorce shows a constant influence on the academic achievement among pupils, regardless of the child's grade level and children of divorce usually suffer the largest scholastic decrease in their areas of greatest strength. According to Potter (2010), school-age children frequently experience difficulties in their academics because they struggle to take the divorce off their minds. Lytle (1994) goes on to observe that children from split families are agitated at school, and they frequently experience an array of related emotional disturbances which include anxiety, fear, and depression, which have a negative effect on their ability to focus on their work. This is further supported by Desforges (2000), who notes that children from divorced homes exhibit



noteworthy behavioural changes at school, including a decline in work standards, palpable restlessness, a difficulty to focus on tasks, and a significant increase in daydreaming time, all of which has a deleterious impact on their academic performance.

At some points in the split-home student's academic career, their performance in the classroom might suffer substantially (Potter, 2010). A longitudinal study by Jeynes (2002) demonstrated an association between divorce in the first generation and poorer educational attainment in the third generation. According to Bernardi and Radl (2014), parental separation and divorce have also been connected to an increased number of school issues, such as suspension from school, poor academic performance, and truancy. A statement made by Rodriguez and Arnold (1998) that children from divorced households are twice as likely to drop out of school raises more serious concerns.

Problem Statement

In the present research, we sought to look at how parental separation and divorce affect the psychological health of students at a school in Senga, a high density located in the city of Gweru, Zimbabwe. Divorce and separation were rare issues in traditional African societies (Arugu, 2014). In the unlikely case that divorce occurred, there were however strong extended family systems, which would absorb the children as their own and cushion them from any likely suffering that would follow (Mokomane, 2013). However, increasing levels of Westernisation and the entailing urbanisation in more recent times have somehow weakened these systems, and to some extent changed perception of divorce from generally being perceived as a sign of failure to one of self-determination. Culturally wavering between conservative African values pertaining to the family and modern values of self-determination, there is hence a need to understand how Zimbabwean children are being affected by the steady rise of divorce rates.

Objectives of the Study and Research Questions

Hence, the aim of the present study was to investigate how the children of separated and divorced parents are faring at school, both academically and psychosocially in general. The following specific research questions guided the research:

- How does parental separation /divorce affect a learner's psychological well-being?
- What are the effects of the separation/divorce of the parents on the academic performance and other social features of the learners' learning?
- What are the coping mechanisms used by children concerned?
- What measures can be instituted by schools and related stakeholders in ameliorating the challenges faced by the children?



METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm and Design

The research study is framed within the parameters of the social constructionism paradigm. The core assumption of social constructionism, according to Kane (2012,) is that people are moulded by their social setting. Reality is socially fabricated and there are several realities rather than a single detached reality, each of which is tied to the complexity of naturally occurring phenomena and is characterized by the views of the members. This fits well with the purpose of the study, which involved an endeavour to qualitatively comprehend how the participants perceived their social realities in dealing with the difficulties posed to them by parental separation and divorce.

The researchers used the phenomenological design to understand the lived experiences from the children under investigation. The phenomenological design examines the life experiences through the descriptions provided by the participants involved. The aim of phenomenological design is to get rich data carrying the complexity of meaning that experiences hold for each respondent.

Target Population and Sampling

The target population for this study consisted mostly of the children with separated or divorced parents in the Senga Suburb of the City of Gweru in Zimbabwe. From this target population was purposely sampled eight students, who fitted the required criteria. The shared factor among the students in the chosen research area is that their parents were either separated or divorced. According to Williams (2007), purposive sampling grants the researcher the advantage of handpicking significant individuals who, in their opinion, best represent the range of those who would be best acquainted with the needs of the chosen subject or issue. The chosen participants were thus, in the researchers' view, individuals who were knowledgeable and well-informed about the research topic, coming as they were from families where the parents were either divorced or separated. Four teachers who acted as key informants were also included in the study. The shared factor among the teachers is that they were actively involved in the teaching and supervision of the students concerned, and knew them personally. The demographic details pertaining to the students and the teachers are presented in Table 1. As shown in the table, seven of the learners were girls and only one was a boy. Participant information according to family status is in turn shown in Table 2.

Table 1: Demographic information of the participants

Learners:				Teachers		
<u>Pseudonyms</u>	<u>Age</u> (years)	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Grade</u>	<u>Pseudonyms</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Teaching</u> <u>grade level</u>
No.1: Cathy	10	female	5	Mrs	Female	5
No.2: Thabo	15	male	7	Kamusoko		



No.3: Mia	13	Female	7	Mr Moyo	Male	7
No.4: Pauline	13	Female	7	Ms Ncube	Female	6
No.5: Praise	13	Female	7	Mr Banda	Male	4
N0.6: Lebo	12	Female	6			
No.7: Alison	12	female	4			
No.8: Nancy	12	female	7			

Table 2: Participant information according to family status

Learner/ participant	Parents positioning	Years in the status	Child's y parents separated
No.1: Cathy	divorced	6	4
No.2: Thabo	Divorced	7	8
No.3: Mia	Divorced	4	9
No.4: Pauline	Separated	2	11
No.5: Praise	Separated	5	8
N0.6: Lebo	Divorced	1	11
No.7: Alison	Divorced	3	9
No.8: Nancy	divorced	4	8



Research Instruments

The researchers used narrative stories, personal narrative diaries, and semi-structured interviews to gather data. In order to get a feel about the children's issues, difficulties, and past life experiences, the researchers asked the participants to compose narrative essays about their experiences. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), using narratives enables participants to draw on their own experiences, epiphanies, and existential crises from their own lives.

In addition, each participant was required to keep a three-month narrative diary as part of the second way of data collection. These narrative diaries are meant to provide insight into the participant's current circumstances and feelings. Narrative diaries are unstructured strategies that provide for the greatest degree of participant response freedom. Williams (2007) points out that using diaries as introspective tools is crucial for obtaining descriptive and interpretive accounts from respondents. These offer a dependable substitute to interviews in their facilitation of precisely remembering profound details. However, when combined with interviews, they appear to be one of the most reliable techniques of gathering information. Hence, the researchers also conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants about their story diaries every two weeks.

Ethical Issues

The researchers took account of the possible ethical issues during the data collection process, which included informed consent and confidentiality. In terms of informed consent, the investigators wrote to the children concerned to explain the goals, objectives, and methodology of the project. Informed consent (assent) sheets were given to the participants' custodial parents because they were minors under the age of 18. The consent/assent forms also clarified the study's objectives, the procedures it would follow, and its strict adherence to confidentiality requirements. They also stated that taking part in the research was altogether voluntary and that the students reserved the right to pull out at any time. The researchers also offered the participants' guardians a copy of all the results when they were finished. In data analysis, when it became necessary to include participants' names, pseudonyms were created to safeguard their identities. The researchers and the Department of Psychology Department had the responsibility of keeping the data safe after it had been analysed.

Data Presentation and Analysis Procedures

The qualitative data collection techniques employed in the study produced a significant amount of textual and visual data. With the use of Microsoft Word, all interviews were transcribed prior to data analysis. Data from the interviews, personal narrative diaries, and narrative stories were analyzed using the open-coding technique and thematic analysis. De Vos, Delpont, Fouche & Strydom (2011) established that open-coding comprises the breakdown of data into distinct pieces, detailed examination, comparison for similarities and differences, and inquiries regarding the phenomena as reflected in the data.



THE FINDINGS

The findings are presented in tandem with its objectives as follows:

- The extent to which separation /divorce affects a learner's psychological well-being.
- The effects of the separation/divorce of the parents on the academic performance and other social features of the learners' learning.
- The coping mechanisms used by children concerned.
- The measures that can be instituted by schools and related stakeholders in ameliorating the challenges faced by the children.

Table 3 shows the themes representing the various experiences of the students, in regards to the main themes and sub-themes which emerged in the study.

Table 3: The Main Themes and Sub-Themes which Emerged in the Study	
Themes	Sub-Themes
Theme 1: Adult separation and the psychological well-being of student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∅ Sadness and distress ∅ Feeling of abandonment ∅ Anger ∅ Frustration
Theme 2: Adult separation and behavioural problems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∅ Substance use ∅ Antisocial behaviour ∅ Reasons for indulging in felonious behaviour
Theme 3: Adult separation and academic performance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∅ Repeating classes ∅ Difficulties in focusing in class ∅ absenteeism
Theme 4: Coping mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∅ Sleeping ∅ Talking to friends ∅ Distancing from others ∅ Poetry ∅ Difficulties in coping due to anger



Adult Separation and the Psychological Well-being of Learners

Sadness and distress

Regarding parental separation and divorce, the majority of learners showed profound sadness and distress. The reports below reflect how much adult separation and divorce affected the affected children.

Pauline described her anguish over her mother's absence in her writing, and she stated:

Zvinorwadza (it's so hurting) because I feel so sad that I never get to see my mother anymore...

As a result of her mother's absence and behaviour, Alison expressed her displeasure in the following way:

Most of the time, I feel distressed that my mother left me and dad while she moves to a different town to stay with another man whom she had been cheating dad with.

Feelings of abandonment

A number of the learners felt that the absent parent had abandoned them.

Praise stressed these feelings of abandonment by her mother and said:

...pane dzimwe nguva (there are times) when things get complicated for me as a girl who stays with only a dad, without a mother figure around...

Lebo also expresses her feelings of abandonment towards her father:

I feel like he doesn't care much about me because he never calls me but always calls my brother, which ultimately leads her to say I don't think I.....can rely on him for anything.

From the above, it is evidenced that the emptiness created in the child's psyche as a result of the absence of the parent concerned was intense and affected the children unpleasantly.

Anger

During the process of data analysis, the researchers observed that some of the children expressed feelings of anger over the situations they found themselves in due to parental separation and divorce.

Nancy expressed anger towards her father because of the physical abuse that her mother experienced while they were still married and during the process of divorce. In her personal narrative diary, she wrote:

I mean seeing your mum being beaten up...things like that really hurt me a lot. I would just wish I had the power to beat back my father...that really affected me very badly.

Cathy expressed extreme anger towards her father because she could barely remember his face and how his body structure looked as the divorce happened when she was only four years old and he never bothered to come back to visit her. She said:



I feel so angry most of the time and hate my dad that he never came back to see me, his child that he brought to this world. Izvozvi (now) I can't even remember the sound of his voice.....and my friends always have a lot to say about their dads.

Feelings of frustration

The researchers noted that in conjunction with the feelings of anger, a number of learners also showed feelings of frustration with regard to their condition.

Mia showed her feelings of frustration during the interview pertaining to an incident when she wanted to visit her father and her mother did not give her permission. She said:

I wanted to go and see my dad over the weekend and my mum said I couldn't go... so frustrating. How does she expect me to just stay at home and not visit my dad?

Behavioural problems

Owing to being subjected to emotional setbacks, most of the learners in the study indicated that they display behavioural problems.

Substance use

The family's structure and support have a great impact on the child's behaviour both at school and at home. Some of the participants indicated that they turned to taking substances like marijuana (weed) as a way to cope with the problems that they face daily due to their parents separating.

Thabo's teacher Mr Moyo explained how he found out that Thabo had been smoking weed at school with some of the children, and amongst them there were a couple of students who were in the similar situation as him in regards to his family structure. Mr Moyo explained:

During tea break, I bumped into Thabo and his best friends behind the classroom blocks and in his hand he had a weed cigarette achitoputa (smoking it)...

During the interview Thabo confirmed that he had really been taking marijuana for three years. He said:

I started smoking weed three years ago....I smoke before I go to school, and on my way back home...

Aggressive behaviour

Some of the children also reported showing aggressive behaviour towards their peers. Praise explained her actions to the researchers during the interview as follows:

Sometimes when I get bored because of my home situation I provoke a fight. Just like last week I insulted my classmate and started swearing on top of my voice in class...

These incidents continued until she was caught by her teacher and called for disciplinary hearing by the headmistress and her parents were called in as well.



Reasons for indulging in the aberrant behaviour

The participants who engaged in felonious behaviour attributed it to a number of reasons. Thabo justifies his behaviours during the interview to the researcher by saying:

...when things get too difficult for me to process...I prefer to go out and relax and so I go and smoke weed...the smoking makes me numb and I don't get to feel any pain. When high, I can then become rude or even violent to anyone who provokes me...

Praise explains her actions of swearing in class and to other students and says:

At home when my parents used to fight each other a lot, that way my mother would disengage in the fight as a sign of defeat. That way I noticed that swearing can help me win any argument even with other students in class.

The impact on the children's academic performance

Adult separation had an impact on some of the learners' academic performance. In the case of Thabo, he was fifteen years old yet in grade seven. That is because he got delayed in school for three years while he constantly moved houses due to parental divorce. He ended up repeating classes because he missed some classes during the process. Thabo speaks about how he missed school and says:

...like last year I should have written my grade seven exams but because I could not attend most of my classes I ended up not registering and failing to write them and then I had to repeat the class this year.

In the same vein, Lebo spoke about how her environment at home affected her negatively that she ended up having difficulties in focusing on reading as well as concentrating when she was in class:

Last year's exams were very tough for me and I performed quite badly...the conflicts at home got me so distracted and at school all that all I thought about was whether my parents would have fights again at night ... I couldn't focus.

However, Nancy showed capabilities in excelling in her academics though she was lacking parental supervision as the parents could not attend to her school work.

My last picture is that of my prize giving day in school. I got an award for English but none of my parents were able to attend.

Coping Mechanisms

As the concerned children go through different series of daunting events as their parents separate or divorce, they tend to adjust or find strategies to go through the pains of parental divorce, many of which emphasize and may even aggravate their adversaries in life. The participants used different coping strategies to deal with their situations. Pauline selected to distance herself from the stressful home environment. She explained that:



When I'm at home it's like the chores never come to an end when at the same time I am stressed ...but when I get to visit my uncle's place I just get to just sit and relax.

Mrs Kamusoko explained during the interview how Cathy would distance herself from other students in class. She said:

....every time that I give the children a pairing up or group activity to do she gets away from the others and always wants to work alone.

Nancy explained in the interview about how she faces difficulties in coping due to a lot of anger inside of her:

I don't really cope well, ndine hasha dzisingaite (I have a very short temper). When a person tells me something even slightly provocative, I get angry and if I don't, I get sad ndobva ndachema (then I cry).

Mr Banda the guidance and counselling teacher talked about how Thabo would engage into smoking marijuana so that he would feel numb from the pain as a way of coping. He said:

During one of my counselling sessions with Thabo, he mentioned that he had a huge argument one morning and that's when he started smoking.

Alison however decided to use writing poetry as a coping strategy. In one of her poems she wrote:

....anyone who hurts me must be shut out, cast to the other side.

Lebo explains how she talks with her friends about the situation at home and that helps her ease some pain:

....when I feel like my head is about to explode, I talk to my best friend and even cry into her shoulder.

To support the above statement, Mrs Ncube, Lebo's teacher explained that she once saw her with her friend and she was hugging her while she cried. She said:

During tea break, I once came across Lebo hugging her friend, with tears on her cheeks.

Measures that can be instituted by the schools and related stakeholders in ameliorating the problems

This section summarises what the teachers as the key informants had to say about measures that can potentially be instituted by schools and related stakeholders in attempts to ameliorate the problems that manifest at school among children affected by the separation or divorce of their parents.



Acquaintance with trained counsellors

The teachers pointed out that most schools do not have qualified counselors like psychologists in their systems to help solve problems that may arise and affect the psychological well-being of children coming from divorced families. They pointed out that the ministry of education should look for or assign skilled counselors into schools, especially on the note of stabilizing the psychological well-being of such children. This would also have a benefit of reducing the burden on the headmasters of school who often have to independently look for trained counsellors and it also reduces workloads on teachers so that they can focus more on the teaching aspect of the child.

Introduction of support groups and programs

It was also pointed out that a majority of divorced-parent children may not necessarily require official psychiatric or psychological care but they need support from their immediate family members, friends and their classmates to help them cope with the problems emanating from the family's breakdown. In this regard, it was suggested that teachers could also engage in non-academic activities like plays that can ease and relax the child's mind.

Training teachers

According to the teachers, the school boards should offer teachers training programs on the detrimental effects of adult separation on children as well as workable solutions for creating classroom programs that can better serve these children. Teachers could be designated by the schools to take part in workshops and programs designed to help them learn how to support children from divorced families. Children of divorce can also be taught practical strategies and programs in small groups by trained teachers.

Enforcement of parent-teacher days

Teachers also suggested they should be given room to work closely with parents of children from separated families so as to symbiotically monitor the children's psychological wellbeing as well as their academic performance. This would be facilitated through building stronger lines of communication between teachers and parents at parent-teacher days. They pointed out that for the affected student to succeed academically, there must be ongoing communication and collaboration between the school, teachers, and parents.

DISCUSSION

The study sought to investigate the psycho-social, behavioural and academic effects of adult separation/divorce on the children at a primary school in the city of Gweru in Zimbabwe. The results of the research will be discussed under the subheadings related to the main themes that emerged in the study. The first theme encompassed the effects of adult separation on the psychological well-being of the learners. The findings indicated that the children faced a variety of emotional problems regarding their parents' separation and divorce which included sadness, distress, feelings of abandonment, anger and frustration.

The researchers noted that the students expressed feelings of sadness and distress in many ways and that these feelings were deep-rooted within each participant. According to Wallerstein and



Kelly (1980), feelings of sadness and distress arise among the children as a consequence of the parents' lack of involvement and their indifference in regards to their wellbeing. Taylor and Andrews (2009) argue that parents embroiled in situations of marital breakdown do not recognize how upset their children are because they are either too disturbed psychologically themselves or are too preoccupied with their own plight.

Furthermore, some of the learner participants felt abandoned, and these feelings are rooted in the absence of contact with the parent and the egotistic drives they display. Children have a natural desire to stay connected close to both of their parents and the lack of that causes and fuels up the feelings of abandonment (Crittenden, 2013). Lang and Zagorsky (2001) assert that such feelings are marked by focusing attention on the absent parent, together with the intense discomfort ensuing from the parent's absenteeism. In general, existing research suggests that children tend to suffer more in material and financial terms when the father is the missing parent, leading the children to intense feelings of self-consciousness and desertion (McLanahan, 1999). In some cases, non-custodial fathers may even deliberately 'forget' and neglect their children upon divorce out of bitterness of having lost custody of them (Braver & Griffin, 2014; Greif, 2014). However, in the majority of such cases, they are hindered by emotional and practical difficulties to continue a stable relationship with their children. Despite the fact that custody of children is usually handed to the mother subsequent to divorce, recent research suggests that fathers can be equally effective as single parents (Schnayer & Qrr, 2014). However, having a good 'surrogate mother' from kinship ties such as an aunt, as can be available and common in the extended family systems of Africa, may go a long way in alleviating the problems emanating from the maternity side upon divorce (Mildred, 2014).

Additionally, the findings revealed that most troubled children showed various degrees of rage. During the data collecting period, the participants displayed anger due to the circumstances surrounding their parents' divorce and separation. Faber and Wittenborn (2010) indeed explain that anger is a typical response to a child being separated from a parent. When a child stops speaking to one parent, they are often also cut off from the other parent, and may be angry against the remaining parent for their loss of their other parent. They may also be angry against the parent who abandoned them or the remaining parent, depending upon the circumstances that surrounded the divorce process.

Moreover, the researchers observed that most of the participants were feeling helpless in the situation that they are in, which is typical of a long running form of depression. According to existing research, the depressive effects of depression upon children show a bifurcation according to the gender of the children involved. According to Simons et al. (1999), divorce amplifies a girl's risk for depression, because it increases the chances of her mother being depressed, which has a knock-on effect on the quality of her parenting. On the other hand, they note that boys tend to become depressed in general after their parents' divorce. In general, this indicates that parents are necessary in a child's upbringing. A child is a child because there are parents (e.g. Vervoort et al., 2012).

The outcomes of the study also showed that children who come from divorced families show problematic behaviours. According to Simons et al. (1999), children from broken marriages usually act out of their own and the remaining parent's rage and depression. Behavioural problems among the concerned children tend to be worse during the first few early years of the separation. Some of the participants, especially those in their teen years, turned to smoking, a clearly delinquent behaviour of children of that age range. The learners started to engage in



such delinquent habits so as to cope with the problems they were facing. Blitstein et al. (2005) state that adversarial social changes in a child's life constitute a crucial factor in predicting later drug use and abuse. The more disruption there is, the less the stability in their lives, leading to delinquency. The children in the study explained that the reason why they engaged in delinquent behaviours like smoking was because of the depression and anxiety that came along with parental separation. According to Nunes-Costa, Lamela, and Figueiredo (2009), children of divorced parents frequently exhibit mild to serious depressive symptoms and as a result are more likely to engage in anti-social and delinquent behaviours. Some children might skip school, while others might feel lonely and forlorn at school because no one is aware of their anxiety over their parent's separation.

Furthermore, results from the study displayed that adult separation affected the participants' studies mostly in an adversarial way. Children of separated parents have troubles in school as a result of struggles in navigating the deluge of negative emotional and mental states that follow their parents' divorce (Mahony, 2015). Learners from divorced families show more behavioural problems, increased negative self-concepts, and amplified difficulties with fellow learners due to the difficulties they experience in school, which eventually leads to more distress in getting along with their parents. The resultant vicious cycle of problems may ultimately lead them to have ideas of skipping classes or eventually dropping out of school. The case of Thabo, a boy who repeated classes showed that the divorce had a negative effect on his academic performance. The divorce resulted in the participant missing classes and failing to proceed to the next grade for the final exams. Parental separation therefore can also result in children becoming underachievers academically (Zangmo, 2019). It is important to take into account in fact that according to existing research, boys cope worse with divorce than girls at school, showing a litany of problems which include rage, school problems, truancy or aggressive behaviour. On the other hand, girls may try to appease adults by not showing their feelings (Hetherington & Elmore, (2003).

Coping Mechanisms

The other objective was to identify the coping mechanisms that were used by children from divorced families at school. The learner participants employed various coping mechanisms to deal with their different situations regarding their parents' divorce, which included smoking, writing poetry, talking to friends, distancing from others and also some displaying difficulties in coping due to increased anger. These results are in tandem with the study conducted by Vélez, Wolchik, Tein, and Sandler (2011), which revealed that when children from divorced families come across problems, they cope through various means which include talking to friends and teachers at school as well as alienating themselves from others.



CONCLUSIONS, PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We conclude that parent separation and divorce invariably carry acutely adversarial effects in the psychological wellbeing and academic performance of pupils in primary school. These effects can accumulate and interact to form a vicious cycle in the children's lives that severely impedes their personal and academic development. Therefore, parents should be very careful and take into close consideration the welfare of their children during the course and finalisation of divorce. In helping children deal with their feelings and problems, parents should take responsibility and play an active role in their children's lives. Therefore, such children need special attention at school and various interventions can be instituted to enable their proper development at school, including those cited in this research, such as introduction of support programs and groups, training teachers to identify such children and help them in navigating their issues, enforcement of teacher-parent days and incorporation of trained counsellors in educational settings. In particular, the ministry of education and government could chip in through provision or allocation of qualified personnel in schools to provide counselling, even in the poorest schools. Educators could also help children to maintain and buttress their friendships in school so that the concerned children can have someone who is a peer to confide with.

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