

Blended Family Dynamics and Academic Performance Outcome of the Child in Kenya: Case of Kabete Sub-County in Kiambu County

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Abstract

Family changes adversely impact the academic performance outcome of a child. The aim of the study was to investigate the effect of blended family dynamics on academic performance outcome of the child in Kenya using case of Kabete Sub-County in Kiambu County. To achieve its objectives, the study uses primary data collected from a sample of 50 secondary school age-going children from blended families. The data was analysed using descriptive analysis method as well as inference using chi-square method. One of the key findings of the study was that that blended family dynamics influenced the academic performance outcome of children, with stepfather families having negative influence on the academic performance outcome of children. The findings of the study are important in that they can be used to formulate policies and strategies for promoting improvement in psychological wellbeing of the child in blended families.

Keywords: academic performance outcome, blended family, stepparents, stepfather families, stepmother families.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the traditional family of mother, father, and shared biological children as the dominant structure of a family has been replaced by the modern family, the blended family (Cindy and Fernandez, 2014). Blended families are called by several other names including stepfamilies, reconstituted families, patchwork families, non-traditional families, new families, etc. Baham, Weimer, Braver, & Fabricius (2008) refer to the traditional family as the intact family, also popularly referred to as the nuclear family where the family has remained together for the duration of the child's life.

Charlein (2009) contends that the concept of blended family has evolved from the embracing of two contradictory cultural ideals, marriage and individualism. Marriage is formal commitment to share one's life with another placing a strong value in the institution of marriage. Individualism emphasizes personal choice and self-development. High value is placed on personal freedom, fulfilment, and growth as well as spiritual fulfilment, reflecting individualism. Between 1900 and 1960, marriage changed from an institutional and practical arrangement to a companionate one, meaning that individuals looked to marriage not just for help in raising a family and sharing a home but also for personal growth and fulfilment. Since 1960, marriage has become more an individualized institution as increasing number of individuals made unilateral decisions to divorce or separate, and more people made decisions based on what they perceived as best for them rather than for their families as a whole (Fine, 2010). High emphasis on personal growth can explain partially the high divorce rate in the United States (US) as it provides individuals in dissatisfying marriages with a reason to seek divorce (Fine, 2010).

In the US the rate of family breakdown is more than 50% and children born to married parents experience family breakdown prior to the age of 16 years (Lazar, Guttman, & Abas, 2009). Majority of these adolescents become part of a remarried family prior to turning the age of 18 years causing a change in the family structure of these adolescents that result in relational issues in their life (Carranza, Kilmann, & Vendemia, 2009). In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the institution of traditional family is resilient but steadily responding to global changes (Dube, 2015). For instance in Kenya, Chacha (2015) reported details of a complex and almost dysfunctional blended family where the stepmother and the stepfather had one child of their own while she brought a son into the marriage and he brought two daughters.

Available empirical evidence has shown that there is negative association between family dynamics and academic performance outcome for children who did not live with both biological parents Sundstrom (2013) and Turunen (2011; 2014). The higher risks for negative academic performance for children who did not live with both biological parents were related to disruptions in the family structure.

2. Literature Review

Initially, formation of a blended family depended on the death of a spouse. This has been preceded, since 1960s by divorce and remarriages of one or both partners from previous spouses (Cindy & Fernandez, 2014). Dissolution of two traditional family structures may lead to formation of a blended family structure that requires

reorganization as a whole in terms of its definition, identity, purpose, and roles of the family members (Cindy and Fernandez, 2014).

2.1 Dynamics of Blended Families

Blended families can be distinguished between simple and complex blended families (Jozsa & Balassa, 2014). A simple stepfamily is one in which there is only one stepparent and all children are the biological children of the same parent. This type of family would occur with a step-mother family or a step-father family. A complex stepfamily is one in which both parents are stepparents to at least one child. A complex stepfamily may also include the presence of a half-sibling: a child that is the result of a genetic union between both parents in the family, and would be a half-sibling to a child of the mother's or a child of the father's.

Blessing (2016) identifies three types of siblings and two main types of family composition. The three types of sibling are: full-siblings, step-siblings, and half-siblings. A full sibling is a sibling of the target child who shares the same biological parents. A step-sibling is a sibling of the target child who is not biologically related to the child, and has entered the family system via the child's stepparent. A half-sibling is a sibling of the target child who shares one biological parent with the child, but the sibling's other biological parent is not biologically related to the child. The half-sibling can be a result of the union between the target child's biological parent and the target's stepparent, or could be the result of the target child's biological parent's with a prior partner (Blessing, 2016).

The life of a child is influenced by the number of parents and siblings that they live with, as well as by whether or not their parents are married (World Family Map, 2014). According to the World Family Map, two-parent families are becoming less common in many parts of the world although they still constitute a majority of families around the globe. Children are particularly likely to live in two-parent families in Asia and the Middle East, compared with other regions of the world. Children are more likely to live with one or no parent in America, Europe, Oceania, and sub-Saharan Africa than in other regions (World Family Map, 2014).

2.2 Role of Stepparent

The transition into step parenting role is neither immediate nor a smooth transition (Pasley, Dallhite, & Ihinger-Tallman, 2017). This process is clouded by lack of positive role models for the role of stepparent, relegating each family to re-imagine and enact this function of step parenting within the ongoing family relationship. For the stepparents who do not have biological children of their own in the blended family, their step parenting role becomes more challenging (Pasley et al, 2017). This is because the presence of children requires an ongoing attention and interaction but for the stepparent, the form of the "relational lens" that the attention and interaction of children takes remains a troubling question (Pasley et al., 2017). Further, the authors indicate that private time and concern must be sacrificed in the new parenting role.

Empirical evidence shows that stepfathers feel inadequate in their role and do not perceive mutual love or mutual respect between themselves and their stepchildren, for instance, they are less warm, less supportive, less controlling, and more permissive, and less consistent in their discipline with their stepchildren than were fathers with their biological children; while stepmothers are reported to be more authoritarian in their parenting style than were others in first-marriage families and commonly use control without explanations of reasons for discipline and do not promote independent decision making on the part of stepchildren (Pasley et al., 2017). Being a stepmother is believed to be more difficult than being a stepfather, primarily because stepmothers often are expected to assume primary responsibility for child care. The most successful parenting in a blended family structure occurs where the stepparent focuses first on the development of a warm, friendly interaction style with the stepchild and once a foundation of mutual respect and affection is established, a stepparent who assumes a disciplinarian role is less likely to meet with resentment from the stepchild (Pasley et al., 2017).

2.3 Academic Performance Outcome

Several researchers including Sundstrom (2013) and Turunen (2011; 2014), investigated the association between family dynamic and academic performance outcome for children in the US and Sweden and found negative academic performance of children who did not live with both biological parents. Family structure theories can be seen to support these results. The higher risks for negative academic performance for children who did not live with both biological parents were related to disruptions in the family structure. Such disruptions include the turmoil a child experiences when parents separate and or re-couple with a step-parent, weaker connections between the child and his/her non-custodial (absent) parent (usually the father), and weakened connection to resources outside the immediate family. Having lived with half-siblings in Sweden and United States, is negatively correlated with educational performance even when controlling for number of half and full-siblings (Ginther & Sundstrom, 2012). After accounting for household conflicts, children in stepfather families perform worse in school and have lower academic performance outcome than children living in original, two-parent families (Brown, 2010).

Sundstrom (2013) captured the complexity of stepfamily relationships using large Swedish data set of 40,000 children born in 1964-1965 matched with 36,000 of their full and half-siblings born in 1960-1970. The children were followed into adulthood and their academic performance examined. The cross-section results show that growing up with half-siblings is negatively correlated with the academic performance. The author used sibling-difference models to take account of selection and assess the casual effect of living in a certain family and sibling dynamics in childhood. Evenhouse and Reilly (2004) and Shui (2015) analyze the adolescent data using family fixed-effects estimation methods and find that stepsiblings do worse in academic performance outcome as reflected in Grade Point Average (GPA) than their half-siblings who are joint children in blended families.

Ginther and Pollak (2004) and Ginther and Sundstrom (2012) studied the reasons why living in a blended family may have a negative effect on academic performance. One possible explanation is that parents' time and stepparents' time are imperfect substitutes and that this leads to fiercer competition for the parents' time between the full and half-siblings which, in turn, creates more stress for the children. Another possible explanation, borrowed from evolutionary psychology, is that parents favour their own off springs over their stepchildren (Case, Lin, & McLanahan, 2001; Thomson, 2017). According to the authors, the children raised by stepparents have less schooling than the biological children of both parents. Tillman (2008) studied data on more than 11,000 teens and found that teenagers in families with different biological parents had lower academic grades than other adolescents. Boys living with half or step-siblings had the most difficulty adjusting. Problems may arise because teens feel they have to compete for parental attention, combined with the stress of living with non-traditional siblings. Artis (2007), Fomby & Cherlin (2007), Magnuson & Berger (2009), Brown (2010), and Brown, Manning, & Stykes (2015) investigated living arrangement patterns and their implications on child academic performance. On average, children residing outside of families with two biological married parents, married stepparents, and cohabiting families fair less well in academic wellbeing.

There is an increasing trend to encourage both parents to maintain contact with their children following parental separation and divorce (Rasmussen and Stratton, 2016; Kalil, Mogstad, Rege, and Votruba (2011)). The driving force behind this trend is the belief that such contact is in the best interest of the child. Rasmussen and Stratton (2016) use information on the distance between the child and the non-residential parent in order to proxy for contact and analyze child outcome including academic performance outcome for children from nonnuclear families in Denmark while Kalil et al. (2011) do similar work using Norwegian data. Contrary to the popular belief, the authors find no evidence that children who live a greater distance from their non-residential parent experience worse academic performance outcome. Rasmussen and Stratton (2016) use Instrumental Variable (IV) approach to account for reverse causality on recognizing that distance to the non-residential parent is a decision variable that may be related to child academic performance outcome. The results suggest that academic performance was better for children who live farther away from their non-residential parent.

2.4 Governing Theories

The key theory that underpinned the study is Attachment Theory by Bowlby complimented by Theory of Structural Family Therapy by Minuchin. The Attachment Theory emphasizes the importance of attachment in regard to Internal Working Model (IWM) of a person which guides him/her in inter and intrapersonal relationships throughout life while the Structural Theory places importance on the patterns of interaction within the family.

2.4.1 Attachment Theory

Attachment theory states that a strong emotional and physical attachment to at least one primary caregiver is critical to personal development and it is one of the most studied aspects of psychology. In his work in late 1960s involving the developmental psychology of children from various backgrounds, Bowlby (1969) established the precedent that childhood development depended heavily upon a child's ability to form a strong relationship with at least one primary caregiver. As a concept in developmental psychology, attachment theory concerns the importance of attachment in regards to personal development. The theory makes the claim that the ability for an individual to form an emotional and physical attachment to another person gives a sense of stability and security necessary to take risks, branch out, and grow and develop as a personality.

The parent-child relationship provides the child with important ideas of forming relationships and learning to adjust to various experiences in life (Hines, 2007; Gray, 2011). The theory assumes that adult friendships or romantic relationships develop from parents or examples of early caregivers (Carranza et al., 2009), suggesting that a parental separation could cause the child to have relationship issues later in life. Family breakdown can change the attachment style creating feelings of anger, resentment and confusion. In a blended family structure, adolescents and young adults face challenges of building relationships and committing to a relationship because of low trust in stepparents, low satisfaction and interpersonal skills (Fogarty, Ferrer, and McCrea, 2013). This creates the challenge of the blended family in building quality family.

Cassidy and Shaver (2008) explain that attachment theory sheds light on early development of Internal

Working Model (IWM) in individuals. According the authors, the model informs the individual of relationships and interactions with self and others from childhood to the entire lifespan. Potter and Sullivan (2011) assert that IWM facilitates future interactions of the individual with self and the world. The presence of the primary caregiver mostly the mother is paramount because the child mirrors the self with whom it attaches to (Smith and Elliot, 2011). According to Beebe and Steele (2013) the internal working model begins to develop six months after the baby is born. This confirms the observation by Smith and Elliot (2011). Positive internal working model facilitates intra and interpersonal relationships (Davies, 2011). Attachment relationships form bases on which individuals regulate their emotions (Brenning & Braet, 2013).

The attachment model explains infant behaviour towards their attachment figure, during separation and reunion times. It is believed that attachment behaviours formed in infancy will help shape the attachment relationships people have as adults. Some psychologists, such as Harris (1998) and Field (1996), disagree with this idea. Harris (1998) believes that too much emphasis on how a child "turns out" should not be placed on the parents and also disagrees with the nurture assumption as well. Peers have a lot of influence on a child's personality, just as the child's environment does. Field (1996) also criticizes the attachment model because he believes that there are many limitations to it.

2.4.2 Theory of Structural Family Therapy

Theory of structural family therapy by Minuchin (1974) focuses on the organization of the entire family to include rules, boundaries, and coalitions that characterize the family structure (Nichols, 2010). Structural theory views the family as an integrated whole and as a system. The emphasis is on patterns of interaction within the family providing clues to the basic structure and organization of the system, the family. According to Minuchin (1974), the family will change as society changes. Society develops extra familiar structures to adapt to new ways of thinking and new social and economic realities. It is these changes in society that shape the formation of the blended family and other forms of the family.

The key critique of the Structural Theory is Standish (2013), who claims that the Theory de-emphasizes emotional lives, is biased on appropriate family structure that is "western" nuclear family model and needs cross cultural considerations. While the attachment theory emphasizes the importance of strong emotional and physical attachment to personal development including children, family structural theory addresses problems in the functioning within a family. Changes in family structures can influence personal development of children in terms of psychological, social, and academic wellbeing (Brown et al., 2015).

3. Methodology

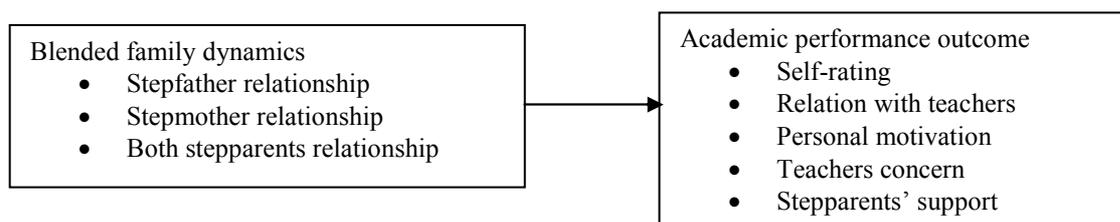
3.1 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework focuses on the interrelationships of various variables based on the theoretical and empirical considerations made in the literature review. Figure 1 illustrates the interrelationship of the dependent and independent variables used in the study. The independent variable is the blended family dynamics while the dependent variable is the psychological wellbeing of the child.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Blended Family and Academic Wellbeing of Child

Independent Variable

Dependent Variable



Source: Own formulation based on Minuchin (1974) and Bowlby (1969)

Academic performance outcome refers to the outcome of education reflecting the student's success in meeting short- or long-term goals in education (Brown et al., 2015). Several aspects as proxy for academic performance outcome used in the study include: self-rating on academic performance, relationship with teachers, personal motivation, teachers concern for own performance, and stepparents' academic support

Blended family is a family where at least one parent has children from a previous relationship that are not genetically related to the other parent (Jozsa & Balassa, 2014). The aspects used in the study as proxy for blended families is the blended family types: stepfather family, and stepmother family.

3.2 Sampling Design and Data Collection

The study employed both random (or probability) sampling and non-random (or non-probability) sampling techniques in sample selection. The target 15 public secondary schools in Kabete Sub-county were stratified into

three (3) strata: girls' only secondary schools, boys' only secondary schools, and mixed secondary schools. A simple random sample of one-third of schools from each stratum was drawn, namely: one school for girls, one school for boys, and three mixed schools. From each school, the study drew a target sample of 10 students from blended families using purposive sampling with the guidance of the schooling administration through Guidance and Counselling teachers. Thus, the study used a sample size of 50 secondary school age-going students from blended families in the age-group 14 - 19 years. According to RoK (2013), secondary school age-going children are in the 14 - 19 years age bracket.

With the help of the guidance and counselling teachers, the respondents were convened in a room, inducted about the study and were able to willingly participate in the study. The study collected primary data on family composition types, on children from blended families focusing on their well-being in relation to psychological wellbeing.

3.3 Study Area

Kabete is a cosmopolitan Sub-County in Kiambu County, close to Kenya's Capital City, Nairobi. It covers an area of 60.20 square kilometres which is about 2.4 percent of the total area of Kiambu County and has a population of 140,427 people constituting about 8.7 percent of the total population in the County (RoK, 2009). Due to its proximity to the Nairobi capital city, Kabete Sub-County has the highest population density in Kiambu County which is 2,534 persons per square kilometre followed by Kiambaa Sub-County which has 2,153 persons per square kilometre. The Sub-County is among the leading innovative commercial hubs in Kiambu County and constitutes five (5) County Assembly Wards (CAWs): Gitaru, Muguga, Nyathuna, Kabete, and Uthiru. Kabete Sub-County is also among the wealthiest counties in Kenya where people primarily work in the Civil Service, carry out businesses, do farming or are in the informal sector. The larger population of the people is in retail business and service provision where they manage hotels and restaurants, new and second hand clothes, foodstuffs, hardware shops and household goods (RoK, 2013).

Kabete Sub-County has a total of 203 schools: 185 primary schools and 18 secondary schools. The secondary school age group is 14-19 years and forms about 7.4 percent or 10,391 of the total population in the Sub-County (RoK, 2013). The total number of students in public secondary schools in the Sub-County is 5,504.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Analysis of Academic Performance Outcome

Annex 1 presents the results of various dimensions of academic performance outcome of children from blended families in Kabete Sub-County. Overall, the results suggest that respondents made a positive evaluation of their academic performance outcome.

4.2 Academic Performance Outcome by Family Typology

Annex 2 presents results of academic performance outcome of children from blended families in Kabete Sub-County. The results show that the difference in academic performance outcome between children from stepmother family and stepfather family was statistically significant ($\chi^2(1) = 7.936, p < .05$) implying that blended family dynamics influenced the academic performance outcome of children, with stepfather families having negative influence on the academic performance outcome of children. This finding is consistent with the findings of Brown (2010) who established that children living in stepfather families perform worse in school than children living in stepmother families.

5. Conclusion

The results of the study showed that most of the children in Kabete Sub-County assessed various dimensions of their academic performance outcome as good. However, adverse academic performance outcome was registered for stepfather family suggesting there exists a gap of attention in parenting within the stepfather family typology which the stepfather is not able to fill. As a result, stepchildren from stepfather families face challenge adjusting to new family structure with the adverse effect of their outcome.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Academic performance outcome

Table 1: Academic wellbeing of children in Kabete Sub-County

Dimensions of academic wellbeing		Good	Fair	Bad	Total
I would rate my academic wellbeing as:	Frequency	26	21	3	50
	Percent	52%	42%	6%	100%
I view my relationship with my teachers as:	Frequency	28	20	2	50
	Percent	56%	40%	4%	100%
My personal motivation to study is:	Frequency	28	20	2	50
	Percent	56%	40%	4%	100%
My teachers' concern for my performance are:	Frequency	24	23	3	50
	Percent	48%	46%	6%	100%
I view my step-parent's academic support as:	Frequency	19	22	9	50
	Percent	38%	44%	18%	100%

Annex 2: Academic performance and family type

Table 2: Academic performance outcome of children from blended families in Kabete Sub-County

Dynamics		Academic wellbeing		Total
		Good	Fair/bad	
Stepfather social setting	Frequency	6	15	21
	Percent	23.1%	62.5%	42.0%
Stepmother social setting	Frequency	17	8	25
	Percent	65.4%	33.3%	50.0%
Both stepmother and stepfather social setting	Frequency	3	1	4
	Percent	11.5%	4.2%	8.0%
Total	Frequency	26	24	50
	Percent	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 3: Chi-square test of academic performance outcome

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.936 ^a	1	.005
Likelihood Ratio	8.152	1	.004
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.777	1	.005
N of Valid Cases	50		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 11.04.