

Title

A COMPARATIVE STUDY: EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF FAMILY ENVIRONMENT ON ACADEMIC SUCCESS AMONG CHILDREN IN SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES AND FOSTER CARE HOMES: A CASE STUDY OF LILONGWE REHABILITATION CENTRE AND LILONGWE PRIMARY SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of family environment on the academic success of children raised in single-parent households and foster care settings, with specific reference to Lilongwe Rehabilitation Centre and Lilongwe Primary School in Malawi. The study adopts a mixed-methods research approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative techniques to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with children, teachers, parents, and caregivers, while quantitative data were gathered using structured questionnaires and a review of academic records, including school grades and attendance registers. The study is grounded in Attachment Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which together provide a framework for understanding how caregiver relationships, emotional security, and environmental systems influence children's academic performance.

The findings indicate that caregiver-child relationships play a critical role in shaping emotional stability, stress management, and learning outcomes. Children from single-parent families reported higher levels of emotional support and academic supervision than those in foster care environments. Specifically, 56.2 percent of children from single-parent households reported receiving strong emotional support, compared to 20 percent of children in foster care. While financial challenges were more common among single-parent families, consistent caregiver involvement and emotional encouragement helped foster resilience and sustained school engagement. In contrast, children in foster care experienced greater instability, with frequent changes in

caregivers and schooling identified as major barriers to academic continuity and achievement. Overall, parental involvement and secure attachment emerged as protective factors across both family settings, while instability and unresolved trauma were identified as the most significant risk factors affecting children in foster care. By comparing these two non-traditional family environments, the study addresses a gap in Malawian research and provides evidence-based insights for policymakers, educators, and social service providers seeking to improve academic outcomes among vulnerable children. The study contributes to broader discussions on educational equity by highlighting the importance of stable caregiving, emotional support, and school-based interventions in promoting academic success.

Keywords: family environment, academic success, single-parent families, foster care, parental involvement, emotional support, Malawi, attachment theory, ecological systems theory

INTRODUCTION

The family environment plays a central role in shaping a child's academic success, influencing cognitive development, motivation, emotional regulation, and overall educational achievement. Children who grow up in stable and supportive family settings are more likely to develop positive learning attitudes and achieve better academic outcomes. However, children raised in single-parent families and foster care homes often encounter distinct challenges that may negatively affect their educational progress. Research consistently shows that family structure, socioeconomic conditions, parental involvement, and emotional stability are key

determinants of academic performance. In non-traditional family settings, children may experience limited supervision, emotional stress, and inconsistent educational support, all of which increase their vulnerability to poor academic outcomes.

This study explores the lived experiences of children from single-parent households and foster care environments in Malawi, with the aim of understanding how these family structures influence academic success. It examines both the challenges children face and the resilience they demonstrate within their respective family contexts. By identifying strengths and weaknesses within single-parent and foster care environments, the study seeks to contribute to existing academic literature and support the development of effective interventions that promote educational success among vulnerable children.

In the Malawian context, socioeconomic challenges significantly affect children's access to quality education. Poverty remains widespread, with a large proportion of the population living below the poverty line. Single-parent families, often resulting from divorce, death, or personal choice, frequently face financial constraints and time limitations that affect their ability to support children academically. Similarly, children in foster care are more likely to experience trauma, frequent placement changes, and disrupted schooling. This study therefore seeks to examine how family environment, emotional support, and caregiver involvement influence academic performance among children in single-parent and foster care settings in Malawi, while also offering insights to guide policy formulation and social support programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW This chapter reviews existing scholarly literature on the relationship between family environment and

academic success, with a particular focus on children from single-parent families and foster care homes. Key concepts such as family environment, academic success, parental involvement, single-parent families, and foster care are examined to establish a conceptual foundation for the study. Existing research indicates that parental involvement is strongly associated with improved academic outcomes, even in non-traditional family structures. Studies suggest that children from single-parent households can perform well academically when caregivers provide consistent emotional support and remain actively engaged in their education, despite financial or time-related challenges.

In contrast, research on foster care highlights the negative impact of placement instability and frequent caregiver changes on children's educational outcomes. School transfers, disrupted peer relationships, and inconsistent academic monitoring often result in lower academic achievement among foster care children. Additionally, emotional and behavioral difficulties arising from trauma and neglect further compound educational challenges. The literature emphasizes the importance of emotional and psychological support in fostering resilience, motivation, and academic engagement among vulnerable children.

The study is guided by Attachment Theory, which emphasizes the importance of secure caregiver-child relationships in emotional and cognitive development, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which explains how multiple environmental systems, including family, school, and community, interact to influence child development. These theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how family environments shape academic success.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed-methods research approach that combined qualitative and quantitative techniques to examine the influence of family environment on academic success among children in single-parent families and foster care homes. An exploratory research design and case study approach were adopted to allow for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences. The study population comprised children, parents, caregivers, and teachers associated with Lilongwe Rehabilitation Centre and Lilongwe Primary School.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select a total of thirty-one participants, including sixteen children, eight from single-parent families and eight from foster care homes, as well as five teachers, five caregivers, and five parents. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, structured questionnaires, and a review of academic records such as grades and attendance registers. A pilot study was conducted to refine data collection instruments and ensure clarity and reliability. Qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis to identify emerging themes, while quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics with the aid of Microsoft Excel. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and minimizing potential harm to participants.

RESULTS

The study achieved a full response rate from all thirty-one participants. The demographic profile indicated a relatively balanced gender distribution, with 51.6 percent male and 48.4 percent female participants, and an age range spanning from nine years to over fifty years. The findings revealed clear differences in family experiences and academic support between children from single-parent families and those in foster care.

Children from single-parent households reported higher levels of parental involvement, with half of the respondents indicating strong caregiver engagement in their school activities. This involvement was associated with better academic performance and more consistent school attendance. In contrast, children in foster care reported lower levels of caregiver involvement, with only a quarter indicating strong academic support. Financial hardship emerged as a major challenge for single-parent families, often limiting access to educational materials. However, emotional encouragement and consistent supervision helped mitigate these challenges.

Children in foster care faced more severe challenges related to placement instability, emotional stress, and past trauma. Frequent changes in caregivers and schools disrupted learning continuity and weakened emotional security. Emotional support was reported by a significantly higher proportion of children from single-parent families compared to those in foster care, and this emotional stability was strongly linked to motivation, resilience, and academic engagement. The findings were further supported by graphical and tabular presentations that illustrated comparative trends between the two family environments.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are consistent with existing literature and the theoretical frameworks guiding the research. Attachment Theory helps explain why children from single-parent families, who often maintain stable emotional bonds with caregivers, demonstrate greater academic resilience despite financial constraints. Conversely, the lack of stable attachments in foster care settings contributes to emotional insecurity and poorer academic outcomes. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems

Theory further highlights how interactions between family, school, and community environments shape children's educational experiences.

The Malawian context underscores the importance of extended family networks and community support systems in mitigating the challenges faced by vulnerable children. The study confirms that parental involvement and emotional support serve as critical protective factors, while instability and unresolved trauma pose significant risks to academic success, particularly for children in foster care.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that family environment plays a significant role in influencing academic success among children in both single-parent families and foster care homes. Despite economic challenges, single-parent families often provide consistent emotional support and active involvement that promote positive academic outcomes. In contrast, foster care environments are frequently characterized by instability, weaker emotional bonds, and disrupted schooling, which negatively affect academic achievement. The findings emphasize the importance of secure attachment, stable caregiving, and sustained educational support in improving academic outcomes for children in non-traditional family settings.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that single-parent families be supported through targeted financial and material assistance from government agencies and non-governmental organizations to reduce economic pressures that hinder educational support. For foster care settings, there is a need for improved caregiver training in emotional support and child development, as well as policies aimed at reducing placement

changes and ensuring continuity in schooling. Schools should strengthen communication with caregivers, implement counseling and mentoring programs, and adopt inclusive policies that address the needs of vulnerable learners. Policymakers are encouraged to develop comprehensive educational and social support policies tailored to the unique challenges faced by children in single-parent and foster care environments.

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