

Assessing the Effect of Parental Divorce on the Academic Performance of Learners: A Study of Selected Primary Schools in Mporokoso District of Northern Province, Zambia

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Abstract: This study assessed the effect of parental divorce on the academic performance of learners in selected primary schools in Mporokoso District of Northern Province, Zambia. The study adopted a descriptive survey design with a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. A total of 120 respondents, including learners from different grade levels, class teachers, head teachers and teachers, participated in the study. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, and interviews. The qualitative data obtained were analysed using study themes generated from the study while quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel. The findings revealed that learners from divorced families frequently exhibited emotional distress, decreased concentration, lack of parental support, and low self-esteem, all of which contributed to poor academic performance. Quantitative analysis indicated a statistically significant difference in grades between learners from intact families and those from divorced families, while qualitative insights highlighted the role of psychosocial challenges and unstable home environments in shaping learners' educational outcomes. The study therefore concluded that parental divorce has a notable negative effect on learners' academic achievement. Recommendations include the implementation of school-based counseling services, enhanced parental engagement programs, community awareness campaigns on the impact of divorce, and policy interventions aimed at providing emotional and academic support for affected learners to improve their educational outcomes.

Keywords: Academic Performance, Educational Outcomes, Emotional Well-being, Parental Divorce and School Performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Parental divorce has become a significant social issue with profound implications for children's development and educational outcomes, particularly in primary education. Family structure plays a central role in shaping a child's emotional, social, and cognitive growth, and disruptions such as divorce often create instability that can hinder learning and personal development (Kasoma, 2000). In Zambia, including districts like Mporokoso in the Northern Province, divorce has been increasingly reported due to factors such as economic hardship, marital conflicts, and changing socio-cultural norms (Chila, 2018). Despite this, there is limited research exploring how parental divorce impacts learners' academic performance within the primary school context (Kasoma, 2000). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for educators, policymakers, and parents to design interventions that provide adequate support to learners affected by family disruptions (Chila, 2018).

Divorce is a common and increasingly accepted reality in modern society, with its effects reverberating far beyond the couple involved. Globally, the divorce rate has been rising, with various studies linking it to significant emotional and psychological impacts on pupils (Amato, 2017; Kelly & Emery, 2019). In Zambia, like many African countries, divorce is still seen as a socially sensitive issue, yet its frequency has been steadily increasing in recent decades. According to the Zambia Statistics Agency (2020), the number of divorces reported in Zambia has grown, especially in urban and peri-urban areas, while rural regions, such as Mporokoso District in Northern Province, have not been thoroughly studied.

Academic performance refers to the measurable outcomes of a learner's education, usually expressed through grades, test scores, exam results, and the successful completion of learning tasks or objectives. It shows how well a student has achieved the goals of education within a given curriculum (Chanda, 2023). Academic performance is closely linked to the stability and support provided within the home environment. Children from divorced families often experience emotional challenges such as anxiety, sadness, and low self-esteem, which affect their concentration, motivation, and engagement in school activities (Siamoonga, 2023). Studies conducted in similar contexts have indicated that learners from divorced families tend to have lower academic achievements, higher absenteeism, and reduced participation in classroom activities compared to their peers from intact families (Omwenga & Anika, 2024). These outcomes suggest that family disruptions have both direct and indirect effects on educational outcomes, influencing not only grades but also behavioral and psychosocial development (Chanda, 2024). By examining learners in selected primary schools in Mporokoso District, this study aims to provide empirical evidence on how parental divorce affects academic performance, highlighting both academic and emotional challenges.

Children from divorced families often face a lack of consistent parental guidance and support, which can hinder their ability to complete assignments, prepare for examinations, and meet school expectations (Omwenga & Anika, 2024). In addition, the breakdown of family communication and routines can exacerbate behavioral challenges, including withdrawal, aggression, and inattentiveness, which further negatively impact learning outcomes (Dreman, 2000). Teachers and school administrators often report difficulties in managing learners who come from unstable home environments, as these learners may require additional attention, counseling, and encouragement to achieve academic success (Chila, 2018). This underscores the importance of understanding the specific needs of learners affected by divorce to develop targeted interventions that support both their academic and emotional well-being (Siamoonga, 2023).

The socio-cultural and economic context of Mporokoso District provides a unique perspective on the challenges faced by children from divorced families. In many communities within the district, access to counseling services and parental education programs is limited, and socio-economic constraints may prevent parents from providing adequate support for their children's education (Mulenga et al., 2023; Kashumba et al., 2025). Moreover, cultural perceptions around divorce can influence community support structures and the level of attention given to learners experiencing family breakdown. These factors highlight the complexity of addressing the academic challenges associated with parental divorce and the need for multi-level interventions that involve schools, families, and communities (UNICEF Zambia, 2018).

This study draws on existing literature emphasizing the interconnection between family structure, emotional well-being, and educational outcomes. Globally, research has consistently shown that children from divorced families are more likely to experience academic difficulties, behavioral problems, and emotional distress (Smith-Greenaway, 2017; Brand, 2019). In African contexts, parental divorce has been linked to delayed educational progress and reduced school performance, which can have long-term effects on social and economic opportunities (Grant et al., 2019; Chanda, 2024b).

Studies in Zambia, particularly in rural and semi-urban districts such as Mporokoso, remain limited. Research indicates that children from broken homes often face emotional and psychological challenges that directly impact their schooling (Kasoma, 2013; Mundende, 2022). By focusing on this specific context, the study sought to fill this knowledge gap, providing insights into how divorce affects learners' schooling and identifying practical strategies to support affected children.

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Zambia, the rising rate of divorce has become a significant social issue with serious implications for children, particularly in rural districts such as Mporokoso in the Northern Province. According to ZSA (2020), over 22,000 divorce cases were recorded in 2018, with Lusaka and Copperbelt provinces reporting the highest incidences, while rural provinces, though

less reported, reflect similar patterns of marital breakdown (ZSA, 2019). Recent data further indicates that about 30% of marriages in Zambia end in divorce within the first ten years, underscoring the growing instability in family structures (Mwansa, 2021). While urban areas report higher incidences of divorce, rural regions remain under-researched, especially in terms of how family breakdown affects pupils' educational outcomes (Chibwe, 2019). Children from divorced families often experience emotional challenges such as sadness, anxiety, and reduced motivation, which can negatively influence their academic performance (Mutinta, 2021), with studies showing that pupils from broken families are 25% more likely to repeat a grade and have 15% lower attendance rates compared to those from intact families (Musonda, 2020). In rural areas like Mporokoso, these effects are compounded by limited access to educational support systems, including counseling services and parental guidance programs, which are crucial for maintaining pupil engagement and performance (Mwale & Banda, 2020). Additionally, socio-cultural perceptions around divorce may lead to stigma or reduced community support, further exacerbating the academic challenges faced by affected learners (Lusaka et al., 2018). Given these dynamics, investigating the specific impact of parental divorce on the academic performance of pupils in Mporokoso District is essential to inform strategies that can mitigate adverse outcomes and promote the well-being of learners (Phiri, 2022).

1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- i. To investigate the emotional and psychological impact of parental divorce on pupils' academic performance in selected primary schools of Mporokoso District.
- ii. To examine and analyze the key factors that contribute to the negative effects of parental divorce on pupils' academic performance in selected primary schools of Mporokoso District.
- iii. To identify and recommend effective school- and community-based strategies for supporting pupils affected by parental divorce in selected primary schools of Mporokoso District.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study on the effect of parental divorce on the academic performance of pupils in Mporokoso District is significant for several reasons. It provides valuable insights into how family disruption affects learners' educational outcomes, particularly in rural settings where limited research exists. The findings may guide policymakers, educators, and community leaders in developing targeted support systems, such as counseling services and parental engagement programs, to help mitigate the negative effects of divorce on pupils. Additionally, the study benefits parents by highlighting the importance of maintaining consistent support and guidance for their children, even after separation, and raises awareness about the socio-cultural and economic factors influencing academic performance. For the wider community, the research emphasizes the need for collective responsibility in supporting children from divorced families, fostering a more resilient and nurturing educational environment. Ultimately, this study contributes to improving learner resilience, enhancing academic outcomes, and promoting holistic well-being for children affected by parental divorce.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Parent-Child Relationship Theory (Hart & Risley, 2016): This theory suggests that the quality of the parent-child relationship was critical for pupil's social, emotional, and cognitive development. This theory was useful for identifying effective strategies for supporting pupils through the divorce process.

Research in Brazil has shown that pupils from divorced families tend to perform poorly in school compared to their peers from intact families (Araujo & Costa, 2015). A study conducted by Oliveira and colleagues (2017) found that pupils from divorced families were more likely to experience emotional and behavioral problems, which in turn affected their academic performance. Divorce, a widespread phenomenon in modern society, has far-reaching consequences for all parties involved, particularly pupils. The impact of divorce on pupils has been a topic of interest for researchers and scholars across various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and education.

Focuses on how pupils can adapt to adversity, such as parental divorce, and continue to function well in various aspects of life, including academically. Werner (2018) emphasizes that while pupils of divorced parents may face emotional distress, many demonstrate resilience due to protective factors like strong social support, positive school environments, and effective coping mechanisms. Resilience theory suggests that while the effects of divorce are significant, some pupils possess the ability to cope and even thrive despite the challenges they face.

Wallerstein & Kelly, psychologists, conducted a study on the effects of divorce on pupil's academic performance.

Lungu & Mumba concluded that while parental divorce often leads to negative academic outcomes for adolescents, supportive relationships and interventions from both parents and schools can significantly mitigate these effects. They recommended that schools in Zambia incorporate support programs specifically for pupils from divorced families to address their unique challenges.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Descriptive research design aimed at accurately and systematically describing a population, situation or phenomenon and can answer what, when, where, when and how questions but of course not the why questions: Kowalczyk (2015) adds that was a study designed to depict the participants in an accurate way. This research design enabled the researcher to collect information from respondents without, having to deal with the whole population.

The target population for this study included pupils who had experienced parental divorce in Mporokoso District. Specifically, the study targeted pupils aged between 10 and 15 years, who are currently enrolled in three selected primary schools within the district. The target population was 1200, with a sample size of 120; 10% of the target population. The sample size was chosen to ensure adequate representation of the population while maintaining practical feasibility for data collection and analysis. Additionally, 3 Head Teachers; 1 from each selected school, 3 Guidance Teachers; 1 from each selected school, 15 class Teachers; 5 from each selected school, 75 learners; 25 from each selected school and 24 parents. Data-collection involved distributing questionnaires to head teachers and teachers as well as conducting individual interviews with learners and parents. The qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analysed using study themes generated from the study while quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel

Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Participants (both pupils and teachers) were informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their right to confidentiality and voluntary participation. Consent was obtained from both the participants and their parents or guardians for minor pupils. All data collected was treated with strict confidentiality.

4. STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

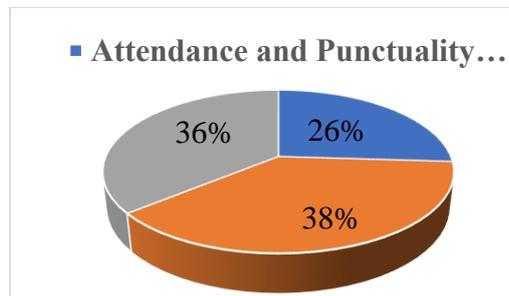
The emotional and psychological impact of divorce on pupils is a multifaceted issue that affects Pupils in various ways, depending on their age, individual personality, and circumstances surrounding the divorce. The emotional and psychological impact of divorce on pupils can significantly affect their performance in schools. Here are some ways in which divorce can influence a pupil's academic performance.

30 (38%), Decreased Academic Performance; Divorce can lead to a decline in academic performance due to Emotional Distress: Pupils may experience emotional turmoil, making it challenging to focus on their studies. The stress and uncertainty surrounding divorce can lead to decreased motivation and interest in academic activities. **Reduced Self-Esteem:** Pupils may struggle with feelings of guilt, shame, or low self-esteem, which can negatively impact their academic confidence and performance.

29 (36%), Behavioural Changes; Divorce can also lead to behavioural changes that affect academic performance, including, **Increased Aggression:** Pupils may exhibit increased aggression or anger issues, leading to disciplinary problems and decreased academic focus. Some pupils may withdraw from social interactions and academic activities, leading to decreased participation and engagement. Pupils may engage in attention-seeking behaviours or act out in class, disrupting the learning environment and impacting their own academic performance.

21 (26%), Attendance and Punctuality Issues; Divorce can also affect a pupil's attendance and punctuality, leading to **Increased Absenteeism,** Pupils may experience increased absenteeism due to emotional distress, family conflicts, or changes in family dynamics. Pupils may struggle with punctuality, leading to missed classes, decreased instructional time, and negative impacts on academic performance.

Figure 4.1 Emotional and psychological impact of divorce on Pupils



Source: Field Work (2025)

Findings by Different Respondents

The emotional and psychological impact of divorce on pupils is a complex issue that affects Pupils in various ways. To gain a deeper understanding of this issue, researchers have collected data from different respondents, including Pupils, parents, teachers, and counsellors.

Pupils Perspectives

According to 39 Pupils who have experienced divorce often Findings revealed that 16 (41%), **feeling sad**, 9 (23%), **angry**, **14 (36%), confused**. They struggled to adjust to changes in their family dynamics and living arrangements. Pupils also experienced intense emotions, including **fear, anxiety, and guilt**. These emotions manifested physically, such as stomach-aches, headaches, and difficulty sleeping.

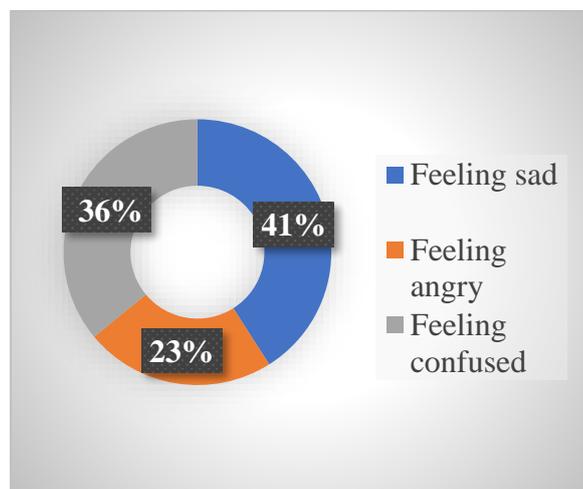


Figure 4.2 Pupils Perspectives

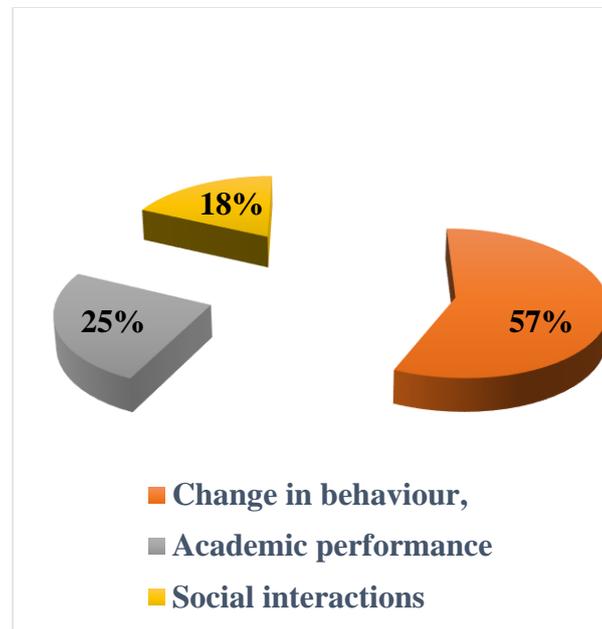
Parents' Perspectives

According to 10 respondents from Parents who have gone through divorce often report 3 (30%), feeling stressed 2 (20%), feeling guilty, 1 (10%), anxious, 4 (40%), **worried about the impact of divorce on their Pupils**. They struggled to balance their own emotional needs with the needs of their Pupils. According to the findings parents experienced depression, anxiety, and stress related to the divorce process. These emotions affected their ability to provide emotional support and stability for their Pupils.

Teachers' Perspectives

Views from Head teachers and class Teachers were combined together, the findings revealed that 16 (57%), change in behaviour, 7 (25%), academic performance, 5 (18%), social interactions. They observed that Pupils from divorced families are more **anxious, withdrawn, or aggressive than their peers**. Teachers felt uncertain or unprepared to support Pupils from divorced families, highlighting the need for professional development and training.

Figure 4.3 Teachers Perspectives



Source: Field Work (2025)

Counsellors' Perspectives

Counsellors who worked with Pupils from divorced families often report that these Pupils benefit from individual and group counselling.

Emotional Impact

Pupils often experience a range of emotions, including 1 (33%), **anger, sadness, guilt, loneliness, sorrow, fear, and rejection**. These feelings manifested physically as stomach aches, breathing issues, chest pain, and headaches. If left unaddressed, some feelings can develop into disorders like oversleeping and overeating, particularly within the first year of divorce.

Psychological Impact

Divorce can also have a profound psychological impact on Pupils, 2 (67%), **affecting self-esteem, emotional stability, and social adjustment**. Pupils struggled to adapt to changes within the family and home environment, continuous separation, and possible increased conflict between parents. This can lead to emotional, mental, and behavioural problems, which may persist into adulthood.

Factors that contribute to the negative effects of divorce on pupils academic performance

Divorce can have a profound impact on pupils' academic performance, leading to decreased motivation, reduced self-esteem, and poor academic outcomes. Research has identified several factors that contribute to the negative effects of divorce on pupils' academic performance.

15 (19%), Parental Conflict; Parental conflict is a significant factor that contributes to the negative effects of divorce on pupils' academic performance. Pupils who experience high levels of parental conflict tend to perform poorly academically, exhibit behavioural problems, and experience emotional distress. **17 (21%), Changes in Family Dynamics;** Changes in family dynamics, such as changes in parental roles, responsibilities, and relationships, can also contribute to the negative effects of divorce on pupils' academic performance. **19 (24%), Economic Instability;** Economic instability is another factor that contributes to the negative effects of divorce on pupils' academic performance. **20 (25%), Lack of Parental Support;** A lack of parental support is also a significant factor that contributes to the negative effect of divorce on pupils' academic performance. **9 (11%), School-Related Factors;** School-related factors, such as teacher support, school climate, and academic expectations, also contributed to the negative effects of divorce on pupils' academic performance.

Effective strategies for supporting pupils through the divorce process

Divorce can be a challenging and emotional experience for pupils, affecting their academic performance, emotional well-being, and social relationships. To mitigate the negative impacts of divorce, it is essential to identify effective strategies for supporting pupils through this process.

9 (11%), Open Communication and Emotional Support; Open communication and emotional support from teachers, parents, and school counsellors are crucial in helping pupils cope with the emotional challenges of divorce. **16 (20%), Collaborative Co-Parenting;** Collaborative co-parenting is another effective strategy for supporting pupils through the divorce process. **20 (25%), Academic Support and Accommodations;** Academic support and accommodations are essential in helping pupils cope with the academic challenges of divorce.

17 (21%), School-Wide Initiatives and Policies; School-wide initiatives and policies can also play a critical role in supporting pupils through the divorce process. Research had shown that schools that implement school-wide initiatives and policies to support pupils from divorced families tend to exhibit better academic performance, emotional well-being, and social relationships. **18 (23%), Community-Based Initiatives and Partnerships;** Community-based initiatives and partnerships can also provide critical support for pupils through the divorce process.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 CONCLUSION

The study revealed that parental divorce has far-reaching implications on children's educational outcomes. The findings indicate that learners from divorced families often struggle with emotional instability, reduced concentration, and low self-esteem, which directly hinder their academic engagement and performance. Furthermore, socio-economic challenges resulting from single-parent households, such as limited financial support and inadequate learning resources, exacerbate the difficulties faced by these pupils. The study underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions, such as counseling services, community sensitization, and school-based support systems, to mitigate the negative effects of divorce on learners. Ultimately, addressing the academic and emotional needs of children affected by divorce is essential for promoting equitable educational opportunities and improving overall learning outcomes in the district.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Schools should provide pupils from divorced families with access to emotional support and counselling services within the schools.
2. Schools should foster a positive school culture that promotes social inclusion, empathy, and understanding.
3. The Ministry of Education should create a policy for children from broken homes to ensure that they are well catered for.
4. Communities through local leaders should promote collaboration and partnerships between schools and community organizations to provide a comprehensive support system for pupils from divorced families

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