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IMPACT OF DIVORCE ON A CHILD IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to understand the impact of divorce on a child in the classroom, by means of a questionnaire sent to teachers. In the study, the survey method was used, being one of the qualitative methods. The participants of the study comprised 25 teachers selected via convenience sampling method. The data were collected using a questionnaire developed by the researcher using different sources (Mahony, 2015, 7-8; Shinoda, 2001, 42). The data were analyzed through qualitative data analysis methods. The results have revealed that divorce has mostly never been good for anyone involved. Children are the most affected. Most children do not want their parents to divorce; whereas some do. Some children are confused and do not realize what they want, especially if they have seen their parents being unhappy in the marriage. The child's age plays a major factor on his or her reaction and understanding of the whole process of divorce. Children come from different backgrounds, home environments, family structures, personalities and so on. Due to these differences, each child reacts in a different way to his or her parents' divorce. No two children react in the same way. The teachers' role is very important to help a child overcome some psychological problems stemming from his or her parents' divorce.

Keywords: divorce; child psychology, classroom teaching; elementary education

1. Introduction

A divorce is generally never good for anyone. Be it the parent, the child, the family, society or the country. While a divorce might have some benefits for the adults, like starting a new job, moving cities, a new hobby or a new spouse, it is never good for a child, whatever his or her age might be. The child's whole life turns upside down. The child feels a sense of confusion and betrayal watching his or her parents deal with the challenges a divorce throws at the couple.

Does divorce cause permanent psychological damage to the children? Are they the victims, like their parents? Do they have difficulty adjusting to school and friends? Do they have insecurities and trust issues? Do they become a bully or a victim of bullying? Are they able to cope with their academics? A lot of studies have been carried out on the participants of the impact of divorce on children. One common conclusion is that children from divorced families have more behavioural, emotional, health and academic problems (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2007, 106). Children of divorce are at risk of having difficulties at school (Pedro-carroll & Cowen, 1985). They found that children of divorce had more disruptive classroom behavior, were absent more frequently, and had lower IQ scores than children from intact families.

The annual 'Matrimonial Survey 2016' in the UK by management consultants Grant Thornton estimates that the three most common reasons for marriage breakdown leading to divorce reported by those surveyed continued to be growing apart/falling out of love (25%), extra-marital affair (22%) and unreasonable or controlling behaviour (17%). All couples face similar kinds of problems. It's how they decide to face these challenges that decides how the marriage will turn out. Some look at each other as two different teams competing with one another. Some look at themselves as a team trying to overcome the challenge together. A child goes through a number of psychological, emotional, mental and academic challenges when parents get divorced. Some are affected more than the others. The extent to which this traumatic experience affects the child is based on a number of factors. How a child adjusts to divorce is based on the child's, and the family's situational characteristics (Department of Justice, Canada, 1997).

1.1. Gender

The gender of the child plays a vital role on how he or she adjusts to a divorce. Some say girls are affected more than boys and some say that boys are affected more than girls. There is also some research pointing to the fact that gender does not matter when a child goes through a divorce. Guidubaldi and Perry (1985) conducted a nationwide study on grade 2,3,5 and 7 children from a sample of 699 children who were assessed two years earlier. The assessment tools used were the Achenbach Parent and Teacher Rating Scales, the Hahnemann Elementary School Behavior Rating Scales, and a locus of control scale. The parents and children were also

interviewed. The results indicated that children from intact-families performed better than children from divorced families. Also, the research indicated that girls from divorced families were more stable than boys from divorced families. The girls behaved better, were happier and performed better than boys.

Other studies show that girls are more adversely affected than boys. Wallerstein and Kelly (1975) interviewed 27 families and their 34 preschoolers between the ages of two-and-a-half to six years. These children were interviewed again after a year of the divorce. They found that 63% of the girls were in a worse condition, psychologically. The mother-child relationship had made a downward trend.

1.2. Age at Divorce

The age of the child at the time of divorce greatly influences the way the child handles and reacts to the divorce. It is believed that younger children adjust better to the separation of parents than older children. (Broadwell, 2005) believes that when a divorce takes place when a child is between the age of six and eleven years, the child feels a sense of abandonment. They are too young to understand the concept of divorce and feel like they are at fault or that they have been forgotten by the parent who does not have custody of the child. Some children might blame one parent over the other for the separation. Some, especially boys, may be frustrated and this frustration may be seen in the classroom or playground. Girls express their frustration and anger by either becoming introverts, attention seekers or anxious children.

In infants the effects of divorce can be seen in the form of crying and/or clingy babies. They might not understand what is happening but they can sense the tension in their surroundings.

Teenagers usually find it very difficult to handle a divorce as they are at a very vulnerable age. Many parents stay in bad marriages for the sake of their little children. When their children become teenagers or go to university is when they decide to go their different ways. Angharad Rudkin, a clinical psychologist and chartered member of the British Psychological Society who works with adolescents struggling to come to terms with family breakdown says "Older teenagers can look back and feel like they were living a lie – that this family life they had grown up with and perhaps never questioned was something their parents were just waiting to break up when they went away to university" (Barkham, 2013)

1.3. Socio-economic status

In most cases, a divorce means a lower standard of living. In cases from affluent families, the mother gets a fat alimony and is in a better financial position. Many studies have proved that a lower socio-economic status caused, due to divorce, adversely affects the child. In their study Guidubaldi and Perry (1984) found that even with controlled socio-economic status, a child from a divorced home struggled with academics and their social skills. This proves that divorce affects the academic and social skills of a child, irrespective of the socio-economic status.

1.4. *Ethno-cultural background*

A lot of research has been done on the effects of divorce based on the ethnicity and cultural background of adults. However, not much research has been done on the effects of divorce on children, based on their ethno-cultural backgrounds. A lot of traits are passed on from adults to children. Studies have shown that Asians and Africans adjust better to the challenges of divorce than Americans and Europeans. Amato and Keith (1991) found in their meta-analysis that divorce affected white adults more than African Americans. According to Lawson and Thompson (1996) African American males turn to the church and family for emotional and moral support when faced with a divorce. African Americans already face a lot of disadvantages in society and this could be the main reason why they are better able to cope when a divorce takes place.

1.5. *Child rearing*

Parenting styles is another factor to be considered when looking at how a child adapts to a divorce. The four kinds of parenting styles are authoritarian or disciplinarian, permissive or indulgent, uninvolved, and authoritative. According to Grych and Fincham (1992) parenting styles play an important role in the way a child reacts to a divorce. Equally important is discipline instilled in the child. Children need discipline to understand their boundaries better. It makes them more confident and secure since they know the lines they cannot cross. It is called 'tough love'. As much as the custodial parent may feel sorry for the child due to the divorce, discipline is important. It is very difficult to instill as a single parent; but very necessary.

Research says that parents are more involved in the disciplining of the same sex child. This means that fathers discipline their sons more and daughters get disciplined more by their mothers. In most cases mothers get custody of the child and the fathers do not play a major role in the bringing up of the children. This means that boys lose out on the discipline instilled by their fathers. In contrast, because mothers usually retain custody (90% of the time), there is little or no loss of discipline for girls (Teyber, 1992). Girls who have been raised by their fathers alone have the same adjustment problem due to divorce as boys do when the father is missing.

1.6. *Intervention by schools/teachers*

Studies have shown that a child copes better when there is support from all quarters of his or her life. This means that the extended family, school, teachers and caregivers play a significant role in helping to minimize the adverse effects of divorce. The most important person, in a child's life at school, is the teacher. (Mahony et al., 2015) says that in her study many teachers spoke about making partnerships with other school personnel, parents and community members to construct a safe environment for young children. Apart from this, teachers, were very keen on

giving academic, emotional, and behavioural support to young children from divorced families. It is very important for teachers to know what exactly is happening in a student's personal life. That way the child can be supported. In countries like India and Turkey, divorce is still a taboo. Though the number of divorce cases are rising it is still kept under wraps. In such situations, the school and teachers are never told about the change in family dynamics. In such instances helping a child cope with the divorce is impossible for the teachers.

1.7. The divorce cycle

Children from divorced families, as adults, go through many challenges with their own partners. One of the most well-known concepts is the divorce cycle. According to Wolfinger (2005) when comparing children from intact families, the children of divorce are more likely to marry as teenagers, but less likely to wed overall, more likely to marry people from divorced families, more likely to dissolve second and third marriages, and less likely to marry their live-in partners. The divorce cycle has an impact not only on individuals and families, but on society as a whole. We can see that there are many factors that play a role in how divorce affects a child. We cannot say one particular factor plays a more important role than the other. Divorce is a very complex procedure and a lot more research needs to be done to know exactly what the effects of divorce are on children (Department of Justice, Canada, 1997).

The purpose of this research is to discover what teachers have observed in the classroom when dealing with children from divorced families. What is the impact of divorce on a child in the classroom? Do teachers notice any difference in behaviour between children from intact-families and those from divorced families? Due to the confusion that sets in with a broken home, a child may have difficulties bonding with peers and teachers. Is this very obvious in the classroom? Some children may hide their feelings and emotions very well and some cannot do that. Are teachers able to sniff out the ones that need the extra support and are knowingly or unknowingly reaching out for help and support.

2. Method

In the study, the qualitative research design used, was the survey method. The survey questions were designed after an extensive search of the related literature of the study, and were utilized in order to collect qualitative data. The details of the study design are as follows:

2.1. Participants

The participants of the study comprised 25 teachers, who were teaching in various schools. The demographic information about the participating teachers are as follows:

- Gender: A majority of the participants were female (76%) and the rest male (24%)
- Age: A majority of the participants were in the age group of 31 to 40 years and the least were in the age group of 51 to 60 years.
- Subjects they teach: The participants' subject expertise varied from English Language & Literature, Math, Humanities, and Biology, to Music. The elementary and pre-kindergarten teachers teach all subjects. There were two English teachers and 2 elementary school teachers. There was also one vice-principal, who was also an International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme (IBPYP) coordinator and an International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (IBMYP) coordinator.
- Years of teaching experience: A majority of the participants have 11 - 20 years of experience in teaching their subject. Thirteen teachers (52 %) fell into this group. There are two teachers in the range of 41 - 50 years (8 %) and five teachers each in the range of 1 – 10 years and 21 – 30 years (20% each)
- Highest Degree: The highest qualification held by fourteen of the participants was a Master's degree (56 %). Ten participants held a Bachelor's degree (40 %) and one participant chose not to reveal their highest degree.
- Home and Current Location: Twelve (48 %) of the participants were from Asia and one (4 %) participant was from the continent of Africa. There were four (16 %) participants from North America and eight (32 %) participants from Europe. There is a difference in the home and current location of the participants. Seven (68 %) of the participants are currently living in Asia and one (4 %) participant is currently in South America and Africa each. There are two (8 %) participants currently living in North America and four (16 %) participants living in Europe.
- Marital Status: A majority of the participants (60 %) were married and six (24 %) participants were unmarried. Three participants (12%) were divorced and one did not want to reveal marital status.

2.2. *Sampling procedures*

The participants were selected using convenience sampling method. Confidentiality of the participants was maintained. The names and email ids of the participants were not used. Instead each participant was referred to by a number. The participants were contacted via a WhatsApp message or via Facebook messenger. Once they agreed to be a part of the research a link to the survey questions was sent to them. They were given one week to answer the survey questions after which responses would not be accepted.

2.3. *Data collection tool and analysis of the data*

The data were collected using a questionnaire developed by the researcher utilizing different sources. Knowledge of the Phenomenon questions (Q 11 - 14) were from Linda Mahony's paper

on Developing an Online Questionnaire (Mahony, 2015, 7-8). Questions 15 - 20 were from Kevin Seiji Shinoda's paper on Children of Divorce: The Impact on Classroom Behaviour (Shinoda, 2001, 42). The survey questions investigated the experience and expertise of the participants when answering the survey, developed by the researchers, was used to gather data from them in the form of a questionnaire administered as a Google form (see Appendix 1). The total number of questions was 20. There were ten questions based on demography. Four questions were about the awareness that the participants have of the phenomenon of divorce. The rest of the six questions were questions about the observations the participants have made of students from divorced homes, in their classroom. The data was analyzed by looking at the answers to each question and finding the common answers given by the twenty-five participants. The analysis also involved looking at any interesting ideas or suggestions made by the teachers, any special themes or concepts mentioned and the answers that were mentioned the least and the most numbers of times.

3. Results

From the Literature Review it can be seen that there are many factors that play a role on how a child responds to a divorce. Some of the factors are age at time of divorce, gender, socio-economic status, ethno-cultural background and child up-bringing. A child spends a majority of his or her time at school. The teachers are the best ones to be able to observe and notice any changes in behavior and emotions, in any child in their classroom. The next adult, who a child can turn to, after the home is at school. Therefore, teachers and administrators need to be trained on how to deal with a child who is dealing with or has dealt with a divorce. Of the thirteen teachers that took part in the survey, the majority of them felt that divorce played a crucial role in a child's behavior. Here is a summary of the responses to every question:

A majority of the participants, 13 of the 25, mentioned infidelity and abuse, be it mental, emotional or physical as a cause that leads to separation and/or divorce. Incompatibility was also mentioned as a cause leading to divorce. In most arranged marriages the compatibility between a couple is not taken into consideration. Financial problems also very often lead to divorce. When the honeymoon period is over and reality sets in then finances is a major factor that makes or breaks a marriage. Lack of communication was also mentioned a couple of times as a cause for divorce. Keeping the lines of communication open is very important for a marriage to work.

The process of a divorce could be a long and drawn out affair. It is expensive, involves time and energy, involves lawyers and going to courts. In some countries a couple has to go for

counselling before the divorce is finalised. Out of the 25 participants, 14 mentioned taking care of the children as a challenge during the process of divorce. And this is a valid and important concern as the children are the ones that face the brunt of a divorce for no fault of theirs. Who takes care of the children? How are the children handling the divorce? The hostility of the whole situation affects the child negatively. Finances are also a major concern during the process as lawyers can be expensive. Four of the twenty five mentioned emotional challenges. The whole dynamics of the family is going to change and this can cause emotional stress to each and everyone involved.

Following the divorce financial strain was mentioned by 10 of the 25 participants. The couples have to now live on a single salary with lesser comforts. Supporting the child's well-being as a single parent was also mentioned. One participant suggested that post-divorce the family should turn to group counseling for support and to be better able to handle the whole situation. Loss of identity was mentioned as a challenge faced post-divorce. In countries like India, where most women are uneducated and are financially dependent on their husbands, a divorce can be a big blow to their image and self-identity.

All the participants said that it would be helpful if they, as teachers, knew what a child is facing at the home front. Knowing this would help them be more sensitive to the child's emotions, behaviour and academic performance. One participant, who was a Boarding House master said that if the situation is known to the care-givers of the child they can sometimes show a little more compassion and leniency in some areas. There could also be a slightly enhanced professional dialogue with colleagues, above the normal, for that child. An interesting fact, mentioned by a participant, was that knowing would help practice mindfulness with the child.

Most participants said that they sometimes observe a change in behaviour as this difference is not very easily noticed. Some children may be going through a very difficult time due to the divorce, but hide it by being gregarious and funny. Children are very good at hiding their true feelings and emotions. There could be an extreme reaction too and the behaviour change is very obvious. One of the participants said that these changes are not seen in older children and more obvious in the younger children. Another participant said that it depends on the age of the child. One participant said that the change in behaviour is more obvious among the boys, as compared with the girls, especially if the father has little or no contact with the child. The age at the time of divorce and the gender are two factors mentioned in the Literature Review too.

Of the 25 participants, six thought that there is a difference in how often children from divorced homes and children from two-parent homes get into trouble. Seven of them said there may be a difference, six said there is no difference and six participants had no opinion. This could be due

to the fact that many couples decide to stay together, and make the marriage work for the sake of the child. Children in homes where there is conflict are in a worse situation than children from divorced homes. This explains the unacceptable behaviour of children from intact-families with conflict, and hence teachers do not notice the difference at school.

How a child from a divorced family interacts with other students depends on a number of factors like age, the attitude of the custodial parent, the circumstances, the environment, parental support, reason for the divorce, the relationship between the parents post divorce and the home experience. One participant said that some students can struggle to relate to different genders. For instance, students with absent fathers can sometimes lack male role models and this can be detrimental. Sometimes there can be distrust between a student and teachers of a certain gender, influenced by the divorce happening at home. Some other differences that can be seen are that a child from a divorced home might be more guarded, and may get physical, emotional, when faced with challenges. Another participant believed that students from a divorced family like to get attention and they do it with bad choices most of the time. They are also torn between two parenting styles. One adult says something, the other parent says another thing and this can confuse the child. They are also emotionally in need. They see their teacher as an emotional charger and they do everything to get positive feelings and attention.

A majority of the participants (56%) said that there might be a difference in the teacher's interaction between a child from a divorced home and a child from an intact home. Of the twenty-five, 7 participants (28%) said there is no difference and only 4 (16%) said that there is a difference. The reason for this could be that all the participants are caring and empathetic teachers who give a lot of importance to pastoral care in the classroom. A teacher who is warm, understanding, patient, kind and helpful is trusted by his or her students and this makes the child very comfortable with the teacher. Therefore, there is no difference in the interaction.

There were varied responses to this question. One participant said that differences are noticed at the beginning stages of the divorce and once the child accepts and gets used to the new situation he or she settles into normality. One participant said that sometimes, students can be hostile or aggressive especially if there are trust issues with male teachers. Sometimes some students have a lack of discipline or ambition (some male students for instance) as they have few male role models around them. Related to this, one participant said that children who stayed with their fathers were not disciplined and this reflected in their work. Submission of homework was most times missing. One participant made a very interesting observation saying that students who come from two-parent families are mostly focused on academic achievements and very little of emotional interaction but the students whose parents are divorced are mostly in need of emotional help. They care about interactions, social connections and feelings more than

academics. They do their tasks to get attention and to be loved and cared for. Another observation was that they pretend to be alright and do not share what is on their mind until they believe that the teacher will be supportive and understanding.

One participant said that she went through a divorce when her children were very young and this enables her to understand the challenges that such students face and helps her support them effectively. Another participant who went through a divorce, said that it was a very difficult experience for the older child. Over time, the older child got better. One participant said that he had observed that a divorce makes a child more withdrawn, and absence from school increases. One participant said that he/she assumes the challenges would be greater with middle school children. A particular participant said that these students must be supported as much as possible, to help them have an enriching classroom experience. Teachers need to be aware of the behaviors that those students show in the classroom and collaborate with the parent to manage feelings and behaviors. Some of the participants said that they do not have any first-hand experience. One participant, who has a lot of insight said that teachers need to be careful and sensitive when handling students from divorced families and should not react to any unacceptable behaviour, but respond, with understanding and tact. It can be observed that divorce is not a very talked about phenomenon in Asian countries and the majority of the participants (68%) are currently located in Asia.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Divorce rates around the world have significantly increased due to the pandemic. As per a BBC report (BBC & Savage, 2020), a leading British law firm reported a 122% increase in enquiries between July and October (2020) as compared with the same period in the previous year. Similar patterns have been seen in the US, China and Sweden. Lack of commitment is the main reason for divorce. The average first marriage that ends in divorce lasts for about eight years (Wilkinson & Finkbiener Family Law Attorneys, 2020). By this time a couple might have one or two children going to elementary school. Current trends indicate that at least half of all marriages will end in divorce. There is a lot of research done on the negative effects of divorce in children. There are two assumptions made. The first being that divorce has a negative impact on children and the second being that children brought up in an 'intact' household are better off than the ones brought up in single-parent households (Amato & Keith, 1991). Research done by Yongmin Sun shows that children of divorced parents are more likely to experience psychological, academic, behavioural, and drug-related problems than children from intact households. This disruptive behaviour may cause children to lash out at teachers, disobey rules, become aggressive, or refuse to participate. Without a doubt, going through a divorce is a traumatic experience for parents and children alike (Cherlin, 2000, 62-66).

Every teacher will at some time in their teaching career come across students from divorced homes. Therefore, it is very important that administrators and teachers know how to identify these students and also know how to interact with them. This could mean a kind word, a little more empathy and attention, and knowing how to deal with the behavioral, emotional, and mental challenges that these students go through. The academic challenge is the easy part. School administrators should make it mandatory for teachers to be trained in these areas. Further, the involvement of the family in the well-being of the child will make a huge difference in the child's temperament. Some students may not share with their teachers what they are going through. However, as long as the student knows that there is an adult in the classroom who cares for him or her, there will be a huge burden lifted off from his or her shoulders. This would make the student more comfortable and secure and that there is someone around who can be trusted.

Children turn to their teachers for support as they are the next most important people in their lives. Again, due to differences in background each child should be handled in a different way. For this to be effective, teachers should be aware of their students' background and they should be trained to handle the nuances of a divorce. Some effective strategies that can be used in the classroom are being consistent and ensuring that the student going through the divorce, follows the rules and expectations of the class. Structure and discipline are necessary and important, especially when a student is going through an emotional turmoil. A close partnership between the school and the student's home is important. Good communication between the divorced parent and the teacher, not only when there is a concern, but also for positive feedback, helps a child understand that he or she is cared for. Children behave differently at home and at school. It is good for the teacher and parent to know what happens in both these environments and how the child reacts to happy and unpleasant moments. A student might not know what he or she is going through, but just knowing that the teacher is someone who can be trusted, would make a significant difference in the child's school experience.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire to explore the impact of divorce on a child in the classroom

Thank you for being a part of my study. Please be assured that the data gathered will only be used for the purposes of this study and will not be used otherwise.

The information collected in this questionnaire is confidential and will only be used to determine the impact of divorce on a child in the classroom.

This questionnaire has three sections, with twenty questions in all. It will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete.

Some items require you to write a short response of one to two sentences. Other items ask you to answer yes or no, and in some instances you may be prompted to elaborate on your answer. You may choose not to answer any question and proceed to the next question at any time.

Section 1 – Demographic information

1a. Name and Last Name

1b. Email

1c. Gender:

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

1d. Age:

- 18-30 years
- 31-40 years
- 41-50 years
- 51-60 years
- 61-70 years

1e. Subject you teach:

1f. Number of years teaching:

- 1-10 years
- 11-20 years
- 21-30 years
- 31-40 years
- 41-50 years

1g. Highest Degree:

- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Ph.D. or higher
- Prefer not to say

1h. Where is home located?

- Asia
- Africa
- Europe
- North America
- South America
- Australia
- Antarctica

1i. Your current location:

- Asia
- Africa
- Europe
- North America
- South America
- Australia
- Antarctica

1j. Marital Status:

- Married
- Unmarried
- Divorced
- Prefer not to say

Section 2 – Knowledge of the phenomenon

In this section I am interested in exploring teachers' understanding of circumstances prior, during and after a couple's separation and divorce.

2a. What do you believe to be the circumstances that may lead to a couples separation and/or divorce?

2b. What are some of the challenges families experience during the process of separation and divorce that you are aware of?

2c. What are some of the challenges families experience following the process of separation and divorce that you are aware of?

2d. Does having knowledge of the challenges of particular families have an impact on how you interact with these children and their families? Yes or No. If yes, please elaborate.

Section 3 – For teachers

3a. When you observe children in a classroom setting, do you notice any behavioral differences between children who come from two-parent families versus a divorced home background? Please explain.

3b. Is there a difference in how often children get in trouble between those from divorced homes and children from two-parent families?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

3c. How do children from divorced homes interact with other students versus children from two-parent homes?

3d. Is there any difference in the interaction with the teacher between a child from a divorced home and a child from a two-parent home?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

3e. Can you describe any differences that you have observed as far as on-task behavior for children from divorced families versus two-parent families?

3f. Do you feel you have any personal insight with regard to divorced children? If so, could you describe your experiences?

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