The Impact of Marital Conflict on Students' Academic Achievements in Public Secondary Schools in Iringa Municipality

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Abstract

The study aimed to assess the impacts of marital conflict on students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Iringa Municipality. Specifically, the study was guided by three objectives: to explore the effects of marital conflict on students' psychological well-being, to assess the effects of marital conflict on students' social well-being, and to identify the coping strategies adopted by students affected by marital conflict. The study was conducted in Iringa Municipality, Iringa Region. A total of 34 participants were involved, including 30 secondary school students, two heads of schools, and two parents from families experiencing marital conflict. The study employed a qualitative research approach within the constructivist research paradigm. Data were collected through focus group discussions and interviews. The findings revealed that marital conflict has a significant impact on students' academic achievement by affecting them physically, socially, financially, and psychologically. It also influences their cognitive, affective, and spiritual development.The study

recommends that schools should strengthen support systems by organizing student discussions on the impacts of marital conflict on academic achievement. Such discussions provide students with an opportunity to share experiences, express their feelings, and learn from others facing similar challenges. This may help reduce feelings of isolation, promote emotional support, and encourage positive coping strategies that can improve students' academic performance.

Keywords: marital conflicts, students, academic achievements.

1.0 Introduction

The responsibility for supporting students who experience parental marital conflict also rests with schools. Teachers are expected not only to meet students' cognitive needs but also to support their emotional, social, and physical well-being (Abu &Kolawale, 2012). However, the authors acknowledge that the effects of marital conflict on students are often overlooked because many teachers are not adequately prepared to discuss such issues with learners. As a result, students may not receive the support they need during difficult family situations. Therefore, teachers should receive appropriate training to enable them to identify, understand, and support students from families experiencing marital conflict, thereby promoting their academic development.

According to Cherun, Chase-Land, Solate, and McRae (2016), students from families affected by marital conflict often fear that teachers may also neglect or reject them. Teachers may find it difficult to respond effectively because many have not received adequate training in dealing with students facing family-related challenges.

Nevertheless, teachers who understand the emotional and behavioural changes associated with marital conflict can provide appropriate guidance and support. Such support can help students cope with family challenges and reduce disruptions to their learning.

Teachers are often the first professionals to notice changes in students' behaviour when family relationships begin to deteriorate. Since students spend a considerable amount of time at school, the school environment provides an important opportunity to identify those experiencing family problems and offer timely assistance. Schools can provide access to guidance and counselling services, emotional support, and other professional interventions that help students cope with the effects of marital conflict. Such support is particularly important during periods of family instability, as it helps students remain focused on their education despite challenges at home.

Furthermore, students from families experiencing marital conflict often want their teachers to understand their home situations and avoid judging them when their academic performance or behaviour changes. According to Animasahun (2014), students appreciate teachers who are willing to listen, understand their feelings, and provide encouragement. Through guidance, counselling, and supportive teacher-student relationships, schools can help students develop effective coping strategies that enable them to adjust to both their home circumstances and the school environment.

In Tanzania, studies such as Lawuo et al. (2015) have mainly focused on strategies for addressing family conflict, with limited attention given to the coping strategies adopted

by students themselves. Previous studies have recommended interventions such as parental education, guidance and counselling services, and collaboration with government institutions, religious organisations, and community stakeholders to support families experiencing marital conflict. These interventions have been considered important in reducing family conflict and improving students' emotional well-being.

Similarly, Bubelwa (2014), who investigated the effects of broken marriages on primary school pupils' academic performance in Ilala Municipality, Tanzania, found that family breakdown contributes to poor academic achievement, psychological problems, and behavioural misconduct among learners. These findings indicate that marital conflict has far-reaching consequences for children's educational development. Therefore, addressing the effects of marital conflict among secondary school students is essential because these students face numerous academic, emotional, and social challenges that may hinder their learning and overall development.

Likewise, Kusekwa (2017) found that marital conflict affects students' behaviour and emotional well-being. The study reported that students from families experiencing marital conflict often display signs of emotional instability, loneliness, low self-esteem, and poor academic motivation. However, the findings also suggested that the intensity of marital conflict differs across families, with some experiencing occasional disagreements while others face frequent and destructive conflicts. This implies that the severity of marital conflict may influence the extent to which students' academic achievement is affected.

Furthermore, Kamaldeen et al. (2023) examined the relationship between marital stability and the academic performance of sandwich students at Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin. The study found a significant relationship between emotional intelligence, marital stability, and students' academic performance. Although the study demonstrated the importance of stable family relationships, it did not specifically examine the different types of marital conflict or explain how each type influences students' academic achievement. Similarly, many previous studies have discussed the general effects of marital conflict without identifying the specific forms of conflict experienced by families or how these affect students' educational outcomes.

Most previous studies on marital conflict and students' academic achievement have been conducted outside Tanzania. Therefore, applying their findings directly to the Tanzanian context may not provide an accurate understanding because family structures, cultural practices, and educational environments differ across countries. Moreover, the few studies conducted in Tanzania have largely focused on primary school pupils rather than secondary school students. Consequently, there is limited empirical evidence on how marital conflict affects students' academic achievement in Tanzanian public secondary schools.

This study was therefore conducted to assess the impacts of marital conflict on students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Iringa Municipality. The findings are expected to benefit students from families experiencing marital conflict by providing information on possible coping strategies for overcoming learning challenges. The

findings will also assist teachers in identifying and supporting affected students more effectively. In addition, parents and the wider community will benefit from the recommendations provided by the study. School counsellors, psychologists, and education stakeholders may also use the findings to develop appropriate interventions that promote stable family environments and improve students' academic achievement.

2.0 Material and Methods

2.1 Research Approach and Design.

This study employed a qualitative research approach. The approach was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and contexts surrounding marital conflict and its impact on students' academic achievement. Since the phenomenon under investigation is social in nature, the qualitative approach allowed participants to express their experiences and views in their own words.

The study adopted a cross-sectional research design. This design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to collect data from different categories of participants at a single point in time. The design also provided an opportunity to gather rich information from students, heads of schools, and parents regarding the impact of marital conflict on students' academic achievement. Generally, a research design provides the framework that guides the systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of data in order to answer the research questions.

2.2 Participants

The study involved participants from two public secondary schools in Iringa Municipality. A total of 34 participants were purposively selected because they were considered capable of providing relevant information regarding the phenomenon under investigation. The participants included 30 secondary school students, two heads of schools, and two parents from families experiencing marital conflict.

2.3 Data Collection Method

Data were collected through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Focus group discussions were conducted with students to obtain their experiences and perceptions regarding the effects of marital conflict on their academic achievement. Interviews were conducted with heads of schools and parents to obtain detailed information about the challenges experienced by students from families affected by marital conflict. The use of these methods enabled the researcher to obtain detailed and rich information from different participants, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data collected through focus group discussions and interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis began with organizing and securely storing the collected data. Thereafter, the researcher became familiar with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts and discussion notes. The analysis followed several steps, including familiarisation with the data, development of thematic categories, coding,

categorisation, interpretation, and presentation of the findings. Similar ideas were grouped into themes based on the research objectives. The findings were then presented narratively and supported by direct quotations from the participants to illustrate the major themes that emerged from the study.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Before conducting the research, the researcher obtained the necessary research clearance by following the research procedures of Ruaha Catholic University (RUCU). Permission was also obtained from the relevant authorities before data collection commenced. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their voluntary participation was sought before they were involved in the research. The researcher assured participants that the information they provided would be treated confidentially and that their identities would remain anonymous. Where necessary, codes rather than participants' names were used to protect their identity.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences. In addition, all sources of information were properly acknowledged to avoid plagiarism, and the researcher-maintained honesty, integrity, and professionalism throughout the research process.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The findings of this study on the impacts of marital conflict on students' academic achievement in selected public secondary schools in Iringa Municipality are presented in

this section. The data were collected through focus group discussions with students and interviews with heads of schools and parents. The findings are presented according to the study objectives.

3.1 Marital Conflicts that Affect Students' Psychological Well-being

The findings revealed that marital conflict negatively affects students' psychological well-being, which in turn influences their academic achievement. Participants reported that students from families experiencing marital conflict often suffer from emotional distress, fear, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Such psychological challenges make it difficult for students to concentrate on their studies and participate effectively in school activities.

Psychological abuse may involve intimidation, threats, emotional manipulation, or behaviour that creates fear and insecurity. Examples include preventing a spouse from interacting freely with other people, restricting movement, making threats, emotional blackmail, and damaging personal property. One student explained:

> I had frequently witnessed conflicts and harassment between my parents. My mother often devalued my father in front of me. I could see that she did not love him and only tolerated him because she depended on him to support our family. I felt deeply hurt by the way my mother treated my father. Sometimes I wished they could separate so that my father could be happy, although I also wanted both of my parents to stay together. Because of this situation, I often found myself unable to concentrate on my studies and frequently forgot what I had learned. As a result, I performed poorly in my examinations. (Student from Secondary School A, 5 March 2024).

Similarly, a teacher from Secondary School B described how students from families experiencing marital conflict are affected emotionally and academically:

> From my experience, students who experience hardships due to their parents' marital conflict often become lonely and withdrawn. Some develop truancy behaviour, while others engage in petty businesses to meet their basic needs despite having living parents. For example, one Form Four student sells cashew nuts after school to earn money for essential needs. Many students also change their behaviour because they lack close parental supervision, guidance, encouragement, and emotional support.(Teacher from Secondary School B, 28 February 2024).

These findings indicate that marital conflict has a significant negative impact on students' academic achievement. Family conflict affects students not only psychologically but also physically, socially, financially, and emotionally. As a result, many students experience stress, poor concentration, low motivation, and emotional instability, which reduce their ability to perform well academically.

The findings further suggest that students living in conflict-ridden families often struggle to study effectively because the home environment is characterised by constant tension and emotional insecurity. Such conditions interfere with students' cognitive development and limit their ability to focus on learning. In many cases, parents become so overwhelmed by their own conflicts that they fail to provide adequate guidance, encouragement, and emotional support for their children. Consequently, students lose motivation, develop negative attitudes towards learning, and experience declining academic achievement.

3.2 Marital Conflicts that Affect Students Sociological Well Being

The findings revealed that marital conflict also affects students' social well-being, which subsequently influences their academic achievement. Participants explained that students from families experiencing marital conflict often receive limited parental support, supervision, and emotional care. As a result, many of them experience difficulties in their social relationships and school life.

During an interview, one parent from the Municipal Social Welfare Office described how marital conflict affected both the family relationship and the student's education:

> My husband used to beat me whenever he was drunk. Whenever this happened, my children became frustrated and sometimes tried to defend me by fighting back against their father. This only made the conflicts worse. One day, during one of the fights, my son picked up a stick and attempted to hit his father. Since that day, my husband has refused to accept him as his child. My son now feels like a stranger in his own family. This year he is expected to sit for the Form Four National Examination, but nowadays he no longer studies as hard as he used to because he is always afraid of meeting his father. That is why I came to the Social Welfare Office to seek help. (Female client, Municipal Social Welfare Office, 4 March 2024).

Similarly, a head of school explained that although disagreements may occur in many families, frequent and unresolved marital conflict negatively affects students' learning motivation:

It is normal for families to experience disagreements from time to time. However, when conflicts become frequent and lead to separation, students are the ones who suffer most. They lose motivation to learn, become emotionally disturbed, and eventually perform poorly in their academic work. (Head of School, Secondary School B, 28 February 2024).

The findings further showed that some students from families experiencing marital conflict engage in various income-generating activities to support themselves because their parents are unable to meet their basic needs. Some students sell sweets, bottled water, fruits, snacks, or other small items before or after school to obtain money for food, learning materials, and transport. Others engage in temporary jobs such as fishing, farming, or other forms of casual labour. These responsibilities consume time that would otherwise be devoted to studying, thereby affecting their academic achievement.

In some cases, marital conflict forces one parent to leave the family home in search of peace, while in more severe situations it may result in domestic violence, family separation, or children running away from home. Such circumstances expose students to emotional stress, insecurity, and unstable living conditions, making it difficult for them to concentrate on their studies. Some children eventually live on the streets or seek refuge with relatives because they can no longer tolerate the hostile home environment.

Overall, the findings suggest that marital conflict extends beyond the relationship between spouses and significantly affects students' social development. The absence of parental care, emotional security, and a stable home environment weakens students'

confidence, social interactions, and commitment to learning. Consequently, students become more vulnerable to poor academic achievement and other social challenges.

3.3 Marital Conflicts that affect Students Coping Strategies

The findings under this sub-theme indicate that marital conflicts affect students' coping strategies. Most secondary school students are unable to express openly what they experience in their families. As a result, marital conflicts negatively affect their academic performance and overall well-being.One teacher explained:

> Students miss their basic needs because parents (mother and father) are responsible for providing the family's daily needs. When conflicts begin at home, it becomes difficult for parents to engage in economic activities, which limits their ability to provide learning materials such as textbooks, exercise books, pens, school fees, and school uniforms. Some students ask for help from teachers when they are at school. Others come to school without pens or exercise books. Many spend the whole day at school without anything to eat until they return home. In both day and boarding schools, some students even lack basic items such as soap. (Teacher from Secondary School B, 28 February 2024).

Students affected by marital conflicts develop different coping strategies to reduce the effects of family conflicts on their academic life. Some withdraw from their homes and stay with relatives. Others engage in petty businesses in town to earn money for school needs. However, some adopt negative coping strategies, such as prostitution and drug abuse. Other students seek guidance and counselling services from teachers and school

matrons. Some also engage in temporary jobs such as farming, livestock keeping, and mining to earn money for school expenses.

Furthermore, some students seek support from school administrators by requesting essential learning materials such as exercise books and pens. They also ask school leaders to meet with their parents after reporting family conflicts to school matrons or patrons so that possible solutions can be discussed to restore harmony within the family.

Many students from families experiencing marital conflicts gradually develop coping strategies that help them adjust to the school learning environment. School administrations also support these students in different ways, including improving communication between students, parents, teachers, and other learners. In addition, school management monitors students' attendance and academic progress to identify those who require additional support.

Marital conflicts often disrupt relationships between parents and their children. When students are continuously exposed to conflict at home, they may eventually accept it as a normal part of family life. Consequently, some students perceive conflict as a normal aspect of social relationships and attempt to maintain their happiness despite the difficult home environment. Open emotional expression and opportunities to discuss their feelings can help these students develop self-confidence and improve their emotional well-being.

The findings further revealed that many students use avoidance as a coping strategy. They try to distance themselves from parental conflicts by avoiding situations that may

trigger arguments between their parents. They also avoid discussing issues that remind them of painful family experiences. Although avoidance may temporarily reduce emotional stress, it does not eliminate the negative effects of living in a conflict-ridden family environment.

Based on these findings, coping skills training should be provided to both parents and students. Such training would help parents understand the emotional harm caused by marital conflicts while equipping students with healthy coping strategies. Since students are the most vulnerable victims of parental conflicts and have little control over family situations, they require adequate emotional and psychological support. Therefore, parents should recognise the emotional damage caused by marital conflicts, as these conflicts not only affect students' psychological well-being but also contribute to poor academic achievement.

3.4 Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that students from families experiencing high levels of marital conflict generally performed poorly academically. This may be because they are exposed to a home environment characterised by hostility, tension, and negative interactions, which affect their emotional well-being and learning. These findings are consistent with those of Lesmin and Saker (2018) and Olatain and Akpan (2003), who reported that marital conflict leads to significant changes in parenting behaviour, parent-child attachment, and other important emotional structures within the family. Fathers in families with high marital conflict are often less involved in parenting and tend to

withdraw from family responsibilities. The studies further indicate that students of all ages experience parental conflict as a source of stress, although no specific age group appears to be more vulnerable than others.

The present study also confirmed that marital conflicts have a significant negative impact on students' academic achievement. These findings are consistent with those reported by Wami et al. (2021), who examined the influence of marital conflict on the academic performance of secondary school students in Port Harcourt Metropolis, Rivers State. Their study found that marital conflicts had a direct negative effect on students' academic achievement. Furthermore, students from families experiencing marital conflicts were more likely to engage in drug abuse, prostitution, armed robbery, and other criminal activities. They also tended to display behaviours such as disobedience, unruliness, and rebellion. However, the study did not clearly identify the specific types of marital conflicts that were common in the study area.

Similarly, Cummings and Davies (2011), in studies conducted in several Sub-Saharan African countries, reported that marital conflicts were common and had a considerable effect on children's educational progress. However, they also found that when parents remained actively involved in their children's education despite family conflicts, students achieved better academic outcomes. Although their study highlighted the importance of parental involvement, it did not specifically examine the different forms of marital conflict and their direct effects on students' academic achievement.

The findings of the present study further revealed that marital conflicts often weaken the family's economic situation, isolate students from their peers, contribute to poor psychosocial well-being, influence negative behavioural changes, and reduce academic performance. These findings are supported by Svinicki (2004), who argued that a supportive school environment, including positive teacher attitudes and effective school administration, can enhance students' motivation to learn.

Students require continuous parental support, guidance, and encouragement to achieve important developmental tasks. However, parental conflicts may negatively affect students' psychological adjustment, behaviour, social relationships, self-esteem, and academic achievement, with some effects continuing into adulthood. These findings are consistent with Harold and Leve (2012), who argued that after separation or divorce, even when both parents remain in the same locality, reduced parental care and supervision may contribute to children's poor adjustment and negatively affect their educational progress.

The findings also suggest that marital conflicts create multiple challenges for families, especially during adolescence, which is a critical stage of development. During this period, adolescents are expected to accomplish several developmental tasks. Exposure to continuous parental conflict may interfere with these developmental processes and affect their academic and personal growth. These findings support the arguments of Sherman (2009), who described self-esteem as a healthy understanding and acceptance of oneself that recognises personal limitations without becoming excessively self-critical.

The study further found that students from families experiencing marital conflicts develop different coping strategies to adapt to their difficult home environments. These strategies include running away from home, engaging in temporary work, and operating small businesses to meet their educational needs. However, some students adopt unhealthy coping mechanisms, including joining deviant peer groups, stealing, gathering misleading information, and smoking marijuana. Students from conflict-ridden families may also exhibit behaviours such as aggression, victimisation of others, and poor social maturity, all of which can negatively affect their academic achievement.

These findings support Akanbi (2014), who argued that secondary school teachers are in a unique position to assist students in overcoming the challenges associated with marital conflicts. Through guidance, counselling, and academic support, teachers can help minimise the negative effects of family conflicts on students' educational outcomes. Overall, marital conflict disrupts students' learning by interfering with productive study habits and increasing emotional problems such as anxiety and depression, which ultimately reduce their academic performance.

4.0 Conclusion

This study aimed to assess the impacts of marital conflict on students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Iringa Municipality. Specifically, the study examined the effects of marital conflict on students' psychological well-being, social well-being, and the coping strategies adopted by students from families experiencing marital conflict.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that marital conflict has a significant negative impact on students' academic achievement. The study found that students from families experiencing marital conflict face various psychological challenges, including stress, anxiety, fear, poor concentration, and low motivation, all of which interfere with their learning and academic performance.

The findings also revealed that marital conflict affects students' social well-being. Many students receive inadequate parental support, supervision, and emotional care, making them more vulnerable to poor social relationships, absenteeism, behavioural problems, and reduced academic engagement. Some students also lack basic school necessities, including learning materials and school uniforms, which further affect their academic achievement.

Furthermore, the study found that students adopt different coping strategies to manage the challenges associated with marital conflict. Some seek guidance and counselling from teachers, school counsellors, relatives, and trusted adults, while others engage in petty businesses or temporary work to meet their educational needs. However, some students adopt unhealthy coping mechanisms that negatively affect both their personal well-being and academic progress.

Overall, the study concludes that marital conflict extends beyond the relationship between parents and has far-reaching consequences for students' educational, psychological, and social development. Therefore, collaborative efforts among parents,

schools, communities, and relevant institutions are essential to minimise the effects of marital conflict and promote students' academic success.

5.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

(a) The government should strengthen community education programmes that promote peaceful family relationships and create public awareness of the effects of marital conflict on children's education. It should also strengthen guidance and counselling services through social welfare departments and other relevant institutions to support families experiencing marital conflict.

(b) Parents should recognise that frequent marital conflict has serious consequences for their children's psychological well-being and academic achievement. They should strive to resolve family disagreements peacefully and create a supportive home environment that promotes children's learning and overall development.

(c) Schools should strengthen guidance and counselling services to identify and support students from families experiencing marital conflict. Teachers should be encouraged to establish trusting relationships with students so that affected learners feel comfortable seeking help when facing family-related challenges. Schools should also organise awareness programmes, seminars, or student discussion forums on the effects of marital conflict. Such activities provide opportunities for students to share experiences, encourage one another, and learn positive coping strategies. These programmes can reduce feelings of isolation and strengthen students' emotional resilience.

(d) Teachers should receive training on identifying students experiencing emotional and psychological distress resulting from family conflict. They should maintain confidentiality while providing appropriate guidance, encouragement, and referrals whenever professional support is required.

(e) Religious institutions and community organisations should continue providing marriage education, premarital counselling, and family support programmes aimed at strengthening marital relationships and reducing family conflicts. Their collaboration with schools and local government authorities can contribute significantly to improving students' well-being and academic achievement.

(f) Future studies should examine the impacts of marital conflict on students' academic achievement using larger samples and different geographical areas. Researchers may also employ quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to provide broader evidence on the relationship between marital conflict and students' educational outcomes.

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