Research Article

Examining Students' perceptions of the impact of marital breakdown on academic performance in Sierra Leone. Case Study: Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology

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Abstract
Families are a student's first point of contact with the world. Parents and other influential family members ensure young people's early training and socialization. Families lay the psychological, moral, and spiritual foundations for a child's holistic development. Structurally, marriages and families are either destroyed or together. In this circumstance, a broken marriage is not structurally stable due to divorce or other reasons such as separation, death outside of marriage, or only one parent. The purpose of this study is to examine students' perceptions of the impact of marital failure on their academic performance. This study used a descriptive research design using quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. This approach was chosen because it is applicable across the population, time-saving, and cost-effective. Data collection included primary and secondary sources, with primary data allowing for personal contact and interviews with respondents, while secondary data focused on theoretical insights and literature from other authors. This study was carried out at the Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology in the Northern Region of Sierra Leone. One thousand participants were selected for the study, including students, faculty, staff, and residents of both sexes around the university. Random and purposive sampling methods were used to select the respondents. A sample of 200 participants of both sexes was selected, out of which 100 students, 50 lecturers from the Faculty of Education, and 50 residents of the university area were selected to express their opinions
Keywords: Marriage, Broken-marriage, Perception, Performance, impact, Students.

Introduction

Family is a student's first point of contact with the world [1]. Thus, parents and other influential family members provide early training and socialization to adolescents. Families lay the psychological, moral, and spiritual foundation for the holistic development of children. Structurally, marriages and families are either broken or intact. Broken marriages in this context are those that are structurally not sound due to reasons such as divorce, separation, death outside marriage, single parenting, etc. [2] state that student parenting is the leading cause of psychological distress in marriages, labeling of adoptive parents, family breakdown, divorce, and parental withdrawal. He argues that such abnormalities in the home are likely to affect students' academic performance. Living in a single-parent or broken home can be stressful for children and parents. Such families face the challenge of inadequate economic resources [3] found that adolescents from unstable families seem to have more social, academic, and emotional problems than those from stable families. Adeke et al. believe that [4] the family and its structure play a key role in a student's academic success. Castro et al., state that [5] parents are probably the ones who have the most obvious and obscure interest in their students' academic success. There is some simple evidence that unstable marriages lead to stress, tension, lack of motivation, and frustration. These phenomena have a negative impact

on children's academic achievement. Bastaits et al., argues [6] that students from unmarried parents and separated families are more likely to fail and are more vulnerable emotionally. However, this is not true in all cases of family breakdown. Some students study hard and succeed in life, regardless of their background or family structure. Furthermore, Omoruyi explained that [7] the environment in which a child lives has a significant impact on his or her ability to learn and ultimately, academic achievement. Students' reactions to parental divorce may be influenced by the custodial parent's remarriage. According to Sehlabaka [8], parental remarriage may increase rather than reduce stress for students. Divorce may cause students to feel anxious and uncertain about the future, feel like the future is bleak, or be paralyzed by the fear that something terrible will happen [9]. Some students may do better in college because they try to avoid problems at home [10]. In contrast, other students may intentionally improve their grades to get their parents' attention [11]. Students whose mothers have recently divorced are more likely to arrive late to school and receive less help with their homework. Amato conducted a quantitative meta-analysis [12] to determine the relationship between divorce and academic success. Results regarding educational success showed that divorced students had statistically significant lower academic achievement compared to students whose parents remained married their entire lives [13]. Amato recently updated her meta-analysis to include studies from the past several decades. The results show that students with divorced parents continue to perform significantly worse than students with consistently married parents, both in academic achievement and in behavior, psychological adjustment, and social relationships [14].

Although divorce is a great loss for students, not all students react to their parents' divorce in the same way [15]. Each child's reaction depends on how they perceive the divorce [16] or their personal and family circumstances before and after the divorce [17].

Some young people react with anger, fear, or great sadness, while others feel happy or sad. Some young stars may feel ashamed of their parents' divorce and hide it from their friends or pretend that nothing happened. Other students react and stay calm, especially if violent fights break out at home [18].

Many studies on the subject [19, 20] document the impact of divorce on students. Hussain et al., studies reveal [21] that from The Sun Children raised by divorced parents may feel less psychologically competent than those raised in healthy families.

Studies have also confirmed that students whose parents are divorced may experience emotional problems such as loneliness and depression [22]. Additionally, a study comparing students in single-parent schools to those in two-parent schools found that children raised in single-parent homes were at higher risk for academic underachievement [23]. Family breakdown affects students differently. There are many factors, the most important of which is the reason for the family's breakdown, whether temporary or permanent. Death separates families, children know that their parents will never return, they grieve the loss, and they relocate in anticipation. They want to restore a sense of security and attachment to the parents they left behind. This study shows that the student forgets about other things they should be doing, such as schoolwork. As a science student, you approach your classroom activities and laboratory exercises with determination. But a child struggling with grief and practical problems in a family where both parents have broken up produces a child who feels unwanted.

However, this can lead to resentment, causing serious harm and undermining a child's intellectual abilities, which are necessary for a science student, affecting their academic performance in class and elsewhere. However, Liu et al. [24] found that the early loss of a mother is more damaging to children than the loss of a father.

She explained that mothers have to care for their young children more intensively and leave them in the care of relatives or paid domestic helpers who have different parenting styles than their mothers and rarely provide the attention and affection they formally receive from their children. Thus, science students who grow up in such conditions may suffer from a lack of love and attention from their mothers, which will later affect their lives as science students in classes and internships.

Nevertheless, Schanz-Laursen et al. [25] found that as children grow up, the loss of a father often exceeds the loss of a mother, especially for boys. Mothers have to go to work, and the double burden of housework and part-time work may leave them with less time and energy to provide the care their

children need. When mothers are unable to do this, they feel neglected and are more likely to become angry. When mothers cannot provide their children with the recreational opportunities and status symbols that their colleagues have, their anger is

even greater. In this case, science students may miss more of their father's advice in choosing a science career than students from stable families or whose fathers are still thriving.

For grown-up boys, losing their father means they no longer have a source of identity compared to their peers, and they dislike the petticoat rules, for example, homeschooling. Families where both parents die at the same time and are very devastated by the deaths, the impact can be doubly severe, in addition to the radical changes that come from the living pattern. Children often have to get used to being cared for by others, usually strangers. Students face many challenges related to their academic performance. According to Gager et al., [26] the perception that the family has been destroyed by divorce may be more harmful to students. She gives two explanations:

Students' adjustment period to parental divorce is long and complex. Moreover, the adjustment period before the death of a parent is more sensitive for students.

Rejection of divorce, problems between parents, and instability in the relationship between parents may lead to anxiety and poor academic performance in children.

All these factors must play a major role in assessing students' academic performance who need time to catch up and think logically.

Secondly, family breakdown due to divorce is serious because it usually occurs in terms of peer groups, and children are different. Children may feel embarrassed or ashamed when they ask about the missing parent or wonder why another parent is there to replace the missing parent.

They may also feel guilty if they enjoy spending time with the missing parent or would rather live with that parent than with the parent who is caring for them. However, Rodriguez & Margolin reported [28] that this temporary absence may be more harmful to children. Such temporary interruptions are distressing for children learning science, but they can also lead to a lowering of family relationships for both parents and their children.

Thus, failure of family adjustment may simultaneously affect the academic achievement of students from such families. Otherwise, academic performance in science subjects may be affected, which may indicate that the problem may be due to social or emotional instability. Studies have shown that students differ in several aspects based on variables of their country of origin, such as socio-economic status, parental attitudes towards school, educational practices, etc. These family variable backgrounds are also positively related to the academic performance of children, especially science students, who need care and love. This situation is similar to that of Oginni, O. I. [29] who investigated factors within students' home and family backgrounds that influence their academic performance. Variables such as socio-economic status, family size, birth order, parental attitudes, education, parental presence, etc., are bound to affect students' social life and intellectual learning experiences at school. This is because students are born with psychological, emotional and intellectual needs; the need for love, care and security; the need for new experiences; the need for praise and recognition; and the need for responsibility. Students from broken homes may not have access to many of these needs, which affects their performance.

Aim and Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to examine students' perceptions regarding the impact of marital breakdown on their academic performance.

Materials/Methods

Study Design

A descriptive research design was used in this study using quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. This approach was selected due to its applicability to the entire population, time saving and cost effective. Data collection included both primary and secondary sources, primary data allowed for personal contact and interviews with the respondents while secondary data focused on theoretical insights and literature from other authors.

Study Area

This study was carried out at the Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology in the Northern Region of Sierra Leone. As an institution focused on science and technology, the university

strives to provide students with the skills and knowledge needed to meet the challenges of a rapidly evolving world. Our faculty are renowned experts in their fields and our facilities are state-of-the-art.. We are proud of our diverse community of students, faculty, and staff who come from all works of life and bring unique perspectives and experiences to the University. We believe that this diversity strengthens our institution and prepares our graduates to be global citizens.

Population

A population is a complete group of individuals, cases, or objects with observable characteristics, whereas a target population is a population that is the subject of a study to generalize the results [30]. The subjects of the study were students, lecturers, and residents of both gender around the university. A population of 1000 participants was selected for the study which include 900 students and 50 lecturers form the education department, and 50 community people rising around the university.

Sample and sampling method

Sampling method

Kothari [31] and Fraenkel & Wallen [32] define a sample as a small group of individuals selected from a population from which the researcher needs to obtain information and conclusions. The sampling method refers to collecting a sample of research participants from a population. In this study, random sampling and purposive sampling were used to select the respondents.

Sample Size

According to Omona [33] cited by Kamanda A.M.K. [34], sampling is everything. Research is not just about observing or interviewing people. Sampling can also be about environments, societal processes, and procedures. In a case study, a clear decision must be made, and individual cases must be included in the study. To make the study relevant, a population sample of 200 participants of both gender was selected, out of which 100 students, 50 lecturers from the Faculty of Education, and 50 residents of the area surrounding the university were selected to share their opinions on the phenomenon under study.

Data collection method

This is the method by which data is collected. The data for this study was gotten from two sources: primary and secondary sources.

Primary data source

Primary data was collected using face-to-face questionnaires and interviews. Data was collected from all the participants. During the interviews, the researcher was careful and alert to better analyze the information collected during the interviews and from the questionnaires.

Secondary data sources

Secondary data consists of existing knowledge about the topic being studied. Secondary data provides important material to guide and assist the researcher in determining the research objectives. The secondary data sources for this study were obtained from published and unpublished sources. These include computer-based data, project documents, magazines, newspapers, and textbooks on the research topic.

Data presentation and analysis

Presentation of data

Percentages and tables were used to present the data collected through questionnaires. Results explanations were used for the presentation of the data collected through interviews and observations. The collected data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program (version 25.0).

Data analysis

Data analysis was performed using descriptive qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques. Data was triangulated using tables. Quantitative data collected was coded and categorized according to the elements of the semi-structured questionnaire using frequency distribution tables. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and results were presented in frequency tables and percentages. Data was generated from open-ended questions and analyzed by comparing the responses of respondents. In this study, tables (frequency and percentage) were used to analyze the biological

profile of the respondents. The data obtained through questionnaires and interviews were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program (version 25.0) and presented in tables to explain the results.

Results and analysis

This included providing the demographic characteristics of the people involved in the study. This information was obtained by the researcher to determine the age group of the participants, the education level of the participants, and the gender of the participants.

Age of the Respondents

Table 1 shows the age of the respondents.

Table 1: Age of the Respondent

Age Range (Years)	Frequency (N=200)	Percentage (%)
Less than 20	75	35.5
20 - 30	60	30
31 - 40	45	20.5
41 and above	20	10
Total	200	100

Source: Field survey, 2024

According to the results in Table 1 above, the majority of the respondents i.e. 75(35.5%) are below 20 years of age, followed by 60(30%) below 30 years of age, 45(20.5%) in the age group 31-40 years and remaining 20(10%) are above 41 years of age. This means that the respondents are mature enough to make decisions in all aspects of their lives.

Gender of the Respondents

Table 2 shows the gender of the respondents.

Table 2: Gender of the Respondents

Gender	Frequency (N=200)	Percentage (%)
Male	70	20
Female	130	80
Total	**200**	**100**

Source: Field survey, 2024

According to the results in Table 2, most of the respondents i.e.130 (70%) are female, and the remaining 70 (30%) are male. Gender was considered while selecting the respondents to get consistent information about the marriage failure of both genders.

Educational Level of Respondents

Table 3 shows the educational level of the respondents.

Table 4.3: Educational Level

Age Range (Years)	**Frequency (N=200)**	**Percentage (%)**
University degree	50	25
Advance level	30	15
Diploma	50	25
WASSCE level	70	35
Total	200	100

Source: Field survey, 2024

The results in table 3 showed that almost all the respondents i.e. 70(35%) had secondary education, 50(25%) had university education and 50(25%) had diploma and the remaining 30(15%) had higher secondary education.

Students' perceptions of the impact of marital breakdown on academic performance.

The aim of this study was to find out how students perceived the impact of failed marriage on their academic performance. The researcher wanted to know what they thought happened in their student life after their parents separated. Table 4 below shows the students' reactions to failed marriage and the impact of their status on their academic performance. The researcher distributed the questionnaire to 100 respondents who were students.

Table 4: Students' perceptions of the impact of marital breakdown on academic performance.

	QUESTION	YES	NO	TOTAL
1.	Are you aware of the broken marriages among the parents?	90(90%)	10(10%)	100%
2.	Have you experience psychological impact due to parents' broken marriages?	70(70%)	30(30%)	100%
3.	Does lack of support from parents results in poor academic performance?	80(80%)	20(20%)	100%
4.	Are you shamed for your parents' broken marriage?	50(50%)	50(50%)	100%
5.	Do you feel angry due to your parents' broken marriage?	95(95%)	5(5%)	100%

Source: Field survey, 2024

According to the results in Table 4, 90% of students from broken marriages were aware of the situation. The majority were affected by this. Moreover, almost all students knew that their parents were having marital problems even before they learned about separation or divorce. They became aware of the problems in different ways, for example, arguments between the parents, parents spending less time together, parents coming home late and especially fathers not coming home for days. Moreover, students mentioned violence against parents, children, or both parents before the separation. The majority of students (about 70%) are said to have intellectual disabilities. 80% said that their parents' failed marriage led to a lack of support, which led to poor academic performance at university. 50% of students are ashamed of their current situation. Nearly all students (95%) said they were upset about their situation.

Conclusion

In summary, the results showed that students in broken marriages are aware of the situation. The majority are affected by it. Furthermore, almost all students knew that their parents were having relationship problems even before they learned about the separation or divorce. They became aware of the problems in various ways, such as arguments between their parents, parents spending less time together, parents, especially fathers, coming home late, and sometimes not coming home for days. Furthermore, the majority reported being emotionally affected by the breakdown of their parents' marriage. Additionally, students whose marriages had failed reported lower academic performance. Furthermore, the results showed that students with separated/divorced parents were more likely to shame their classmates who came from cohabiting families. Finally, the students felt emotionally upset about their situation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher would like to provide the following recommendations that may help disseminate the impact of marriage breakdown on students' academic performance: • Understand that you have a duty to care for all students, regardless of their biological relationship.
• Authorities should collaborate with higher education institutions to provide strong guidance and counseling tools to support all students who require special attention.
• Social welfare ministries, interfaith institutions, and universities should introduce training activities on marriage, relationships, and citizenship education to build healthy families, especially for the health of families, communities, and society at large.

Declarations
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