

The Challenges Encountered by Single-Parented Students on Their Secondary School Education in Msalato Ward, Dodoma Municipality-Tanzania

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ABSTRACT: This study investigated the challenges encountered by single-parented students and how these challenges affect education in secondary schools within Msalato Ward, Dodoma Municipality, Tanzania. In the context of a rising number of single-parent households driven by factors such as divorce, death, and socio-economic hardship students are increasingly vulnerable to academic setbacks. The research employed a descriptive survey design involving 86 single-parented students selected through purposive and simple random sampling. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with teachers and counselors. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. Findings revealed that single-parented students face a range of academic challenges, with the most prevalent being financial constraints, emotional and psychological distress, limited parental care, and reduced access to counseling services. A significant proportion of respondents confirmed that these students often struggle to afford tuition fees and educational materials. Interestingly, socialization was not identified as a major challenge, suggesting that peer interaction remains relatively unaffected. The study recommends for the government, NGOs, and local communities to establish targeted financial aid schemes specifically for students from single-parent families. The implementation of school-based counseling programs, financial aid schemes, parental engagement initiatives, and peer mentorship systems. These measures are vital to promoting equity and academic resilience among students from single-parent families.

KEYWORDS: Single-parented Students, parental separation, Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Single-parenthood is becoming an increasingly prominent social reality in many parts of the world, including Tanzania. According to the Tanzania National Bureau of Statistics (2022), nearly one in four households is headed by a single parent, predominantly women. This demographic shift has prompted growing concern about the impact of single parenting on children's well-being, especially in relation to education. Unlike students in two-parent families, single-parented students often lack adequate social, emotional, and financial support systems necessary for education success (Ngussa and Nkhoma, 2023).

Numerous studies have found that the education of students from single-parent households tends to be lower than that of their peers from intact families (Amato and Patterson, 2023). This disparity is attributed to factors such as income insecurity, reduced parental supervision, and increased emotional stress. Moreover, single parents may have limited education themselves, which can affect their capacity to assist children with academic work or advocate for them in school settings (Mwita and Mligo, 2021). Despite various educational reforms and interventions, the unique needs of single-parented students are often overlooked. A comprehensive understanding of the challenges they face is essential for designing effective support mechanisms that promote academic resilience and success. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the multifaceted academic challenges encountered by single-parented students in secondary schools and provide evidence-based recommendations for educators and policymakers.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Tanzania, the number of children raised by single parents has been steadily increasing due to factors such as divorce, separation, death of a parent, and migration (Lugalla and Ngware, 2022). This trend has significant implications for students' academic performance, particularly at the secondary school level, where emotional, social, and financial support from parents play a critical role in educational success. Single-parented students often face multiple challenges, including limited access to learning materials, emotional distress, and a lack of parental supervision or motivation, all of which may hinder their academic progress (Mkumbo, 2020).

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Despite the growing prevalence of single-parent families, there remains limited empirical research in the Tanzanian context that specifically explores how being raised by a single parent affects secondary school students' academic achievement. Existing studies in Tanzania have largely focused on general socio-economic challenges affecting education, without narrowing down to the unique circumstances and academic vulnerabilities of single-parented learners (Mligo, 2021). Consequently, educational stakeholders lack targeted strategies to support these students effectively. This gap in research makes it difficult to design policies or interventions that address the academic needs of students from single-parent households. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the specific challenges faced by single-parented secondary school students in Tanzania and how these challenges impact their education, with the aim of informing policies that promote equity in education.

3. EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

A study by Mwinuka and Mwoma (2023) in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, used a qualitative case study approach to investigate the lived experiences of single-parented students in public secondary schools. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with students, teachers, and guardians. The findings revealed that single-parented students struggled with lack of school materials, frequent absenteeism due to domestic responsibilities, and limited emotional support. Teachers noted that these students were more prone to dropping out or underperforming academically. The study concluded that economic hardship and inadequate parental guidance were central to the educational challenges experienced by these learners.

Similarly, a mixed-methods study conducted by Agyemang and Yeboah (2021) in Ghana examined the academic performance of students from single-parent homes in comparison to their peers from two-parent households. The researchers employed surveys and academic record reviews for 200 students across four secondary schools. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, while qualitative data were interpreted through thematic analysis. Results indicated that students from single-parent families scored significantly lower in core subjects like Mathematics and English. Emotional instability and the need for older students to assume caregiving roles for younger siblings were reported as critical contributing factors.

In Kenya, Muthoni (2020) employed a descriptive survey design to assess the influence of single parenting on students' academic engagement and performance. The study sampled 150 students and 30 teachers from public secondary schools using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings showed that most single-parented students lacked motivation due to low self-esteem and financial stress. Teachers observed that these students exhibited more behavioral issues and absenteeism compared to their counterparts. The research suggested that school-based counseling and mentorship programs were vital in mitigating the negative effects of single parenting on students' education outcomes.

A broader study by Adewunmi et al. (2022) in Nigeria focused on the socio-economic dimension of single parenting. Using a quantitative correlational design, data were gathered from 300 secondary school students using structured questionnaires. Regression analysis revealed a strong negative correlation between single-parent household income levels and students' academic achievement. The study emphasized that poverty among single-parent families often leads to students missing school due to lack of transport or fees, ultimately affecting their education progress. In the Tanzanian context, another recent study by Nkwera (2022) used ethnographic methods to explore how cultural and societal perceptions of single-parented students influence their academic identity. Through participant observation and narrative interviews, the study found that stigma and marginalization by peers and some educators negatively affected students' classroom participation and self-confidence. This social exclusion further discouraged engagement education and performance.

4. STUDY METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive survey design to investigate the challenges faced by single-parented students in relation to their education at the secondary school level. The target population comprised all students from single-parent families enrolled in public secondary schools in the selected region. A total of 86 students from single-parented families were selected for the study. Purposive sampling was used to identify single-parented students from school records, followed by simple random sampling to select participants from each school. The structured questionnaire comprising both closed and open-ended questions were used to collect quantitative data from the respondents. Qualitative data from teachers and school counselors were collected by using interviews. Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed by using descriptive analysis to obtain descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and mean scores with the help of SPSS version 25. Qualitative data from key informants were analyzed by thematic analysis to identify common patterns and themes related to the study objectives.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study findings, summarized in Table 1 were based on five statements reflecting potential challenges experienced by students from single-parent families. A significant proportion of respondents (25.6%) strongly agreed and 24.4% agreed that single-parented students struggle to pay tuition fees following parental separation. Meanwhile, 12.8% remained neutral, 15.1% disagreed, and 22.1% strongly disagreed. These findings highlight the financial vulnerability of children in single-parent households. Financial hardship

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is a well-documented consequence of single parenting, often associated with reduced income and increased responsibility on the custodial parent, which negatively impacts children's access to education (Amato, 2014; Kainz and Pan, 2022).

A majority of respondents (32.6%) strongly agreed and 27.9% agreed that students from single-parented families face economic instability. Conversely, 19.8% strongly disagreed, 9.3% disagreed, and 10.5% were neutral. These findings are consistent with research indicating that economic hardship is a major predictor of academic underperformance among single-parented students (Mukulu et al., 2023). Respondents overwhelmingly supported the notion that students from separated homes lack adequate parental care: 34.9% strongly agreed, and 20.9% agreed. In contrast, 16.3% strongly disagreed, 15.1% disagreed, and 12.8% were neutral. The lack of emotional and academic support due to the absence of one parent can significantly affect a student's motivation and engagement in school (Mwaseba and Mdoe, 2021).

Table 1: The challenges encountered by single-parented students.

Statement	Responses	SA	A	N	D	SD
Students cannot pay their tuition fees because their parents have separated	Frequency	22	21	11	13	19
	Percentage (%)	25.6	24.4	12.8	15.1	22.1
Students from single parented families are economically unstable	Frequency	28	24	9	8	17
	Percentage (%)	32.6	27.9	10.5	9.3	19.8
Students from separated homes lack proper parental care	Frequency	30	18	11	13	14
	Percentage (%)	34.9	20.9	12.8	15.1	16.3
Students from separated families have socialisation challenges	Frequency	4	13	15	21	33
	Percentage (%)	4.7	15.1	17.4	24.4	38.4
Students from separated homes do not easily access counselling services	Frequency	8	20	16	21	21
	Percentage (%)	9.3	23.3	18.6	24.4	24.4

Source: Students Msalato ward, 2025

Interestingly, responses to whether such students face socialization problems revealed an opposite trend. A significant portion of respondents (38.4%) strongly disagreed, and 24.4% disagreed, indicating that many students from separated families socialize well. Only 19.8% agreed, and 17.4% were neutral. This suggests that although these students face economic and emotional challenges, social interaction may not be severely affected, supporting findings by Demo and Cox (2020) that peer interactions often remain intact despite family structure changes. Regarding access to counseling services, 24.4% strongly disagreed, 24.7% disagreed, 32.6% agreed, and 18.6% were neutral. These mixed responses suggest that while some schools may provide access to psychosocial support, others lack sufficient counseling frameworks. Previous studies highlight that consistent access to school-based counseling can help mitigate the emotional challenges faced by children from disrupted families (Okeke and Dlamini, 2022). In addition to the questionnaire, interviews with key informants revealed two critical themes:

Financial Constraints

Key informants emphasized that students from single-parent homes often lack basic educational resources due to financial difficulties. As one school head noted: *"Sometimes students miss school because they need to work small jobs to help their single parents. This is because they cannot afford school supplies or transport every day."* This reflects findings by Uwezo Tanzania (2021), which indicate that financial hardship is one of the leading barriers to consistent school attendance and performance in single-parent households.

Emotional and Psychological stress

Respondents also reported emotional distress among single-parented students. The school counsellor expressed: *"they often feel alone and stressed. There's no one to talk to when things get hard, especially about personal or academic issues."* These statements are indicative of the psychological impact of parental separation, which can manifest in emotional withdrawal, reduced concentration, and lack of academic motivation (Mugisha et al., 2020). The absence of academic supervision due to overburdened single parents may further contribute to poor academic outcomes.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study revealed that single-parented students in Msalato ward of Dodoma Municipality faces a range of challenges that significantly affect their secondary education. Chief among these are financial constraints, emotional and psychological distress, lack of parental care and supervision, and limited access to academic and psychosocial support services. A considerable proportion of respondents affirmed that students from single-parent households often struggle to pay tuition fees and lack school learning materials. On the other hand, emotional challenges such as loneliness, stress, and lack of education guidance further compound the difficulties these students face, reducing their ability to concentrate and perform well in school. Based on the conclusion of the study

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findings, it is recommended that the government, NGOs, and local communities should establish targeted financial aid schemes, such as bursaries or scholarship programs, specifically for students from single-parent families. This will help alleviate the burden of tuition fees, school supplies, and transport costs that hinder regular school attendance and learning. Likewise, the educational institutions should organize parental awareness seminars and workshops that emphasize the importance of continued emotional and education support for children, even after separation or divorce, and community leaders, religious institutions, and social welfare organizations should be engaged in supporting vulnerable students by providing mentorship, financial assistance, and creating safe spaces for after-school programs.

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