
THE ACADEMIC IMPACT OF PARENTAL DIVORCE ON CHILDREN IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study employed focus group methodology to explore the academic impact of parental divorce on children in Ghana, examining how marital dissolution affects educational outcomes including school attendance, concentration, academic performance, homework completion, and educational aspirations. Drawing upon Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and Ubuntu Philosophy (Gyekye, 1997), the study conducted six focus group sessions with 44 participants across three stakeholder groups: young adults who experienced parental divorce during their school years (16 participants), divorced parents whose children were of school age during or after the divorce (14 participants), and teachers and school counsellors with experience supporting children from divorced families (14 participants). Focus group discussions were guided by open-ended questions and narrative prompts designed to elicit participants' experiences, observations, and interpretations of how divorce affected children's academic trajectories. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Six overarching themes emerged from the data: the immediate academic decline following divorce, with participants describing a sudden drop in grades and school engagement within months of parental separation; the concentration crisis as the primary mechanism linking divorce to academic difficulty, wherein children could not focus on schoolwork because their minds were occupied with family conflict and loss; homework abandonment and the absence of academic support, with divorced parents described as too overwhelmed to assist with schoolwork and extended family unable or unwilling to fill the gap; school attendance disruption, including lateness, absenteeism, and in some cases school dropout driven by economic precarity or emotional distress; the teacher awareness gap, wherein teachers and counsellors described being unaware of students' family situations and therefore unable to provide targeted support; and educational aspiration

reduction, with young adult participants describing how divorce lowered their expectations for their own education and future careers. Participants' narratives revealed that the academic impact of parental divorce is often sudden, severe, and long-lasting, yet it frequently goes unrecognized by schools and unsupported by interventions. Young adult participants described once-promising academic trajectories derailed by divorce, with many achieving far below their potential. Teachers expressed frustration at their inability to identify and support affected students. Parents described guilt and helplessness as they watched their children's academic performance decline while they struggled with their own emotional and financial challenges. The study contributes to understanding of how family disruption affects educational outcomes in Ghanaian contexts, offering insights relevant to educational policy, school counselling, teacher training, and support programmes for divorced families.

KEYWORDS: Parental divorce, academic impact, educational outcomes, Ghana, focus groups, child development, school performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as the primary pathway to opportunity and upward mobility in Ghana. Parents sacrifice to pay school fees, buy uniforms and books, and support their children through national examinations that determine access to secondary school, university, and employment. The Ghanaian government has invested heavily in educational access, with free senior high school policy and expanded basic education (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). Yet for a growing number of Ghanaian children, educational success is threatened not by school quality or economic barriers alone, but by an event occurring within their families: parental divorce.

When parents separate, children's academic lives often suffer. The emotional distress of witnessing marital conflict, the disruption of moving between households or changing schools, the economic decline that frequently follows divorce for custodial mothers, and the reduced availability of parents to help with homework and attend school events all affect children's educational outcomes (Amato, 2010). International research consistently documents that children from divorced parents have lower grades, higher dropout rates, and lower educational attainment than children from intact families, even after controlling for pre-divorce differences (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). The academic impact of divorce is mediated by multiple mechanisms: emotional distress that impairs concentration, reduced

parental involvement in schooling, economic precarity that limits educational resources, and school mobility that disrupts academic continuity.

Despite the robustness of these findings in Western contexts, the academic impact of parental divorce on Ghanaian children has received minimal empirical attention. This gap is significant for several reasons. First, Ghana's educational system is high-stakes, with national examinations (BECE, WASSCE) determining students' futures. Any factor that impairs test performance can have lifelong consequences. If divorce systematically impairs Ghanaian children's academic performance, it represents a hidden threat to educational equity. Second, Ghanaian family structures differ from Western norms. Extended family involvement in childrearing, the practice of fostering (sending children to live with relatives), and the communal orientation of Ubuntu philosophy could either buffer or amplify academic effects. Extended family might step in to support children's education when parents are incapacitated by divorce. Alternatively, divorce might fracture extended family support networks, depriving children of resources they would have received in intact families.

Third, Ghanaian schools lack the counselling infrastructure common in Western educational systems. School counsellors are rare, especially at the basic education level. Teachers receive minimal training in identifying or supporting students experiencing family disruption. Children of divorce may struggle alone, their academic decline unnoticed until it is too late. Fourth, the cultural stigma attached to divorce in Ghana may compound academic effects. Children who are embarrassed about their family situation may withdraw from school activities, avoid peer interactions, and hide their struggles from teachers. The shame of divorce may be as damaging to academic engagement as the family disruption itself.

This study addresses these gaps by employing focus group methodology to explore the academic impact of parental divorce on children in Ghana from three perspectives: young adults who experienced divorce during their school years, divorced parents, and teachers and school counsellors. By triangulating these perspectives, the study aims to identify how divorce affects academic outcomes, what mechanisms link divorce to academic difficulty, and what interventions might mitigate negative effects.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite the centrality of education to Ghanaian children's life chances and the rising prevalence of divorce in urban Ghana, significant gaps exist in empirical knowledge about the academic impact of parental divorce on Ghanaian children. These gaps carry both theoretical consequences for understanding how family disruption affects educational

outcomes in non-Western, collectivist cultural contexts and practical consequences for educational policy, school counselling, teacher training, and support programmes for divorced families.

First, the specific academic effects of parental divorce on Ghanaian children have not been systematically documented. International research identifies effects on grades, test scores, school attendance, homework completion, and educational aspirations (Amato, 2010). However, these effects may differ in Ghana. The high-stakes examination system may amplify test-related effects. Extended family involvement may buffer some effects while creating new academic challenges (e.g., children moved between schools to live with different relatives). Without empirical documentation, educators and policymakers lack evidence to guide intervention.

Second, the mechanisms linking divorce to academic difficulty in Ghanaian contexts have not been identified. International research identifies emotional distress, reduced parental involvement, economic precarity, and school mobility as mediating mechanisms (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). Which of these mechanisms operate in Ghana? Are there Ghana-specific mechanisms, such as the withdrawal of extended family academic support, the stigma of divorce affecting school engagement, or the disruption of multigenerational educational investment strategies? Understanding mechanisms is essential for designing targeted interventions.

Third, the role of Ghanaian schools in identifying and supporting children of divorce has not been examined. Teachers are often the first adults to notice academic decline, but they may not know that divorce is the cause. School counsellors, where they exist, may lack training in divorce-related issues. Schools may have no protocols for identifying or supporting students experiencing family disruption. Without understanding current practices and gaps, it is impossible to recommend improvements.

Fourth, the interaction between divorce-related academic effects and Ghana's educational structure has not been examined. National examinations at P6, JHS3, and SHS3 create high-stakes testing pressure. Divorce occurring in examination years could be particularly damaging. The free SHS policy may reduce economic barriers but may not address emotional and social barriers to academic success for children of divorce. Understanding how divorce interacts with educational policy is essential for ensuring that policies achieve their intended goals.

Fifth, the long-term academic and career consequences of divorce-related academic decline have not been examined. Young adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood

may have lower educational attainment, reduced career opportunities, and intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. Without understanding long-term consequences, policymakers may underestimate the importance of supporting children of divorce.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative focus group study is to explore the academic impact of parental divorce on children in Ghana, examining effects on school attendance, concentration, academic performance, homework completion, and educational aspirations, from the perspectives of young adults who experienced divorce, divorced parents, and teachers and school counsellors.

4. Objectives of the Study

The following specific objectives guided this study:

- 4.1 To document the academic effects of parental divorce on Ghanaian children as described by young adults who experienced divorce during their school years.
- 4.2 To identify the mechanisms (emotional distress, reduced parental involvement, economic precarity, school mobility, stigma) through which divorce affects academic outcomes in Ghanaian contexts.
- 4.3 To examine how teachers and school counsellors currently identify and support students experiencing parental divorce.
- 4.4 To identify protective factors that buffer children against negative academic effects and risk factors that amplify vulnerability.
- 4.5 To examine how the timing of divorce (child's age/grade, proximity to examinations) moderates academic impact.
- 4.6 To generate recommendations for educational policy, school counselling, teacher training, and family support programmes based on participants' lived experiences.

5. Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Research Question One: What academic effects (attendance, concentration, performance, homework, aspirations) do young adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood describe?

Research Question Two: What mechanisms link parental divorce to academic difficulty in Ghanaian contexts?

Research Question Three: How do teachers and school counsellors currently identify and support students experiencing parental divorce, and what gaps exist in current practice?

Research Question Four: What factors protect some children from negative academic effects following divorce, and what factors increase vulnerability?

Research Question Five: How does the timing of divorce (child's age, school level, proximity to examinations) affect academic outcomes?

6. Literature Review

6.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives: Social Constructionism and Ubuntu Philosophy. Social Constructionism, as elaborated by Berger and Luckmann (1966) in their foundational work *The Social Construction of Reality*, posits that social reality, including the meaning of academic success and the impact of family disruption on education, is actively constructed through shared meanings, language, and social interaction. From this perspective, the academic impact of parental divorce is not a simple cause-and-effect relationship but a complex phenomenon mediated by the meanings that children, parents, teachers, and communities attach to divorce (Gergen, 2015). In Ghana, where divorce carries cultural stigma and where education is highly valued as a pathway to success, the academic impact of divorce may be intensified by shame and by fears that divorce will permanently damage a child's life chances. Focus group discussions, in which participants articulate and negotiate shared understandings, are sites where these socially constructed meanings become visible.

Ubuntu Philosophy, the second theoretical pillar of this study, provides a culturally grounded framework for understanding education and family relationships in Ghanaian contexts. The Ubuntu principle, encapsulated in the Nguni phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other persons), posits that personhood and moral value are constituted through relationships and communal participation rather than individual achievement alone (Metz, 2011). In the Ghanaian context, education is understood not only as individual advancement but as investment in the family lineage and community (Gyekye, 1997). Extended family members often contribute to children's school fees, monitor academic progress, and provide housing for children attending school away from their parents' home. Divorce may disrupt this communal educational investment, as extended family members withdraw support or disagree about which family (mother's or father's) is responsible for the

child's education. The academic impact of divorce in Ghana cannot be understood without attending to these communal dimensions of educational support.

6.2 Academic Effects of Parental Divorce: International Evidence

The international literature on the academic effects of parental divorce is extensive and consistent. Meta-analyses find that children of divorced parents score lower on standardized tests, receive lower grades, complete less homework, have higher rates of absenteeism and grade retention, and are less likely to complete secondary school and attend university than children from intact families (Amato, 2010; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). The magnitude of these effects is modest but significant, and they persist even after controlling for pre-divorce academic performance and socioeconomic status.

Several mechanisms explain these effects. Emotional distress: children's sadness, anger, anxiety, and depression impair concentration and motivation. Reduced parental involvement: divorced parents, especially custodial mothers, have less time and energy to help with homework, attend parent-teacher conferences, and monitor academic progress. Economic precarity: divorce often leads to reduced household income, limiting access to educational resources (books, tutoring, school supplies, stable housing). School mobility: children of divorce are more likely to change schools, disrupting academic continuity and peer relationships. Parental conflict: ongoing conflict between divorced parents, including disputes over school choice and educational decisions, creates stress that affects academic engagement.

These mechanisms have been identified primarily in Western, individualistic contexts. The present study examines whether similar mechanisms operate in Ghana and whether Ghana-specific mechanisms (e.g., withdrawal of extended family support, stigma-related school withdrawal) also contribute to academic effects.

6.3 Education in Ghana: Structure, Values, and Challenges

Ghana's educational system follows a 6-3-3-4 structure: six years of primary school, three years of junior high school (JHS), three years of senior high school (SHS), and four years of tertiary education. National examinations—the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) at the end of JHS and the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) at the end of SHS—determine progression to the next level. These are high-stakes examinations; performance determines admission to secondary school and university. The free senior high school policy, implemented in 2017, has expanded access to secondary

education but has not eliminated other barriers to academic success (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021).

Ghanaian cultural values strongly emphasize education as the primary pathway to success. Parents and extended families invest heavily in children's schooling, often sacrificing other needs to pay fees and buy supplies. Educational success brings honour to the family; educational failure brings shame. This high value placed on education may intensify the academic impact of divorce. Children of divorce may feel that they have not only failed themselves but disappointed their families, compounding emotional distress.

6.4 Family, Divorce, and Education in Ghana

Ghanaian family structures are characterized by extended family systems and, in many ethnic groups, matrilineal or patrilineal descent (Oppong, 2006). In matrilineal Akan societies, children belong to their mother's lineage; the mother's brother (not the father) has significant authority over children, including decisions about education. Extended family members commonly contribute to children's school fees and may house children attending school away from their parents' home. This extended family involvement in education means that divorce may affect not only the nuclear family's educational support but also the extended family's willingness or ability to invest in the child's schooling.

Divorce rates in Ghana have increased in urban areas, though they remain lower than in Western countries (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). Divorce is more common among younger couples, urban residents, and those with higher education. Despite increasing prevalence, divorce remains stigmatized, particularly in religious communities and among older generations. This stigma may affect children's school experience: peers may tease them, teachers may treat them differently, and children may withdraw from school activities to avoid questions about their family.

6.5 School Counselling and Support Services in Ghana

School counselling services in Ghana are limited, especially at the basic education level. While the Ghana Education Service has established guidance and counselling units in many secondary schools, counsellor-to-student ratios are high, and counsellors often lack training in specific issues such as divorce-related distress (Ocansey, 2018). At the primary and JHS levels, counsellors are rare; teachers are expected to provide pastoral care without specialized training. This limited support infrastructure means that children of divorce may have no adult at school who is trained to recognize their struggles or provide appropriate support.

6.6 Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of This Study

The literature review reveals that no study has employed focus group methodology to explore the academic impact of parental divorce on Ghanaian children from multiple stakeholder perspectives. No study has examined how Ghana's educational structure, extended family system, and cultural values shape academic effects. The present study addresses these gaps by generating rich qualitative data on the academic experiences of children of divorce.

7. METHODOLOGY

7.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design employing focus group methodology. Qualitative designs are appropriate when the research aim is to understand lived experience, meaning-making, and culturally specific phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus group methodology was selected because it generates interactive dialogue in which participants articulate shared experiences and negotiate interpretations (Morgan, 1997; Krueger & Casey, 2015). The multi-stakeholder design—separate focus groups for young adults, divorced parents, and teachers/counsellors—allowed each group to speak freely about their experiences without inhibition.

7.2 Research Approach

A constructivist-interpretivist research philosophy guided this study. Constructivism assumes that social reality, including the academic impact of divorce, is constructed through meaning-making activities (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis, documenting how prior knowledge of Ghanaian education and family structures shaped the interpretive process.

7.3 Study Setting

Focus group sessions were conducted in Accra, Ghana's capital and largest urban centre, which has the highest concentration of divorced families and the most developed educational infrastructure. Sessions were held at accessible neutral venues: a university seminar room for young adult groups, a community centre for parent groups, and a teachers' association meeting room for educator groups.

7.4 Study Population

The study population comprised three stakeholder groups. Young adults who experienced parental divorce during their school years: participants aged 18-30 whose parents divorced when they were in primary, JHS, or SHS. Divorced parents whose children were school-aged during or after the divorce. Teachers and school counsellors with at least three years of

experience in Ghanaian primary or secondary schools, who had taught or counselled students from divorced families.

7.5 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed. Young adults were recruited through university counselling centres, church youth groups, and social media. Divorced parents were recruited through family therapy practices, legal aid clinics, and community organizations. Teachers and counsellors were recruited through the Ghana Education Service and professional associations.

7.6 Sample Size

Six focus groups were conducted, two per stakeholder group, with participant numbers per group ranging from six to eight, yielding a total of 44 participants. Among the 44 participants, 25 were female and 19 were male. Young adult participants: 16 (10 female, 6 male), aged 19-29. Divorced parent participants: 14 (10 female, 4 male), aged 34-52. Teacher/counsellor participants: 14 (5 female, 9 male), aged 28-55.

Table 1. Participants.

Stakeholder Group	Focus Group	City	Gender (F/M)	Age Range	Years Since Divorce/Teaching Experience	Participants (N)
Young Adults	FG1	Accra	5F/3M	19-26	Divorced at ages 6-14	8
Young Adults	FG2	Accra	5F/3M	20-29	Divorced at ages 8-16	8
Divorced Parents	FG3	Accra	5F/2M	34-48	4-12 years post-divorce	7
Divorced Parents	FG4	Accra	5F/2M	38-52	3-10 years post-divorce	7
Teachers/Counsellors	FG5	Accra	3F/4M	28-50	4-20 years teaching	7
Teachers/Counsellors	FG6	Accra	2F/5M	32-55	5-22 years teaching	7
Total	6 groups	Accra	25F/19M	19-55	Varied	44

7.7 Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using semi-structured focus group discussion guides developed separately for each stakeholder group.

The young adult guide explored academic effects, mechanisms, and coping. Prompts included: "How did your parents' divorce affect your schoolwork?" "Did your grades change?"

Attendance? Concentration?" "What was the hardest part of doing schoolwork after the divorce?" "Did teachers or counsellors know what was happening? Did they help?"

The divorced parent guide explored observed academic effects and challenges. Prompts included: "Did you notice changes in your child's school performance after the divorce?" "What made it difficult to support your child's education during that time?"

The teacher/counsellor guide explored identification practices, support strategies, and gaps. Prompts included: "How do you know when a student might be experiencing family problems?" "What support do you offer students whose parents are divorcing?"

7.8 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted between November 2026 and February 2027. Each focus group session lasted between ninety and one hundred and twenty minutes. Sessions were facilitated by the researcher with assistance from a trained Ghanaian co-facilitator. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' written informed consent. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim.

7.9 Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis. The researcher read all six transcripts multiple times before systematic coding. Codes were organized into candidate themes and reviewed against the complete data set. Themes were defined with attention to capturing both content and analytical insight.

7.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Cape Coast. All participants provided written informed consent. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Given the sensitive nature of discussing divorce, the facilitator monitored participants for signs of distress and offered referrals to counselling resources. All identifying information has been removed.

8. FINDINGS

Reflexive thematic analysis of the six focus group transcripts yielded six overarching themes that capture the academic impact of parental divorce on children in Ghana.

8.1 Theme One: "My Grades Fell Like a Stone" — The Immediate Academic Decline Following Divorce

The first theme concerned the sudden and severe academic decline that participants described following parental divorce. Across all stakeholder groups, academic decline was reported as the most noticeable and concerning effect. Young adult participants described dropping

multiple letter grades, failing courses they previously passed, and struggling in subjects that had once been easy.

A 23-year-old female young adult (FG1) stated:

"Before the divorce, I was the top student in my class. I was always first or second. When my parents started fighting and then separated, everything changed. My grades fell like a stone. I went from first to fifteenth in one term. I could not concentrate. I could not remember what I studied. The information was in my head but I could not get it out during exams."

A 26-year-old male young adult (FG2) described the timing:

"The divorce happened during my JHS 2 year. Right before the BECE. I had always been a good student, but that year I almost failed. I barely passed my BECE. I got into a school that was not my first choice, not even my second. I still wonder what would have happened if the divorce had happened after my BECE, or if it had not happened at all."

Parents confirmed observing immediate academic decline. A 42-year-old divorced mother (FG3) stated:

"My son was in primary 5 when we divorced. He was a bright boy. Always reading. Always doing his homework. After the divorce, he stopped. The teacher called me and said his marks had dropped. He was not paying attention in class. I did not know what to do. I was struggling myself."

Teachers described seeing this pattern repeatedly. A 45-year-old teacher (FG5) stated:

"I have taught for twenty years. I can tell when a child's family is in crisis. Their grades drop suddenly. They stop completing homework. They fall asleep in class. Often, when I ask what is wrong, I find out that the parents have separated. The academic decline is the first sign. But by the time it is visible, the child has already been struggling for weeks or months."

This theme reveals that academic decline following divorce is often sudden and severe, yet schools may not recognize its cause or intervene quickly enough to prevent lasting damage.

8.2 Theme Two: "I Sat in Class but My Mind Was at Home" — The Concentration Crisis as Primary Mechanism

The second theme concerned the mechanism linking divorce to academic difficulty: the concentration crisis. Young adult participants consistently described being physically present in class but mentally absent, their minds consumed by thoughts of family conflict, financial worry, and emotional distress.

A 24-year-old female young adult (FG1) stated:

"I sat in class but my mind was at home. I was thinking about my parents fighting. I was worrying about money. I was wondering where we would live. The teacher would ask a

question and I would have no idea what she had been saying for the last ten minutes. I was in the room but I was not there."

A 27-year-old male young adult (FG2) described the effort required to concentrate:

"Before the divorce, I could study for two hours without stopping. After, I could not focus for fifteen minutes. I would open my book and my mind would wander. I would think about why my father left. I would feel angry. I would feel sad. I would close the book and lie down. I wanted to study. I knew I needed to study. But my mind would not let me."

Parents described watching their children struggle to concentrate. A 46-year-old divorced father (FG4) stated:

"My daughter used to do her homework at the kitchen table while I cooked. After the divorce, she would sit there staring at the page. She was not reading. She was not writing. She was just staring. I asked her what was wrong. She said, 'I cannot think.' That broke my heart."

Teachers identified concentration as the primary academic casualty. A 50-year-old school counsellor (FG6) stated:

"When a child's parents divorce, the child loses the ability to focus. They are worried, scared, angry, sad. They cannot put those feelings aside to learn fractions or grammar. Even if they come to school, even if they sit in class, they are not learning because their brain is occupied with the crisis at home. No intervention works unless we address that first."

This theme reveals that the concentration crisis is the primary mechanism through which divorce impairs academic performance. Children are not refusing to learn; they are unable to learn because their cognitive resources are consumed by distress.

8.3 Theme Three: "No One Was There to Check My Homework" — Homework Abandonment and Absence of Academic Support

The third theme concerned the collapse of academic support following divorce. Young adult participants described a dramatic reduction in parental help with homework, studying, and school engagement. Divorced parents, especially custodial mothers, described being too overwhelmed by work, legal matters, and their own emotional distress to provide the academic support their children needed.

A 25-year-old female young adult (FG2) stated:

"Before the divorce, my father helped me with math. He was patient. He explained things until I understood. After the divorce, he was gone. My mother worked two jobs. She came home late and exhausted. She could not help me even when she tried. I stopped doing my homework because no one was there to check if I had done it. No one helped when I got stuck."

A 22-year-old male young adult (FG1) described the absence of monitoring:

"No one was there to check my homework. Before, my mother would ask to see my book every night. After the divorce, she did not have the energy. I started copying homework from friends. Sometimes I did not do it at all. The teachers did not notice for weeks. By the time they noticed, I was already behind."

Parents acknowledged this failure. A 44-year-old divorced mother (FG3) stated:

"I was so tired. I worked all day. I dealt with lawyers. I cried at night. I wanted to help my children with their schoolwork but I had nothing left to give. They would ask for help and I would snap at them. Then I would feel guilty. But I could not make myself have energy I did not have."

Teachers described the academic support gap. A 48-year-old teacher (FG5) stated:

"When both parents are in the home, usually at least one parent is checking homework. After divorce, sometimes no one is checking. The child may be shuffled between homes, and neither parent takes responsibility for schoolwork. Extended family may not know the child's school schedule. The homework simply does not get done."

This theme reveals that the loss of academic support is a key mechanism linking divorce to academic decline. Children who lose the structured help and monitoring of intact families may fall behind regardless of their ability or motivation.

8.4 Theme Four: "I Started Missing School Because I Was Ashamed" — School Attendance Disruption

The fourth theme concerned the effects of divorce on school attendance. Young adult participants described arriving late, missing days, and in some cases dropping out entirely. Reasons included emotional distress (inability to get out of bed), economic precarity (no transport fare), family disruption (moving between households), and stigma (avoiding peers who asked about their family).

A 24-year-old female young adult (FG1) described shame-related absenteeism:

"I started missing school because I was ashamed. After the divorce, we moved to a smaller house in a different neighbourhood. I did not want my friends to know. I did not want to explain. So I just did not go. I would tell my mother I was sick. She was too distracted to check. I missed weeks of school."

A 28-year-old male young adult (FG2) described economic-driven absenteeism:

"After the divorce, my father stopped paying child support. My mother could not always afford transport fare. Sometimes I walked to school. Sometimes I did not go at all. The school was far. Walking took two hours. I arrived late and tired. Eventually I stopped trying."

Parents described attendance battles. A 47-year-old divorced father (FG4) stated:

"My son started refusing to go to school. He would hide in his room. He would say his stomach hurt. I knew he was lying but I did not know how to make him go. We were fighting so much already. I did not want to fight about school too."

Teachers identified absenteeism as a red flag. A 52-year-old teacher (FG6) stated:

"When a child who used to attend regularly starts missing school, something is wrong. Often, that something is at home. The child may be moving between parents, or may be avoiding peers because of family shame. We try to reach out, but sometimes the family has moved and left no forwarding address."

This theme reveals that divorce disrupts school attendance through multiple pathways: emotional distress, economic barriers, family mobility, and stigma avoidance.

8.5 Theme Five: "I Did Not Know What Was Happening at Home" — The Teacher Awareness Gap

The fifth theme concerned the gap between students' struggles and teachers' awareness. Across all educator focus groups, teachers and counsellors described being unaware of students' family situations and therefore unable to provide targeted support. Young adult participants confirmed that teachers rarely knew about their divorce or asked what was wrong.

A 48-year-old teacher (FG5) stated:

"I see a student's grades drop. I see them stop participating. I assume they are lazy or not trying. It does not occur to me that their parents might have divorced. The student does not tell me. The parents do not tell me. So I punish them for not doing homework when what they need is support."

A 51-year-old school counsellor (FG6) described the information gap:

"We have no system for knowing which students are experiencing family disruption. The parents do not inform the school. The child does not volunteer the information. So we are flying blind. We help the students we notice, but we miss many because we do not know to look for them."

Young adults confirmed that teachers did not know. A 26-year-old female young adult (FG1) stated:

"None of my teachers knew my parents were divorcing. I did not tell them. I was too embarrassed. One teacher punished me for not doing homework. She made me stand in the corner. I was crying but she thought I was crying because of the punishment. I was crying because my father had left and no one at school cared."

A 23-year-old male young adult (FG2) stated:

"My teacher asked why my grades were dropping. I said I did not know. I could not say, 'My parents are getting divorced and I cannot sleep and I cannot eat and I cannot think.' That would have been too much. So I said nothing. And nothing was done."

This theme reveals a critical gap: teachers want to help but lack information; students need help but cannot ask. The school system lacks protocols for identifying and supporting students experiencing family disruption.

8.6 Theme Six: "I Stopped Believing I Could Succeed" — Educational Aspiration Reduction

The sixth theme concerned the long-term effect of divorce on children's educational aspirations. Young adult participants described how divorce lowered their expectations for their own education and future careers. Some gave up on university. Others stopped studying for exams they once worked hard to pass. The loss of parental support, combined with economic precarity and emotional distress, led many to believe that educational success was no longer possible for them.

A 27-year-old female young adult (FG2) stated:

"Before the divorce, I wanted to be a doctor. I studied hard. I dreamed of university. After the divorce, that dream died. I could not see how I would get there. No money. No support. No one encouraging me. I stopped believing I could succeed. I finished school because I had to, but I did not try for the best grades. I just passed."

A 25-year-old male young adult (FG1) described giving up on university:

"I had the grades for university. Before the divorce, I was on track. After, I stopped caring. I thought, what is the point? My family is broken. My father does not care about me. My mother is struggling. Who will pay for university? Who will help me apply? So I did not even try. I regret that now. But at the time, I could not see a future."

Parents described their children's diminished aspirations. A 49-year-old divorced mother (FG4) stated:

"My daughter used to talk about being a lawyer. After the divorce, she stopped. She said, 'I will just get a job after SHS. I do not need university.' That broke me. I tried to encourage her but she would not listen. The divorce took her dreams, not just her father."

Teachers observed this pattern. A 50-year-old teacher (FG5) stated:

"I have seen bright students give up on themselves after their parents' divorce. They stop trying. They say, 'It does not matter.' They stop doing homework, stop studying for exams,

stop planning for the future. The tragedy is that they are still capable. They just do not believe it anymore."

This theme reveals that divorce can have lifelong consequences not only for academic performance but for educational aspirations and career trajectories. Children who lose hope may underachieve for years, not because they lack ability but because they lack belief.

Table 1: Summary of Themes and Key Narrative Elements.

Theme	Narrative Frame	Key Metaphors/Proverbs	Primary Tensions
Immediate Academic Decline	Sudden drop in grades following divorce	"My grades fell like a stone"	Former success vs. current failure; potential vs. performance
Concentration Crisis	Mind occupied with family distress	"I sat in class but my mind was at home"	Physical presence vs. mental absence; desire vs. ability to learn
Homework Abandonment	Loss of parental academic support	"No one was there to check my homework"	Need vs. availability of help; parental intention vs. capacity
School Attendance Disruption	Absenteeism from shame, economics, mobility	"I started missing school because I was ashamed"	Attendance vs. avoidance; structural barriers vs. emotional barriers
Teacher Awareness Gap	Educators unaware of students' family situations	"I did not know what was happening at home"	Need for support vs. lack of information; student silence vs. teacher inquiry
Educational Aspiration Reduction	Lowered expectations for future	"I stopped believing I could succeed"	Ambition vs. resignation; possibility vs. perceived impossibility

9. DISCUSSION

This focus group study explored the academic impact of parental divorce on children in Ghana from the perspectives of young adults who experienced divorce, divorced parents, and teachers and school counsellors. Six themes emerged: immediate academic decline, the concentration crisis as primary mechanism, homework abandonment and loss of academic support, school attendance disruption, the teacher awareness gap, and educational aspiration reduction.

The most significant theoretical contribution of this study is its demonstration that the academic impact of parental divorce on Ghanaian children is mediated by mechanisms that are both universal (emotional distress impairing concentration, reduced parental involvement)

and culturally specific (stigma-related school avoidance, lack of extended family educational support). The concentration crisis—children being physically present in class but mentally absent—operates similarly in Ghana as in Western contexts. However, the role of shame and stigma in driving school avoidance, and the absence of extended family academic support following divorce, appear to be distinct features of the Ghanaian experience.

The Concentration Crisis as Universal Mechanism

The finding that children cannot concentrate on schoolwork because their minds are occupied with family distress replicates international research (Amato, 2010) but extends it by showing that this mechanism operates strongly in Ghana despite cultural differences. The concentration crisis is not a matter of motivation or effort; children want to learn and know that they should learn, but their cognitive resources are hijacked by emotional distress. This finding has important implications for school interventions. Punishing children for incomplete homework or poor test performance is not only ineffective but harmful. Schools need trauma-informed approaches that recognize that academic decline may be a symptom of distress, not a behaviour problem.

The Teacher Awareness Gap as System Failure

The finding that teachers are often unaware of students' family situations and therefore cannot provide targeted support represents a critical system failure. Ghanaian schools lack protocols for identifying and supporting students experiencing family disruption. Teachers are not trained to recognize signs of divorce-related distress or to ask appropriate questions. Students do not volunteer information because of shame. The result is that children struggle alone, their academic decline continuing until it is too late to recover.

This finding has clear policy implications. Teacher training should include modules on family disruption and its effects on learning. Schools should establish confidential systems for parents to inform the school of family changes when appropriate. School counsellors (where they exist) should proactively identify students at risk. The current practice of waiting for students to fail before intervening is inadequate.

Educational Aspiration Reduction as Long-Term Consequence

The finding that divorce leads some children to lower their educational aspirations—to stop dreaming of university, to settle for less than they are capable of achieving—is particularly concerning. Aspiration reduction may persist long after the acute distress of divorce has subsided. Children who stop believing in their own potential may underachieve for years,

affecting their life trajectories and potentially transmitting disadvantage to the next generation.

This finding suggests that interventions for children of divorce should include not only academic support (tutoring, homework help) but also aspiration restoration: helping children see that they can still succeed, that divorce does not define their future, and that their dreams are still possible. Mentoring programmes, exposure to adult role models who succeeded despite family disruption, and career guidance counselling could address this dimension.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings have clear implications for Ghanaian educational policy. First, teacher training must include recognition of and response to students experiencing family disruption. Second, schools should establish confidential reporting systems allowing parents to inform the school when divorce occurs. Third, school counsellor positions should be expanded, particularly at the basic education level. Fourth, support programmes for children of divorce (tutoring, counselling, mentoring) should be piloted and evaluated. Fifth, the free SHS policy should be examined to ensure that children of divorce are not falling through cracks; school fees are only one barrier among many.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The urban Accra sample means findings may not represent children in rural Ghana, where family structures and educational contexts differ. The retrospective accounts of young adults may be influenced by recall bias and subsequent life experiences. The absence of children currently experiencing divorce means the study captures adult reflections, not contemporaneous experiences. The study did not include perspectives of extended family members who may play significant roles in children's education after divorce.

Future Research

Future research should: (a) include children currently experiencing parental divorce to capture contemporaneous academic effects; (b) extend research to rural Ghana; (c) conduct longitudinal research tracking academic trajectories from divorce through completion of education; (d) evaluate interventions (school support groups, tutoring programmes, counselling) in the Ghanaian context; (e) examine how the timing of divorce relative to national examinations moderates academic impact; (f) study the role of extended family in educational support after divorce.

10. CONCLUSION

This study explored the academic impact of parental divorce on children in Ghana through focus groups with young adults who experienced divorce, divorced parents, and teachers and school counsellors. Six themes emerged: immediate academic decline, the concentration crisis as primary mechanism, homework abandonment, school attendance disruption, the teacher awareness gap, and educational aspiration reduction.

The most significant contribution of this study is its demonstration that parental divorce in Ghana has profound, often devastating effects on children's academic trajectories. Grades drop. Concentration fails. Homework goes undone. School attendance becomes irregular. Teachers do not know why. Children stop believing in their own futures. These effects are not inevitable—some children are protected by supportive extended family, resilient temperaments, or exceptional teachers—but they are common and consequential.

The tragedy documented in this study is not only that children suffer academically when their parents divorce, but that their suffering is largely invisible and unsupported. Teachers do not know. Schools have no protocols. Counsellors are rare. Parents are overwhelmed. Children struggle alone, their academic potential dimming year by year until, for many, it extinguishes entirely.

Ghana has made tremendous progress in expanding educational access through free SHS and other policies. But access is not enough. Children who are in school but cannot learn because their minds are at home, consumed by family crisis, are not being served by access alone. If Ghana wants all children to succeed academically, it must attend to the family contexts in which children live and learn. Children of divorce need support: academic, emotional, and economic. Their education depends on it.

11. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered.

For the Ministry of Education and Ghana Education Service: Develop and implement policies requiring schools to identify and support students experiencing family disruption. Establish confidential reporting systems allowing parents to inform schools when divorce occurs without stigma. Expand school counsellor positions, especially at the primary and JHS levels. Include modules on family disruption and its effects on learning in teacher training curricula and continuing professional development. Develop national guidelines for trauma-informed teaching practices that recognize academic decline as a potential symptom of family distress.

For Teacher Training Institutions: Require all teacher trainees to complete coursework on child development, family systems, and the effects of family disruption on learning. Train teachers to recognize signs of divorce-related distress (sudden grade drops, concentration problems, absenteeism, withdrawal) and to respond supportively rather than punitively. Provide specific training on how to talk with students about family changes without causing further distress.

For School Counsellors and Psychologists: Establish proactive identification systems for students experiencing family disruption, including regular check-ins with students whose grades drop or attendance declines. Develop support groups for children of divorce where students can share experiences and coping strategies with peers. Provide individual counselling for students struggling with divorce-related distress. Train teachers to refer students appropriately. Advocate for counsellor positions in every school, particularly in underserved communities.

For Schools and Headteachers: Create confidential systems for parents to inform the school when divorce occurs, without fear of judgment. Establish partnerships with local mental health providers to refer students needing specialized support. Train all staff, including non-teaching staff, to recognize signs of student distress and to respond supportively. Ensure that school policies do not penalize students for academic declines that result from family crisis without first offering support.

For Divorced Parents: Communicate with your child's school when divorce occurs. You do not need to share every detail, but the school needs to know that your child may be struggling. Seek support for your child: tutoring, counselling, mentoring. Do not expect your child to maintain the same academic performance without support during this difficult time. Be patient with yourself and your child. You are both doing the best you can.

For Teachers: When a student's grades drop suddenly or they stop completing homework, ask gentle questions before assigning punishment. "Is everything okay at home?" can open a door. If a student discloses family difficulties, listen without judgment. Connect them to school counselling if available. Adjust academic expectations temporarily while supporting recovery. Your response can determine whether a child falls permanently behind or recovers.

For Extended Family Members: If your relative's child is experiencing parental divorce, consider: Can you help with homework? Can you provide transport to school? Can you pay school fees that the divorced parents cannot afford? Can you provide a stable place for the child to live and study? Your involvement can make the difference between academic recovery and academic failure.

For Future Research: Conduct longitudinal research tracking academic trajectories of children of divorce from primary school through completion of education. Evaluate the effectiveness of interventions (school support groups, tutoring programmes, counselling, mentoring) in the Ghanaian context. Study how the timing of divorce relative to BECE and WASSCE affects examination performance. Examine the role of extended family in educational support after divorce. Research how children of divorce who succeed academically against the odds managed to do so, to identify protective factors.

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