Divorce and its implications on socio-emotional and academic lives of Junior High School Students

Abida Karafat Abdul-Sallam

GES, Techiman North, Bono East
Emperailabi@yahoo.com

Danso Emmanuel Edem

GES, Okai Koi North, Greater Accra
edemdanso@gmail.com

Alfred Kuranchie

University of Education, Winneba
kuranchiealf@yahoo.com

Francis Adomako Barfi Haruna

Catholic University of Ghana, Fiapre
maalong39@yahoo.com

&

Sylvia Faazong Dery

Kotokrom M/A Basic 'A'
slyviadery@gmail.com

Abstract

The study explored the consequences of divorce on students' education and socio-emotional lives. To unveil the lived experiences of students from

divorced homes, the interpretivist philosophy and inductive approach were relied on to generate the study data. Using a semi-structured interview, data was collected from 20 participants who met the inclusive criteria. The study found that divorce has rippling effects on children's social, emotional and academic lives, which have the tendency to ruin students' educational pursuit. It however also found that the victims of divorce devise strategies such as engagement in co-curricular activities and relying on their God to mitigate the challenges arising from being from divorce homes. The study recommended that professional counseling should be given to children from divorced homes before allowed to stay with single parents.

Introduction

The Concept of Divorce

Every growing child would desire to live with both parents in order to be able to share their joyous and saddest moments with them. However, this desire does not materialize for all children, as some have their parents divorced along the line where they have to live with either of the parents. This situation causes a number of such children's hearts to be broken. Divorce is the permanent separation of a legally married couple. Hamilton (2012) asserts that the number of marriage contracts is increasing rapidly as more people of legal age enter the marriage institution. Surprisingly, however, marriage breakdown is also on the rise, owing primarily to marital discontent and infidelity (Jones, 2015; Tait, 2014). Härkönen et al. (2021) contend that the subject of divorce is becoming an increasingly prevalent social problem that has become a topic of discussion. This is a global social issue, and Ghana has its fair share.

Consequences of Divorce on Children

Divorce is a devastating event for those who have gone through it (Darab et al., 2020). Grief, shame, resentment, disappointment, strong rage, and a sense of split loyalty may be felt by children who have been touched by their parents' divorce (Usakli, 2013). For a variety of reasons, the disturbance caused by fighting, which leads to family breakups, in turn has effects on students' school success (Bubelwa, 2014). A systematic review of literature disclosed that parental divorce is related to

unfavourable outcomes in academic achievement, behaviour, psychological adjustment, self-esteem, and social relationships (Demir-Dagdas et al., 2018). Again, students' lives in broken homes are characterised by high levels of emotional stress, which might impede their intellectual development, resulting in such youngsters growing up without receiving proper academic training (Magpantay et al., 2014).

A study conducted in Africa by Akinleke (2017) revealed that pupils who originate from two-parent homes outperformed their counterparts from single-parent homes in terms of academic work. This is due to the fact that two-parent homes create a more conducive atmosphere for their children to study in. The finding is consistent with those found in Western countries that parental divorce is related to lower levels of educational achievement in children (Amato & Anthony, 2014; Bernardi & Radl, 2014; Harkonen et al., 2017). According to Schaan and Vögele (2016), when parents divorce, the majority of children feel emotional shock and high levels of anxiety. The children become emotionally involved in their parents' divorce from the minute they are made aware of their parents' separation (Cano & Gracia, 2022). Described by Keane and Loades (2017) as internalising difficulties such as sadness, anxiety, and low self-esteem, these youngsters have relational challenges that are difficult to resolve. As Spinelli et al. (2020) point out, some children may have pinned the entire guilt for the marriage's breakdown on their own shoulders. A study by Ayub and Iqbal (2012) revealed that, as a result of divorce, adolescents reported reduced psychological well-being, lower self-esteem, and a lowered sense of superiority.

Investigations have revealed other staggering effects of divorce on children. For instance, Kleinsorge and Covitz (2012) found that children from divorced or single-parent families are more likely to experience the long-term impacts of the situation. They implied that the degree to which the problem persists in the long run would be determined by the individual's capacity to adjust to his or her new lifestyle. Children from divided families are twice as likely as children from intact homes to have unfavorable results in the long run (Anderson, 2014). Morrissey et al. (2014) argue that the consequences of divorce include poverty, poor scholastic performance, poor health, increased rates of behavioral issues, and depressive symptoms.

In supporting this point, adolescents from divorced homes are more likely to postpone marriage until later in life and to experience breakups or divorces in their own marriages, hence continuing the trend (Smock & Schwartz, 2020). According to Nelson et al. (2014), children require their

father (who is typically the absent parent) as a source of affection, security, and identification, as well as a person against whom they can safely revolt, during their youth. However, the absence of a father figure following a divorce can have negative consequences, such as the child feeling alone and abandoned (Oren & Hadomi, 2020; Arugu, 2014). Boys who had their fathers absent during their early years of life, according to Flouri et al. (2015), exhibited signs of maladjustment such as being more reliant on adults, experiencing more social and emotional difficulties, having more feminine sex role orientations, and interacting more with females. Wood et al. (2018) postulate that these consequences delay their ability to form intimate and meaningful relationships. Arditti (2012) argued in support of this viewpoint, stating that divorce causes emotional, traumatic, and complex children's ties with their fathers to deteriorate and their connections with their paternal relatives to worsen as well. These are the dire consequences of divorce, which need to be minimized if they cannot be eliminated completely in our societies.

Coping Strategies of Students from Divorce Background

In every situation, people devise means to navigate through in order to grow and progress, so children from divorced homes also manage to pursue education to the level that their ability can take them. A study by Hlomani-Nyawasha et al. (2020) revealed that the students from divorced homes took to drinking and going out with their peers to cope with the situation. Morrison et al. (2017) also found that students from divorced homes cope by relying on reading the Bible as well as praying for God's guidance and protection. A study revealed that children who were victims of divorce resorted to seeking forgiveness from their parents for abandoning them and spending quality time with their trusted friends and family members (Du Poly, 2013). On their part, Angielkoska et al. (2015) realised that in order to cope with the challenges they had as a result of divorce, the children kept silent on issues that affected them. The discoveries signal that children from divorced homes resort to different means to cope with the consequences that the parents' divorce visits on them.

Ecological Perspective Theory

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model has been utilised to better understand the impact of parental divorce on children. Child development, according to this paradigm, occurs inside four nested systems: the microsystem, the

mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem, all of which communicate with the chronosystem. These systems are believed to interact and have an effect on a child's life (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). According to the paradigm, the physical, biological, psychological, social, and cultural layers or levels of interacting processes result in change, growth, and development. As such, what happens in one system has an effect on and is impacted by events occurring in other systems (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). For this reason, the study adopted the theory to understand how divorce affects a child's involvement at several levels, such as school and the broader social setting. These processes are inextricably linked to and influence one another (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017).

Divorce as a process affects parents directly, but it also has the potential to affect the children in the marriage. This causal chain does not operate in a single direction (Schramm & Becher, 2020). Hong et al. (2012) discussed the microsystem, which consists of the child's family, education, and peer group, all of which are constantly in contact with one another. According to Zito and De Coster (2016), parents initiate the divorce process within the family structure, which has a direct effect on the child. Scott et al. (2013) assert that marital problems tend to result in divorce, which has an influence on both the youngsters and the people with whom they often interact. According to Skinner et al. (2022), the mesosystem is the stage at which peer-group, educational, and family structures interact. Rahimah and Koto (2022) posit that the mesosystem is made up of several connected microsystems. As a result, what happens at home or among friends may have an impact on how students behave at school, and vice versa. Furstenberg (2014) asserts that while marriage unites two families to support the couple, the child's access to both families is always reduced, limited, or lost entirely when the marriage dissolves.

The term "exosystem" refers to those structures over which the child has some power but is not directly involved, as defined by Vélez-Agosto et al. (2017). Divorce is well-documented to cause significant "stress for children, ranging from the loss of interaction with one parent to financial difficulties (Salami et al., 2018). As parents divorce, the financial situation in the family deteriorates. Even if the children are not directly affected by events at their parents' place of employment, the divorce will have an effect on them. These elements mostly have effects on children's lives (Haimi & Lerner, 2016). Bronfenbrenner (1976) posited that the macro-system encompasses both the system's major

social structures and the principles and values that influence and are influenced by all other levels. Divorce carries a lot of negative connotations due to how society views it. It is critical to recognize the chronosystem, which refers to developmental time frames that overlap through the interconnections of different processes and their consequences on an individual's development (Skinner et al., 2022).

Research Questions

Two research questions guided the conduct of the study:

1. What socio-emotional and academic consequences do students face in school as a result of divorce?
2. How do students cope with the consequences they face as a result of divorce?

Methodology

Liu et al. (2017) and Shrivastava et al. (2019) posited that human biological make-up dictates how an individual responds to adversities in life. Thus, the ability of the person to respond to adversities, either positive or negative, depends on how that individual constructed their social world. To evaluate the consequences of divorce and how participants responded to them, interpretivist philosophy and an inductive approach were used. To absolve the researchers of biases, the study adopted a phenomenological design based on the principle that there is no objective experience that stands outside its interpretation because we can only know what we experienced by attending to perceptions and meanings that awaken our consciousness (Patton, 2015). This principle guided the gathering of data from students who are victims of divorce.

Though the population of the study included all students who are victims of divorce in the Catholic Cluster of Schools in Sawla West District, Ghana, a patriarchal society where children belong to their fathers, the sample was limited to twenty students. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants who met the selection criteria. The semi-structured interview conducted allowed for participants' privacy, the chance to further probe responses, and the opportunity to observe other emotional and behavioural cues during the interviews.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, Guba and Lincoln's (1994) criteria of dependability, conformability, credibility, and

transferability were used. Member-checking was used to ensure credibility; the participants had the opportunity to peruse the results after data analysis. The full audio tape recordings were also played to them to confirm the statements made in the interview. Also, "thick description" was done to ensure transferability. The records of data in the field notebook were kept as a guide for future references. To establish conformability, a reflexive journal was kept throughout the entire study. The reflexive journal aided in recording day-by-day activities. To acknowledge the sources of reference, the researchers recorded websites visited, reports and books used, and the articles cited. Interviewees' experiences, such as mood, gestures, and reflections when a particular question was asked during the interviews, were recorded. Finally, a code-recoding strategy was used to ensure dependability.

To analyze the data, the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) Protocol was employed. Cooper et al.'s (2012) IPA Protocol for data analysis was applied by listening to the recordings and reading the transcripts a number of times to immerse ourselves in the experiences of the participants. The notes were transformed into emerging themes. After that, we looked for connections between emerging themes, which were grouped according to conceptual similarities. They were then identified and grouped based on the major themes and sub-themes. Lastly, thematic networks were created to synthesise the superordinate themes and sub-themes.

Results of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore the consequences of divorce on the lives of the participants and how they strive to overcome them in school. The following sub-themes (role reversal and loneliness) and denial, engagement in extra-curricular activities, the student arbitration system, and the faith and belief system emerged from the data analysis.

Loneliness

In most patriarchal societies in Ghana, the children belong to the fathers. As such, the children are given to the fathers after divorce. The arrangement has rather negative consequences for the participants, as they argue that they become lonely, especially in cases where their fathers forbid or regulate how often they could visit their mothers when on vacation or weekends. In the case of loneliness, two participants responded:

"The absence of my mother usually triggers my loneliness. My father has always prevented me from visiting my mother. This is the major source of my loneliness" (Jennifer).

"Anytime I think about the absence of my parents, I feel lonely and rejected in my entire life" (Joseph).

Participants had mixed reactions as to what made them feel lonely during instructional hours. A section of the participants claimed they became lonely anytime teachers treated the topic of "divorce" in class. Conversely, some participants do enjoy such lessons because they have much information to share during such lessons. Some participants mentioned:

I usually feel lonely when the issue of divorce is being discussed in the classroom. I feel bad because I wish such a situation never happened to me" (Joycelyn).

"I feel uncomfortable because it makes me think a lot about what is happening in my life" (Cecilia).

"Whenever the topic of divorce came up in class, I started thinking about all the good times I had when my parents were together and the current situation I find myself" (Jennifer).

While the treatment of the topic on divorce makes some of the students uncomfortable, others realise that the teachers were rather preparing them to face reality in the future and also as a requirement of the curriculum. This was how a participant responded:

Sometimes I get the impression that the teacher wanted me to cry; that is why he is teaching on divorce. But other times, I realized that the teacher is only preparing us for the future, and not to make me cry. The teacher may point a figure at you and say, "Hey you," what is divorce, even if the teacher is unaware of your parents' divorce status" (Evelyn).

Participants also disclosed that they usually feel lonely in school when their parents fail to meet their daily needs. Two responses in connection with this are:

"I usually feel lonely when my parent cannot meet my basic needs..." Let me give one example: when there is time for sports or excursions, all my friends will leave me behind because I do not have money to attend such programs"* (Evelyn).

"When my friends are going to buy food and other stuff during break time, I feel lonely because I do not have money to buy food myself" (Prince).

Participants again intimated that when they see other parents with their children in the school, they feel uncomfortable and rejected by their parents. They added that they usually feel sad when the school calls for Parent Association (PA) meetings because their parents would never turn up. Two participants disclosed:

> *"Sometimes when I see my peers with their mothers and fathers in the school, I feel lonely and rejected by my own parents"* (Licalina).

> *"When the school calls for a Parents' Association meeting, I feel lonely because my parents will not be there for me"* (Cecilia).

Role Reversal

The participants intimated that prior to the divorce, they used to report to school on time and actively participated in other curricular activities. However, the situation had changed after the divorce of the parents because they now represent the 'mother figure' taking care of the house before leaving for school. The situation has had many consequences on them. Some participants responded:

> *"In fact, I have encountered a number of issues because of my parents' divorce. Living with my father alone means I have extra duties before school. Most of the time, I go to school late and end up missing some classes"* (Samira).

> *"Most of the time, I am compelled to carry out extra chores in the morning before going to school; I'm unable to participate in extracurricular activities"* (Hikmat).

> *"The divorce has caused a slew of problems. Living with one parent has not been easy for me as I have to perform household chores before going to school"* (Jennifer).

Participants also reported that though they love to engage in long conversations with their peers in school, they usually have to restrain themselves because they had less or nothing to say when their colleagues are in discussions about how their parents care for and love them and what they buy for them. A participant disclosed:

> *"The divorce of my parents really affected the manner in which I interact with my peers. When my friends were discussing how their parents love them, flash gifts on them, and how they spent the holidays, I had less or nothing to say"* (Evelyn).

Coping Mechanisms

The results of the study indicated that the incidence of divorce had many consequences on the children in the marriage. The participants, however,

used the following mechanisms to cope with the situation in order to continue their education:

Denial

Participants used denial as a strategy to cope with life after their parents divorced. Participants depended on denial to avoid the reality that their lives had drastically changed. To them, they were too young to understand what was really happening between their parents at the time of the divorce until they were a bit older. Visits to their parents made them fully understand what actually had happened. One participant responded:

> *"All I knew at the time was to nod politely when my mother and father were talking to me about their intention to divorce and the subsequent divorce itself. I pretended to the best of my ability that everything was fine. It's hard to say whether another strategy would have been more effective because I was little and I do not have any ideas as to how to go about the show"* (Licalina).

Participants also mentioned that they were not in a position to accept any other person as their father or mother except the people they grew up with and knew to be their parents. To them, they were not in a position to believe what their parents had recently narrated to them about their true parents. One participant said:

> *"I have been leaving with my father and mother right from preschool to this level. Recently, something happened in the house, and I got to know that she is not my mother. For me, I still consider her my mother"* (Niamah).

Arbitration

For the participants to resolve the challenges they have with their peers in school, they applied the principle of arbitration as a strategy. They did not see the need to be at loggerheads with their peers since they all learn in the same environment. The participants were also of the view that reporting their peers to the school authorities for punishment would rather create a hostile environment for them to live in and have a peaceful mind for their studies. These are some ways the children from divorce homes used arbitration to resolve challenges with their peers:

> *"They are still my brothers and sisters. If they offend me and I report them for punishment, how can I approach them for help another day? Sometimes I approach the person and express my frustration about the issue. We move on when we reach a*

perfect agreement, but if the issue remains unresolved, I summon some of my friends to intervene" (Razak).

"Let me tell you something that happened to me before. I had some kind of confrontation with my friend some time ago in class. Though we never fought or quarreled ever since, I usually felt uncomfortable asking for help from him until one day I gathered the courage to approach him for us to reconcile and move on. Ever since, I have chosen not to keep issue at heart but face it there and then" (Yussif).

"I don't want to feel bad again in school. The only time I felt bad in school was when I had problems with my best friend. Though I never liked what he did to me, I also felt bad for taking the issue personally. It took me some time to reconcile with him after he spoke to my mother" (Evelyn).

Engaging in Extra Curricula Activities

The participants engaged in games and sporting activities as a form of coping strategy whenever they felt bored and lonely. They admitted that as they engaged in these activities, they tended to forget about their worries, pain, and other issues during the period. Two participants narrated:

"Anytime you feel bored, try to jump around, play any games that my strength allows me... You will not only sleep well, but you will become refreshed. For me, I love to play anytime. It helps me cope with my situation" (Ali).

"Being part of the school football team really saved my life when my parents got divorced. Initially, the divorce caused difficulty to me. I was down; I started avoiding people, and sometimes missed classes. When I play football with my colleagues, I feel okay" (Muzzammil).

Belief System

The participants intimated that their belief system has helped them cope effectively with the parents' divorce. They had become closer to the maker; they rely on prayers to cope with their parents' divorce. Two participants described how prayers have helped them cope:

"Tahjjud (dawn prayer) has really helped me a lot after my parents divorced. It was really difficult for me to sleep at night after the divorce. But when I observed Tahjjud consistently, I feel relieved and have sound sleep" (Hikmat).
"Though I pray for myself when I am in trouble, I usually ask my mother to pray for me and with me in order to overcome the challenges I face and it has helped me" (Diana).

Participants stated that they have no reason not to call on their God when they are in difficulties because he never fails them when they do that. One participant revealed:

> *"God has been there for me even before my parents divorced. I do not know why I should ignore him now. I know he will not fail me like my parents. The little prayer I say every day is 'Lord, never leave me alone"* (Joycelyn).

Discussion

The study uncovered that divorce has rippling effects on children's socio-emotional development. The participants' experience in the situation makes them feel lonely and isolated. Their situation makes them restrained from group activities that could help develop their cooperative and teamwork skills, a component of the 21st century skills required for future personal and work life. This finding ties in with Bronfenbrenner's (1977) argument that, as the family systems are inextricably linked to and influence one another, any alteration of the family system may have an effect on the developing child's life. Afful-Broni (2005) supports Bronfenbrenner's (1977) view that when a parent is absent from a child's life, a void is created because the developing child loses the help that both parents would have provided.

Bronfenbrenner argued that because the microsystem is bidirectional in nature, any alteration in any part of the system may have an effect on either of the parties. By extension, when the parents of the participants divorce, there is a likelihood that the microsystem will get distorted, and that may explain the possible reason participants feel lonely and isolated in school. The implication is that a student who lived with both parents and received support growing up and experienced care and love from extended and nuclear families may have different lived experiences compared with a student who experiences divorce and suffers rejections, humiliations, and frustrations growing up. In addition, students from divorced homes have a higher tendency to face social transition problems such as substance abuse, indiscipline, truancy, uncompromising conduct, and unruliness (Namale, 2017). Mauki (2014) also reaffirmed the position that the absence of one parent does not only create a void in the child's life but also exposes the child to a range of problems of psycho-social adjustment and other deviant behaviors.

On the children's coping strategies, Campbell (2016) found that such children cope by expressing their feelings to the offenders in order to settle any misunderstanding, which is in agreement with how students in

this study cope with challenges they have with their schoolmates. Angjelkoska et al. (2015) also discovered that children from divorced homes coped by keeping silent on issues affecting them. Furthermore, Du Poly (2013) reported that schoolchildren coped with divorce by limiting and/or avoiding constant interaction with their divorced parents. The current study also disclosed that the children coped with the situation by forgiving their parents for abandoning them, reading the Bible daily, and praying for God's guidance and protection, among others.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The stories of the students from divorced homes disclose that divorce brings a myriad of social and emotional consequences, which could directly and indirectly affect the academic progress of the children. The students assuming the position of "mother figure" affects the children's social life and academic work. Performing this role for a long time may have negative effects on not only the children's academic performance but also their dropping out of school. Divorce may also have a high tendency to expose the children to anti-social behaviours in school and later in life, if not tackled by appropriate authorities.

To be able to stay in school and pursue education, the children adopt varied strategies by engaging in co-curricular activities, relying on their maker, and practicing the spirit of forgiveness. These strategies do not seem to be very effective, as they still reported a number of challenges that they encountered as a result of their parents' divorce. Consequently, it would be ideal for counsellors, psychologists, social workers, and school administrators to identify students from divorced homes for assistance to enable them to cope with the social, emotional, and academic challenges they encounter. The study also advocates for professional counselling for children prior to staying with single parents to help them pursue education to become useful to themselves, their families, and their societies.

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