

## Investigating the Effects of Parental Divorce on Academic Performances of Young People

Chauke Thulani Andrew<sup>1</sup> and Obadire Olusegun Segun<sup>2</sup>

*Abstract: This study explores the effect of parental divorce on academic performance of youth and provides detailed analysis of the finding. The study was conducted in Madonsi Village, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The sampling procedure used was non-probability coupled with purposive sampling. The study shows lack of communication, infidelity, abuse, snoring, sexually incompatibility as reasons for divorce. It shows that divorce makes it hard for youth to focus on their school work due to lack of home support. The study recommends that youth work in South Africa should be professionalised to ensure that youth workers are recognised and they obtain license for professional counselling. This will enable them to provide necessary professional support for young people who come from marital divorced families. It was recommended that policies formulation that addresses the plight of young people from broken homes having financial hardships should be enacted.*

**Keywords: Academic Performances, Young People, Gender, Marriage, Divorce**

### Introduction

The escalation and the negative effect of parental divorce in Madonsi village and other places in South Africa are causing serious concern for many. Hence the researcher ventured into a qualitative approach to investigate the effects of divorce on academic performance among youth. Divorce is a painful and traumatic experience for all those who are involved and it can cause disruption of family life (Giddens & Phillip 2013: 382). Marriage is the foundational institution in which divorce protrudes. Therefore, it is crucial to analyse its composition. There are several factors which could lead to a divorce in marriage. According to Preller (2013: 03) sexually incompatibility is one of the factors that contribute to divorce. This may occur when a couple has been in a relationship for a long period of time and suddenly one partner developed cold feet sexually. Ill-health may also play a part by causing lack of interest in sexual relationships in marriage. In this way, it may lead a partner who is not sick to seek for sexual pleasure outside the marriage or deciding to leave the marriage since there is no more sexual excitement in it. Other reasons include infidelity, lack of trust, violence and emotional or physical abuse of substances or alcohol may be contributing factors.

---

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Gender and Youth Studies, University of Venda, South Africa. Email: [Chauke.thuli@gmail.com](mailto:Chauke.thuli@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> International Relations, University of Venda, South Africa

Families may be unable to nurture and protect their children from social stigma due to parental divorce. Young people whose parents are divorced might be overwhelmed by anxiety and stress as they decide which parents they are going to live with. This decision may have consequential effects on their performance at school (Heaton 2010: 107). Divorce rates in South Africa have climbed astoundingly since the enactment of Act 70 of 1979. The consequences of this change in a family structure have had a negative academic and educational impact on thousands of young people between age 14 and 24 years from parental divorce (Bryan, DeVault & Cohen 2008: 494). The quality and stability of family relationships directly influence a young person's behaviour, social competence and academic achievement. Therefore, parental divorce could be one of the contributing factors to the decline in young person's academic performance. Every year from 2000-2011 between 20,000 and 39,000 young South African between ages 14 and 24 years experienced their parents' marriage divorce (Statistics South Africa, 2012).

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

Divorce tends to negatively affect parental involvement in their children's school work, which leads to young people who come from parental divorce feeling unwanted and not loved by one of their parents. This usually leads young people expressing anxiety and anger at the same time. A boy child might begin to blame his father for divorcing his mother, which may lead to a relationship breakdown between father and son. Young people may feel they are not protected by both parents, therefore, lead them to find a place where they can feel protected such as staying in a foster care. Some eventually commit crime and drop of school because of lack of guidance.

### **Objectives**

The aim of this paper was to investigate the effect of parental divorce on the academic performances of youth. This study seeks to raise awareness among Madonsi Village community on the effects of divorce on young people's academic performance. This aim was achieved by looking at the following specific objectives:

- To explore the effects of academic performance of the youth
- To identify the strategies to address the effects of divorce on academic performance of youth at Madonsi Village

### **Research Questions**

The researcher sought answers to the following research questions in the study:

- How does divorce affect the academic performances of the youth?
- What the strategies are for address the effects of marriage dissolution on academic performances among youth?

## Literature

According to Madzhadzi (2005: 53) young people from parental divorce tend to be reluctant to participant class. Young people from dissolved families also do not have the confidence to participate in class, compared to young people from unbroken families. Most of these young people do such because of low self-esteem and depression that might be taking place in their lives as a result of marital dissolution of their parents. Lack of participation in class will lead them not to engage in a robust debates and presentations which may contribute to their school marks. These often lead to failure.

Madzhadzi (2005) prenatal divorce leads to a situation whereby youth from broken families change from one school to another. I fully support the statement which demonstrates how the academic performance of young people can be affected because of marital dissolution. After marital dissolution young people are likely to change schools. For instance, if it happens that both parents were staying at town, after the dissolution of the marriage, the husband may lose custody of children but not that of the house. In such instance the woman has no choice but to look for another place to live to another place. If it happens that the relocation is takes them to another province, these young people may have to change schools, have to learn new languages, usually find it difficult to adjust and their academic performance is likely to decline.

According to Morgan (1999: 262) young people who come from a broken family tend to show lack of social maturity. I agree with Morgan's argument. However not every young person from a non-intact family displays lack of social maturity. They often show traits such as bullying because they always look for someone to take their frustrations on. Displaying lack of social maturity in the case of bullying other students tends to have an effect on their academic performances, especially if they would be reported and then suspended by the school authorities.

Mhlongo (2003:15) emphasizes that the academic performance of young people from parental divorce becomes affected, for instance a young person is a minor they often worry too much about whom they are going to stay with, whether they will be placed or taken away to a child and youth care centre or not. The result of this tends to have a huge impact cognitively which results in a situation where they start getting lower marks. Some scholars who have previously done research on marriage dissolution have shown that children from intact families often perform better than those children from non-intact family. I disagree with these scholars who demonstrated the above point; some children from non-intact family perform much better than children from intact family.

## Theoretical Framework

A combination of theories, namely conflict theory, social exchange theory and lastly equity theory were used in this paper to provide theoretical explanation of parental divorce. The social exchange theory demonstrated that whoever decides to embark on marriage enters for exchange of certain benefits which a marriage can offer (Cox, 2006). Individual expectations differ from one person to another which might range from love, companionships, security, and procreation and so on. For example, wife may

enter marriage to love her husband with all of her heart. She may expect to be loved back by her husband or she want to gain the status of being called Mrs (title used for a married woman). It may also be for material possession in order to inherit the wealth of her husband when he died. When husband begins to physically or emotional abuse his wife, she may feel insecure or regard that marriage as unequal. She may not see herself as being equal partner in a marriage since the equity theory hold that indeed people enter into marriage for a sense of benefit that a marriage can bring. In addition, she may want to be equal within the marriage, such that no one might be above someone because of gender or status. An individual in marriage does not want to be treated as subordinates they want to be equal in every decision that needs to be taken within the marriage. Sharing of resources and love must be equal for and from both spouses. Failure to ensure that there is equity in exchange of resources in a relationship will lead to conflict. The conflict theory holds that tensions occur in a relationship when there is misunderstanding or abuse of power (Cox, 2006).

### **Material and Methods**

The study was qualitative in nature and the sampling method was purposive, a sub-type of non-probability sampling. The goal is to provide findings that could be generalised for a category of South African youth. The participants were 12 young people between the age 14 and 24 years who come from marital divorced families using purposive sampling technique. There were five (5) males and seven (7) females, majority of the respondents were in secondary school and above while only one (1) was in primary school. Some participants completed the questionnaires in their home language which is Xitsonga and others in English. The researcher used open-ended questions as form of self-administered questions to ensure the respondents have the chance to provide answers in more details. The questionnaires were distributed in September 2015 to the selected respondents from Madonsi village. The questionnaire booklet was handed out by the researcher in the presence of the guardian of all these young people especially those under the age of 18. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study. The researcher assured these youth about their safety during the course of the study. They were also briefed about their answers being treated anonymously. The researcher mentioned to the participants in the study about voluntary, privacy and confidentiality of their participation which will be fully respected.

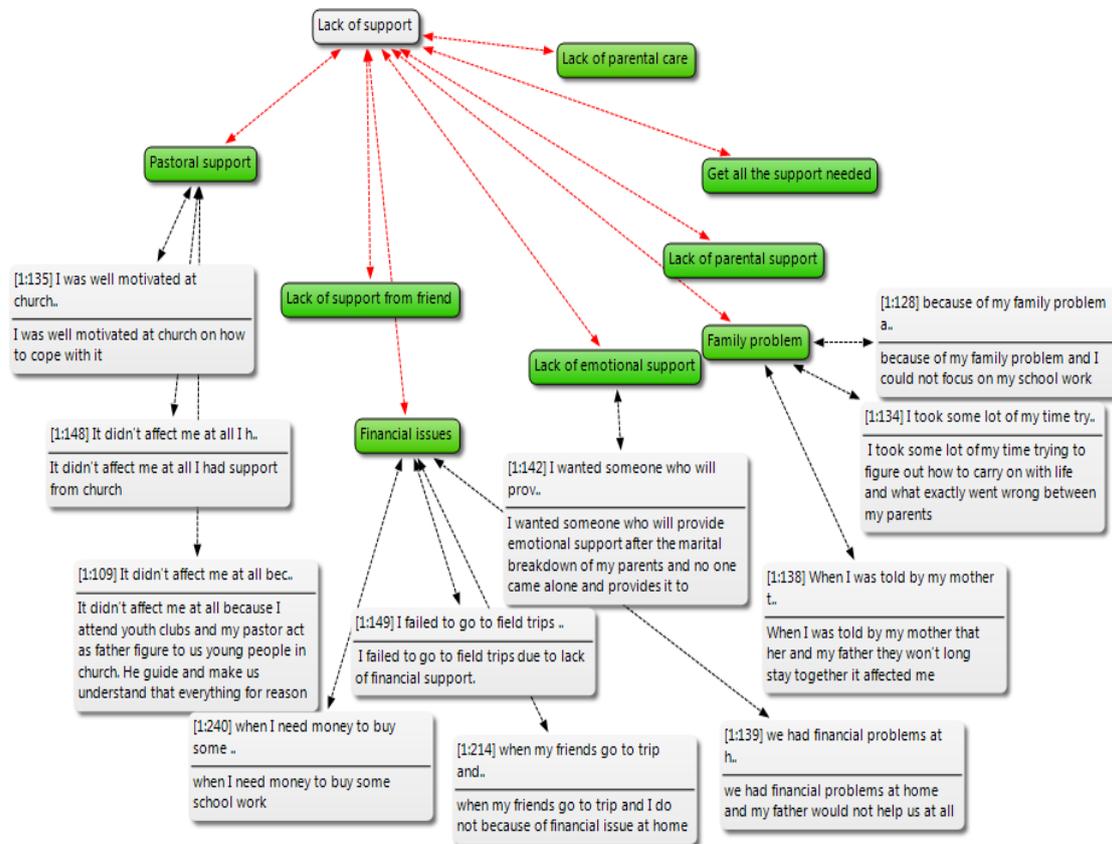
The data was analysed through discourse analysis which focused on written and spoken words using Atlas.ti version 7.5.10 for qualitative data analysis.

### **Results**

#### *The effect of divorce on academic performance among youth*

The negative effects of divorce on academic performance of young school children came out strongly in the findings as shown below. Figure 1 shows responses on how lack of both parental nurturing and supervision affects academic performance of young people. Lack of parental role, financial issues, family problems, lack of pastoral support, lack of emotional support are all contributing factors to poor academic performance. A respondent confirmed that lack of both parental supervision resulted in a

situation where there is no one to offer the youth emotional support in time of stress, which is sometimes caused by school overload.



**Figure 1: Lack of parental nurturing affect academic performance**

One of the respondents alluded that lack of parental supervision had led her to a situation where she encountered financial problems and she could not attend school trip which was part of her semester marks. She further said that:

If my father was living with us, maybe he would be able to help my mother so I do not struggle at school work.

Another respondent alluded that she had no one to assist her with her school work because her mother was busy generating income for the family while her role of monitoring and supervising his school work suffered. Figure 1 shows that some of the respondents' academic performances were not affected by lack of parental nurturing because they had joined youth clubs and church pastors played significant roles in their lives by showing them righteous paths which enabled them to perform well in their studies.

Academic performances of majority of the respondents were adversely affected. One respondent alluded that:

Lack of parental supervision affected my academic performance since I am staying with my grandmother and she didn't go to school and my mother works far away from us as a domestic

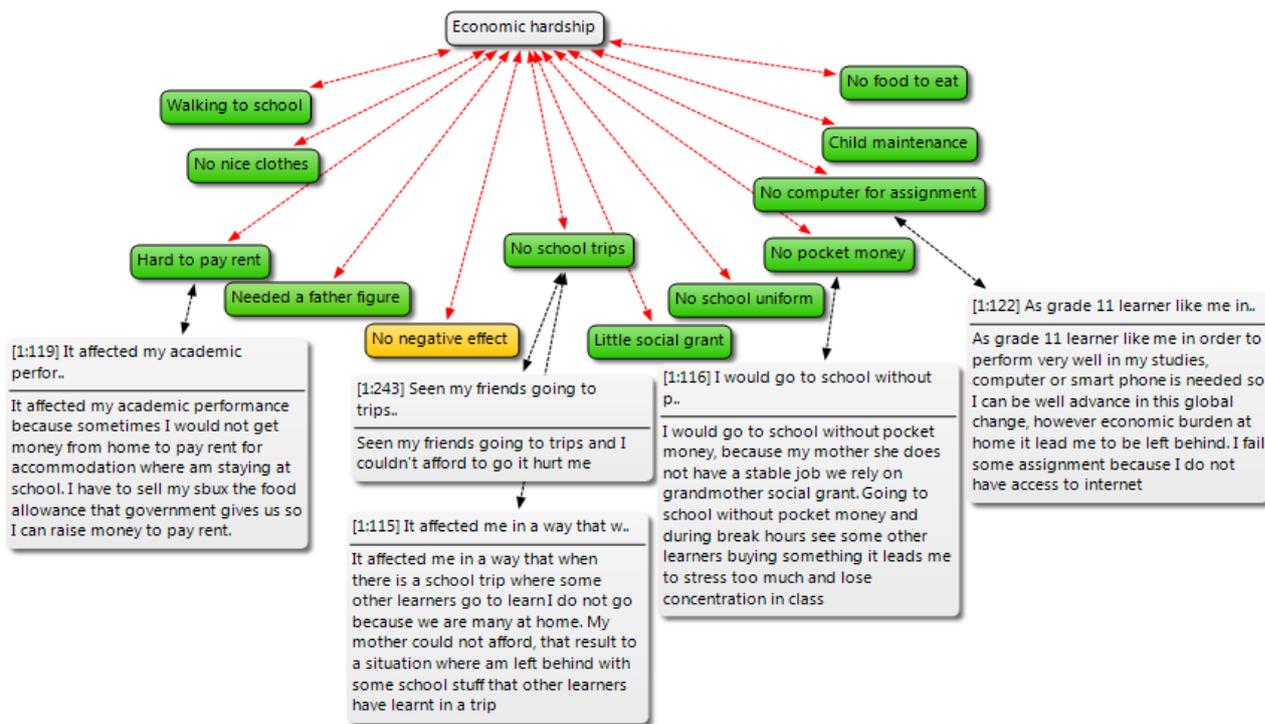
worker. This resulted in a situation where there is no one at home to give me informal education which would enable me to perform very well in my formal education.

Another respondent said:

I lose concentration in class because I used to think much about what my mother was going through after her marital breakdown. She was always tense and she never helped me with my school work; neither did my father come along and helped me with my school work. He was focusing on his new family which led me to be left all alone and end up repeating grade 10.

*Economic hardship and academic performance*

Economic hardship was mentioned as a problem that young school children faced after their parents divorced their marriages. Figure 2 shows economic hardship being resulted in a situation where there was no food, no pocket money, no uniform, no school trips and no computer to complete assignments.



**Figure 2: Economic hardship and academic performance**

Figure 2 shows many of the respondents faced economic hardship to the extent that they could not afford proper school uniform, like some other learners. One of the respondents said that as a grade 11 learner, she needed a smart phone that would enable her to access internet and get information to complete school assignments, but could not get it because there was no one to buy it for her, this affected her academic performance. Although some of the respondents reported that they did not face economic hardship because they are financially supported by people around them.

Some of the respondents articulated that economic hardship affected their academic performances in a way that sometimes they would go to school without food or pocket money. One respondent alluded that after school he would sometimes come back home to find out there was nothing to eat, which led him to neglect his school work and cause a lot of stress to him.

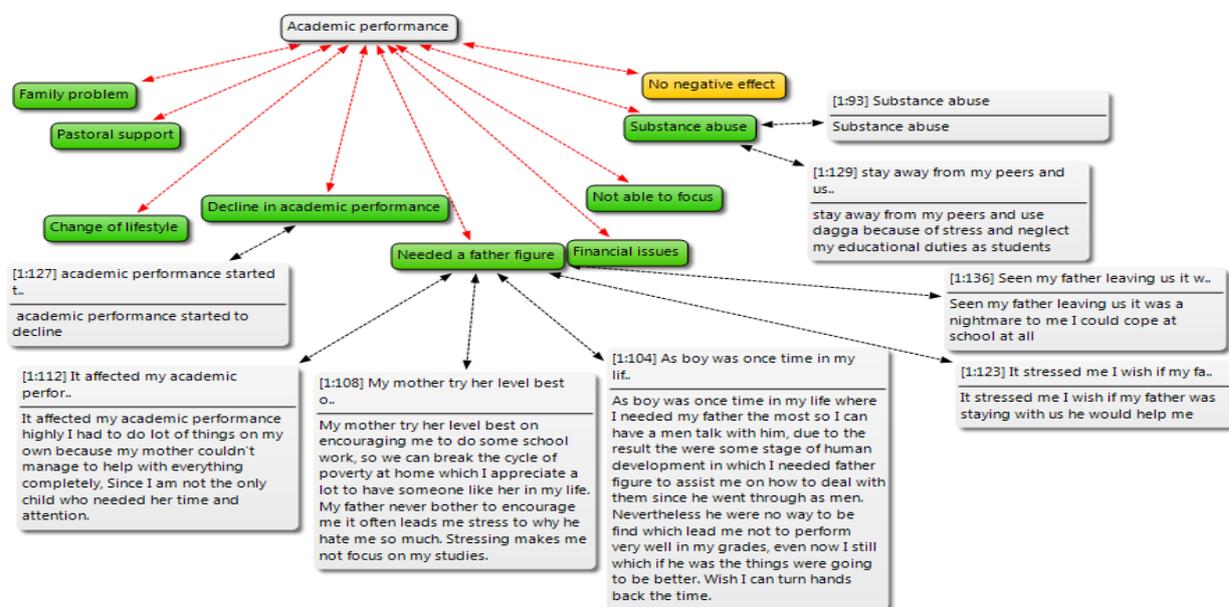


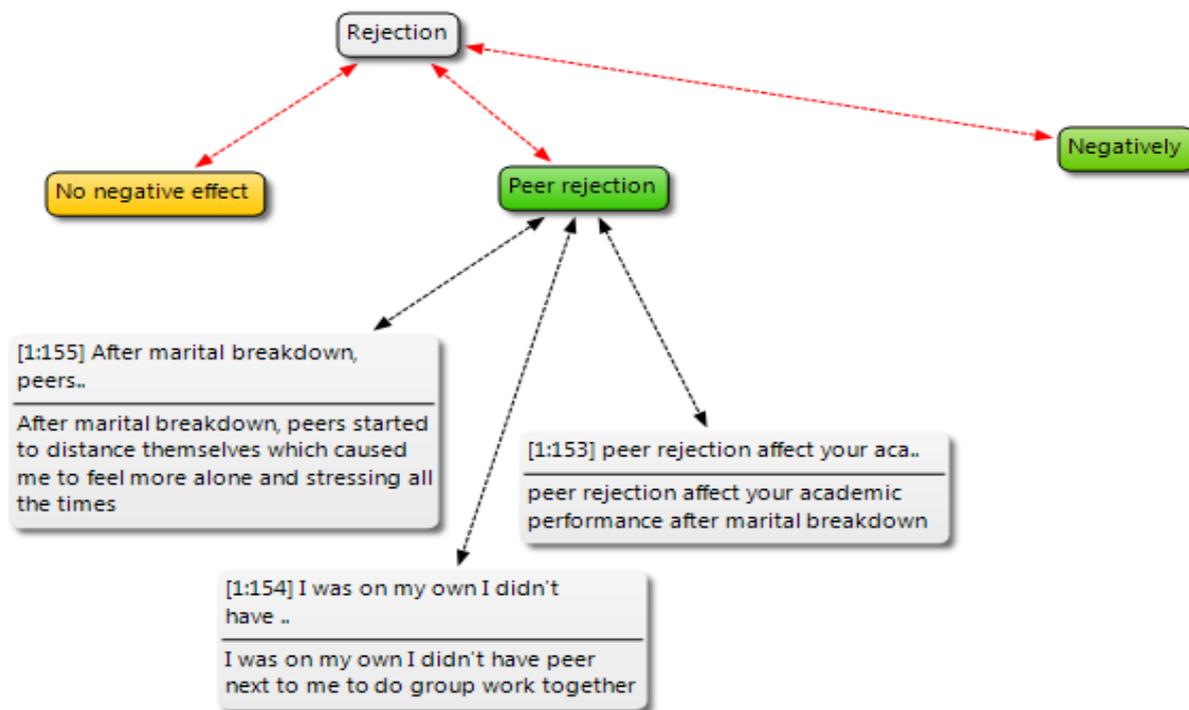
Figure 3: Deterioration of academic performance

The majority of the respondents' academic performances declined after the marital breakdown of their parents. One respondent alluded that seeing his father walk out of his life brought much more stress to his life, which resulted in a decline in his academic performance:

My mother tried her level best on encouraging me to do some school work, so we can break the cycle of poverty at home which I appreciated a lot to have someone like her in m life. My father never bother to encourage me it ... he hated me so much. Stress makes me not to focus on my study.

Another respondent reported that he began to score low marks in class and he started taking dagga, believing it would take away his pain caused by his parents' marriage divorce.

Although majority of the respondents did not encounter peer rejection after the marital breakdown of their parents. But some reported their experiences of peer rejections from their classmates. One respondents said:



**Figure 4: Peer rejection and academic performance**

After marital breakdown (of my parents), peers started to distance themselves (from me) which caused me to feel more alone and stressing all the times.

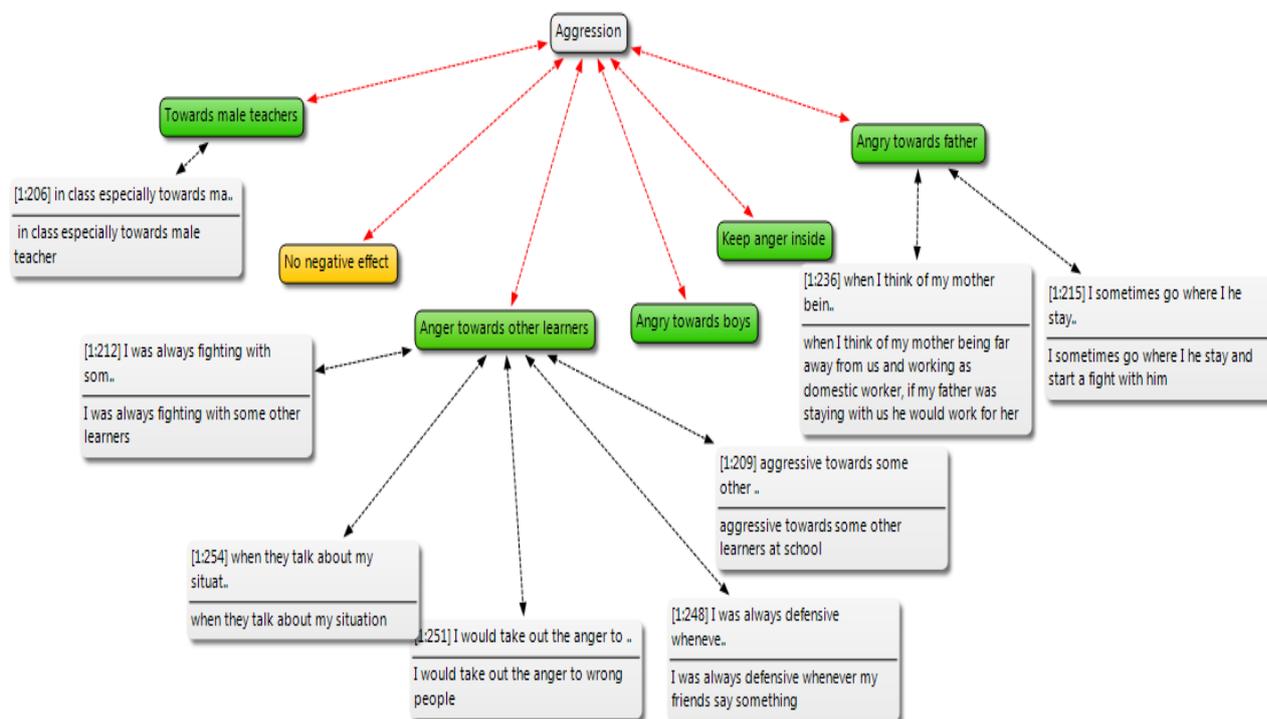
Some of the respondents said that their friends were nowhere to be found, unwilling to do school work with them which led them to feel so lonely and eventually could not perform well in their studies.

*The psychological effects*

Psychological effects that marriage divorce has on young people whose parents went through marital breakdown were mentioned by the respondents in the study.

In Figure 5, majority of the respondents said they experienced depression. One respondent alluded that when he went to school and happen to find that his friend has pocket money whilst he did not, it would hurt him and often results in stress. Another respondent emphasised that she got depressed when she could not get money for rent.





**Figure 6: Divorce and aggression**

One respondent emphasised that she was very aggressive towards other learners at schools, especially towards boys because when she saw boys, it would remind her of her father’s wickedness. Another respondent articulated that he would get angry with her mother whenever she refused him from going to visit his father. He would also get angry when he saw her working as a domestic worker while his father was still alive (Figure 6).

**Possible strategies to address the effect of divorce**

The possible strategies to address the effects of marriage divorce are views from young people from broken families on what they believe could be done to address this issue.

*Role of parents*

One respondent wished that both parents would perform their parental roles despite their differences. Children must not be punished for their parents’ separation. They alluded that they need both parents’ support, to assist them with their school work, not fight in front of their children and be responsible for their upkeep despite their situations.

*The role of teachers*

They emphasised that teacher’s roles are very essential in their academic and social life. One respondent articulated that teachers’ involvement or help could make them do well in their academics and develop a sense of confidence among themselves. Another respondent reported that sporting

activities at school must be prioritised as mechanism to deal with psychological effects of marriage divorce.

#### *The role of the community*

The community where the young people resides also has important responsibility to play. The respondents mentioned that the community should not see them as outcast or punish them for the mistake of their parents rather they should be encouraged and supported in their academic and other endeavours.

#### **Discussion**

The study revealed that lack of communication plays a dominant role in the parental divorce in the study area. Lack of communication and use of foul languages wherein one partner uses harsh words against the other spouse leading to domestic violence could lead to divorce. The researcher found that drunkenness in a marriage could lead to the use inappropriate words towards the other partner and being absent minded due to excessive use of social media could spell danger. These findings are consistent with the work of Preller (2013: 03) who emphasised that social networking increases the rate of divorce, proper channel of communication among couples no longer prevail.

The finding of the study regarding lack of parental nurturing and supervision reveals that most respondents reported that without the help of their parents they are unable to perform very well in their studies. This is consistent with the work of Ballantine and Hammerick (2009: 44) who found out that young people from broken families have lower grades, lower test marks and higher drop-out rates on average than those who come from two-parent (intact) households. According to Hetherington and Kelly (2002) the learning of the child is affected by the home background. If outlook for educational development of such a young person is not encouraging, they are likely to show poor cognitive functioning, which displays exteriorly in difficulty in maintaining the alertness, attention and concentration needed in classroom performance and which works interiorly to slow down the mental process of registering, selecting and reaching to information. An impoverished home environment would have a cumulative effect, so that a young person exposed to it would become progressively more handicapped in their performance as they grow older.

According to Ballantine and Hammerick (2009) most young people from broken homes are generally disadvantaged because they are generally regarded as deprived academically, economically, socially and culturally. Their environments are not conducive to learning and their education is not adequate. As a result of loss of one parent these young people suffer psychological problems. Furthermore, father-son bond is essential in moral development. Without it a young man's moral bankruptcy arises. The effect of marriage divorce on academic performance among youth is devastating. The remark concerning the importance of father figure to a son in the study is found to be accurate. In many cases young boys from broken families who are in the custody of their mothers are likely to express anger in class and other disturbing behaviours Ballantine and Hammerick (2009). Mothers find it very difficult to

deal with such behaviour since we are still living in a patriarchy society; where African mothers still believe a boy must be treated with more respect more than a girl (Mudau and Obadire, 2017). Therefore these mothers are unable to discipline their sons.

Regarding economic hardship, the study revealed that the majority of the respondents faced economic challenges, which led them to perform poorly in their studies. Some could not attend school trips, they could not put on proper uniform or eat balanced food due to poverty. This is consistent with the work of Anant & Michaels (2008:44) they postulate that children from non-intact families are likely to perform poor academically compare to children from intact families due to lack of financial stability which enable school children to have access to school materials.

On the decline in academic performance, the study revealed that majority of the respondent's academic performance began to decline when the parents began to fight a lot within a marriage which drives one parent away. This is consistent with the work of Mhlongo (2003: 15), Cox (2006: 467) & Cooper et al. (2009: 47) who emphasise that the academic performance of young people from parental divorce becomes affected, for instance a young person who is a minor often worry about whom they are going to stay with (father or mother or relative), where they will be placed or taken away to a child and youth care centre or not.

Regarding infidelity, the finding of the study revealed that majority of couples cheat in their marriages which results in marriage divorce. This is consistent with the work of Demo and Fine (2010: 76) which stressed that unfaithfulness is mostly a commonly cited cause of marriage divorce especially among married couples. Couples who stayed in a marriage for long period of time tend to seek sexual pleasure outside the marriage and seek someone who will satisfy their sexual gratification. Some do so for sake of experimenting. Economic hardship also plays a vital role in infidelity; a wife can cheat on her husband by dating rich men in order to live glamorous life style or to be able to provide for her children.

On sexual activities, the study revealed that all respondents did not involve themselves in sexual activities due to the marital divorce of their parents. The researcher also found that the respondents did not engage in sexual activities because they believed it would lead to a situation where they will suffer similar fate as their parents. This finding is not consistent with the work of Radi and Bernardi (2014: 23) who postulate that children from non-intact families are likely to fall pregnancy and impregnate before they complete their first degree. These findings may be as a result of the different context in which the study was conducted.

### **Recommendations**

Traditional authorities at the local level should ensure that they have youth desks, which should be manned by youth care workers. By doing so it would enable young people who come from broken families who are not performing very well academically to get some assistance from youth care workers in the form of informal education. This will improve their performance at school.

Youth development in South Africa should be professionalised to ensure that youth development workers to be recognized and obtain professional license. These youth development workers should provide service to young people who come from marital broken families. They should also work at schools and work hand in hand with the Department of Education by identifying these category of young people in order to help them.

Many scholars have found that financial hardship among youth results in school dropout or scoring lower grades. Policy makers should formulate policies that would provide support to young people who come from marital broken families especially those who are facing financial hardships. These efforts will yield positive result if it could be tackled together with the assistance of care workers, traditional leaders and the community as a whole.

### Conclusion

This study revealed the effects of parental divorce on young people's academic performance. In addition to that parental divorce I social stigmas which have long lasting effect in the lives of young people. More so, Young people who are contemplating getting into a marriage must bear in mind that marriage is not a play ground. Marriage is a cornerstone of a happy family and happy family is a cornerstone of a nation, anything that comes against marriage, such as divorce, brings a disease to the nation and terribly affects peace and economic growth of the nation hence should be address with all seriousness.

### References

- Anant, S. & Michael, G. 2008. The effects of marital breakup on the income distribution of women with children. *Journal of Resource* Vol 43(3):611-629
- Ballantine, J.H. & Hammerick, F.M. 2009. *The Sociology of Education: A systematic Analysis*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Pearson Publishers
- Bryan, S., DeVault, C. & Cohen, T. F. 2008. *The marriage and family experience: Intimate Relationships in a changing society* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.). Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth
- Cox, F.D. 2006. *Human intimacy: Marriage, the Family, and Its Meaning* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.). Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth
- Cooper, C., McLanahan, S., Meadows, S. & Brooks-Gunn, J. 2009. Family Structure Transitions and Maternal Parenting Stress. *Journal of Marriage and Family* Vol 71(3): 558-574.
- Giddens, A. & Philip, W.S. 2013. *Sociology* (7th ed.). London: Polity Press
- Heaton, J. 2010. *South Africa family law* (3rd ed.). Durban: LexisNexis
- Hetherington E. M. & Kelly J. 2002. *For better or worse*. New York: Norton
- Mhlongo, S.T. 2003. The psycho-social effects of divorce on children. A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement of University of Venda. For degree of Social Work at the University of Venda, Thohoyandou.
- Mudau, T.J. and Obadire, O.S. 2017. The role of patriarchy in in Family Settings and its Implications to Girls and Women in South Africa. *J Hum Ecol.*, 58(1,2): 67-72
- Office for National Statistics 2012. *Divorce in England and Wales*. London: Statistics Bulletin
- Radi, J. & Bernardi, F. 2014. The long-term consequences of parental divorce for children's educational attainment. *Journal of Population Science* Vol 30: 161-162
- Preller, B. 2013. *A Guide to Divorce and Separation in South Africa*. Cape Town: Random House
- StatsSA. 2012. *Marriage and divorce: Statistics*. Statistics South Africa, Pretoria: South Africa Government Printers