Unseen Struggles: Perspectives on Secondary Students from Broken Homes

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ABSTRACT

The increasing prevalence of broken families poses significant challenges for children, particularly in the context of education. This study focuses on the experiences of secondary students, who come from incomplete family structures. Despite extensive research on the emotional impacts of parental separation, there remains a gap in understanding how these experiences uniquely affect academic performance and social interactions among adolescents in this cultural context.

This research aims to explore the reasons for family breakdowns, the specific challenges faced by these students, their coping mechanisms, and the advice they offer to peers in similar situations. Utilizing a descriptive-narrative and phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants to capture their lived experiences.

Findings reveal that emotional distress, feelings of loss, and a lack of parental support are prevalent among respondents. However, many students demonstrate resilience through adaptive coping strategies, emphasizing the importance of social support and self-empowerment. This study highlights the critical need for targeted interventions that address the unique challenges faced by students from broken homes.

The insights gained from this research can inform educators and policymakers in developing support systems tailored to the needs of these students, ultimately fostering better academic and emotional outcomes. Future directions include further exploration of the long-term effects of parental separation on students' life trajectories and the role of community resources in promoting resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Conflicts are a natural and unavoidable part of family life, and as families navigate their relationships, disagreements are bound to arise. However, when these conflicts intensify and become more frequent or unresolved, they can put significant strain on the relationship between partners. Over time, this tension can escalate to the point where it becomes difficult for the couple to maintain their connection, often resulting in the decision to separate or part ways. The ongoing conflict, if not addressed, can undermine the foundation of the relationship and lead to a breakdown in communication and trust, ultimately contributing to the end of the partnership. Separation can be an incredibly challenging and emotional time for a family, as it brings about significant changes for everyone involved. Parents must navigate the complexities of adjusting to new ways of interacting with each other, while also learning how to adapt their parenting styles to suit the evolving family structure. The impact of divorce on children can vary greatly from one child to another. Some children may naturally adjust to the situation, showing an understanding of the changes and handling the transition with resilience. However, for other children, the process of adapting to their parents' separation

may be much more difficult, leading to emotional struggles as they try to come to terms with the new family dynamics.

According to data from the Philippine Statistics Authority, a significant portion of married couples in the Philippines—approximately one in every five—find themselves facing the prospect of separation or divorce. In fact, in just the year 2012 alone, there were a total of 10,528 cases of marriage nullity and annulment filed, which averages out to 28 cases being filed every single day. These concerning statistics highlight the serious scope of the issue, with a variety of factors contributing to the breakdown of relationships, such as incompatibility, communication issues, financial struggles, a lack of commitment, substance abuse, and mental health challenges. While separation has been a part of social reality for many years, its effects on family dynamics—especially on children—remain deeply significant. Looking back to the 1960s, for example, there were 28,988 men and 52,187 women recorded as separated. Research from that time also pointed out that children growing up in low-income communities, as well as those influenced by cultural factors such as religion and ethnicity, were particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of parental separation. These findings underscore the complex nature of the issue and the lasting impact it continues to have on families, particularly the younger generation. Researchers agree that this period produces acute emotional and psychological disturbance for most parents and children (Lamb et al. 1997). Most children are acutely distressed during the first year or so after separation (Lamb et al. 1997). Some researchers have found acute symptoms and stress among children still at peak levels two years after their parents' separation (citations in Lamb et al. 1997), and one study found children and parents less distressed two months after separation than they were a year later (Hetherington et al. 1992, cited in Grych and Fincham 1992).

Separation and divorce are stressful events which bring significant disruptions into children's educational paths, especially if accompanied by sustained parental conflict at home or more neglectful parenting quality (Amato, 2000, 2010). Separation and divorce may also cause a reduction of parental control and supervision (Amato, 2001), with younger children usually more affected by reduced parental involvement (Demo & Acock, 1996). Similarly, parental separation may be surrounded by social stigma, which in turn affects children's feelings and perceptions (Albertini & Dronkers, 2009; Schröder, 2008). Lastly, in some contexts the father—most often the non-custodial parent—still serves as an important figure of authority, setting childrearing norms and ensuring compliance with them. After separation or divorce, children typically live without their biological father and, thus, are likely to experience reduced parental control and supervision (Booth & Amato, 1994), especially if the father enters another partnership upon breakup (Meggiolaro & Ongaro, 2015).

Education is undeniably one of the most important factors in shaping the future of students, as it serves as a critical foundation for achieving both personal aspirations and professional goals. Strong academic performance is often viewed as the key to opening doors to opportunities, and for many students, it is the pathway to success in life. However, when parental conflict or separation disrupts the relationship between parents and their children, it can have a profound and detrimental effect on a student's ability to focus, stay motivated, and perform well academically. The emotional strain and instability caused by such family issues can make it difficult for students to concentrate on their studies or find the drive to excel, ultimately impacting their academic outcomes. Although divorce and separation have become increasingly common, their emotional impact on all members of the family remains significant, leaving long-lasting consequences not only for the mental health of the children but also for the physical health and overall well-being of every family member involved. This disruption can create a cycle of stress, confusion, and emotional turmoil, which can affect various aspects of their lives for years to come. Xerxa et.al, 2019)

Early studies showed that children of divorce were more likely to exhibit aggressive, impulsive and anti-social behavior, to have more social difficulties, to be less compliant to authority, and to show more problem behaviors at school (e.g. Camera and Resnick 1988; Emery 1988; Hetherington et al. 1982; Kurdek and Berg 1983; Warshak and Santrock 1983; Zill 1983; cited in Kelly 1993). They have also been shown to have lower academic achievement, more negative self-concepts and more problematic relationships with both

mothers and fathers (Amato and Keith 1991, cited in Amato 1994). As adults, they have been shown to have lower psychological well-being, less education, less marital satisfaction, more behavioral problems, more risk of divorce and poorer physical health (Amato 1994). One recent longitudinal British study found the odds ratio for being above the clinical level on mental health problems was 1.70 at age 23 and 1.85 at age 33 (Rodgers et al. 1997, cited in Wolchik et al. 2000).

Although there is a substantial and growing body of research dedicated to exploring the impact of parental separation on children, particularly regarding its emotional consequences and its broader implications for family dynamics, there is still a noticeable and significant gap in the existing literature. This gap pertains to the lack of detailed studies and understanding on how exactly this issue affects certain aspects or specific groups within the population. Despite the wealth of research on general trends and outcomes, there is a clear need for more focused investigation into how parental separation uniquely influences different age groups, cultural backgrounds, or other demographic variables. Additionally, further research is required to explore the long-term effects of parental separation and the various ways it might shape not only emotional well-being but also behavioral, academic, and social outcomes for children in diverse family situation specifically affects secondary students. While studies have explored the reasons, challenges, coping mechanisms and pieces of advice, none have delved into the grades affected, behavior, financial stability and where they are currently residing of this demographic. This gap highlights the need for a focused investigation to understand better how parental separation influences secondary students' experiences and resilience in the context of the Philippine cultural and educational landscape. By addressing this unexplored area, the study aims to provide insights that can inform targeted interventions and support systems for students grappling with this challenge.

This research holds significant importance as it delves into a crucial yet often overlooked issue: the impact of parental separation on the experiences and well-being of secondary students. As these students navigate the complex and demanding landscape of higher education, the emotional and financial stress resulting from parental separation can profoundly influence their ability to perform academically and manage the various pressures they face. The emotional turmoil that often accompanies such separation can hinder their concentration, motivation, and overall mental health, which, in turn, affects their academic success. This study seeks to understand in greater depth how parental separation shapes the way secondary students handle the challenges in their lives, both in and outside of school. It will explore the coping strategies and mechanisms that students rely on to cope with these difficulties. By shedding light on these aspects, this research aims to address the gap between the unique needs of these students and the support systems that are currently available to them. The findings from this study will be invaluable in guiding educators, school administrators, and policymakers to develop more effective and targeted intervention plans. These plans can offer tailored support to students who are grappling with the emotional and practical challenges stemming from parental separation, ultimately helping them to succeed academically and thrive in their personal lives.

The uniqueness and significance of this research stem from its focused investigation into the specific experiences of secondary students within the distinct cultural and educational context of the Philippines. In a society where the dissolution of marriage has long been stigmatized, yet is becoming increasingly common, this study stands apart by addressing a critical gap in the literature. While many prior studies tend to generalize the effects of parental separation on children or young adults in broad terms, this research takes a more nuanced approach by zeroing in on a specific and often underexplored demographic: secondary school students. By narrowing its focus to this group, the study seeks to provide a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the unique struggles that these students face in the wake of parental separation. In doing so, it aims to explore how the emotional, social, and academic challenges they encounter are influenced by both their age and the cultural context in which they live. Furthermore, this research examines the coping mechanisms that these students employ as they navigate the complexities of their lives, shedding light on how they manage the pressures associated with familial disruption. By offering this focused insight, the study contributes valuable knowledge to the broader discourse on parental separation, particularly in the context of a society where divorce or separation is often viewed with cultural sensitivity and stigma.

By offering culturally relevant insights into the experiences of secondary students, this study brings a fresh perspective to the ongoing discussion surrounding family dynamics and academic performance. It highlights the often-overlooked role of physical activity as an effective coping mechanism for students dealing with the emotional challenges of parental separation. By emphasizing how engaging in physical activity can serve as a valuable tool for managing stress, maintaining emotional balance, and improving mental health, the research contributes new and important knowledge to the field. This exploration not only enhances our understanding of how students respond to personal difficulties but also offers practical applications that can be utilized to improve educational outcomes. The findings provide actionable recommendations that can be used by educators, administrators, and policymakers to develop strategies and interventions aimed at supporting students' well-being. By integrating physical activity into the broader framework of student support, the study proposes tangible solutions to help students thrive both academically and emotionally, thereby fostering a healthier and more productive educational environment.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study seeks to document the experiences and coping mechanisms of the secondary learners who are dealing with the product of broken homes. The objectives guiding this research are as follows:

1. What is/are the reasons or circumstances that made you belong to the broken homes?
2. What specific challenges have you encountered because of being raised in a non-traditional or incomplete family structure?
3. How have you come to understand the challenges you face growing up in a broken family?
4. What advice would you offer to teenagers or students who are currently facing challenges due to an incomplete family?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-narrative approach to document and analyze the diverse experiences of secondary learners who are from broken family or from parents' separation. According to Ruthellen (2025), Narrative research aims to explore and conceptualize human experience as it is represented in textual form. Aiming for an in-depth exploration of the meanings people assign to their experiences, narrative researchers work with small samples of participants to obtain rich and free-ranging discourse. The emphasis is on storied experience. Generally, this takes the form of interviewing people around the topic of interest, but it might also involve the analysis of written documents.

This research also utilizes a phenomenological design to explore the impact of parental separation on the learning experiences of secondary students. The phenomenology approach is the most suitable for this study because it seeks to understand the lived experiences and personal perspectives of individuals who have encountered a specific phenomenon—in this case, parental separation. By focusing on how students perceive and make sense of their experiences, phenomenology allows the researcher to capture the more profound, subjective dimensions of how parental separation influences their emotional well-being, and coping mechanisms.

The design is ideal for this study as it allows for exploring the phenomenon from the participants' viewpoints, recognizing that everyone's response to parental separation is unique. The participants' feelings, insights, and narratives provide fresh, nuanced understandings that might not be fully captured through other research designs. Examining the phenomenon experienced by the students themselves ensures that the research findings reflect those directly affected' authentic, lived experiences, making the results more meaningful and grounded in real-world contexts (Redulfin, et. Al, 2025).

By incorporating multiple qualitative research methods, the study sought to illustrate the challenges, coping mechanisms, and pieces of advice from the learners.

Research Participants

Respondents were selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals who self-identify as Junior High School students having no complete family. This strategy ensured that the sample included a diverse range of voices and experiences, providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and triumphs faced by the learners in dealing with the separation or brokenness from the family.

Ethical Considerations

Interviews were conducted at times convenient to the respondents, ensuring their comfort and willingness to participate. A google sheets and field notes were used to document the interviews. All information gathered was treated with the utmost objectivity and confidentiality, ensuring the privacy and rights of the respondents.
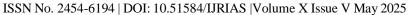
Research Instruments and Data Collection

The research employed a carefully crafted set of open-ended guide questions as its primary data collection tool, specifically designed to investigate the effects of parental separation on the experiences and coping mechanisms of secondary students. These guide questions were meticulously developed to capture a wide range of insights and to encourage participants to reflect deeply on their personal experiences. To ensure the validity and effectiveness of these questions, they underwent a rigorous validation process, conducted by experts in both qualitative research methodologies and educational studies. This process was essential to confirm that the questions were not only relevant to the research objectives but also reliable and clear in eliciting meaningful responses. The open-ended nature of the questions was intentionally chosen, as it allowed participants the freedom to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words, offering a more nuanced and detailed understanding of the challenges they face and the coping strategies they employ. By utilizing this validated instrument, the study ensured that the data collected would be both comprehensive and authentically reflective of the participants' lived experiences, thereby providing a richer and more accurate depiction of the impact of parental separation on secondary students.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, a qualitative method particularly effective for capturing the complexity and personal nuances of the research topic. These interviews offered participants the opportunity to freely articulate their thoughts and emotions, providing the researchers with rich, detailed insights into their experiences. To ensure the accuracy and integrity of the data, each interview was carefully recorded, transcribed, and translated. The in-depth nature of this approach allowed researchers to explore participants' responses more thoroughly, identifying recurring patterns and themes related to the impact of parental separation on life challenges and coping strategies. This method facilitated a comprehensive, contextually rich understanding of the phenomena being studied, allowing for a deeper exploration of the participants' lived experiences.

Data Analysis

To synthesize the study's findings, narrative analysis was employed to assess the impact of parental separation on secondary students' learning. Following the interviews, the researcher adhered to a rigorous data analysis process. Initially, the recorded data was transcribed, and participants' responses, originally provided in their mother tongue, were translated into English. The researcher then categorized the participants' reactions. Once the core ideas were identified, the data underwent thematization for further analysis and discussion. The interpretation process began by narrating the participants' authentic experiences, grounded in their specific contexts. A thorough exploration of their responses was conducted, followed by an interactive interpretation that highlighted key insights from their answers. To further substantiate the

analysis, relevant theories and existing studies were incorporated. Throughout the entire process, efforts were made to minimize personal bias, ensuring that the participants' thoughts and emotions were authentically represented.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected from secondary students who come from broken homes or whose parents separated is analyzed and interpreted to show how it happened, the various challenges they faced after their parents' separation, adaptive coping strategies, and their advice for other students going through the same situation. These findings are divided into two major themes per question.

Reasons that a family is broken or incomplete

- Parental Conflict and Dysfunction

Many responses highlight issues stemming from parental conflict, such as alcoholism, infidelity, and neglect. For instance, one respondent notes that their father is a "drunker," leading to separation, while another cites an affair as a catalyst for family breakdown. This aligns with research suggesting that parental conflict significantly impacts children's emotional well-being and can lead to long-term psychological issues (Amato & Keith, 1991).

Loss and Absence

Responses also reveal feelings of loss—either through death or absence due to separation. Multiple respondents mention losing a parent to death or the absence of one due to separation. This theme resonates with findings that children from broken homes often experience grief and a sense of abandonment, which can affect their social and emotional development (Tschann et al., 2017).

Challenges encountered because of being raised in a non-traditional or incomplete family structure

- Emotional Distress and Feelings of Loss

Many respondents express significant emotional distress stemming from their family situation. Feelings of sadness, loneliness, and grief are prevalent, as seen in statements about crying for deceased family members and the longing for parental support. Research indicates that children from broken homes often experience heightened levels of depression and anxiety, which can persist into adolescence and adulthood (Wolchik et al., 2002).

- Lack of Support and Guidance

Another prominent theme is the lack of parental support and guidance, particularly in decision-making and emotional support. Respondents mention feeling challenged in their studies and lacking someone to consult during difficult times. This aligns with findings that children from incomplete families frequently report feeling unsupported, leading to difficulties in academic performance and social relationships (Dunn & Plomin, 1990).

Coping Mechanisms

- Acceptance and Resilience

Many respondents express a sense of acceptance regarding their family situation, highlighting their ability to adapt and find strength. Phrases like "I accepted the reality" and "I became brave" indicate a process of coming to terms with their circumstances. Research shows that resilience can develop in children facing adversity, allowing them to thrive despite difficult backgrounds (Masten, 2001).

- Support Systems and Social Connections

Another significant theme is the importance of support from friends and family. Respondents mention the role of friends in providing motivation and emotional support, which aids in coping with their challenges. Studies indicate that strong social networks can buffer the negative effects of family disruption, helping individuals manage stress and improve their overall well-being (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001).

Pieces of advice from the respondents to teenagers or students who are currently facing the same challenges as them

- Resilience and Self-Empowerment

A significant number of respondents emphasize the importance of resilience and self-empowerment in overcoming adversity. Phrases such as "Don't let those circumstances break you" and "Be strong and help yourself" reflect a proactive attitude towards dealing with challenges. This theme aligns with research indicating that fostering resilience can help individuals navigate difficult situations more effectively. Studies have shown that resilience is not only a key factor in coping with family disruptions but also plays a crucial role in overall emotional well-being (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Encouraging teenagers to embrace strength and self-reliance can empower them to take control of their lives despite their circumstances.

- The Importance of Support and Positive Outlook

Another prevalent theme is the emphasis on maintaining a positive outlook and the value of support from others, including family and friends. Many respondents suggest that students should "choose to be happy" and "pray for guidance," highlighting the role of faith and social connections in fostering hope and resilience. Research supports the idea that maintaining a positive mindset, alongside having supportive relationships, can significantly buffer the negative effects of familial instability (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). Encouraging teenagers to seek support and focus on their dreams helps them cultivate a sense of purpose and direction, essential for navigating their challenges.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of students from broken homes reveal a complex interplay of emotional challenges, coping mechanisms, and resilience. The data gathered from secondary students underscores that parental conflict and loss are primary factors contributing to family breakdowns. These circumstances lead to significant emotional distress, characterized by feelings of sadness and loneliness. Many respondents expressed a longing for parental support, which highlights the crucial role that guidance plays in their development.

Despite these challenges, students demonstrate remarkable resilience. Many have adopted coping strategies that involve acceptance of their situations and the establishment of strong social networks. These support systems, particularly friendships, serve as vital resources for emotional and practical assistance. The advice shared by respondents emphasizes the importance of resilience, self-empowerment, and maintaining a positive outlook, which are essential for navigating the difficulties associated with their family circumstances.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To better support students from broken homes, these are my recommendations created based on the results:

1. Enhance Support Systems: Schools and communities should establish robust support networks that include counseling services, mentorship programs, and peer support groups. These initiatives can provide students with the emotional guidance and practical assistance they need to navigate their challenges effectively.

2. Promote Resilience and Empowerment: Educational programs should focus on developing resilience and self-empowerment among students. Workshops that teach coping strategies, emotional regulation, and problem-solving skills can empower students to take control of their circumstances and foster a sense of agency.

3. Encourage Positive Relationships: Encouraging students to cultivate positive relationships with peers and adults can help mitigate feelings of isolation. Schools could facilitate activities that promote teamwork and collaboration, fostering a sense of community and belonging.

4. Integrate Life Skills into the Curriculum: Incorporating life skills education into the curriculum can equip students with essential tools for managing their emotions and navigating challenges. Topics such as stress management, communication skills, and goal setting can be particularly beneficial.

5. Raise Awareness and Reduce Stigma: Initiatives aimed at raising awareness about the experiences of students from broken homes can help reduce stigma and promote empathy among peers. Campaigns that highlight the strengths and resilience of these students can foster a more inclusive and supportive school environment.

By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions and communities can play a crucial role in supporting students from incomplete families, helping them to thrive despite their challenges.

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