

# Effects of Marital Conflict on Academic Performance of Students in Public and Private Day Secondary Schools in Kiambu Sub-County, Kenya

Inanga Ann Nkirote<sup>1</sup>, Nairobi, Esther Marima<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Pan African Christian University,

<sup>2</sup>PhD, Lecture, Pan Africa Christian University, P.o Box 56875– 00200, Nairobi Kenya

**Abstract:** *The marital harmony is one of the most powerful primary agents of socialization and achievement of the entire family including children at school. Marital conflict, or its absence therefore, is an important part of this. The general objective of this study was to investigate the effect of marital conflicts on the academic performance of public and private day secondary school students in Kenya based on a case study of selected schools in Kiambu sub-County. The study was anchored on Erickson's theory, Behavioral theory and Abraham Maslow's theory on hierarchy of needs. A descriptive survey design was adopted. Data was collected using a questionnaire through the drop and pick method. Data was tabulated and presented descriptively using frequency tables, charts and graphs. Results showed that most of the respondents had a low concentration as a result of quarrels between parents/guardians, and majority of the respondents agreed that their academic grades were affected by marital conflicts among parents. It was concluded that marital conflicts negatively impacted on children's academic performance. It was recommended that parents or guardians who are experiencing conflicts in their families should consider counselling options as soon as possible to avoid negative effects on their children.*

**Keywords:** Marital Conflict, Academic Performance, Couple Counseling

## 1. Introduction

Conflicts occur in all human societies and in various degrees. Marital conflict is depicted by husband and wife having different opinion about issues, events or activities which cannot be mutually resolved. Marital conflict usually arises mostly due to lack of understanding between the couple (Margolin, 2007). The effects of marital conflicts on children are traumatic as they may cause children to question their self-worth, experience unnecessary grief, guilt, or confusion (Siti, Nor, & Zalina, 2013). Young children especially, have difficulty understanding the rationality of their parents' reasons for conflict (Vander Valk, Spruijt, Goede, 2015, Maas & Meeus, 2015). In a family experiencing marital conflicts, it is difficult for children to find a sense of security because experience shows that what seemed stable and good could fall into pieces, leaving the children empty (Rodman, 2010).

Marital relationship plays a very important role in determining the academic performance of the spouses' children in school. In their study, Harold, Aitken and Shelton (2007) revealed the roles of marital relations and children's academic achievement. In accounting for the relationship between marital relations and children's adjustment, researchers suggest that marital relationship affects the children's adjustment directly through the emotional stress level and academic performance (Cummings & Davies, 2014). A conflict-riddled marriage may be associated with low achievement of children, because witnessing conflicts between parents heightens a level of stress on children and keep them from focusing on schoolwork (Hurlock, 2011). These children also learn inappropriate social problem-solving skills through modeling parental behaviors. Lee and Chung (2014) found that the marital relationship perceived

by Korean adolescent students were positively related to their school adjustment. Parents in a dysfunctional marriage are likely to be distressed and distracted by marital conflicts. Studies suggest that children in unstable marriages score lower than children from stable marriages on measure of academic success (Amato & Keith, 2008).

Research on the relationship between marital conflicts and children's academic success has focused on homework performance, personality development and school dropout (Cummings & Davies 2014). Most studies have dwelled on the developmental stage and gender of the child (Cummings, Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 2011; Cummings & Davies, 2014; Emery & O'Leary, 2010; Raver, 2014). Academic performance of students, particularly in Kenya is a key factor for their future. It is measured using grades achieved. Failure in the national examinations like Kenya Certificate of Primary Education and Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education make the life of students almost uncertain and full of despair (Sunal & Mutua, 2007). However, information on the relationship between marital conflict and academic performance of secondary school students in Africa and Kenya in particular is scanty. Maina's (2010) studied the impact of family conflicts on the academic performance and interpersonal relationships of pupils in public primary schools in Nakuru Municipality. Although the study found linkages between marital conflict and academic performance, the research was limited to Nakuru Municipality, thus the need for this study to establish whether similar results can be obtained in other regions. Limited research had been undertaken focusing on the link between marital conflict and academic performance of students in public secondary schools in Kiambu sub-county. The purpose of this study was to establish the effect of marital conflict on academic

performance of students in public and private day secondary schools.

## 2. Literature Review

According to Emery and Laumann-Billings (2008), children become attached to both parents and learn to depend on them for their survival. As a result, children become extremely overwhelmed after witnessing violent scenes between their parents and the parent-child relationship they have been relying on for nurture, safety and help is threatened by this violence. Home has been identified as an overwhelming factor affecting students' performance academically. Academic performance is an active demonstration that assess students learning, such as; presentation, musical and dramatic performance. Exposure to marital conflict might influence student directly or indirectly through its effect on their academics. It would appear, then, that broken homes may present a very serious danger to the emotional, personality, and mental adjustment of the young adolescent. This impinges on students' academic achievement. Cumming and Davies (2014) explained that couples from conflict free family tend to contribute immensely to the society through their high level of productivity within and in their places of work. The connection between parental conflict and academic achievement operated in at least two ways; mediated by family support and directly. High levels of parental conflict and family discord may relate to lower motivation by parents being involved with their adolescents in schools related activities.

Levine (2010) asserts that family factors greatly impact achievement levels in academics. These researchers suggested that achievement in school is formed through marital experience in childhood. It is commonly believed that divorce has a negative impact on children's cognitive performance. Deficits of cognitive performance have been found when children in divorced or father- absent families are compared with children from intact families particularly in the area of quantitative performance. For given observable parental characteristics, children with divorced or separated parents tend to perform less well at school than children living with their two parents. According to Bulduc, Caron, & Logue (2012), a child from a divorce family may face more difficulty than those in intact families, due to having to cope with a familial, emotional, or residential change. Bulduc et al. specifically examined students that had experienced parental divorce while attending college. Of the 17 interviewed, only one-fourth reported their grades suffering due to the divorce.

Kamau (2013) investigated the relationship between family background and academic performance of secondary school students in Siakago Division, Mbeere North District, Kenya using a descriptive research design with a target population of 1,081 students in Siakago Division and 1,081 parents. The study used a sample of 338 students and parents which were selected by use of a proportionate stratified random sampling method. The study revealed that parental marital status, family size, parent's education level and family financial status had a positive relationship on academic performance of students. However, the findings showed that while the marital status of the parents was not significant in explaining

the academic performance of students, the type of family, either cohesive or conflictive had an effect in academic performance. This signals the role of conflict in marriage and academic success of children.

The study relating to marital conflict and academic performance of students cannot be exhausted without considering the supporting theories and models. Numerous theories have been proposed regarding the family, marital conflict, child development and behavior (Boss, Doherty, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 2008). This study was anchored on four theories: Erickson's (1950) theory, Pavlov's (1927) Behavioural Theory and Maslow's (1970), Hierarchy of Needs Theory. Erikson (1968) proposed a psychoanalytic theory of psychosocial development comprising eight stages from infancy to adulthood. Erikson's ideas were greatly influenced by Freud (1923) going along with Freud's theory regarding the structure and topography of personality. Erickson's theory is divided into various stages based on a child's age. The first stage is trust versus mistrust. Some of the many problems due to marital conflict experienced in this stage are insecurity and hostility (Crain, 2011). The second stage is autonomy versus shame/doubt. When pupils' needs at this level are not met, they are likely to shift into great shame and doubt in themselves. The third stage, which is between 2-6 years, is initiative versus guilt. Here the pupils create their social world. Failure to meet their demands leads to development of an inner sense of guilt hampering the normal social development process which may result into build-up anxiety. The fourth stage is industry versus inferiority. This is between 6-12 years. During these years, pupils have tasks of facing and meeting the family, peers and school expectations. Problems at this stage include feelings of inadequacy, poor self-image, fear of school, lack of concentration, poor memory, excessive competition, expressing anger and sexual disadvantages (Bee & Boyd, 2009). Drawing from psychoanalytic theory, it can be deduced that pupils in homes with marital conflict lack trust in their parents because they are unable to provide basic needs for them. They will also be very ashamed of their background or family set-up because of the marital problems in those families. Some of the pupils feel guilty and blame themselves for their parent's fighting. Such feelings of guilt and low self-esteem lead to inferiority complex, which in turn leads to poor academic performance and poor interpersonal relationship with peers (Macnow, 2014).

Behavioural theory was proposed by Pavlov in 1900 and holds the view that the person is the product of his/her environment whereas the radical behaviorists such as Skinner ruled out the possibility of self-determination and freedom (Pavlov, 1927). It outlines that behaviorism equates learning with behaviors that can be observed and measured. Reinforcement in learning is key to successful transfer through behavioristic learning; there is need for strong emphasis on the stimulus and the response and their relationship. According to the theory, the primary goal of behaviorism is to form a relationship between a stimulus and a response. Behaviour modification aims to increase a person's skills so that the number of the response options is increased by overcoming disturbing behaviours that restrict choices. Bandura (1977) supports the belief that students learn their behaviour from others with whom they interact

with through observation or modeling. In addition, the mind, behaviour and the environment all play an important role in the learning process (LeClaire & Rushin, 2010). Students normally model parents, peers, siblings, authority figures, teachers and others whom they admire and trust (Staddon, 2014). Thus, the environment in which students grow up in shape their future. Those who grow up in an environment full of marital conflicts between their parents will exhibit different behaviours as compared to those who have grown up in a peaceful environment. Each student that observes or witnesses marital conflict is bound to adopt coping mechanisms which affect their academic performance and interpersonal relationships (Baum, 2005).

Abraham Maslow's theory on hierarchy of needs focuses on self-actualization of a person (Maslow, 1970). Some characteristics of a self-actualized person include tolerance, welcoming uncertainty, acceptance of self and others, creativity, need for privacy, autonomy, genuine caring for others, sense of humor and directedness. Maslow divided human needs into five categories. The most basic category is the physiological needs, which include food, shelter, clothing and education. When students lack these basic needs due to marital conflicts, they cannot grow well balanced, and their concentration is negatively affected. After the basic needs, a person yearns for safety needs. Students who witness their parents fighting all the time do not feel safe in that home. There is the fear that the parents might separate or even hurt them. Maslow also discussed the belonging needs. This refers to the need to be accepted and be able to affiliate with others. If students are communicating well with parents, they will feel accepted. In most cases, parents who are fighting do not have time to make the students feel needed. Students are bound to think that they are the cause of their parents' fights, which makes them feel unloved (Rennie, 2008). Esteem needs come forth on the hierarchy. This need makes one gain approval from others. When a couple is fighting, they cannot gain approval from the students as well as other society members. The highest need on the hierarchy is self-actualization. This need makes one feel self-fulfilled, hence able to realize their own potential. If all other needs are not fulfilled, one cannot reach the stage of self-actualization. It all starts at the physiological needs which can only be satisfactorily met in a loving family environment with minimal conflicts (Hoffman, 2009).

### 3. Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive research design to investigate the effects of marital conflict on academic performance of students in public and private day secondary schools in Kiambu Sub-County. Orodho (2009) states that, survey study gathers data at a particular point in time with the intention of describing the nature of the existing conditions. Descriptive research design was used when collecting information about people's attitudes, opinions, habits or a variety of education or social issues. There was a total of 22 secondary schools in Kiambu Sub-County. The target population comprised of 720 Form Three students in 4 public and 2 private mixed day secondary schools in Kiambu sub-county (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology-MoEST, 2015). This was because students from these public schools and private mixed day schools usually go home after school, and are likely to understand the nature and extent of marital conflicts in their homes. The researcher selected a sample of 72 respondents from the 4 public and 2 private mixed day secondary schools in Kiambu sub-county through purposive sampling. This sample was appropriate because it represented 10% of the target population as recommended by Mugenda and Mugenda (2003). A simple random sample of students was picked from the respective schools.

The primary data was collected using a questionnaire of closed and open-ended questions formulated in line with the objectives of the study. The researcher sought written permission to carry out the proposed research from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. A research permit from National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) and authority from the County Director of Education (CDE) were sought in order to carry out research in Kiambu Sub-County. The researcher also sought permission from the principals of the sampled schools, after which the schools were visited for the administration of the questionnaires. Careful instructions were given to the respondents on how to fill in the questionnaire. The researcher ensured confidentiality of the information in the questionnaires.

### 4. Results and Discussions

Results on response rate showed that 58 responses were obtained while 2 questionnaires were incomplete. Respondents' views were sought with respect to several dimensions of marital conflict and their effect on various aspects of academic performance such as academic grade, participation in school activities and concentration while in class. The results are presented in the table below.

**Table 1: Agreements with effects of Marital Conflicts on Academic Performance**

Statements on Effects of Marital Conflicts	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. Dev.
If parents/ guardians are quarrelling/ fighting, children cannot perform well in school	0%	4.4%	16.8%	41.6%	37.2%	4.12	0.84
When my parents quarrel, I become withdrawn from school activities	0%	2.3%	44.2%	53.5%	0%	3.51	1.36
My academic grades are negatively affected by the marital conflicts among parents	0%	3.1%	45.8%	45.8%	5.2%	3.53	0.65
The parental quarrels affect my relationship with teachers in school hence my poor academic performance	0%	17.6%	26.9%	47.2%	8.3%	3.56	0.88
I feel drawn away from my peers due to family conflicts between my parents which distracts my performance in school	0%	2.1%	39.6%	54.2%	4.2%	3.60	0.61
The marital conflicts affect my self-esteem which negatively affects my academic performance	0%	8%	30.1%	40.7%	21.2%	3.75	0.88

The table shows that 41.6% and 37.2% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed, respectively, that children cannot perform well in school if parents/guardians are quarrelling/fighting. However, 16.8% of the respondents were neutral while 4.4% of the respondents disagreed. Therefore, majority (78.8%) of the respondents were of the view that children cannot perform well in school if parents/guardians are quarrelling/fighting. A high mean score was obtained on a 5-point scale ( $M=4.12$ ,  $SD=0.84$ ), implying that the quarrelling/fighting between parents potentially affected children's academic performance. This finding is in line with a previous study undertaken by Harold et al. (2007) which associated marital conflict with children's poor academic achievement.

The results reveal that 53.5% of the respondents agreed that they became withdrawn from school activities when their parents quarreled. However, 44.2% of the respondents were neutral and 2.3% of the respondents disagreed. The results suggest that most of the respondents became withdrawn from school activities as a high mean score ( $M=3.51$ ,  $SD=1.36$ ) was obtained. This is consistent with the observation by Cummings and Davies (2014) that marital relationship affects the children's adjustment directly through the emotional stress level leading to withdrawal from school activities which reflects on their school outcomes.

Further findings indicate that 45.8% and 5.2% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed, respectively, that their academic grades were negatively affected by marital conflicts among parents. The table also shows that 45.8% of the respondents were neutral and 3.1% of the respondents disagreed. On aggregate, majority (51%) of the respondents agreed that their academic grades were affected by marital conflicts among parents ( $M=3.53$ ,  $SD=0.65$ ).

The table also shows that 47.2% and 8.3% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed, respectively, that the parental quarrels affected their relationship with teachers in school hence their poor academic performance. However, 26.9% of the respondents were neutral whereas 17.6% of the respondents disagreed. In total, 55.5% of the respondents agreed that quarrels between parents had an effect on the relationship they had with teachers which reflected on their poor academic performance ( $M=3.56$ ,  $SD=0.88$ ). This may be through externalizing behavior in line with studies such as previously undertaken by Macharia and Ngwiri (2004) which found that children raised in conflict riddled families have aggressive tendencies that may affect their relationship with teachers and peers.

As per the table, 54.2% and 4.2% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed, respectively, that they felt drawn away from peers due to family conflicts between parents which affected their performance in school. However, there were 39.6% of the respondents who were neutral and 2.1% of the respondents who disagreed. Thus majority (58.4%) of the respondents felt drawn away from peers in school due to family conflicts. A high mean score was obtained on a 5-point scale ( $M=3.60$ ,  $SD=0.61$ ) which implies that marital conflicts potentially affected the relationship children had with their peers in school. This finding agrees with the viewpoint of Kamp et al. (2008) that marital conflict pose

social consequences to the children because the behavior of children from families which are not intact experience emotional trauma that make them withdraw from social relations. The finding agrees with Erikson's (1968) psychoanalytic theory of psychosocial development which suggest that children from families with conflict often experience feelings of inadequacy and poor self-image, with a tendency to withdraw from social activities.

Further results in the table reveals that 40.7% of the respondents agreed and another 21.2% strongly agreed that the marital conflicts between their parents affected their self-esteem which negatively affects my academic performance. However, 30.1% of the respondents were neutral whereas some 8% of the respondents disagreed. Thus, majority (61.9%) of the respondents held the view that marital conflicts between their parents negatively affected their self-esteem and reflected on their academic performance. A high mean score was obtained on a scale of 1 to 5 ( $M=3.75$ ,  $SD=0.88$ ), which implied that parental conflict had a negative effect on children's self-esteem and academic performance. This finding is in line with Siti et al. (2013) who asserted that marital conflicts cause children to question their self-worth. It also agrees with Macnow's (2014) view that children lose self-esteem which in turn leads to poor academic performance and poor interpersonal relationship with peers (Macnow, 2014). (Rennie, 2008). The finding conforms to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory which places esteem needs forth on the hierarchy.

## 5. Conclusions

This study sought to establish the effect of marital conflict on academic performance of students in public and private day secondary schools. Results showed that family conflicts have an outright effect on children's performance in their academics. Academic grades are negatively affected by the marital conflicts among parents, rendering the students withdrawn from school activities and the students' achievement in school is formed through marital stability, whose lack would lead to deteriorating performance in academic. Parents or guardians who are experiencing conflicts in their families should consider couple counselling options as soon as possible to avoid negative effects on their children. Creating awareness about the impact of domestic violence on communities conveys the importance of preventing such violence in the families. More focused efforts are required in order to reduce the overall level of marital conflicts in society.

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