

**Double Jeopardy:  
The Psycho-Educational Effects of Absent Parenting  
on Children with Specific Learning Disabilities:  
A Case of Masvingo Urban, Zimbabwe**

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*Double Jeopardy: The Psycho-Educational Effects of Absent Parenting on Children with Specific Learning Disabilities: A Case of Masvingo Urban, Zimbabwe*

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## ABSTRACT

*The economic hardships which have plagued Zimbabwe have led to the movement of the adult population who are largely parents to the Diaspora. This trend has created 'absent parents'. This study sought to explore the psychological and educational effects of this absent parenting on children with specific learning disabilities left behind. The researcher used a quasi-experimental design to collect data, specifically; the researcher administered a standardized achievement test, the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT LEVEL 1) to twenty four children with learning disabilities under controlled conditions. Twelve (12) of the learners had absent parents and twelve (12) were staying with both parents. Questionnaires and School based tests were used to complement the data from the standardized test results. The questionnaires were administered to professionals dealing with the children who include educational psychologists and specialist teachers. SPSS version 11.5 was used to analyse data. School based test results were analysed over a period of one year, from April 2011, when most children with absent parents were still living with their parents and March 2012 when the parents had since left for the Diaspora. Results revealed that children physically staying with both parents performed significantly better on the standardized test than those staying with one or no parents, ( $t=3.448$ , significance value of .005). All children with absent parents witnessed an average 27.53% decline in performance after the departure of their biological parents. This study also revealed that learning disabled children with absent parents exhibited a decline in self esteem which could also explain their poor academic performance. This study recommends that, where possible, parents should move with their children especially those with learning disabilities when they decide to migrate. Future researchers should consider exploring the effects of absent parenting on older children.*

**Key Words:** Children, Absent Parenting and Learning Disability

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# **CHAPTER ONE: PROBLEM AND SETTING**

## **1.1 Chapter overview**

This chapter introduces the study, explores the background of the problem, clearly setting out the objectives of this study and putting the problem in context. The study concentrated on unveiling the psychological and educational challenges that affect children with learning disabilities when their parents are physically away from them, a phenomenon referred to as absent parenting in this study. The study was carried out in Masvingo urban, a small town in the southern part of Zimbabwe. The researcher shall also explain the limitations and delimitations of this study, highlighting the hypotheses and assumptions made in this study.

## **1.2 Background to the study**

Children with learning disabilities and absent parents suffer a double jeopardy. The first one being the difficulties they experience in learning and the second one being the absence of parents to support them through their challenges. The condition of having a learning disability also carries with it a number of negative reactions which require a lot of parental support. The educational achievement of children in general is affected by a number of factors, both intrinsic and extrinsic. The role played by parents is undoubtedly a contributing factor to the educational achievement and psychological growth of children with learning challenges. Children who live with a physical, sensory, intellectual or mental health disability are among the most stigmatized and marginalized of all the world's children, (UNICEF, 2005). This stigmatization and marginalization is only worsened if parental social support is not available. Parents, especially

fathers have a significant role to play in motivating their children to achieve academically, (Zill & Nord, 1994). Parental motivation and support is particularly important for children with learning disabilities.

Absent parenting is a term used by researchers to indicate that a child has lived for part or all of their childhood in a house without their biological parents, (Boothroyd & Perrett, 2008). This could be because the child's parents have left the country, split up or because they never lived together in the first place. It does not usually apply to children whose parents have died, as this is a very different kind of psychological event. This study will focus on those parents who would have migrated to the Diaspora, as this has been a prevalent phenomenon in Zimbabwe, in the past two decades.

Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifests itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations, (Mccown, Driscoll & Roop, 1996). Children with learning difficulties are those learners who show significant challenges in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities, (Hallahan and Kauffman, 1997). The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-1994) provides a diagnostic description of learning disorders as a disorder characterized by an individual's achievement on individually administered, standardized tests in reading, mathematics or written expression being substantially below that expected for age, schooling and level of intelligence. Students with learning disabilities often find learning a difficult and painful process. The presence of a learning disability can make learning to read, write, and do mathematics especially

challenging in the absence of one or more parents, (Charles, 1990). Literature shows that children with fathers at home tend to do better in school, are less prone to depression and are more successful in relationships. Children from one-parent families achieve less and get into trouble more than children from two parent families, (Wallerstein, 1986).

Interest on the impact of absent parenting began way back in the 1960s when people became concerned about whether people (especially men back then – they were less worried about women) developed differently if they grew up without their father in the house, (Boothroyd & Perrett, 2008). This concern partly originated with the long absences of soldiers fighting in the Second World War. The general opinion was that boys who grew up in mother-only homes initially developed a more feminine idea about themselves (or gender identity) in childhood, but then reacted to this by adopting a more masculine set of behaviours (or gender role) in adulthood. A review of all the research, carried out showed however that it was hard to get a consistent picture from all the different studies, (Boothroyd & Perrett, 2006). In Zimbabwe, absent parenting begun as early as the 1960s, when men left their families to look for work in the gold fields of Witwatersrand, South Africa, leaving children behind usually in mother only homes, (Nyanga, Mudhovozi, Zirima and Kasayira, 2011). The economic meltdown which emerged in the early 1990s is the latest trend which forced many Zimbabweans to leave the country in search of better opportunities in the Diaspora. This has forced many parents to leave their children behind in the care of relatives or other caregivers. Children with learning disabilities have not been spared this phenomenon.

Very few studies have focused on the role of parents on the academic achievement of children with learning disabilities. Research in the Western world has tended to pay much attention on the impact of fathers on their children's psycho-social development, this study however sought to

analyse the impact of both parents on the child's psycho-educational development. The study also sought to unveil how the absence of one or both parents' affect the educational performance of children with learning disabilities as measured by individually administered achievement tests and school based assessments. It further sought to clarify if the sex of the parent who is absent is of any significance to the performance of the individual child. This study was conducted in Masvingo urban, focusing on three primary schools.

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

Children with learning disabilities require individualised instruction from teachers and extra help from parents in order for them to improve their performance in school. The economic problems which have bedeviled the country have led parents to leave their children (including those with learning disabilities) behind as they searched for greener pastures in the Diaspora. This pathetic situation has negative effects on the educational performance and psychological well-being of the learners. This study therefore sought to assess the extent to which the absence of parents affects the psychological well-being and academic performance of children with specific learning disabilities.

### **1.4 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to ascertain if the absence of one or both parents has any significant effect on the educational performance and psychological well-being of children with learning disabilities.

### **1.5 Objectives**

The specific objectives of this study were to:

1. Assess the difference in educational performance between learners with learning disabilities who stay with both parents compared to those with one or no parents around.
2. Evaluate the change in educational performance and psychological well being of children with learning disabilities when they are no longer staying with their parents.
3. Assess any difference in the educational performance and psychological well-being of children with a father absent compared to those with a mother absent
4. Make recommendations on how children with learning disabilities with absent parents can be helped to perform better.

## **1.6 Hypotheses**

- 1) Children with learning disabilities living with both parents do not significantly differ in their educational performance from those staying with one or no parent.
- 2) The absence of parents does not have any significant effect on the educational performance of children with learning disabilities.

## **1.7 Significance of the Study**

This study was important as it aimed to gather data which for long has not received much attention, that is, the implications of the absence of a parent or parents on the educational achievement of learners with learning disabilities. The study will be beneficial to:-

1. Educators – practitioners in the field of education that is teachers and educational psychologists will gain new insights on how to assist learners with learning disabilities who are not living with their parents.

2. Existing Body of Knowledge – the study will add valuable information to the existing body of knowledge regards absent parenting.
3. Parents – parents will gain insight on how they can handle their children when they leave for the Diaspora. Results of this study will point out the best alternatives for parents who decide to stay in far away places from their children.
4. Students – fellow students will gain new insights on this topic especially with regards to how it is related to educational psychology and special needs education.

## **1.8 Assumptions**

In this study, the researcher assumed that

1. Changes in the performance of learners from the time their parents left them to the current performance are principally due to the absence of the parents.
2. Results obtained from the learners' performance in standardized tests are indicative of the learners' current achievement level.
3. Respondents to the questionnaire were truthful and honest.

## **1.9 Limitations**

The following factors might have affected the accuracy, quality, reliability and validity of the results of this study:

1. There is a possibility that the standardized test might have been manipulated by teachers due to over-usage and as such the results of the tests might not reflect the true performance of the learners but rather may be indicative of drilling. To overcome this

challenge, the researcher used school based tests to validate results from the standardized test.

2. Time and financial resources – the researcher is currently a full time student and as such did not have adequate time to carry out the research, moreover, limited financial resources incapacitated the researcher from engaging as many as respondents as would have been desirable. To overcome this challenge, the researcher made use of the internship period to collect data.
3. Respondents may not have given truthful information on the questionnaire.

### **1.10 Delimitations**

The study focused on the psychological and educational implications of absent parenting on children with learning disabilities left behind. The researcher did not consider any other implications of absent parenting other than those that are psychological and educational.

The research was conducted in Masvingo urban, involving three (3) primary schools which are all within a five (5) kilometer radius from the Central Business district.

### **1.11 Operational Definitions**

*Absent parent* – In this research, an absent parent refers to a parent who is not physically in contact with his/her child. The parent fails to maintain contact with their child because they are either in the Diaspora or in a distant town which makes them to fail to maintain contact with the child.

***Specific Learning Disabilities*** – This refers to a classification in which a learner has significant difficulty in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. Such learners usually perform very poorly on both standardized tests and school based tests.

***Psycho-educational effects*** – This refers to the mental, emotional, behavioral and educational consequences in this case related to absent parenting.

## **1.12 Summary**

This chapter gave a preview of the main issues related to the psychological and educational effects of absent parenting on children with specific learning disabilities, particular attention was given to the background of the study, the aim, objectives, hypotheses, limitations, delimitations and justification of the study. A clear statement of the problem was also given.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Chapter overview**

This review focuses on previous studies conducted to determine the magnitude of the impact of absent parenting on children with specific learning disabilities. The review will look at how the migration of parents has created absent parents in developing countries including Zimbabwe. A review of theories that are embedded in this study will also be done.

### **2.2 Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework explores literature which is related to the basic concepts in this study and these include, absent parenting, children with specific learning disabilities and effects of absent parenting on children.

#### **2.2.1 Absent Parenting**

Absent parenting is a term which refers to a situation in which a child has lived for part or all of their childhood in a house without their biological parents, (Boothroyd & Perrett, 2008). In developing countries, researchers usually use the term to refer to a situation in which children are left behind when one or both parents migrate, (Yeoh & Lam, 2008). Many labour migrants – both men and women –leave their children behind with extended family members or friends in the home countries in their quest to improve livelihood circumstances for themselves and their families through migration, (Sassen, 2006). This migration might not necessarily be from country to country but sometimes might be from a rural area to an urban area. While improved economic circumstances after migration have been noted in a range of studies, the psychological, educational, social and emotional costs of their departure – especially on children left behind – have been often omitted from the migration balance sheet, (Yeoh & Lam, 2008).

Generally, of children born since 1984, more than 60% will spend an average of 5 years of their childhood with one or both absent parents, (Compas & Williams, 1990). Moreover, 30% of all children in the United States spend their entire lives with single parents, or absent parents, (Knox, 1996).

### **2.2.2 Children with Specific Learning Disabilities**

Children with specific learning disabilities are those children with a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, recall, spell or do mathematics calculations, (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997). A child with a learning disability cannot try harder, pay closer attention, or improve motivation on their own; they need help to learn how to do those things. A learning disability, or learning disorder, is not a problem with intelligence. Learning disorders are caused by a difference in the brain that affects how information is received, processed, or communicated, (Bos & Vaughn, 1994). Children and adults with learning disabilities have trouble processing sensory information because they see, hear, and understand things differently.

There is evidence that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are prone to exhibit learning problems and students who are emotionally disturbed often display some behavioural characteristics of learning disability, (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997). The assumption is that Learning disability can be exacerbated by environmental disadvantage and emotional disturbance. Such disadvantage can include the absence of parents.

### **2.2.3 Role of Fathers on the Psychological well-being and Educational Performance of Children with Learning Disabilities**

More often than not, single-parent families include a mother and children whose original father no longer lives in the home or has moved to the Diaspora to explore better life. Similar to income and parent education, father absence is also a risk factor that makes it more difficult for children to succeed in school, (Knox, 1996). When parents separate, or when the father leaves the country children often lose both the financial and emotional support of their fathers, which can have a negative impact on academic performance. Although child support does not resolve all of these issues, it does make a significant difference. Children in mother-only families who receive child support tend to do better in school than those who do not receive child support (Thomson & McLanahan, 1994). Reviewing data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Knox (1996) found that for every \$100 of child support mothers receive, their children's standardized test scores increase by 1/8 to 7/10 of a point. In addition, fathers who support their children financially typically have more contact with them, further decreasing the negative emotional impact of marital breakdown or migration. The support of the father is more crucial in instances where the child has learning disabilities.

The study by Kuhn (2006) further showed that the emigration of fathers and male siblings often resulted in improvements in the education of children left behind in some rural areas in Bangladesh. He concluded that out-migration of fathers and brothers in these rural areas have substantial and predominately positive impacts on the pace of schooling of children, both boys and girls, left behind in Matlab. This is largely because remittances send home are used to improve the educational resources of children left behind.

However, remittances cannot replace the physical presence of the father as Charles, (1990)

argues that children with fathers at home tend to do better in school, are less prone to depression and are more successful in relationships. Smith (2001) argues that fathers are critical in cultivating desired behaviors and boosting their children's self-esteem which is important for both a healthy psychological life and educational achievement.

#### **2.2.4 Role of Mothers in the Educational Performance and Psychological Well-being of Children with Learning Disabilities**

Research on the influence of the absence of mothers is contradictory. Western studies indicate that the absence of a mother is not a predictor of negative outcomes, (Milne, Myers, Rosenthal & Ginsburg, 1986). However, a number of studies indicate that regardless of whether they are single or married, mothers who work full-time in distant places or abroad often have less time to spend with their children (Thomson & McLanahan, 1994), a condition that may lead to lower achievement and increases in behavior problems at school.

What appears consistent in the various studies in Asia, however, is that children left behind by mothers tend to fare less well compared with other groups of children with migrating parents. Those with migrant mothers tend to have more difficulties academically and performed more poorly in terms of their physical and emotional health (Asis, 2006; Battistella and Conaco, 1998). Caregivers in a study on children in Sri Lanka left behind by their mothers reported certain negative behaviours, though not in the majority, in the children after their mothers leave. Some of these behaviours include loss of appetite, weight loss for children under five years of age, and temper tantrums among those of all ages, especially adolescents, (Save the Children, 2006).

Children between 6 and 17 years old also felt lonely and/or sad. In this study, incidences of abuse were not high and there were no observably higher levels of violence from fathers in the absence of mothers.

Unfortunately, the situation is worse for children with mental and physical disabilities. Their already marginalized position in society can degenerate further in the absence of a parent, (Yeoh & Lam, 2008). Children with disabilities are often neglected, have low hygiene levels, and many of them are not in school. They may eventually have to be institutionalized due to neglect.

### **2.2.5 Psychological Implications of Absent Parenting on Children with Learning Disabilities**

Research evidence largely indicates that children without parents experience a number of negative psychological reactions. Kaplan, Liu and Howard (2001) argue that it's a very traumatic experience for any child to go through life with an absent parent, regardless of age. They may develop insecurities, helplessness, and anger issues may arise. They may become bullies at school, due to the hurt they have build up from the absent parent not being in their life, (Kaplan et al, 2001). They may be the ones bullied, due to the insecurities they have from the absence of parents.

Absent parenting affects the children with learning disabilities in many other ways also. They may become depressed and withdraw themselves from any social activities due to low self esteem triggered by the departure of one or both parents. They may experience learning difficulties, or aggression may arouse toward parents, teachers, and siblings, (Knox, 1996). Feelings of hopelessness may bring forth thoughts of suicide. They are more likely to be referred

to a psychologist for help. They are also more likely to become sexually active at a very young age (this is most likely for girls without a father), (Boothroyd & Perrett, 2008).

Compas & Williams, (1990) posit that, “while children with learning disabilities face challenges academically, a problem that is more troubling than difficulties with the 3 R's (reading, writing, arithmetic) is the 4th R: relationships. It is on this 4<sup>th</sup> R that the absence of a parent or parents will be felt most”. Many children with learning disabilities cannot play successfully with even one child and certainly not two. They do not read social signals: facial expressions, gestures, or tones of voice any more than they read letters or words. Additionally, many of these children are literal and concrete; they can not deal with subtleties, nuances, inferences, or multiple meanings, (Compas & Williams, 1990). This affects family life and peer relationships because they often can not understand jokes, subtle teasing, or sarcasm. One of the consequences of this is that they have to be taught explicitly how to relate to others. Parents have to work with them on *reading* faces, *reading* gestures and movements, and learning what is and is not appropriate to say. Parents may have to coach them through common social situations until they develop appropriate interpersonal behaviors. Parents can provide their children with practice in anticipating what might happen in various social situations. However, when the child with learning disabilities does not stay with the parents who can coach them, maladjustment is most likely to occur. Nyanga et al (2011), argue that parents are critical in imparting an understanding of rules, customs and traditions which prepares the child to enter into the moral order of a responsible adult life and it is the foundation of developing *hunhu*. Children living without parents might lack the element of *hunhu* which according to Nussbaum (2003), cited in Nyanga et al (2011) is the capacity to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony, and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community culture and ethos.

## **2.2.6 Educational Implications of Absent Parenting on Children with Learning Disabilities**

The education of children left behind is affected by the migration of one or both parents, though the evidence is often mixed. According to media reports, parental absence in Mexico is an important reason why children left behind do poorly in schools. A headmistress interviewed claimed that as many as 10 out of 73 children in a class are left behind and that these children often drop out of school or turn to crime in their parent's absence (National Public Radio, 9 May 2006, as cited by Yeoh & Lam, 2008). In India, migration of males is reported to lower girls' chances of acquiring an education as they have to take on more domestic responsibilities. At the same time, Indians who migrate to urban areas have a heightened awareness of the value of education which translates into greater attention to ensuring that their children receive a better education (Srivastava and Sasikumar, 2003).

Studies of the impact of migration on the education of children left behind in Bangladesh have also shown mixed results. Several of these studies show that a large proportion of the migrants' remittances was used for children's education (Afsar, 2003; Kuhn, 2006) – a finding that is replicated in other country studies such as Jampaklay's (2006) on children left behind in Thailand and Hugo's (2002) study on the impact of migration on Indonesian families. Afsar, 2003 also discovered that school enrolment for children with learning disabilities rates were higher among migrants' families in the rural areas.

## **2.3 Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on Bowlby's Attachment Theory, Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory and the Father Absence Theory.

### **2.3.1 Bowlby's Attachment Theory**

Attachment is an affectional bond between child and primary caregiver (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978 as cited by Kennedy and Kennedy, 2004). Bowlby's ethological attachment theory (1969/1982), provides an essential framework for understanding the impact of early social/emotional relationships on cognitive-affective structures used by the child to construct views of the world, self, and others, (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2004). Attachment theory addresses social-emotional development from the perspective of both process and outcome and has identified a variety of markers predictive of later academic performance, social competence, and psychopathology. Attachment theory provides an awareness of and new meanings derived from the child's history and the subtleties of observed child, parent, and teacher behaviors in the current context. Children usually and naturally make attachments to their biological parents and that attachment is necessary for their social, psychological and academic success in life. Children living without parents often lack this attachment and this naturally has effects on their psychosocial life.

### **2.3.2 Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory**

According to this theory, parents have a strong modeling influence on their children. Children in all cultures learn and develop by observing more experienced people engaged in culturally important activities. In this way, teachers and parents help students to adapt to new situations, aid

them in their problem solving attempts and guide them to accept responsibility for their behaviour, (Rogoff as cited by Travers, Elliot and Kratochwill, 1993). Observational learning has particular classroom relevance since children do not just do what adults tell them to do but rather what they see adults do. Parents can therefore act as role models for their children propelling them to perform better in school, their absence however leave a vacuum which may be difficult to fill.

### **2.3.3 Father Absence Theory**

Draper and Harpending (1982) as cited by Bothroyd and Perrett (2008) proposed that father absence (that is, absence of the biological father from the family home) during childhood is associated with a developmental shift in an individual's approach to relationships and parenting, such that 'father absent' daughters develop a low-investment (that is, short term) relationship 'strategy' in which paternal care of offspring is not expected. Alternatively, father presence and a stable early environment should lead children to develop an approach to relationships which rely on stable pair-bonds and high levels of male investment (i.e. a long term strategy). Belsky, Steinberg and Draper (1991) as cited by Bothroyd and Perrett (2008) later put forward a developmental model in which parental divorce and father absence were one form of stress amongst many, and it is this psychosocial stress which 'affects' development via the attachment process. Specifically, they hypothesized that psychosocial stress leads to poor attachment and both a more opportunistic approach to relationships, and an accelerated life history trajectory.

A large body of literature has accumulated showing that absence of a co-resident biological father during early childhood is associated with earlier age of puberty and first sexual intercourse and increased likelihood of marital breakdown in the following generation, (Bothroyd and Perrett, 2008). The absence of the father is also associated with poor educational performance for

children of both sexes.

## **2.4 Previous Studies**

**i. Battistella and Conaco, 1998: The impact of labour on the children left behind: a study of elementary school children in the Philippines**

The major finding of this study, is that children left behind by mothers tend to fare less well compared with other groups of children with migrating parents. Those with migrant mothers tend to have more difficulties academically and performed more poorly in terms of their physical and emotional health. The research reported that Filipino children of migrants fared worse academically in relation to non-migrants' children. Both studies have similar findings relating to children with migrant mothers – those with absent mothers have a tendency to lag behind children of the other groups.

**ii. Kuhn, 2006. The effects of fathers' and siblings' migration on children's pace of schooling in rural Bangladesh**

This study showed that the emigration of fathers and male siblings often resulted in improvements in the education of children left behind in some rural areas in Bangladesh.

The study concluded that out-migration of fathers and brothers in these rural areas have substantial and predominately positive impacts on the pace of schooling of children, both boys and girls, left behind in Matlab. However, the migration of sisters has no effect on their sibling's education while cases of migrant mothers were still too rare to warrant further study.