

ABSTRACT

Loss of Parents, Academic Performance and Psychosocial Adjustment of Grade Five Children in Zambia: A Quasi Experimental Study

This was a comparative study based on 400 grade 5 children who had lost one or both parents against their 400 peers in the same grade with both parents alive. Data collection involved the children completing various tests for academic performance, the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL), and the Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES-II) with the assistance of the research team. Also, their teacher(s) and parents/caregivers completed the checklists on each child. In other words, the data on behavior problems involved three informants.

Leading hypotheses of this study were that because loss of one or both parents is a painfully devastating experience, especially when it happens at a tender age as was the case for the children in this study, the children with one or both parents dead are likely to:

1. Exhibit more behaviour problems than their peers with both parents alive as measured by the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL), which assesses social competence and behavioural problems.
2. score higher on dissociation than their peers with both parents alive as measured by the Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES-II), DES-II assesses the nature and level of disruption in memory or consciousness as a consequence of traumatic experiences such as loss of a beloved one.
3. score lower on the selected school performance tests (in this case Grade 5 competence tests in math and English) than their peers with both parents alive.
4. display associations between behaviour problems, dissociation and school performance as these areas of functioning are supposed to reinforce one another.

The conclusions were that:

Gender differences in the development of problem behaviour were noted. Teachers reported significant gender differences in all types of problem behaviour. Contrary to expectation, teachers indicated more internalizing and externalizing, and total problems in girls than boys. However, available literature tends to associate more internalizing problems with girls than boys, and vice versa, i.e., externalizing problems are more common in boys than girls. Teachers also reported more behaviour problems in older pupils and in pupils who had scored lower on teacher ratings of pupils' general intelligence test. Comparisons of urban against rural reports from the three categories of informants on behaviour problems revealed that teachers of the rural pupils report fewer problems than their counterparts in the urban sample. On the other hand, caregivers and children from rural areas bring out conflicting reports, depicting more behaviour problems than the urban sample. These differences between rural and urban dichotomy are quite substantial.

The findings on dissociation in this sample were unexpected, in particular the absence of an association between parental loss and dissociation. The DES however seemed

valid for use in a Zambian sample of fifth grade pupils as there was no correlation between the DES and age of the children, and none with pupils' language competence. However, the DES scores were significantly associated with the teacher ratings of pupils' general intelligence test, although with a weak effect size. The DES was also not related to gender or to rural-urban residence of pupils. However, the hypothesis of a significant higher dissociation score for those pupils who had experienced one or more parental losses had to be refuted. Loss of parents in Zambian pupils does not seem to lead to higher levels of dissociation as one would expect on the basis of trauma studies in Western societies, in children and adults alike. Compensatory academic support is suggested as essential because even in the absence of evidence of serious psychosocial problems parental loss during the primary school years often gives rise to disruptions of the child's schooling due to loss of income and or relocation of children to different domiciles. Results from the analysis of variance to test whether children with or without parental loss differed on the DES surprisingly revealed no significant differences.

As expected significant differences were found in performance on maths and teacher ratings of pupils' general intelligence tests with pupils with both parents alive outperforming the others in the parental loss group regardless of the rural-urban dimension of the schools. Thus, parental loss appears to affect the pupils' academic performance in a negative way. As for gender, it did not have a significant effect on performance in language, math sans teacher ratings of pupils' general intelligence. However, a significant correlation was found between language and math scores and higher scores on maths went with higher teacher ratings of pupils' general intelligence. Age did not significantly correlate with any of the school performance tests. Comparisons between urban and rural pupils on all the school performance tests revealed significant differences in performance, with urban pupils outperforming their rural counterparts regardless of whether they were orphan or non-orphan. A similar trend was noted even when age was controlled for.

With the exception of the earlier discussed association between lower teacher ratings of pupils' general intelligence and higher prevalence of behaviour problems as perceived by the teachers, no association was found between dissociation, behaviour problems and school performance. Similarly, there were no large differences in correlations between these main variables and gender. In other words, the correlational structure between problem behaviours, dissociation and school performance were more or less the same for both boys and girls. Urban and rural comparisons also revealed no specific associations between behaviour problems, dissociation and school performance. The same applied when child loss status was taken into account, indicating no substantial difference in correlations between behaviour problems, dissociation and school performance in pupils who lost one or both parents and those with both parents alive.

It is important to mention that the measurement artefacts may have been responsible for some of the unexpected and/or theoretically challenging findings of the study. Indeed, the very complex pattern of the data obtained with the CBCL strongly suggests that the instrument was not completely valid and reliable in the context of this study. In the Zambian cultural context loss of one or both parents may not necessarily lead to serious psychosocial disturbances because of the presence of multiple attachment caregivers in the early years of a child. In other words in the face

of death of one or both parents, there is still stable relationships in the child's emotional life to cushion the impact of loss.

This study had its own limitations. Notable among these were failure of this study to capture reliable data concerning (i) the socio-economic status of the children's families or (ii) the specific alternative caregiving arrangements following the death of their parents tends to weaken the database available for understanding variations in response to various instruments used (iii) the research instruments, especially the CLCL were not translated into local languages in order to ensure that participants really understand issues at hand.

Based on the findings of the study the following is recommended:

1. institute compensatory academic support to orphaned children in their early years of schooling even in the absence of evidence of psychosocial problems.
2. strengthen the efforts in providing positive support to orphans, especially in the area of psychosocial and educational counseling.
3. put in place ongoing short courses through workshops for teachers./
4. MoE should embark on improving on-going educational campaigns on the psychosocial and academic needs of orphans targeted at parents/caregivers.