

Impact of Single Parenting Challenges to their Children's Learning and Development

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Abstract: *Children are supposed to grow in a family setting where both mother and father take their respective roles in the upbringing of the child. In recent years there has been a sudden rise in the phenomenon of single parent families. Single parent families face challenges in properly raising their children. This research sought to find out the impact of single parenting challenges to their infant children's learning and development. The research employed mixed methodologies. It used questionnaires, observation checklist and document analysis as research instruments. The sample of research participants consisted of 30 school teachers, 18 school heads and 20 parents and 20 children in grade 1 and 2. The data is presented in the form of tables and excerpts. The study found out that problems faced by single parents impacted negatively to their children's education and development. There was lack of strong parental support from single parents. Single parents failed to adequately monitor school attendance, home work, dressing and general welfare of their infant children. The academic performance of infant children from single parents was generally lower than those from intact families. The research also found that single families occupied lower strata of society. The study recommends that the schools organise support groups for single parents. The study also recommends that the government legislation and policies should assist low income single parents in their parenting problems. There is need for schools to set up guidance and counselling programmes to assist children from single families so that they are able to cope with challenges they face and are able to compete with children from intact families.*

Keywords: Single parent family, ECD children, Ecological Systems Theory, Children's right and Education

1. Introduction

Children who do not get adequate parental guidance, supervision and care during their early years of development are most likely to perform poorly at school and in interpersonal interactions. Most children from single parent families are likely to be at risk of failing to get adequate educational provision and care from their parents as their single parents may not be in a position to provide the double parental role of being a father and mother alone. Single parents endure numerous social, psychological and economic challenges which make it very hard for them to perform adequately their parenting roles. This eventually affects the learning and overall development of their children. It is the intention of this study to find out the impact of single parenting challenges on the learning and development of their infant children.

2. Research Question

What is the impact of single parenting challenges on the learning and development of infant children?

3. Literature Review

It is when the family bond between parents is broken that a family becomes a single parent family. Sibanda, Chingove and Munyati (2012) describe a single family style as a family with either father or mother living with their children from their previous marriage. Tassoni (2002) in his findings on causes of single parent families in the US sites divorce and death as some of major causes of single parent families. New York Times (2004) made studies in the southern part of Africa and found out that poverty and teenage pregnancies led to a rise in single parent families. Single parenting family system can be as a result of a death, divorce or having children out of wedlock.

The studies done by Rani (2006) indicate that children from single parents who experience economic hardships are not often exposed to home based education which enhances their achievement at school. Rani (2006) supported by Kail (2002) reveal that children whose parents do not expose them to reading stories at home, having music and art lessons at home or other learning activities do not easily understand concepts taught at school. Rani (2006) further points out that children who do not quickly understand concepts may achieve lowly at school or often absent themselves from school due to inadequate provision of learning resources at home. Rani (2006) found out that children who often absent themselves from school are likely to drop out of school in later life. The current study sought to find out the extent to which the targeted children from the single parent family type experience absenteeism and failure.

Case (2009) points out from her findings that children from single families with many children tend to struggle for learning and development material resources both at home and school. Case (2009) goes on to reveal that most children from big family sizes with single parents tend to exhibit negative emotional feelings such as withdrawal, loneliness, distress and fear. Due to the big family size children often struggle for the little resources at their disposal. The New York Times (2004) in their research findings state that most children from developing countries of Southern Africa who live in large poverty stricken single families tend to experience negative feelings such as insecurity and fear due to struggle for the little resources available at home. These negative feelings are likely to affect most children's school achievements in activities such as games, group project and other learning and development activities. Kail (2002) explains that the absence of one parent results in the loss of role model of the absent parent. One parent cannot take the role of being both father and mother thus single parental emotional role model is not available to model the child's

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emotional self conduct. In the case where the father is absent, the mother cannot provide fatherly love and guidance to the children and vice versa. Case (2009) points out that the children from single parent homes tend to develop low self esteem and thus they are most unlikely to achieve success in school. The current study intended to reveal whether the emotional aspect of most children from single parent families in the targeted area are affected by lack of adequate care and support needed for their holistic development.

Rani (2006) in his findings state that due to inadequate provision of basic needs such as health facilities and good nutrition by some single parents, some children from such families tend to exhibit physical and cognitive challenges during their early childhood learning and development. The findings indicate that children who get poor nutrition diets tend to suffer from food deficiency diseases like kwashiorkor and others that can affect both cognitive and physical aspects of the children. Daly (2004) asserts that the period of zero to eight years is a period of rapid brain and physical development such that good nutrition is very important to young children for brain formation and strong muscle development. Rani (2006) explains that children who do not eat balanced diets can have problem such as loss of concentration, short memory span and inactive participation in various activities. It then follows from Rani's studies that children who do not get good nutrition face some cognitive and physical learning and development challenges. Hence the current study sought to investigate whether the children in the targeted group and area face any cognitive and physical challenges.

Most children from socially unstable single parent homes are most likely to experience social problems that can result in negative behaviour such as aggression, bullying, truancy or other anti social misbehaviour. Anthony et al (2005) state in their research findings that, in single parent families' children who do not get supervision and guidance from their parents tend to exhibit negative social behaviour. This supervision is particularly important when the children are still young and need guidance and modelling in appropriate behaviour. They need assistance in choice of good friends and monitoring of play activities they are engaged in after school. This is especially important at the present age where the internet is awash with some programmes that can influence badly to children. Kail (2002) agrees with Antony et al (2005) that children who loaf around after school without parental supervision and control tend to become very aggressive and bully to their peers. In his research findings Kail (2002) came out with statistics on the risk factors and extent to which they accumulate on children's behaviour in the US. The studies above showed that 5% of children exposed to unsafe neighbourhood and negative peer interaction exhibit negative antisocial behaviour such as aggression, and 20% of the children exposed to unsafe neighbourhood, low parental monitoring and much peer activity exhibit antisocial behaviour such as aggression. In his findings Kail (2002) shows that out of the children exposed to safe environment and positive peer interaction only a few tend to behave negatively. Out of the children exposed to unsafe environment and unmonitored peer interaction a substantial number exhibit negative social

behaviour such as aggression. Kail's findings show that as risk factors accumulate, children show more aggressive anti social behaviour. It then implies that children need to be exposed to safe home environment and need to have positive parental social control, guidance and nurturing. It was the purpose of this current study to investigate the impact of single parent challenges on the learning and development of their infant children. It also looked at the effects of parental neglect on social, cognitive, emotional and physical aspects of ECD children in Harare schools.

4. Methodology

The research adopted a descriptive survey research design. According to Belensky (2010) a descriptive research design obtains information concerning the current status of the phenomena and to design what exists in respect to variables or conditions in a situation. Sage (2010) views that descriptive research designs help provide answers to questions who, what, when, where and how of a particular research problem. In the current study the descriptive research design was suitable since it sought to establish the teachers' views and perceptions towards the impact of single parenting challenges towards the learning and development of their infant children. It focused on problems likely to be faced by children from single parent families and the impact of the problems in the children's class performance and attendance during the early childhood stage of grade 1 and 2.

In the study of human relationships such as parenting techniques or family issues the experimental designs are less suitable as they require strict control which is only suitable in natural sciences thus the descriptive survey is the most suitable in the current study. It was the researcher's intention to probe into how challenges faced by single parents affect their children's education and how the children can be helped to attain high education achievement despite coming from single parenting families.

Ideally the research strove to investigate the problems faced by children from single parent families during the early childhood education which is the foundation for their future learning. One advantage of this design is that the respondents are the people who are directly in contact with the particular children from single parent homes. They witness the problems faced by the children in the real classroom environment thus making the collected information valid. Sage (2003) noted that descriptive studies can yield rich data that leads to important recommendations. This research design becomes suitable since findings can be generalised to the whole population.

The researcher conducted a random sampling procedure to pick six schools from the many schools in Glenview/Mufakose District of Harare. Fordon (2001) states that random sampling involves the selecting of a sample on which each element of the population has an equal chance of being selected. The research participants comprised of teachers, deputy heads, heads, teachers in charge, infant teachers and parents so a stratified sample was made. A stratified sample is a probability sampling technique in which the researcher divides the entire population into different subgroups or strata and then randomly selects the

final subjects (Farlon, 2003). This type of sampling was used because the researcher wanted to highlight subgroups within the population. The researcher adopted this procedure for the purpose of obtaining the possible richest information required to answer the research question.

The instruments used in the research were questionnaires, interviews, observation checklist and document analysis. It was important to use the instruments for purposes of triangulation. The information got from questionnaires needed to be verified using observation checklist and document analysis. Interviews gave the researcher opportunity further probe information that was not quite clear.

5. Results

Table 1: Demographic Data for all Participants. (N=68)

Variable	Descriptor	Frequency	Percentage
Teachers	Age range	21-30 years	2 7%
		31-40 years	9 30%
		41-50 years	12 40%
		Over 50 years	7 23%
		Total	30 100%
	Gender	Female	28 98%
		Male	2 7%
		Total	30 100%
	Professional Qualification	Certificate in Education	5 17%
		Diploma in Education	16 53%
		Degree	9 30%
		Total	30 100%
	Teaching Experience	0-10 years	9 30%
		11-20 years	15 50%
		Over 20 years	6 6%
Total		30 100%	
Variable	Descriptor	Frequency	Percentage
Heads Deputy Heads Teachers In Charge	Professional Qualifications	Diploma in Education	2 11%
		Degree	16 89%
		Total	18 100%
Parents	Age Range	21-30	12 60%
		31-40	5 25%
		Over 40	3 15%
		Total	20 100%
	Gender	Female	16 80%
		Male	4 20%
		Total	20 100%
	Professional Qualifications	No Qualification	14 70%
		Certificated	4 20%
		Degree	2 10%

There were more female teacher respondents than male teacher respondents. There were more teachers who had diploma in education than other professional qualifications. The table also reveals that a high number of teachers had above 11 to 20 years teaching experience.

Most school authority office bearers who responded in the research study were well educated mature professional with a lot of teaching experience as indicated by the data provided. Most of the school authorities had an age range of

over 50 years comprising 89% of the respondents. Most of the school authority office bearers who responded were degree holding females whose teaching experience was above 20 years. The gender percentage of females who responded is 78% and those with degree professional qualification comprised of 89% of the respondents.

Of the single parents interviewed, 60% of them were in the range of 21-30yrs being the majority of the respondents. The single mothers comprised of 80% of the gender of single parents. 70% of the respondents had education qualification of below 3 O' Level passes. Most of the single parents who participated in the research study were unemployed.

Table 2: Questionnaire responses on the impact of single parent challenges on their children's learning and development

Narration	Instrument			
	Positive		Negative	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Pupils' cognitive aspect is affected	22	73%	8	27%
Pupils are affected emotionally	27	90%	3	10%
Pupils are affected socially	25	83%	5	17%
Pupils' physical aspect is affected	19	63%	11	37%
School attendance not regular	17	57%	13	43%
Inadequate school and sports attire	18	60%	12	40%
Homework not supervised.	20	66%	10	34%
No home based education	20	66%	10	34%
Lack of parental role model	24	80%	6	20%
Poor children's health	16	53%	14	47%
Fees not fully paid each term	25	83%	5	17%
Class performance is good	12	40%	18	60%

The questionnaire responses indicate that the problems of education provision, care and support of most single parents in the target group impact negatively on their children's cognitive, emotional, social and physical aspects of learning and development. From the questionnaire respondents 73% of them point out that most target children are affected cognitively and 90% of the children exhibit emotional problems. 83% noted that the children are affected socially and 63% revealed that the children are affected physically.

Inadequate fees, school clothing, poor health and irregular school attendance were some of the impacts of some single parental challenges noted on their children's learning and development in the current research study. From the questionnaire responses, 83% of the respondents noted inadequate fees payment, while 50% to 60% spelt out poor health, inadequate school clothing and irregular school attendance as other effects of single parenting problems. Lack of home based education and supervision of children's homework was noted by 66% of the respondents and 80% also stated that the absence of the other parental role model can contributed to the lack of positive behaviour.

Table 3: Observation checklist results on impact of single parenting problems on their children’s learning and development

Narration	Frequency				
	+	%	-	%	Total %
Pupils’ cognitive aspect is affected	-	-	-	-	-
Pupils are affected emotionally	26	87%	4	13%	100%
Pupils are affected socially	24	80%	6	20%	100%
Pupils’ physical aspect is affected	15	50%	15	50%	100%
Inadequate school and sports attire	17	57%	13	43%	100%
Poor children’s health	15	50%	15	50%	100%

The observations made agreed with the questionnaire respondents that most of the children in the target groups have cognitive physical socio-emotional problems as well as problems in provision of educational material resources, care and psychological support. 87% and 83% of the observations pointed out that some of the children had emotional and social problems respectively. 50 % of the observations revealed that the physical aspect of most children is affected. Half of the observations revealed that some children had poor health.

Table 4: Documents analysis on impact of single parenting problems on their children’s learning and development

Narration	Documents(register, progress and social record and exercise books)				
	Positive	%	Negative	%	Total %
Pupils’ cognitive aspect is affected	23	77%	7	23%	100%
Pupils are affected emotionally	26	87%	4	13%	100%
Pupils are affected socially	25	83%	5	17%	100%
Pupils’ physical aspect is affected	20	66%	10	34%	100%
School attendance not regular	18	60%	12	40%	100%
Homework not supervised.	18	60%	12	40%	100%
No home based education	18	60%	12	40%	100%
Poor children’s health	15	50%	15	50%	100%
Fees not fully paid each term	19	63%	11	37%	100%
Class performance is good	19	63%	11	37%	100%

From the observed documents it can be revealed that problems of most single parents impact negatively on their children’s learning and development. Most documents revealed that children are affected cognitively, emotionally and physically. Most records indicated irregular school attendance by children in the target area. The observed documents indicated there was little evidence of home based education and supervision of children’s homework by most single parents. Other documents revealed inadequate termly fees payment and low class performance by most children from low income single families.

6. Interview Responses on the Impact of Challenges on Single Parenting on their Children’s Learning and Development

The interviewed single parents affirmed the questionnaire and documents analysis revelation that most children from single parent homes impacted negatively in their cognitive, social, emotional and physical aspects due to lack of parental educational provision, care and support. The excerpts below illustrate these views:

Excerpt 1

‘My child is backward in Maths but I do not have enough time to supervise my child’s home work due to a busy day’s schedule.’ (Parent 2)

Excerpt 2

‘My child cannot read properly but I have little knowledge on how to teach him reading skills’ (Parent 4)

Excerpt 3

‘My child is spoiled; she is not attentive in class.’ (Parent 6)

Excerpt 4

My child is bully but I cannot control his behaviour alone without the father figure’ (Parent 3)

Excerpt 5

‘I earn little money such that I cannot afford to provide for children’s school needs’ (Parent 1)

Excerpt 6

‘My child steals other children’s food at school maybe it’s because they do not get enough food at home as I am unemployed.’ (Parent 5)

The single parents were quite concerned about their failure to fulfil the parental responsibility of the missing parental figure. This led to them failing to properly take care of their children by assisting them educationally, financially and materially. They failed to provide for their children which caused them to steal and perform various misbehaviours. The parents did not have time to help their children with home work or read to them. This impacted negatively on their children’s learning and overall development.

7. Discussion

The current study findings revealed that due to parental stress, little education and poverty and busy daily schedules most single parental challenges impact negatively on their children. Apart from lack of educational material resources, most children from single parent homes had other learning and development problems such as socio-emotional, cognitive and physical development challenges. Most of the single parents were said to be busy earning money for provision of their children’s needs such that they had little time to monitor their children’s socio-emotional needs such as behaviour, emotional control, guidance and counselling resulting in negative behaviour formation by most children from single parent homes. The respondents in the current research study attributed lack of parental role model by the

absent parent to model positive socio-emotional attributes such as anger control, cooperation and other self discipline aspects. From the current findings, the fact that most single parents had little education, it made it difficult for the parents to provide home based education for their children such as story reading, solving Mathematical problems or more, so identifying and nurturing their children's inborn educational talent.

The current research findings also cited lack of parental teaching at home, as one of the causes of most children's low class performance and irregular school attendance. The single parents found it hard to monitor their children's education partly due to their busy schedule as they will be fending for the family needs and also due to their limited educational background. The current study is supported by previous research findings of Rani (2006) who pointed out that children who are not exposed to learning and development activities at home may fail to understand concepts at school resulting in the children disliking school and often absenting themselves from school for trivial reasons. Most of all, the children were likely to perform lowly at school.

The research findings show that children from single parents were most likely to misbehave in class thereby negatively impacting on their academic performance. The misbehaviour could be due lack of supervision, lack of correct modelling from the absent parent or influence of bad peers. Anthony et al (2005) state in their research findings that, in single parent families' children who do not get supervision and guidance from their parents tend to exhibit negative social behaviour. During their formative years children need close guidance from their parents so that they are in a position to adopt from them socially acceptable behaviours. They need adult figures who provide answers to their numerous questions. If the parents are absent busy trying to fend for the family they predispose their children to bad influence from their peers. The research findings showed that most children from single had challenges in the payment of school fees, provision of adequate learning material, provision of school attire and sporting attire. When a child faces those challenges they are likely to affect the child emotionally, psychologically, socially and physically. Rani (2006) in his findings state that due to inadequate provision of basic needs such as health facilities and good nutrition by some single parents, some children from such families tend to exhibit physical and cognitive challenges during their early childhood learning and development. These inadequacies negatively impact on the learning and overall development of the child.

The physical effect on target children from single parent homes was most likely due to lack of adequate nutritious food as evidenced by lack of morning snack by most children. Though most of the findings revealed that 50% of the target children had good physical outlook, it is noticed that half the children had poor health and physical outlook. It is most likely that because most parents in the target group were from low income families, the provision of good diets and medical needs could not be afforded by many single parents. It was exposed by the research findings in the current study that parenting challenges of most single parents impacted negatively on their children's socio-

emotional, cognitive and physical domains thus affecting positive learning and development of most children in the target group.

8. Conclusion

The study made the following conclusions:

- Most single parents failed to adequately provide materially for their infant children.
- In most cases single parents occupied the lower strata of society thereby placing them at economically disadvantaged positions.
- Children from single parents in general lacked nutritious food and lacked behind in terms of their health status.
- Children from single parent families did perform academically well as they lacked parental support that is conducive to learning.
- Single parent had problems in getting time to properly supervise their children's home work resulting in it being poorly done.
- Single parent had problems in instilling discipline in their children. This was particularly so when it was a mother and a male child.

9. Recommendations

The research after considering the findings makes the following recommendations:

- There is need for schools to organise support for single parents.
- There is need for the government to establish social support for single parents.
- There is need for schools to set up guidance and counselling programmes to assist children from single families so that they are able to cope with the challenges.
- Children from single parent families should be given many problem solving tasks and individualized learning activities to their cognitive development.
- There is need for single parents to be given nutrition lessons so as to benefit the children from single parent families.
- Schools should establish adult education classes to benefit single parents so that they in turn will be able to supervise the learning of their children.

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