

Single Parent Families and Their Effect on Children's Academic Achievement in Rural South Africa

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Abstract: The study examines the problems faced by children from single parent families on their academic achievement. The objectives of the study are to identify the problems or challenges faced by students from a single parenthood setup on their academic achievements at the University of Fort Hare. There is an understanding that there are many factors that affect student's academic performance especially for those from single parent families. In this study a triangulated design was utilized to collect empirical data. Closed ended questionnaires and a semi structured interview guide were used to capture the ideas of the students at the University of Fort Hare who come from single parent families. The findings revealed that students from single parenthood face difficulties on their academic achievement due to many reasons. This is because of the fact that their parent's education, income and family structure have an impact on the student's academic achievement.

Key words: Single-parenthood, education, academic achievement, socialization resources, psychological challenges, empirical data

INTRODUCTION

Despite the presence of diverse factors for educational outcomes or achievement among children, the family background characteristics remain as the important driver. Coleman *et al.* (1966) noted that family background variables have a tremendous impact on educational outcomes of children. Milne *et al.* (1986) state that the family background variables include parent's work pattern, family structure, race, parent's education, family income and parent's occupations. Of great concern to this study is the family structure in which the focus is on single or one parent families. The general declines in grade points average or achievement test scores among children in rural university institutions is a concern for this study. According to Eddy and Holborn (2011) single-parent households have become a norm in South Africa as many children grow up under the care of one parent and in most cases a mother.

South Africa is one of the many countries in Africa where education lies at the foundation of many issues today. The success and failure of children in their academic endeavours is based upon the availability or unavailability of supportive guardians such as parents. According to Fatima *et al.* (2013) it is mainly the responsibility of the family to socialize and orient children

to become productive members of society. From a sociological point of view, the family is considered as the socialising agent of the child when he or she comes into world and it has a major influence on the child's physical mental and moral development. The early foundational roots are laid by the family and before the child is enrolled to any secondary agents or institutions the personality that the child takes to school is shaped by the home (Maduewesi and Emenogu, 1997). Therefore, educational and sociological theories conclusively agree that both home and school are core institutions that have a mandate to socialise and educate children.

The greater involvement of parents in the process of conveying education to their children, the greater the children might succeed in their academic achievements and become functional members of the society. The presence of parents in the upbringing of children provides psychological, emotional and financial support in their education. Several studies have been carried in the past to assess the roles played by parents in the educational achievements of the children. Early participation of parents in the child's educational process results in the more powerful impact and better performance. According to Clarke-Stewart (1983) several studies have shown that the children's cognitive and social development is influenced by the parent's behaviours

with their children. Although, it is important to understand the roles played by parents in the social development of children it is more worthy to note how children cope in the presence of only a single parent. Studies tracing decades back have shown that the academic output of children with both parents is different from those one from single parent households. Kim (2004) and Downey (1994) state that children from two-parent households outperform children from one-parent households across a variety of measures. Mandara and Murray (2006) and Sigle-Rushton and Maclanahan (2004) further show in their studies that children from single-parent homes score lower average point grades in tests and complete fewer years of school when compared to children from two-parent homes.

Single parenting is viewed as an important social issue that has a significant effect on the child's academic success. Children who are raised by single parents are at risk of not reaching their full potential. Students within the education system encounter many challenges in their family lives that they bring with them into the classroom (Leadbeater and Bishop, 1994). Eddy and Hloborn (2011) stressed that the University of Cape Town carried out a study of how orphan hood affects children on their school performance. In its conclusions the study noted that children who came from single parent families faced a greater possibility of being enrolled in school and for those who had the opportunity completed fewer years of education on average. They also, faced financial difficulties for their education than children who had both parents.

The family structure ideally provides a sense of security and stability that is necessary for children. When there is a breakdown in the family structure it may have a tremendous impact on a child and their ability to function ordinarily or achieve academically. Many students who are from single parent families be it a mother only or a father face difficulties which arise from such a structure such as economic hardships and emotional problems which have a negative impact on their academic performance. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the effects or impacts of single-parenthood on the academic performance of children enrolled at the University of Fort Hare in South Africa.

The research problem: Two parents play an important role in ensuring that their children develop appropriate psychologically, ensure academic achievement and social development. As stated before the family structure affects children's schooling outcomes and achievements. Naidoo (1998) noted that, although, there has been literature on the single-parent family, a limiting factor is

that it has been racialised since most of the studies have been confined to white subjects. Due to the incidences of HIV/AIDS, domestic violence and high levels of divorce, South Africa remains as one of the countries with a higher rate of single-parenthood. The University of Fort Hare in Alice campus situated in a rural setting presents a platform for assessing the impact of single parenthood on the academic performance of students who come from such family backgrounds. As a disadvantaged institution of learning most of the students are poor black students from the surrounding communities. Eddy and Holborn (2011) posit that a racial dimension can be noted in family structures. From an African perspective it is mostly African families who constitute the single parents cluster as compared to other races such as white or Indian families

One area of study that is important is the relationship between family structure and educational achievement. The major problem that the study identifies is that most single parent families are economically disadvantaged and children from such background face difficulties with regard to their academic achievement and they are associated with social and psychological difficulties. The study, also, argues that students from single parent homes fail to complete their educational studies due to the lack of finance and that their family background impacts on their school achievement. Although, it is acceptable to say that numerous socioeconomic status variables may be attributed in the differences in educational achievement between students from two-parent families and students from single-parent families we can't deny the fact that that family income remains the alright variable. The Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at Alice campus reported a sharp decline in the average scores at first year. The current low pass rate at first year level invokes the need to ascertain the determining factors of poor performance of students. Although, there is an array of factors responsible for the decline in pass rates, this study identifies single-parenthood to be a cause of concern as students grapple with limited financial and psychological support. In light of these factors, this study sought to address the following research aim and objectives.

Research aim: The major aim of this study is to investigate the problems faced by students from single parent families in their tertiary education within a rural setting. Since, it is believed that child parenting is not a one man job, this study acknowledges findings by other scholars that children perform better when there is the support of two parents that when there is a single parent. Benson *et al.* (1980) argues that there is less time spent with children from one-parent families than with children

from both parents. This inevitably affects their educational achievement. Therefore, this study will explore how students from a single parent background cope in their education and how the parents provide the needed support. As such cases are on the increase in South Africa there is need for an urgent introspection of why these trends seem to be mutating and rising.

Objectives of the study:

- To identify the challenges faced by the students from single parenthood
- To identify the various roles played by single parents in the educational success of their children

MATERIALS AND METHODS

According to Kothari (2004) research methodology is a way to systematically solve the research problem. Methodology, also, provides guidelines for collecting evidence about what took place and why other researchers can check for the findings. This study utilised a triangulated design where both quantitative and qualitative research methods were utilised. A survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used as data collection instruments. In this study 20 semi-structured interviews were carried out and 100 questionnaires were distributed to the students who come from single-parent families. The population of the study consisted students from the University of Fort Hare. In particular, first year students (2013 Class) in the Faculty of Social Sciences were purposively selected for the semi-structured interviews. These were from the social work department, communication department and human resources department. The choice of semi-structured interviews was because semi-structured interviews are organised and arranged around particular areas of interest and contain a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee therefore allowing considerable flexibility in scope and depth (May, 1991).

The rationale about choosing a triangulated design is based on Yauch (2003) who argue that these two approaches can be combined to establish a more holistic or complete description of the social phenomena under study. The researchers need to point out that by employing a triangulated approach it was possible to ensure that any intrinsic biases in each of the methods maybe ameliorated. Triangulation is paramount in the sense that the approach allows for verification and increases validity by bringing into focus several

viewpoints and methods (Yeasmin and Rahman, 2012). Although, triangulation may mean different things for this study it means using more than one research method or data collection technique in a single study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study discusses the major findings from the study. One of the major findings from the study was that the consequences of single parenthood differ in terms of gender. This is because there is a difference in the way in which females and males from single parent family structure are being affected by being part of a single parent family. The sex or gender of the child is an important factor to consider. Hetherington (1981) noted that sex is an important control variable because in a single parent family negative effects appear more often for boys than for girls. From the study it was noted that male students from a single parent family faced so many challenges than their female counterparts. The idea behind this finding is that for the male students there is greater emotional stress due their need to contribute to the sustenance of the family. Therefore, the double burden of learning and providing economical support for the family affects the male students. In one of the interviews with a male student the following was reported:

“I come from a family where I am expected to contribute to the financial needs of the family. My mother is unemployed and I have two younger brothers who are also going to school. The little money that I get from my bursary, I make it sure that it helps with the education of my younger brothers. Sometimes when it takes time for us to be paid our bursary money it affects me a lot hence my educational output”.
Semi-structured Interview, Respondent No. 1, August 2013)

This finding concurs with earlier studies by Mandara and Murry (2006), Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan (2004) who stated that growing up without a father seems to have a greater negative effect on boys as compared to girls. In the African culture it is widely believed that a father is the breadwinner of the family. Therefore, in the absence of a father the eldest son is supposed to take responsibility and become the father-figure of the family. This is manifested through provision of the daily needs of the family, especially, in situations where the mother is not getting any form of income. However, for the girl child the general belief is that at some point, one will get

married and become part of another family. Therefore, to reiterate, this study noted that the pressures of being part of a single parent family amounts more to the male students as compared to the female counterparts.

Challenges faced by students from single-parent households: From the study it was noted that students from a single-parent families face multiple challenges that impinge on their educational achievements. The following sections present some of these findings from the study.

Inadequacy of financial resources: According to Anderson (2003) differential outcomes by children from their school work are influenced by differential investments from their parents. Children who are supported more by their parent and who receive higher levels of investment are capable of achieving more positive outcomes. One of the biggest challenges faced by students from single-parent households is the lack of financial support in their studies. Hampden-Thompson (2013) supports this assertion by stating that low levels of educational achievement among children from single parent families can be linked to low levels of household income. According to Milne *et al.* (1986) children’s achievements are influenced by the family’s background variables. These variables include the parent’s occupations, family income, family’s class, race, family’s structure and the parent’s education. From the study it was noted that the majority of the students believed that their family’s income is a cause of concern as most of them come from poor backgrounds. With the need to pay their university tuition fees, meals and residence fees most students from single parent households indicated that the lack of a sound financial backing was a serious matter that adversely affected their studies. The following table presents the student’s views on the lack of adequate financial backing from their families.

Table 1 shows the responses of students from single-parent families who indicated that their families found it difficult to support them financially in their academic studies. The findings can be corroborated by a semi-structured interview extract with one of the affected students.

Table 1: Question: Do you think the lack of adequate financial backing is affecting your academic output?

Response	Frequency (%)
Agree	83
Neutral	4
Disagree	13

A computer printout of a table derived from the data and findings of this study

“My father passed on when I was still in grade 6 and from that moment my mother has been taking care of me and my siblings. The challenge is that she is informally employed and does not get much income from her employment. My father used to support us before he died but however, his pension money is also, little to adequately provide for us. I do not have a bursary to support me and as a result I am always in arrears with my university fees. This affects me a lot because no one can take the responsibility”. Semi-structured Interview, Respondent No. 2, August 2013)

The above qualitative and quantitative results support the idea that single parent families are often entombed in poverty and face greater economic burdens and as a result this adversely affects the educational performance of students from such a family background. Previous studies have also, found that an important reason why students from single-parent families attain low school grades is because of the poor economic condition that usually accompanies this type of families (Entwisle and Alexander 1995; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Research findings in other parts of the world such as America and Asia concur with the findings from this study. With Africa being one of the poorest continents, single parent families especially from rural settings find it difficult to cope with the rising cost of living hence the pressure affects their children’s performance at school and colleges. Ushie *et al.* (2012) argue that single-parent families have an average lower income and therefore are more constrained in ensuring adequate financial resources to meet their children’s learning needs.

Lack of supporting resources and parental involvement: According to Barajas (2011) from the 1980’s there has been growing concern on the need to look at why students from single parent households were disadvantaged as compared to children from two-parent homes. Using a systems perspective approach, Milne *et al.* (1986) found out that there are various factors that caused this disadvantage to happen. These factors include the number of books in the home, parental involvement and their expectations and also income of the single parents. Barajas (2011) further states that there are several key educational resources that play significant roles in determining effective schooling for both men and women. These included-a place to study, availability of books, access to daily newspapers and regular magazines, availability of dictionaries, technological equipment such as computers or typewriter, calculator and one’s own

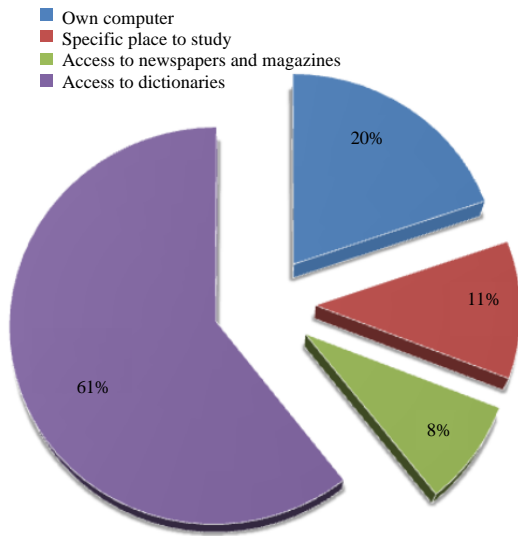


Fig. 1: Resources used by students for their academic purposes at home (A computer printout of a pie chart derived from the data and findings of this study)

room. The presence or absence of such related factors present as the predictors of children’s future academic achievement. From the study it was noted that one of the challenges faced by students from single-parent families was the lack of supporting resources and involvement of their parents in their education. The following pie chart presents some of the resources used by students during their time at home.

Figure 1 shows that approximately 20% of the respondents have their own computers books for their studies while 11% have their own specific place to study. Figure 1 further shows that only 11% have access to daily newspapers and magazines whilst the majority of the respondents, 61% stated that they have access to dictionaries. This shows that students from single parent homes do not have all the necessary resources for academic achievement and that the student’s academic achievement is better enhanced by the number of education resources available at home. While it is considered important for students to have their own place of study and access to personal computers, the results show that only a few of them have access to these exclusive and critical resources. In many instances most of the students find themselves sharing rooms with the other members of the family and this in some way affects their studying patterns. The availability of these resources at home can lead to good academic achievement of the students.

Socialization is a key aspect for every individual for the integration into the wider society. A key objective this study sought to address were the roles played

Table 2: Parent’s involvement in their children’s education. Question: Do your parents sometimes check on your school progress?

Parameters	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid				
Yes	31	31	31	
No	69	69	69	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

A computer printout of a table derived from the data and findings of this study

by the single-parents in the education of their children. Sui-Chu and Willms (1996) and Lee (1993, 2018) argue that a critical factor affecting students from single parent families is the lack of socialization resources. They define socialization resources as the parent’s or other family adult’s behavioral and psychological involvement in the children’s education. Powell *et al.* (2010) argues that sociological approaches on education view the parental school involvement is a gateway to bolster children’s outcomes in their education.

Rafiq *et al.* (2013) also believes that parental involvement and expectations have a greater impact on student’s educational outcomes. The involvement and participation of parents in educational activities offers the parents an opportunity to acquire information about children’s learning and development therefore, ensuing that their child’s abilities are enhanced (Powell, 2001). This helps parents to know how they can stimulate improvements in the development of their child’s educational-related abilities.

This might include activities such as helping children in reading and writing, coaching them to do their homework independently, constant monitoring of their school progress and providing all the possible necessary resource services meant for improving the student’s educational outcomes (Rafiq *et al.*, 2013). From the study it was noted that socialization resources are some of the important attributes which students from single-parent families lacked. Table 1 shows the student’s responses when they were asked whether their parents are directly involved in their education.

Table 2 shows that only 31% of the respondent’s parents check the progress of their children on academic progress. This means that there is no much of concern from the parents with regard to their children’s education. The majority of the respondents which is 69% indicated that their parents were not involved in the progress of their studies. The implication of these results is that when parents check on the academic progress of their children, this gives the children the motivation to perform better unlike when parents show no interest in their children’s school work. The above quantitative data was corroborated with findings from the semi-structured interviews. The following interview extract captures the view of one of the students from a single parent family:

“Ever, since, my matric, my mother hasn’t been directly involved in my education. Although, she has great belief that the way to success is through education she has never shown any concern. Even at times when I take my academic results to her, she doesn’t understand what they mean. Sometimes it makes me worried and I wonder if she will even have the energy to attend my graduation” This worry affects the way I perform because at times I need to see the compassion and passion of my success from my parent . Semi-structured Interview, Respondent No. 3, August 2013)

Rafiq *et al.* (2013) argues that “the role of parental involvement in children’s education has become a central issue in educational policy and research”. It is widely believed that there is a positive relationship between parental involvement and educational success. Based on the data from this study, one can therefore, argue that the lack of involvement by the single parents in the education progress of their children adversely affected their outcomes. Rafiq *et al.* (2013) findings noted that “parental involvement in the study of their children might be a significant factor which enhances the academic achievement of their children”. A key ingredient in the educational success of children is a higher expectation of the parents towards their children’s academic achievements. Astone and McLanahan (1991) argue that parent’s educational expectation for children is positively related to the children’s achievement outcome. From the study most of the students indicated that due to their parents’ poor educational history, there is not much of concern or expectation from them. One of the interviews with a student from a single parent family supports this assertion:

“My father was the only one who was educated and when he died I can hardly remember instances were my mother showed greater expectations towards my education”. It’s mostly my uncle who has shown great concern for my educational success. When I finished matric, my mother insisted that I should look for a job and contribute to the family’s well-being. Sometimes it gives you the courage when your parent expects more from you with regard to your education”. Semi-structured Interview, Respondent No. 4, August 2013)

Scholars state that the concern about the children’s education can be affected by various factors.

Comparisons between families with two biological parents and single parents show that single parent families usually face different burdens in their pursuit to make a living and as a result they cannot afford much time and support for the children. It is further alleged that they are also, stressed out with frustrations of all kinds have lower self-esteem and likewise have lower expectations for the children. This therefore, explains why most of the students indicated that there is less involvement and low expectation from their parents. One best way that can explain the limited involvement of the single-parent families is the idea that, since, they are the primary and frequently sole breadwinners for the family, single parents have less time to concentrate on the progress of their children are less likely to use consistent discipline and have less parental control and all of these conditions may lead to lower academic achievement.

CONCLUSION

The study argued that single-parenthood has great consequences on the educational outcomes of students who come from such backgrounds. The psychological pressure brought about the loss of a parent or guardian possesses serious challenges on the performance of students from single parent families. Several factors act upon single-parents such that their involvement and engagement in their children’s education is limited. Informed by the social capital and human capital approaches as the theoretical framework, the study proved that the lack of emotional, psychological and financial support for the children adversely affects their academic output. Deductions from the study found out that when parents become an important part of children’s lives, meaning to say that when parents are the social capital of children this can spur children to greater heights in their academic achievements. This study contends that without both parents in the family, children lose the human capital that the other parent could provide. This therefore means that the presence or availability of both parents in the family who have strong and close relations with the children constitutes an advantage for children’s learning. It also, ensures that the single parent is not burdened to provide the emotional and financial support that is key to the children’s academic support.

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