

Influence of Single-Parent Families on Preschool Learners' Class Participation: A Case of Mwingi Zone, Kitui County, Kenya

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Abstract

This study was designed to investigate whether single-parent families have influence on pre-school learners' class participation. The study was carried out in Mwingi zone of Kitui County, Kenya. The zone had a total of 67 public pre-schools and the study targeted all the 67 public pre-schools, 1030 pre-school learners and 88 pre-school teachers. The researcher employed descriptive survey design so as to get information from the sampled respondents. The researcher obtained the sample size of the study by using both probability and non-probability sampling techniques. The sampling techniques included stratified random sampling and purposive sampling. The schools in the zone were grouped into five clusters namely: Musukini, Kanzanzu, Mwingi, Ithumbi and Kyethani. The researcher used a representative sample of 10% of the targeted preschool learners and 20.5% of the targeted preschool teachers. To collect data from the respondents, the researcher used questionnaires and observation checklists. The questionnaires were used to collect data from pre-school teachers, while observation checklists were used to collect data from pre-school learners. After collecting the data, the researcher processed it by editing, coding, classifying and tabulating it and then analyzed the processed data using descriptive analysis, frequency distribution tables and percentages and Pearson Correlation Tables. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze data. The findings of the study indicated that there was a strong negative correlation ($r = -0.712$, $P < 0.05$) between single-parent families and the class participation of pre-school learners. The study recommended that the pre-schools should be encouraged to be conducting frequent guidance and counseling sessions for learners from single-parent families. Pre-school class teachers should also identify the learners who are not active in class participation and encourage them to be active in class by offering rewards.

Keywords: Family structure, single-parent family, Pre-school, Pre-school learner, Class Participation, School access

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1. Background to the Study

According to Fomby, Cavanagh and Goode (2011) there is a correlation between family structure and learners' outcomes as they found that learners who grow up in single-parent families and learners with stepparents have poor learning outcomes than those who live with two married biological parents. A study carried out in America by Frisco, Muller and Frank (2007) presents evidence for a link between family structures and educational achievement. For example, Potter (2010) observes that divorce and separation correlate positively with diminished emotional, social and school achievement and performance. Potter's observation is in line with

Amato (2000) who outlines that the financial or economic circumstances of families decline after divorce especially among mother-headed families, which may negatively affect children's nutrition and health, reduce parental investment in books, educational toys, computers, private lessons and constraints in choice of residential location. Another study in US cities by Cooper, Osborne, Beck and McLanahan (2011) shows that boys have increased externalizing behaviour problems at age of five years if they were born to unmarried mothers. Moreover, a Norwegian research found that children who experience divorce early in life have lower educational outcomes and that the effect of divorce is strongest when the child is young (Steele, Single-Rushton & Kravdal, 2009).

Although only a few empirical studies examine the links between family structure and learners' outcomes in Norway, there is some evidence of more school problems and lower academic achievement among children who have experienced divorce (Lauglo, 2008). The same findings are supported by Ermisch and Francescon (2001) who argue that children who experience a family disruption might have lower average educational attainment either because of parenting deficits or because of other deleterious changes that accompany the process of family disruption such as economic vulnerability. Single parented children grow up with low self-esteem frustrations lax upbringing which all contribute to poor participation in activities as compared to their peers who come from stable full parented families (Ngesu, Mulonzi, Mugo & Kasivu, 2014).

A study carried out in South Africa by Meier and Marais (2008) shows that children develop and learn best in a physically and environmentally safe environment where their basic physical and emotional needs are met and that family instability is associated with children's low cognitive achievement, emotional and conduct problems and children's low verbal ability in early and middle childhood. The same argument is supported by Nato (2016) who carried out his study in Bungoma, Kenya who found out those children from single-parent families performed poorly when compared with learners from intact-biological or nuclear family background. Kibwea, Mwanja and

Kamau (2017) point out that poor social background of the children and heavy economic backgrounds reduce for them the opportunities of interacting with their peers

A report by Uwezo Kenya (2016) reveals that nationally only 3 out of 10 pupils in class three can do class two-class work. The report further continues to state that children from poorer households consistently show lower learning skills and that many children across the three East Africa countries (Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania) lack actual literacy and numeracy outcomes. According to records held in Mwingi Zonal Education Office, data shows that from 2013 to 2016 there has been low transition rate of pre-school learners' to class one. For these years, the transition rate has been ranging between 60% - 68%. Similarly, data obtained from the same Office for the year 2013 reported that many learners were classified as most vulnerable children (MVCs) due to the nature of their family backgrounds for example grandparent-headed families, child-headed families and single-parent families (Mwingi Zonal Office, 2013). The objective of the study was therefore to investigate the influence of single-parent families on preschool learners' class participation in Mwingi Zone, Mwingi Sub County, Kitui County, Kenya.

According to Williams and Dunne-Bryant (2006) many young single mothers come from backgrounds that are educationally and economically disadvantaged and as a result they often face tasks of establishing personal identities, preparing for adulthood and becoming parents all at the same time, something that exposes children of young single mothers to many problems such as poor social and motor development, health problems and more academic problems. Children born to single or cohabiting mothers exhibit higher levels of externalizing difficulties at age five years, lower levels of verbal ability and academic problems (Kiernan & Mensah, 2010). Similarly Potter (2010) argues that parental separation is associated with a wide range of adverse impacts on cognitive capacity, poor language development, deficits in school readiness, poor mental or emotional health, poor social conduct and behaviour, early onset of sexual behaviour and teenage pregnancy, poor academic achievement at school and lower levels of education.

Nzina, Mulwa and Kimiti (2019) argue that parents' socio-economic status determines students' retention and academic achievement in school. A study carried out in Kenya by Ngaruiya (2013) on effects of family socio-economic status on pre-school children's primary school readiness confirms that children from single-parent and extended families had low achievements in both language and socio-emotional competencies. Although a number of studies have been carried out on the influence of family structure on learning, none of those studies has been carried out in Mwingi Zone. The target population used in these previous studies is also different from the preschool learners from public schools, which this study targeted. The studies have also used different research designs such as ex post facto research design, longitudinal survey design and correlational and comparative research designs which are different from the descriptive survey research design this study used and therefore research gaps exist which may result in the study yielding different results.

2. Research Methodology

The study adopted descriptive survey design to study the effects of family structure on pre-school learners' class participation in public pre-schools in Mwingi Zone. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) descriptive survey research design is a type of study conducted to generate explanatory information or characteristics about a specific population or phenomenon. Descriptive survey research design is strategic plan that sets out the broad outline and key features to be undertaken in a research study (Mugenda and Mugenda, 2012). They also argue that the design is not only appropriate for data that is obtained but also an appropriate mode of enquiry for making inferences about the large group of people from the data drawn on the relatively small number of individuals from the group. The design was appropriate for the study because it was targeting a large group of people and therefore it was easy to make generalizations from the representative sample of the target population. The design is also less expensive and can be done within a relatively short period of time (Begi, 2009) and therefore suitable for the research which was self-funded.

The target population for this study was 1030 pre-school learners and 88 pre-school teachers from 67 public pre-schools from Mwingi Zone in Kitui County- Kenya. The researcher used both the stratified random sampling technique and purposive sampling to obtain the sample size of the study. Stratified random sampling technique was used to select the sample size in the study. The technique enabled the researcher to obtain a representative sample after stratifying the schools in the zone into 5 strata or sub groups based on their geographical locations and then from each strata, the researcher got a representative sample of 10% of pre-school learners and 20.5% of pre-school teachers.

Table 1: Stratified target population of the study

Sub-group	Respondent	Target population	Sample size
Musukini	Pre-school learners	280	28
	Pre-school teachers	22	5
Kanzanzu	Pre-school learners	160	16
	Pre-school teachers	15	3
Mwingi	Pre-school learners	260	26
	Pre-school teachers	21	4
Ithumbi	Pre-school learners	140	14
	Pre-school teachers	14	3
Kyethani	Pre-school learners	190	19
	Pre-school teachers	16	3

According to Gay (1992), sample size of 10% of the accessible population is enough for a big population. An effective population sample is the one that is not only accessible to the researcher but also representative and diverse (Kombo & Tromp, 2006). Based on that argument, the researcher's sample size of 10% of preschool learners and 20.5% of preschool teachers is an effective population sample. For pilot and test-retest studies, the researcher used purposive sampling to get respondents.

Table 2: Sample Size

Respondent	Population size	Sample size	Sample (%)
Pre-school learners	1030	103	10.0%
Pre-school teachers	88	18	20.5%
Total	1118	121	

The researcher used questionnaires and observation checklists. The questionnaires were used to collect data from pre-school teachers on influence of single-parent families on pre-school learners' class participation in public pre-schools in Mwingi zone. The researcher used observation checklists to collect data from pre-school learners as this enabled the researcher to get accurate data which measure the overt behaviour of the respondents (Kombo & Tromp, 2006). The researcher observed the pre-school learners' behaviour in terms of their class participation.

3. Research Results

The questionnaires were administered to 118 pre-school teachers while check lists were administered to 103 pre-school pupils. The collected data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics where frequency tables were created using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Inferential statistics, that is, correlation analysis was used to test the relationship between the independent and dependent variables followed by data interpretation and discussion of the findings. The questionnaires for this study were administered on pre-school teachers. The results of questionnaire return rate was as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Questionnaires return rate for pre-school teachers

Respondents	Frequency	Percent
Pre-school teachers	18	100%

From table 3, all the pre-school teachers had returned their questionnaires. The return rate became possible because the researcher personally took the questionnaires to the sampled respondents. This was sufficient according to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) who observed that a response rate of 70 percent and over is very good. Since the response rate was more than 70 percent, it was considered very good response. This would provide the required information for purposes of data analysis. On check list all the 103 learners (100%) were visited, observation made and report written. The objective for this study was to determine the influence of single-parent families on pre-school learners' class participation in Mwingi Zone, Mwingi Sub-County, Kitui County, Kenya. To achieve this objective, the respondents were required to indicate whether there was the problem of truancy among pre-school pupils from single-parent families in their classes. The results were presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Presence of Truancy among children from single-parent families

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	13	72.2
No	5	27.8
Total	18	100

It was established that 72.2% of the respondents indicated there were pupils from single-parent families with truancy problems in their classes. Some of the reasons given for this were; some parents failure to provide adequate learning materials and food, babysitting, child labour and past family conflicts among others. The respondents were also asked to rate the class participation of children from single-parent families. The responses were presented in Table 5

Table 5: Class participation of children from single-parent families

Response	Frequency	Percent
Excellent	2	11.1
Very good	2	11.1
Good	7	38.9
Fair	3	16.7
Poor	4	22.2
Total	18	100

Table 5 established that 38.9% of the class participation among children from single-parent families was only good. This was followed by 22.2% who were poor in class participation. These results agree with Kiernan and Mensah (2010) who argue that children of single and cohabiting mothers exhibit higher levels of externalizing difficulties at age five years, lower levels of verbal ability and academic problems. The researcher further sought to find out whether the single-parent families have a relationship with the class participation of pre-school learners. This was done using Pearson product moment correlation measure of relationships between single-parent families and the class participation of pre-school learners. The results were presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Correlation between single-parent families and class participation of pre-school learners

Variables		Grandparent families	Class participation of pre-school learners'
Single-parent	Pearson Correlation	1	-.712**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	18	18
Class participation of pre-school learners'	Pearson Correlation	-.712**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	18	18

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Results in Table 6 reveals that, there is a strong negative correlation ($r = -0.712$, $P < 0.05$) between child-headed families and the class participation of pre-school learners. This implies that child-headed families negatively influence class participation. These results agree with Ngaruiya (2013) who argues there is always a negative correlation between children from single-parents and communication in class. The results also are in line with the findings of Cooper and others (2011) who argue that children's exposure to family instability is associated with lower verbal ability and academic problems. Also, Mwanja and Njagi (2017) point out that a parent is very important in shaping the behavior of a child.

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher made some conclusion. It was concluded that there were varied family structures in all the schools under the study which included intact-biological families, single-parent families, child-headed families and grandparent-headed families. The study concluded that pre-school learners from the single-parent families had higher rates of truancy problems which implied that single-parent families had a negative influence on pre-school learners' class participation and school attendance.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher made the following recommendations: The pre-school teachers and the school administration should identify learners from single-parent families so that they can be offered the necessary psychological and emotional support through guidance and counseling. They can also be provided with food stuff, clothing and learning materials. This will raise their self-esteem. The pre-school administration should communicate with the parents about how their child is going on emotionally, socially and academically at school, develop friendship with children and families so that they can feel safe and secure to talk them. Pre-school class teachers should identify the pupils who are not active in class participation and motivate them to participate by offering them rewards, identify the pre-school learners' strengths and build on them so as to enhance their self-esteem, develop understanding of children's reactions and have private conversations with them for reassurance. The pre-school administration and pre-school teachers should also try to reach out to learners from single parent families and ensure that they give them educational support as well as providing them a safe, friendly and nurturing school environment where they feel free to talk. The school administration should as well place such learners with the most experienced teachers who will ensure that such learners get the attention and classroom stability they require and who will not single out such learners based on their family backgrounds in front of their peers or teachers.

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