

Teachers' perspectives on the factors contributing to childhood adversity

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to determine from teachers' unique perspectives, the types of adversities young South African children are exposed to. The sample consisted of 135 primary school, foundation phase teachers from six different provinces. The data were collected by using an adversity checklist which also included an open-ended question. An overwhelming number of teachers (71%) identified divorce as the most prevalent adversity in the school context. The results suggest that the negative effects of divorce on the well-being of the child, conflict between separated/divorced parents, children left with relatives and long working hours are some of the unfavourable effects of divorce and separation that foundation phase teachers notice in school settings. The pastoral role of the teacher in identifying and supporting children exposed to adversity was also highlighted.

Keywords: Childhood adversity; adversity; divorce; single parents; primary schools; South Africa

Background to the study

The environment individuals find themselves in is important for their general health and well-being. Therefore, it is imperative that we understand the threats to health and well-being, as well as understand the environments in which individuals find themselves (Davids et al., 2015). South Africa is regarded as a 'risk society' due to factors such as high crime rates, poverty, inequality and child-headed households (Steyn & Moen, 2019). 'The history of children and childhood in South Africa is that of adversity, characterized by social oppression, inequality, poverty, and exposure to various forms of violence, abuse and neglect' (Eloff, 2019, p. 408). Poor social settings are considered responsible for 25% of preventable health risks in South Africa (Davids et al., 2015). A third of the 58.78 million South Africans live on social grants, of which 11 million are younger than 18 years (Rossouw, 2017). Almost 20% of households have inadequate access to food and 49.2% of the adult population live below the upper-bound poverty line (Statistics South Africa [STATSSA], 2017). The South African government provides one nutrition meal a day to more than 9 million children in schools (South African Government, 2020).

A growing phenomenon in South Africa is child-headed households, where minors become the caregivers of their younger siblings. This result in children having to carry the burden of care, without adequate skills and knowledge to perform these duties (George & Sloley, 2019). It is estimated that there will be three million HIV/AIDS orphans in the next few years unless comprehensive health care interventions are introduced in communities. In 2015,

approximately 886 202 babies were born, with 50% of the woman giving birth being single mothers with no help from the father (Freeks, 2017). South Africa also have a high adult mortality rate that result in increasing maternal, paternal as well as double orphans (George & Sloley, 2019).

As mentioned before, people in general are influenced by the context they live in. Family is part of an individual's context, which represents a core structure (Moen, 2017) and that is key to development. Family is defined as a basic human institution that shapes the personal identity, social roles and overall focus of an individual (Eloff, 2019, p. 376). In the past few decades, the changes in the structure of the South African family unit was pervasive. Fueling the changes are factors such as migrant labour, increasing globalization and urbanization, divorce, and poverty (George & Sloley, 2019, p. 3). The changes to the family structures have also resulted in a mosaic of family formations (Makiwane et al., 2017). As a multiracial society, South Africans maintain varied forms of the family. The largest group of people in South Africa (36%) live in 'extended' family households, followed by single-person households (22%). Household compositions have transformed especially with the increase in the number of relatives accommodated within the households (Sooryamoorthy & Makhoba, 2016). The complexity of family transformations has also been on the increase, and families are challenged with issues such as demands of work, financial strain, marital tension and conflict, the drive for success, and the modern day stresses on children (Freeks, 2017).

In families with constant parental conflict, difficulties such as higher levels of depression, anxiety, lower levels of self-esteem and lower social and scholastic performance are apparent (Sorek & Brookdale, 2019). Exposure to adverse social environments, for instance, child maltreatment and family dysfunction has shown to predict chronic physical aggression in children (Provençal et al., 2015). In recent decades, there has also been progressive emphasis on the negative impact of divorce for children's well-being (Sorek & Brookdale, 2019). In South Africa, African couples experienced the highest number of divorces from 2008–2017. In 2017, 11309 (44,5%) of the 25390 divorces were from the black African population followed by the white 6048 (23,8%), coloured 4517 (17,8%) and Indian/Asian 1401 (5,5%) populations. The median age at the time of divorce in 2017 was 44 years for males and 40 years for females. 14121 (55,6%) of the couples who divorced in 2017 had children younger than 18 years (Statistics South Africa, 2017).

The number of single-parents as a result from divorce, the death of a spouse, or unmarried parenthood is on the increase. Academically, children who are raised by two, biological married parents score higher in reading and mathematics (Heaton et al., 2014). Children from married parent households tend to be more emotionally and psychologically well-adjusted than children from other family structures. Whereas children living with single-parents often have poor emotional outcomes (Freeks, 2017). Children in single-parent households tend to have fewer resources available in comparison to two-parent households, as the parent has to juggle the responsibilities of being a caregiver and provider to their children (Davids et al., 2015; Heaton et al., 2014). Single parents are also more likely to be socially isolated, work longer hours, and provide lower emotional and parental support than families having married parents (Davids et al., 2015, p. 954). Children from single parent households often have limited access to preventative health care than children

from two parent households (Davids et al., 2015). However, Somefun and Odimegwu (2018) are of the opinion that adolescents who grow up in single-parent households amid poverty and little support do not necessarily become involved in risky behaviours (Somefun & Odimegwu, 2018). Kochanska (2001) echoes that if caregivers are sensitive towards a child, improved emotional regulation is observed.

The role of the teacher in identifying and preventing childhood adversity

Teachers' occupational well-being is an important component of education as relates to student motivation and achievement, as well as teacher attrition and teachers' mental and physical health. Student misbehaviour has been linked to poor wellbeing of teachers. Student misbehaviour has also been linked to feelings of anger, anxiety, reduced job satisfaction and work engagement (Aldrup et al., 2018). Discipline among school children is a universal challenge that many schools face over the world and South Africa is no exception. A study conducted by Masingi (2017), revealed that learners misbehave at school due to factors such as lack of parental support, peer pressure, poverty and lack of motivation to succeed. She is of the opinion that the school environment plays a vital role in promoting either discipline or ill-discipline. Another factor that contributes to the success of the school system is teachers' perceptions of their roles in school and in broader society. Teachers learn to internalize their roles assigned to them by school culture and through their own experiences (Gonzalez-Calvo & Arias-Carballal, 2017).

Teachers are uniquely positioned to establish spaces where children can experience safety, sustenance and security. Research increasingly indicates that the pastoral role of the teacher is gaining momentum because of the decline in parental involvement (Steyn & Moen, 2017). The pastoral role of a teacher is one of the seven roles stipulated by the South African Department of Education Norms and Standards for Educators. A teacher's pastoral role is part of everyday teaching practice, which recognizes that intellectual and social development cannot be accomplished without taking into account internal factors such as emotions and personality as well as external factors such as society and environment (Ogina, 2010). Schools are increasingly seen as key sites for support for various vulnerabilities children are exposed to. Therefore, teachers are often assigned the important role of identifying and providing psychosocial support (Coults et al., 2016). Pastoral care involves promoting and supporting knowledge of the self, self-efficacy, health risk taking, negotiation, reflection and empowerment to provide optimal learning and development outcomes. Pastoral care is focussed on assisting students to become competent and confident to discuss their home life and what they have learned in school (Hearn et al., 2006, p. 9).

Teachers are extremely important in shaping the future of a child. With an emphasis on the holistic development of the child, teachers have an important role to play in communication between school and family (Eloff, 2019). Therefore, one can argue that teachers' responsibilities do not only include teaching, but also include engaging with academic as well as personal and community related issues.

The focus of this study was to determine primary school teachers' perspectives regarding the types of adversities young children are exposed to. Teachers as valuable assets in

identifying and supporting vulnerable children was also emphasized. Therefore, this study was guided by the following research question: What do primary school teachers perceive as contributing factors to childhood adversity?

Methods

As mentioned before, the purpose of this study was to determine from primary school teachers' perspectives the types of adversities young South African children are exposed to. A survey was conducted in primary schools by using an adversity checklist (Addendum A). The adversity checklist that attempted to represent South Africa's unique challenges was compiled through an extensive literature review on childhood adversity. The checklist was distributed to foundation phase student teachers during their practical training period in schools. Student teachers asked experienced foundation phase teachers in diverse primary school settings to complete an adversity checklist. Foundation phase teachers are uniquely positioned to identify adversities, as they spend on average 6 hours a day with the same group of children. Ninety-three student teachers collected data from 135 teachers in six different provinces of South Africa. Private and government primary schools from diverse socio-economic backgrounds in urban and rural settings were included in the study.

The teachers were asked to rank the types of adversities most prevalent in their school settings and communities. They had to indicate to what extent a specific adversity was a problem in their community. Additionally, they had to choose and rank the adversities from 1 to 10, with 10 indicating a significant problem and 1 a slight problem. The checklist included the following adversities: poverty, child neglect, child-headed households, parental depression, parental substance abuse, physical child abuse by parents/caregivers, verbal abuse by parents/caregivers, spousal abuse, divorce, loss of caregiver or significant other, bullying, sexual abuse, substance abuse in the community, violence in the community, HIV/AIDS and 'other'. The concept 'other' was added as an open question for teachers to add additional adversities they felt were prevalent in their community. At the end of the checklist, the teachers also had to complete an open-ended question where they had to comment on the adversities they perceived as the most incessant in their school and community.

During data analysis phase, the reported adversities on the checklists were documented and calculated on a spreadsheet. Only the highest adversity as indicated by the teachers was calculated. In some instances, teachers ranked more than one adversity equally as the highest. In these cases, the additional adversities were also added to the final calculation. A hundred and fifty-nine responses were calculated for the 135 teachers by only calculating the highest ranked adversity. The data collection and analysis were conducted by the researcher and author.

Thematic analysis was used to identify themes and sub-themes in the reported open-ended question that was included with the checklist. The open-ended questions were read and re-read to get an in-depth understanding of teachers' perspectives on childhood adversity. Thematic analysis was used to identify prominent themes in teacher responses. Thematic analysis is a method widely used across a range of epistemologies. It is a method for identifying, analysing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within data sets

(Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2). Thematic analysis is an effective method for examining different perspectives, reporting patterns, highlighting similarities and differences as well as generating insights (Braun & Clark, 2006). Thematic analysis can also be used to identify the important features of a large data set (Nowell et al., 2017).

Results and discussion

The aim of the study was to identify teachers’ perceptions on the types of adversities young South African children are exposed to. The adversities were identified by foundation phase teachers. The value and importance of teachers as community assets was highlighted by the fact that they were able to identify pertinent adversities in young children’s lives.

The adversity checklists were analysed and the highest adversities identified by the teachers in the study were divorce, bullying, poverty, neglect and substance abuse in the community. Seventy-one percent of teachers indicated that divorce was the most notable adversity, followed by bullying (18%), poverty (12%), neglect (9%) and substance abuse in the community (7%).

Table 1 provides a summary of the five highest adversities indicated on the adversity checklist.

Table 1. The highest-ranking adversities identified (n-135) from 159 responses

Type of adversity	Number of teachers	%
Divorce	96	71
Bullying	25	18
Poverty	16	12
Child neglect	12	9
Substance abuse in the community	10	7

In the open-ended question, teachers elaborated on their perspectives on the types of adversities children are exposed to. Not all teachers who completed the checklist, filled in the open-ended question. A hundred and thirteen of the 135 teachers completed the open-ended question. Fifty-two (46%) teachers commented on the effects of divorce, while 48 (42%) teachers mentioned neglect in the open-ended question.

As previously mentioned, South Africa is a country plagued with diverse challenges. It is reported that 49.2% of the adult population live below the upper-bound poverty line (STATSA, 2019) and that a third of South Africa’s population live on social grants (Rossouw, 2017). In 2018, it was estimated that 7.7 million South Africans were living with HIV/AIDS. South Africa is regarded as a ‘risk society’ due to factors such as high crime rates and violence. Regardless of these pressing challenges in South Africa, the most significant adversity identified by foundation phase teachers was that of divorce. One might postulate that teachers are in a unique position to notice familial adversities, seeing that they are working with children and families on a daily basis; however, they are also equally confronted with other adversities such as for instance, poverty, HIV/AIDS, substance abuse and community violence. It was therefore interesting to note that despite the myriad of

challenges South Africans are faced with, teachers overwhelmingly indicated divorce as the most significant adversity that young children are exposed to.

Seeing that divorce was the most significant theme in both the survey and open-ended question, the discussion in this article will only focus on divorce. After the data-analysis phase was completed, the main theme *divorce* was divided in the following subthemes: negative emotional well-being of the child, conflict between separated/divorced parents, children left with relatives, and long working hours. In the next section, the comments that were noted in the open-ended section will be discussed.

Negative emotional well-being of the child

The teachers in this study noted that divorce had a negative effect on the emotional well-being of the children in their classes. Some teachers noted that children who are affected by divorce often craved continuous attention. Teachers felt that children displayed concerning behavioural patterns in class. They noted that the children disrupted the class and showed little respect towards others.

Teachers indicated that children from divorced families often manifested feelings of uncertainty and lack of confidence. They commented that children had many questions regarding divorce and separation, but parents often neglected to inform their children how the divorce will affect them on a practical level.

The following comments were given by the teachers:

Teacher 3 (private, urban primary school) noted the following:

There are quite a number of families within our school's community which has undergone divorce and this ultimately has a negative effect on children's emotional well-being.

Teacher 35 (private, urban primary school):

Divorce – emotionally kids are broken...

Teachers 71 and 112 were of opinion that divorce had an impact on a child's confidence and emotional state in general:

Teacher 71 (government, urban primary school):

A lot of learners are from broken homes. This leads up to learners feeling unsure, sometimes unloved and lacks confidence.

Teacher 112 (private school, urban primary school) noted:

Most prevalent is divorce, learners tend to make stories up to get attention from either of the parents. Learners may also cry when mom/dad drop them after a weekend with the other parent.

Teacher 14 felt that the focus shifted in schools from learning barriers to emotional barriers:

Teacher 14 (government school, urban primary) noted:

The effect of absent parents and divorce has an incredible impact on the classroom. Lately it seems that more children tend to have emotional barriers, than learning barriers.

Divorce is often associated with a decline in well-being and health. The decline is observable in depressive symptoms, psychological distress and life satisfaction (Leipold & Kalmijn, 2016). Children who live with a single parent often have poor emotional outcomes (Freeks, 2017). Fagan and Churchill (2012, p. 2) agree that divorce has a detrimental effect on health and well-being. They state that divorce weakens children's health and longevity. It also increases behavioural, emotional, and psychiatric risks.

Conflict between separated/divorced parents

Several teachers commented on the ongoing conflict between parents who are divorced or who have decided to separate. Custody battles as a source of stress, was also noted by some teachers in the study. Teachers felt that children were often caught in the middle between parents who have decided to separate or were already divorced. The teachers also observed behavioural changes in children during and after divorce.

Teacher 55 (private, urban primary school) noted the following:

Divorce is very common within this community and it often result in custody battles between parents. This has huge implications on the learners and it can be seen through their behaviour in school.

Teacher 34 (government, urban primary school) wrote:

.... that of broken homes through divorce/separation. Children get caught in the middle, used as leverage ... The sharing of custody often leads to inconsistent routines, discipline and lifestyles ...

Teacher 3 (private, urban primary school) noted:

A lot of conflict with parents ... conflict comes from parents fighting ...

'Parental conflict is the key stress factor related to children's adjustment difficulties in the process of separation and divorce.' (Sorke & Brookdale, p. 2). Interparental conflict often leads to maladaptive parenting, which in turn leads to child maladjustment (Khaleque et al., 2015). As mentioned before, parental conflict can contribute to children experiencing higher levels of depression, anxiety, lower levels of self-esteem and lower social and scholastic performance (Sorek & Brookdale, 2019). Adaptive developmental trajectories of children are also hindered by interparental conflict (Khaleque et al., 2015).

Children left with relatives

Children left with relatives was another important theme identified by the teachers in this study. The teachers commented on broken families due to divorce resulting in children being left in the care of relatives. Therefore, parents had less time to spend with their children. Parents who get divorced also leave their children with relatives in order to find employment elsewhere.

Teacher 22 (private, rural primary school) indicated that:

parents don't live with their kids, other family members look after kids. Divorce is most prevalent ... broken families.

Teacher 101 (government, urban primary school) wrote:

Single parents ... leaving their children with grandparents and relatives to work in other provinces.

Parental absence is often associated with immediate and long-term implications for child well-being (Gaydosh, 2015). Some of the presumed negative effects of divorce are attributed to socialization deficits resulting from growing up with one parent. Children who experience parental divorce which inevitably result in parental absence, exhibit similar problems to children who lost a parent due to death (Amato & Keith, 1991). It is established that children in single-parent families fare worse in terms of behavioural outcomes in comparison to married-parent families (Kang & Cohen, 2017). The decline in parental contact and care may also increase the likelihood of problems such as academic failure, low self-esteem and misbehaviour (Amato & Keith, 1991).

Several factors that cause stress within the family context can lead to adverse outcomes in children. Some of these factors are major life events, economic challenges and disrupted family structures (Chappel et al., 2014). Studies indicate that several family transitions over a short period of time may be detrimental to children, as it leads to disruptions in routines in the child's environment and lower maternal availability to the child (Fagan, 2012).

Living with extended family might have negative implications for children, especially relating to behavioural development (Kang, 2019). However, Gaydosh (2015) is of the opinion that being cared for by a relative or kin can also be a buffer against the negative consequences of parental absence. Not much is known on the effects on development of children living with extended family members (Kang & Cohen, 2017), especially in sub-Saharan Africa (Gaydosh, 2015).

Long working hours

Teachers commented on the fact that after the divorce, several parents find themselves on their own resulting in working extended hours. The teachers also observed that due to the fact that parents are often single after divorce, they had less time to spend with their children as they had to manage more responsibilities.

Some teachers felt that children are neglected due to the parents' work responsibilities and lack of communication between parents. Teachers commented that due to the fact that parents have to work long hours, children spend a lot of time on their own which sometimes result in lack of discipline and children spending long hours on technological devices. For some children, parents' long working hours also resulted in children taking over parental responsibilities.

Teacher 76 (private, urban primary school) noted:

Child neglect as parents are working long hours ... There are divorced parents who do not communicate with each other.

Teacher 46 (government, urban primary school) wrote the following:

Divorce rate is very high as well as single parents (loss of spouse). Parents work late, about 60–70% of children are in aftercare ...

Teacher 89 (government, urban primary school) indicated the following:

Currently it is single parents fighting for custody or being busy filling the role of both parents making it difficult to manage time.

Teacher 62 (private, urban primary school) wrote about long working hours resulting in separation and divorce:

... We work in an affluent society where parents are working long hours and focus is on money and wealth. This leads to not having enough time for kids and spouse.

As mentioned before, single parents are more likely to be socially isolated, work longer hours, and provide lower emotional and parental support than married parents (Davids et al., 2015). Children in single-parent households have fewer resources available in comparison to two-parent households, as the parent juggle the responsibilities of being a caregiver and provider to their children (Davids et al., 2015; Heaton et al., 2014).

Another phenomenon is child-headed households. Child-headed households have become an integral part of South African society. It is not uncommon for minors to take care of other siblings and the household. Unfortunately, children in these situations are seldom emotionally capable of coping with this role (Le Roux Kemp, 2013). Unfortunately, research specifically focusing on the effects of absent parents due to long working hours is lacking in the literature.

The pastoral role of the teacher in identifying childhood adversity

In this study, teachers were in a unique position to identify childhood adversities in young school children. As mentioned before, primary school foundation phase teachers spend more or less 6 hours a day with the same group of children. Since they spend extended time with the children in their classes, they developed in-depth knowledge of the children's emotional well-being. Teachers in this study were therefore uniquely positioned to observe

and comment on personal, familial and community stressors in young children's lives. Therefore, one can argue that teachers, especially foundation phase teachers have an important pastoral role to play in identifying and supporting vulnerable children.

Pastoral care is an integral part of teaching and learning in order to meet the personal, social and academic needs of children within the school system. Pastoral care in education is focussed on the holistic development of the child (Chittenden, 2002). Therefore, one can argue that pastoral care in the broader sense is concerned with the welfare of a person as an individual. Pastoral care has an implicit focus on the fact that each person is unique and that care should be focussed on the individual (Caroll, 2010).

Luk-Fong (2008) suggests that teachers may be the most effective professionals in helping children when parents cannot help their children in a divorce situation. Teachers spend more time with students and their influence on them surpasses that of any other professional worker (Chittenden, 2002). For children the school setting is often a safe and secure environment, with regular routines and discipline during periods of transition. Therefore, teachers are imperative in creating a predictable, caring and supporting environment, especially in situations where children are confronted with life changing adjustments (Luk-Fong, 2008).

Conclusion

Using an adversity checklist, this paper examined childhood adversity in South African schools. To the researcher's knowledge, this is the first study to examine childhood adversity from teachers' perspectives in South Africa. While 135 foundation phase teachers do not represent the complete group of South African teachers, it gives us a glimpse into the types of challenges young children are faced with. There are notable themes regarding childhood adversity that warrant commentary.

First, in a country overwhelmed with adversities such as poverty, crime and HIV/AIDS, it was interesting to note that an inordinately high proportion of teachers identified the home environment as the greatest influence on young children. More specifically, they felt that the effects of divorce and separation held the most negative outcomes for the majority of children in their communities. There is a lack of research on the comprehensive effects of divorce on children in sub-Saharan Africa (Gaydosh, 2015). There is also a scarcity in studies relating to the long-term effects of young children living with extended families, after parents get divorced. Equally lacking is research relating to parents who work long hours and the effects of absent parents on young children's psychological well-being.

Second, this study highlighted the important role that teachers play in young children's lives. Although it was not the main focus of this paper, the pastoral role of teachers was highlighted in this study. This argument is consistent with literature that identifies teachers as the most effective professionals in helping and supporting children (Chittenden, 2002) and that emphasises the importance of a supporting environment (Luk-Fong, 2008) to guide children through challenging transition periods in their lives. Future research should focus on researching and developing strategies for teachers to deal with childhood adversity on a daily basis.

Each year, thousands of children suffer due to the divorce of their parents. Divorce causes irreparable harm to all involved, but most especially to the children (Fagan & Churchill, 2012). As a matter of urgency, teachers should take up their responsibility as pastoral caretakers. Equally important is the training of teachers in handling several types of adversities, especially separation and divorce.

Limitations of the study

Although an attempt was made to capture as much information as possible through the survey, the study was limited by what was noted on the forms. However, the thematic analysis of the open question provided a glimpse of the reasons why foundation phase teachers ranked certain adversities higher than others.

The study is not a complete representation of all foundation phase teachers' perspectives. It is a convenience sample based on a limited number of teachers. For future works, it may be worthwhile to include a bigger group of participants. Interviewing the teachers might also add to a more in-depth knowledge of their perspectives on childhood adversity. It might also be valuable to determine how different cultural groups in South Africa experience and handle separation and divorce.

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Addendum A.

ADVERSITY CHECKLIST

Globally, children experience adversities in their daily lives. South Africa is no exception and is regarded as a 'risk society' as it is one of the most violent countries in the world. Several factors contribute to its current standing, namely poverty, food insecurity, inequality, child-headed households, and more. Furthermore, children who are exposed to adversity are at high risk of developing psychiatric disorders and other health related problems. As teachers you are in a unique position to identify childhood adversity, as you work closely with the children in your classrooms.

In the checklist below we would like to determine the general types of adversities you are aware of in your class, school and broader community. Please indicate the types of adversities you are aware of in your class/school/community with an X. You can use the past year as a reference. If you have marked the adversity with an X, please also indicate the severity of the adversity within your community.

Type of adversity	Mark with an X	To what extent is this adversity a problem? Indicate with a number between 1 to 10. 10 indicating a significant problem and 1 a slight problem.
Poverty		
Child neglect		
Child-headed households		
Parental depression		
Parental substance abuse		
Physical child abuse by parents/caregivers		
Verbal abuse by parents/caregivers		
Spousal abuse		
Divorce		
Loss of a caregiver or significant other		
Bullying		
Sexual abuse		
Substance abuse in the community		
Violence in the community		
HIV/AIDS		
Other		
Other		

Please comment briefly on the types of adversities you perceive as the most prevalent in your class, school and community:

Thank you for taking the time to complete the checklist.