



A phenomenological approach to uncovering the influence of parental death on the academic performance of secondary school students

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ABSTRACT

The death of one or both parents is one of the most traumatic incidents that can occur in childhood which may affect a child's life course in many ways. This study uses firsthand data as against several studies that have employed secondary data to investigate the consequences of parental death on orphans. Unlike this study, previous studies that have involved directly the study population and important key informants are very limited. Two Secondary Schools and their students were purposively selected; the sample for the study was twenty respondents consisting of ten orphaned students, five School teachers, and five parents. Data were collected using in-depth and key informant interviews. Qualitative data were analysed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach aided by the use of NVivo software. The findings of the study revealed that parental death across the board affects the academic performance of orphans negatively; maternal orphans perform more poorly. Conclusively, self-determination is the most important factor in determining academic performance.

1. Introduction

The death of one or both parents is one of the most traumatic incidents that can occur in childhood which may affect a child's life course in many ways. Experts from several fields ranging from sociologists, psychologists, educationists, and public health scientists are passionate about understanding how family settings, and more precisely, parental absence, affects the well-being of children. According to Gimenez et al. (2013), there are roughly 153 million children worldwide who have lost one or both parents. It's also been reported that twenty-five percent of children grow up without parents and that 22.1 million children were living with only one parent as of 2014. Of the 22.1 million, approximately 13.4 million children resided with custodial mothers (Grall, 2016). Hunter and Williamson (2000) found that one out of every ten African children under the age of 15 had lost one or both parents, according to their research.

The goal of the study is to obtain a deeper knowledge of people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as to develop a holistic view of particular scenarios such as when a student has lost either mother, father or both, and he or she is left with no other option than to live with relatives from where he or she goes to school. This study explored the experiences of students' loss of (a) parent(s), as related by their surviving parents or relatives, their teachers, and also the orphans

themselves. It utilized the qualitative approach in contrast with the majority of previous studies along this line that utilized the quantitative approach which relies often on historical and secondary data with their attendant drawbacks (Case & Ardington, 2006; Rosenbaum-Feldbrugge, 2019; Burrell et al., 2020). Summarily, this present study is designed to explore the influence of parental death on the academic performance of secondary students in Omu-Aran, Kwara State.

There are alarming and worrisome statistics to corroborate escalating orphanhood as a result of parental deaths from road traffic accidents, societal instability, conflicts, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic, et cetera (Chen et al., 2009; Gbadamosi, 2015; Gimenez et al., 2013). Orphaned children are more affected especially as it concerns their academic performance; bereaved children have lower expectations and aspirations for their future education and careers than children who have not lost a parent, according to studies (Brent et al., 2012; Berg et al., 2014; Thyden et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2022). A few researchers have also found lower educational scores, attainment and success among orphaned children (Amato & Keith, 1991; Pong, et.al, 2003). A lot of research has looked into the psychological effects of early parental mortality due to various causes of death. (Cerel et al., 1999; Lin et al., 2004; Pfeffer et al., 2000, Lin et al., 2004; Liu et al., 2022), however, not much attention has been paid to education: Only a few researchers have looked into parental death and the educational performance of their

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children (Chen et al., 2009; Berg et al., 2014; Prix & Erola, 2016).

In addition, there are very limited studies that have had direct engagement with children and if these children are not given the right attention they may constitute a nuisance to their immediate environment and liabilities to their families. This research work is, therefore, directed towards improving existing knowledge about the influence of parental death on academic performance with the intent of proffering solutions and recommendations. Parental loss poses a great challenge to the entirety of the child's normal growth and development; one of the worst-hit however is his academics (Amato & Anthony, 2014; Prix & Erola, 2017). Previous research on children's academic performance suggests that when both parents are actively involved in their children's education, their academic achievement improves (Fadeyiye, 1985; Nyarko, 2007; Nyarko & Vorgelegt, 2007). The authors (Fadeyiye, 1985; Nyarko, 2007; Nyarko & Vorgelegt, 2007) discovered, for example, that parental participation is linked to student's academic achievement in school. The consequences of parental loss especially on the academics of their children have attracted serious concerns even on the global stage intending to proffer prompt and corresponding solutions (World Bank, 1999; Copson, 2002). Especially now that the number of children facing the absence or loss of a parent has increased due to road traffic accidents, societal instability and conflicts (Chen et al., 2009; Gimenez et al., 2013; Gbadamosi, 2015). Furthermore, a series of high-mortality natural disasters have resulted in unexpected increases in the number of children without parents in recent years, drawing media attention and humanitarian concerns to their predicament.

1.1. Research question

This study explored the lived experience of secondary school students after the death of one or both parents. The purpose of this exploratory design is to uncover the lived experience of orphans as it pertains to their academic performance following the death of their parents. The research question explored was; does the death of (a) parent(s) really affect the academic performance of orphaned students?

1.2. Research objective

The objective of the study is to examine the influence of parental death on the academic performance of students in selected secondary schools in Omu-Aran, Kwara State. Studies have shown mixed outcomes as it pertains to the effect of early parental death on children's educational performance. Some have been negative (Steele et al., 2009; Prix & Erola, 2017), very limited work has shown positive outcomes (Apelian & Nesteruk, 2017), while a few others have been neutral (Francesconi et al., 2010; Amato & Anthony, 2014; Berg et al., 2014; Burrell et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Bernardi and Boertien (2017) study based on explaining conflicting results in research on the heterogeneous effects of parental presence or absence on children's educational attainment according to social background suggested that these contradictive findings might be due to the studies being conducted in different countries. Parental mortality has been linked to an increased incidence of sadness, self-harm, and suicide in children, demonstrating the seriousness of the situation (Berg et al., 2016).

In addition, Shor et al. (2012) also discovered some similar challenges especially anxiety in the surviving parents. Aftermaths of parental death in childhood have also been noted to include: anxiety, sadness, anger, sleep issues, attention-seeking, withdrawn behavior, bed wetting, jealousy, guilt, and other behaviors—all of which can affect school children (Giovaanola, 2005; Bolton et al., 2016). What is certain is the fact that all parents will die at one time or the other but the untimely death of a parent during one's childhood is associated with untoward outcomes especially in terms of academic performance among others (Steele et al., 2009; Amato & Anthony, 2014; Prix & Erola, 2017).

Family structures come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Whether both parents are participating in their children's training or only one parent is

involved determines the structure. The importance of the mother and father in most societies and communities cannot be overstated. Toynebee (1996) explained that in the early year of life, when a child's character and temperament are established, as the educator of her children, the mother at home is unrivaled (this is because the mother spends more time with the child at this early age than the father). Mothers play a very pivotal role in the well-being of their children especially as it relates to their academic performance. A few studies have conjectured that mothers play a more dominant role in the academic outcome of their children than the fathers thereby implying that maternal orphans do more poorly academically following the demise of their mothers with or without the fathers being present (Case & Ardington, 2006; Maxine, 2014).

A few studies have tried to probe into the effect of the presence or absence of fathers (especially owing to death as it relates to this context) (Case & Ardington, 2006; Berg et al., 2014; Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist & Kotimäki, 2020; Liu et al., 2022). Case and Ardington (2006) find that paternal death does not affect academic performance. Since paternal death is a strong predictor of subsequent socioeconomic levels, they contend that, to the extent that such impacts do exist, they probably function through socioeconomic status. However, some studies concluded that paternal orphans are worse off (Berg et al., 2014; Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist & Kotimäki, 2020; Liu et al., 2022).

Parents bear a significant amount of responsibility for their children's educational and professional development (Salami & Alawode, 2000). In other words, before a child enters school, the family establishes the framework for education, and the home influences the personality that the youngster brings to school. According to studies on child academic accomplishment, academic achievement improves when both parents are involved in their children's education (Nyarko, 2007; Nyarko & Vorgelegt, 2007).

Abankwa (2013) also found that children from two-parent homes are more likely to have their parents active in their education than children from single-parent homes. Children in single-parent families might not get the attention they need because the single parent is overworked. Children from single-parent households are three times more likely than children from two-parent families to drop out of high school, even when they are academically equal (Zimiles and Lee, 1991). Single parents usually provide all of the family's financial support, but they also have less time to help their kids with their homework, are less likely to consistently enforce rules, and exercise less parental control, all of which can contribute to low academic achievement (Zimiles and Lee, 1991; Abankwa, 2013).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Research design

A phenomenological research design was used. To get thorough descriptions that serve as the foundation for a reflective structural analysis that captures the substance of the experience, Moustakas (1994) claims that "the empirical phenomenological approach entails a return to experience" (p. 13). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the phenomenological study describes the everyday lived experiences of people focusing on what each and every one "has in common as they experience a phenomenon". Deepa and Panicker (2016) explain that phenomenology design allows the researcher to interpret the meaning and nature of a certain group of participants in a certain setting while sharing their stories. Phenomenology major aim is to reduce a respondent's "grasp of the very nature of the thing" (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The nature of the thing is the essence that researchers seek to study regarding human nature and common experiences lived by people (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The essence of the participants' experiences in order to arrive at an explanation is the focus of phenomenology, in contrast to other qualitative research designs, that supported comprehending the phenomena.

Although other qualitative research techniques collect data on people who are experiencing a common phenomenon, their research seeks a different result unlike the phenomenological design that borders on the lived experiences of people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). From the foregoing, the choice of the phenomenological research design therefore is to help capture the lived experiences of the interviewed respondents.

2.2. Study location

The study was conducted in selected schools in Omu-Aran which doubles as the headquarters of Irepodun Local Government Area (LGA) one of the sixteen LGAs domiciled in Kwara state, the North-central geopolitical enclave of Nigeria. Omu-Aran was established almost 500 years ago and is located at approximately 8°08'00"N and 5°06'00"E. Omu-Aran people were predominantly farmers due to the area's vegetation. They were also well-known for their handicrafts, such as basket making and blacksmithing. It's fast becoming a rural-urban township following its hosting of notable two (2) universities, and a couple of institutions of learning. The estimated population is 147,333 inhabitants (as of 2016) with the vast majority of the area's dwellers being members of the Igbomina ethnic group. The Igbomina dialect of the Yoruba Language is widely spoken in Omu-Aran with the religions of Christianity and Islam popularly practised in the area (National Population Commission [NPC], 2009).

2.3. Method of data collection

The study used the semi-structured interview as the tool for data collection. Data was collected for the study through both In-Depth Interviews (IDI) (from the students) and Key Informant Interviews (KII) (from the parents and teachers). The informed consent form and permission to record the interviews were obtained from all participants. All participants filled out the demographic information sheet.

2.4. Sample size and sampling technique

The first stage involved a purposive selection of the two (2) public secondary schools in Omu-Aran; thereafter twenty (20) respondents were recruited purposively. The 20 respondents comprised ten (10) orphaned students, five (5) teachers and five (5) parents. The emphasis however was on "data saturation" as richness and depth are vital in this study. Respondents were assigned a number for identification purposes.

2.5. Data analysis

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used by this researcher. IPA records participants' lived experiences and is intended to help them comprehend their personal experiences related to a significant life event, encounter, or scenario (Smith et al., 2009).

The study's data was analyzed throughout the research. The researcher took notes and made observations during and after the interviews. After conducting the interviews, the researcher listened to and transcribed all twenty (20) of them. To begin, all personally identifiable information was removed from the transcription and replaced with pseudonyms. Second, the researcher had to take on Epoche's point of view. Simply expressed, "epoche" is becoming aware of and putting aside one's personal biases about the subject under investigation –in a way bracketing the researcher's subjective feelings. During data processing, the researcher in alignment with phenomenology tried to put any preconceived notions and/or beliefs aside and appreciate the subjectivity of each participant's individual experience. Phenomenology also encourages researchers to look at the world through the eyes of participants to gain a better knowledge of their lives and circumstances (Creswell, 2013).

Furthermore, the researcher listened, transcribed, took notes, and made comments for each interview during the third stage of data

immersion. Fourthly, the data was uploaded into Nvivo software where cases were created for each respondent. The fifth step involved data reorganization in which data was arranged using the categories created before the fieldwork by the researcher based on common variables and attributes. Sixthly, coding relevant information in the data concerning the research questions and objectives, the researcher painstakingly read through the transcript line by line looking for expressions that align, suggest, or are in tandem with the objectives of the study. This step initially produces sub-codes. Further evaluation and cross-examinations of similarities and differences among the sub-codes produced the sub-themes (emergent themes, or more recently –experiential statements) which finally led to the parent themes (superordinate themes, or more recently –personal experiential themes) to address the research questions.

Penultimately, the researcher made use of the latest improvements in the NVivo software to display data and create some visual, pictorial, and graphical representations (see Appendices C-P) to help prospective readers understand and appreciate in clearer terms the findings of the study. This also further gives credence and credibility to a relative abstract work. Some of these include; map trees, word clouds, cluster analysis, hierarchical charts, and diagram maps to mention but a few. Finally, data verification was done by a senior data analyst at the University.

2.6. Validity and reliability of the research instrument

In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the research instrument, the four components of Lincoln and Guba's Trustworthiness in a Research Study were adopted vis-à-vis; Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were adhered to in this research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A minimal initial time frame of thirty minutes was established with each participant to promote sustained engagement, the first stage in creating trustworthiness. This amount of time was adequate to obtain all the necessary data. There was no need for more meetings. In keeping with this, it was crucial to give each participant ample time to say all they know as regards parental death and its influence on academic performance. Additionally, the participant's verbal intonation, word choice, and any extra details they provided needed to be carefully observed by the researcher. The constant observation that Lincoln and Guba (1985) mention as their next stage for creating credibility was made possible by these procedures.

Utilizing a method known as member checking is the next and final stage in building credibility; in member checking, participants are contacted and informed of the findings of the data analysis by the researcher(s). To ascertain whether the participants in this study concur with the findings, the researcher contacted two participants who had been informed of this beforehand and had consented to it.

Another aspect of Lincoln and Guba (1985) procedure for determining trustworthiness is transferability. The researcher must be as specific as possible when using this technique. Conversations with the respondents yielded that information. To get a thorough explanation of the phenomenon, the researcher gave each participant enough time to narrate their whole tale while also urging them to elaborate when appropriate. Dependability is another feature that Lincoln and Guba (1985) feel it necessary to prove rigor. Dependability was ensured by allowing a few other lecturers outside the department to review all aspects of the study at intervals for accuracy. The final technique, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) is confirmability. This final step under confirmability involves Reflexivity. A state in which the researcher remained transparent throughout the entire study. Reporting on each of the steps that were accomplished in the study and what the findings were to the supervisors, conclusively, the researcher as much as possible ensured self-reflexivity.

2.7. Ethical consideration

Each respondent was assured absolute confidentiality and anonymity. Study objectives, benefits and the right to refuse to be interviewed were explained to the potential respondents. Only relevant information to the study was requested and informed consent was taken before each interview, they were duly informed that the interview will be audio recorded. Risks such as bringing back bad memories were explained to the respondents and they were free to seek explanation at any time during the interview. They were also told that if they felt uncomfortable during the interview, they could stop it and withdraw without punishment. The transcript was stripped of all names and identifying characteristics, ensuring that none of the responders can be identified. De-identification, in which responders were assigned code numbers was done will help to ensure confidentiality and the data obtained were stored in a secure electronic file.

3. Theory

In a bid to give theoretical backing to this study, two theories were adopted to provide insight into how parental death affects academic performance. They are; the phenomenological theory and the structural-functional theory

3.1. The phenomenological theory

Phenomenology is the study of conscious experience from a subjective or first-person perspective, and it has guided academics in their investigations of young people’s lived experiences concerning the parental loss, grieving, and adaptability over the years (Creswell, 2013; Daly, 2007). Edmund Husserl is regarded as the father of phenomenology (Abalos et al., 2016). He was able to rigorously study the meaning of a person’s "lived experience" which is defined simply as an understanding of the world acquired by an individual by direct, first-hand participation in everyday occurrences rather than through representations created by others (Abalos et al., 2016).

3.2. The structural functionalist theory

According to functionalism, each element of society contributes to overall stability and that society is greater than the sum of its parts. Emile Durkheim, one of the most notable proponents of this theory, saw

society as an organism in which each component performs an essential purpose but cannot function independently. The remaining components of the system must change to fill the void when one component fails. According to functionalist theory, social institutions—each of which is created to meet a specific need—are what make up the various facets of society.

3.3. Conceptual framework

A conceptual framework is described as a group of overarching concepts and guiding ideas drawn from relevant academic fields that are used to structure a presentation in the future (Reichel & Ramey, 1987). As with any social world studies, the framework itself is part of the agenda for negotiation and will be tested, reviewed, and changed as a result of the study (UKEssays, 2018a).

3.3.1. Conceptual clarification

The framework for this study (presented in Fig. 1) is a graphical representation based on the interactions between the independent variable, which is “parental death” and the intervening variables (paternal/maternal distinctive influences, coping strategies, support systems), and how these interactions can result in varying outcomes in form of the academic performance of the orphaned students.

4. Results

4.1. Socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the respondents

Each one of the participants was assigned a pseudonym to preserve their identity. Pseudonyms for students, teachers, and parents were S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, and S10, T1, T2, T3, T4, and P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5, respectively. Tables 4.2.1, 4.2.2 and 4.2.3, reflect the students’, teachers’, and parents’ details respectively

4.2. Parental death and students’ academic performance

Findings from the qualitative analysis (see Appendices B & E) portray the clear significance and peculiarity of the roles of both parents in ensuring sound academic performance for their wards. Worthy of note however is the fact that for both parents, some of these roles can easily be played by others –especially relatives, however, most of the influences raised are best made by the parents themselves and as such

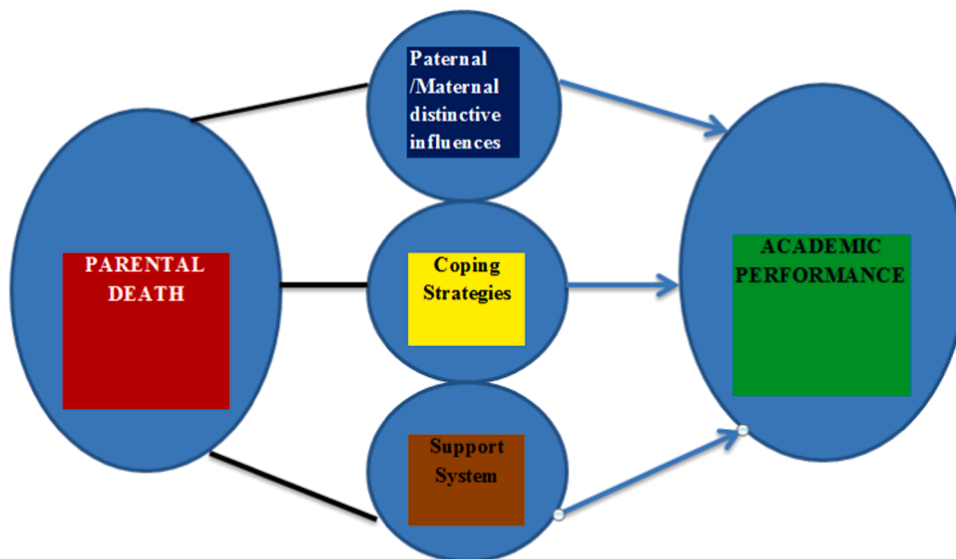


Fig. 1. Relationship between the independent variable (parental death), the intervening variables (paternal/maternal distinctive influences, coping strategies, support systems), and the dependent variable (academic performance).

Table 4.1.1
Characteristics of Students interviewed.

Student	Gender	Religion	Age (Years)	Orphan-Type	Age at Death	Number of Siblings	Family Type
S1	Male	Christianity	17	Maternal	15	2	Monogamous
S2	Male	Islam	17	Maternal	14	6	Monogamous
S3	Male	Islam	16	Paternal	14	8	Polygamous
S4	Male	Christianity	17	Maternal	13	Nil	Monogamous
S5	Male	Christianity	17	Paternal	12	4	Monogamous
S6	Male	Christianity	18	Maternal	12	6	Polygamous
S7	Female	Christianity	15	Maternal	12	5	Monogamous
S8	Female	Christianity	16	Paternal	10	3	Monogamous
S9	Female	Christianity	15	Maternal	09	5	Monogamous
S10	Female	Christianity	18	Paternal	13	4	Monogamous

Table 4.1.2
Characteristics of Teachers interviewed.

Teacher	Age group	Gender	Length of Service	Religion
T1	30–39 years	Male	13 years	Christianity
T2	> 50 years	Female	19 years	Christianity
T3	40–49 years	Female	11 years	Christianity
T4	40–49 years	Female	12 years	Christianity
T5	40–49years	Female	15 years	Christianity

foster parents can merely try their best in filling in the gap created, more like round pegs in square holes.

4.2.1. Maternal death and students' academic performance

The participants' accounts clustered around two sub-themes: Inadequacies Related to Maternal Death and Maternal Absence-Related Influences both of which have three and seven sub-codes respectively. For those that border on Inadequacies Related to Maternal Death, they capture roles or influences that others aside from the biological mothers can attempt to play or make but will still not be comparable or adequate if compared to being done by the actual mothers. They include; inadequate academic support, inadequate care –poor outlook, and inadequate follow-up. While for those that border on maternal Absence-Related Influences, they capture roles or influences that only the mothers of the orphaned students can make and as such the students' academic performance is greatly influenced by their absence. They include; absent motherly companionship, absent motherly spiritual roles, challenges of absent parenting, challenges of stepmothers, lack of motherly motivation, lack of motherly protective nature, and lack of motherly sacrificial nature as depicted in Appendix D

Inadequacies related to maternal death. Respondents reported that major challenges that orphans are affected by are the *inadequacy of academic support* owing to the death of their mothers. For instance, one of the students, a 17-year-old Senior Secondary School (S.S.3) male student reported in this manner:

"She was the one always encouraging me to read, she would explain things I don't understand to me, she would wake me up in the night to read my book, especially during exam period but since she died, nobody has been playing that role and it has affected my performance in school. I am not as serious as before...It affected me a lot, it has not been easy, and nobody encouraged me that much. When she was alive she'd be the one to assist me when I don't understand classwork, I'll take it home, and she will explain it to me. Many times, she will wake me up at night to read" –S4.

Another distinctive influence of maternal death deduced from the data was *inadequate care –poor outlook*. Some of the respondents implied that maternal orphans are conspicuously not well catered for physically. A male teacher with 13 years experience corroborated the point above, in his words:

"...mothers are more caring, more active at home...they take care of the children and look after them. They prefer to be stressed, uncomfortable, at the expense of their children..." -T1

Maternal absence-related influences. The respondents further highlight factors that relate to the outright absence of a mother and the influence on the academics of students. The first was the *inadequate follow-up*, according to T1:

"Fathers hardly have time for the children, the money may be there but who does the cooking, caring, etc. most times it's as if the child has lost nothing if they lost just fathers" –T1

Absent motherly companionship was another sub code deduced from the respondents, according to S6, the 18-year-old male student respondent:

"I miss her companionship, counselling, and prayers for me. Being the last born, we were very close." –S6

T1, the male teacher in support of the mother's companionship absence and its influence also attested:

"The influence of a mother is very huge on the child; the mother carried the child for nine (9) months till birth, she's very close to the child, she always wants to do things that are best for the child, she doesn't want to do anything detrimental to the child" -T1

When asked if she would have fared better academically if it was her mother that died, S8, a 16-year-old female S.S.3 student expressed her fears concerning stepmothers, She responded thus:

"No. If it was my mum that died, he would have remarried and there are chances that she might have maltreated us." –S8

T3 also added her voice:

"...unlike the mother who can stay alone as a widow and be taking care of the children...If the father remarries, it might be difficult for the children to cope because the new wife will take good care of her children more than those of the late wife..." –T3

Some of the respondents attested to the fact that nothing compares to the *motivations that only mothers can give*; they affirmed that such motivations are second to none. 17-year-old S4, in S.S.3, said concerning her late mother:

"She used to help me with my academic work; she encouraged me to read my book and will always tell me that I will be someone great in the future." –S4

S7, the youngest respondent, a 15-year-old female student in S.S.3, also aired her experience of what motherly motivations do:

"I believe that her encouragement especially before exams is special. It had a way of giving me a push to go the extra mile." -S7

Mothers are believed to be specialists in protecting their children from insults, attacks, shame, and all manner of reproach. A maternal

Table 4.1.3
Characteristics of Parents interviewed.

	AGE (in Years)	INCOME	QUALIFICATION	GENDER	RELIGION	NO OF CHILDREN	WORK	LATE PARTNER'S WORK	YEARS AGO THAT PARTNER DIED	STATUS(NOW)
P 1	30-39	N50,000-N100,000	Diploma	Female	Christianity	2	CHEW	Timber Contractor	2	Single
P 2	40-49	>N100,000	B.Sc.	Female	Christianity	3	Public Servant	Public Servant	4	Single
P 3	40-49	N50,000-N100,000	Diploma	Female	Christianity	3	Nurse	Teacher	4	Single
P 4	40-49	>N100,000	B.Sc.	Male	Christianity	3	Records Officer	Trader	15	Re-married
P 5	30-39	N50,000-N100,000	Diploma	Female	Christianity	3	Public Servant	Public Servant	4	Single

orphan lacks this motherly protective nature and hence suffers the consequences, especially at home. 17-year-old male S.S.2 student, S1, emphasized this point concerning his late mother:

“...she doesn't want anything to happen to me at all...She cared so much about me and doesn't want anything to happen to me at all...”
-S1

The love mothers have for their children is palpable, and this makes them go to any length even at the risk of their lives to ensure that their children are comfortable. Maternal orphans, unfortunately, lack this motherly sacrificial nature that only their mothers can express. T1 expressed his thoughts on this:

“They take care of the children and look after them. They prefer to be stressed, uncomfortable, at the expense of their children” -T1

S1 also affirmed this statement of his:

“...She doesn't want me to get hungry, goes all the way to meet my needs...” -S1

4.2.2. Paternal deaths and students' academic performance

The responses from the informants in response to questions that addressed this caption center around two sub-themes: Inadequacies Related to paternal death and paternal absence related influences both of which have two and four sub-codes respectively, namely; 'Divided attention', 'Inadequate provision of essentials', and 'Absent fatherly companionship', 'Absent fatherly inspiration', 'Absent fatherly unique love', and 'Lack of fatherly sacrificial nature' respectively as depicted in Appendix C

Inadequacies related to paternal death. As regards divided attention, one of the respondents, S5, a 17-year-old student in SS3 who has to sell fruits and farm to support himself has this to say:

“His-absence has divided my attention, if I'm reading, I will be thinking of money” -S5

Regarding inadequate provision of essentials, a few out of respondents spoke in support of this point. They inferred that fathers are the natural breadwinners of every family by their wiring so one of the influences their absence will cause which will certainly affect the academic performance of students is inadequate provision of essentials like food, clothing, good accommodation, books, et cetera. S5, who lost his father while in Junior Secondary School (J.S.S.) 2, recalled his experience:

“It was difficult to start because I was like where do I start from? How do I get money for books, school fees, and exam fees?...” -S1

Paternal absence-related influences. The respondents further highlight factors that relate to the outright absence of fathers and the influence on the academics of students. The first was *absent fatherly companionship*, a 16-year-old female student respondent remarked:

“I felt scared because he was the breadwinner of the family. I wasn't happy because he was also closer to us than our mum” -S8

4.2.3. Parental death with weightier influence on academic performance

The majority of the teachers affirmed that across the board paternal orphans fare better than maternal orphans. They emphasized that mothers aside from their domestic roles are also committedly involved in the academic engagements of their children such as preparing for exams, and review of daily school work and assignments. These are the responses of a few of the teachers when asked, “From your experience as a teacher, what category of orphans does more poorly in school – Paternal or Maternal?”

T2: "Orphans who have lost their mothers perform more poorly. The influence of a mother is very huge on the child; the mother carried the child for nine (9) months till birth, she's very close to the child, she always wants to do things that are best for the child, and she doesn't want to do anything detrimental to the child unlike a father, a father doesn't have time, that's why you hear the father say to them when he comes back from work, 'go and meet your mother' so a child that loses the mother is affected the most."

And according to T1;

"It's those who have lost their mothers because mothers are more caring, more active at home. They take care of the children and look after them. They prefer to be stressed, and uncomfortable, at the expense of their children. The fathers are always out looking for money. Fathers hardly have time for the children, the money may be there but who does the cooking, caring, etc. most times it's as if the child has lost nothing if they lost just their fathers. In some circumstances (though very rare) it appears as if fathers are more caring. So summarily, those who have lost their mothers perform more poorly than those who have lost their fathers."

4.3. Other findings

The researcher also made three main discoveries in this study:

1. The proportion of respondents who believed that the death of the parent has brought about positive (and in some cases better) outcomes in terms of the academic performance of the students. Appendix F, in comparing the outcomes vis-à-vis; negative (immediate, intermediate, and long term) and positive, showed that items coded for "positive outcome" were greater than that of "long term negative". This is backed up by a few quotes from the respondents that support this claim, listen to a few of them; S6:

"It's possible that because of the love my mother had for me, I might have become over-pampered and spoilt in the process because most likely, I would have been living with her. But staying with my uncle has motivated me to sit up and study hard to make my father and guardians proud...my performance is now much better than before she died because I am now more determined to pass all my exams than before she died..."

P2 a mother of 3 children remarked: "I can say they are even more serious; they are reading harder than when he was alive and are coming out with better grades" finally, P4, a graduate, record officer, and father of three whose wife (a trader) died 15 years ago shared this good news;

"I thank God my children are performing excellently; they have refused to allow the issue of being motherless to affect their academic performance. One of them even won the state's spelling B competition while she was in primary school while the other also was the best science student in the last exams. So they are doing well."

2. No government support for the orphans based on the remarks from the respondents, even though the majority of them expected and recommended that the government should be at the forefront of catering for the wellbeing of orphans. This depicts the level of awareness by the respondents and enforcement on the side of the government(See APPENDIX M)
3. The researcher noticed that there was not a single double orphan within the cohorts of students that were available for the interview. This could be suggestive of high dropout rate among the double or full orphans.

5. Discussion

Over the years, several studies have made attempts at understanding and explaining the varying outcomes of academic performance of orphans based on several variables of interest, some have opined that maternal orphans do more poorly, and some asserted that there is no significant difference in the academic performance among the different categories of orphans while a few concluded that paternal orphans are worse off (Case & Ardington, 2006; Berg et al., 2014; Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist & Kotimäki, 2020; Liu et al., 2022).

This study has however shown that of the three main intervening variables captured by this study (of which influence of parental death is one of them), each has a great role in affecting the outcome, that is, the academic performance of a particular orphaned student in question; whether he or she is a maternal or paternal orphan, whether there are sufficient support systems vis-à-vis friends or relatives to support, well-meaning individuals or the government to give scholarship or not. The most important intervening variable is not the type of orphan in question rather it is the coping strategies adopted expressed through self-determined actions. Therefore, the explanation for studies that posit that paternal orphans do more poorly than their maternal contemporaries most often than not is that mothers by their nature and wiring inspire their wards better since they are more available to the students, they are more engaged both in counselling, encouraging, and assisting their wards all of which spurs their self-motivation and resolve to attain academic excellence. This cannot be said of most maternal or double orphans, even though the presence of a father or relative who can give equivalent influence, presence, and support as the mother would have done will result in a similar outcome.

The study found out that self-determination expressed through sacrifice, focus and hard work among others is the most important factor in determining academic performance. It also answers the question of why undetermined students excel academically, this is "quasi-success" is seen for instance when parents use their influence to secure good grades or when support systems like teachers or school structures influence the success of students at all cost. The intervening variables; such as the "support systems" and "parental influence" are expected to merely play supportive roles by aiding the determination of the student to achieve good academic performance but with or without them, the self-determined student can still do well academically.

Therefore, this study has been able to find the missing link between the varying outcomes of previous studies (Case & Ardington, 2006; Berg et al., 2014; Apelian & Nesteruk, 2017; Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist & Kotimäki, 2020; Liu et al., 2022). In other words, the academic outcome of orphans or bereaved students is not primarily a function of the gender of the deceased parent, the support systems available to the student, and by extrapolation is not essentially a product of the cause of death.

5.1. The coping strategies geared towards stability and good academic performance

The findings from the study reveal that most orphans cope with the influences of parental death on their academics by taking personal responsibilities and initiatives, in other words, they are usually more self-motivated. Parental death has been linked to psychological issues, which may explain why it has such a poor impact on school achievement (Berg et al., 2014). According to Oosterhoff et al. (2018) youths are most likely to first experience a sudden loss of a loved one during middle adolescence and this often co-occurs with other traumatic events with associated lower school functioning hence the need for coping strategies to enable them to stabilize emotionally and excel academically. Jazmin (2019) reported that the coping strategy used by students was mostly getting support from loved ones; this also aligns with the majority of the respondents' point of view as regards non-personal strategies.

This study has shown that for any orphaned student, among the three intervening variables, what is most essential is the coping strategies

adopted by the student, and also that the most important intervening variable, that is, the coping strategies, is self-determination and what inspires self-determination can be any other factor/variable like paternal or maternal influence, support systems, et cetera. In other words, self-determination is the *constant factor* of any good academic performance equation that must be present whether or not other factors such as presence or absence of parents, support systems and paternal/maternal influence are present or not.

In agreement with this current study of home and school-based initiatives as regards engaging the copying strategies, School-based involvement and home-based involvement are the two main categories of involvement, according to Serum (2019). She went on to say, "Home-based participation might include scheduled schoolwork and downtime, as well as keeping an eye on the child's academic progress. School-based involvement includes things like volunteering for extracurricular activities, attending school events, and communicating with parents and teachers. Both sorts of involvement can result in beneficial effects for children, such as improved grades, increased participation in advanced coursework, decreased dropout rates, increased drive to complete schoolwork and a greater overall value placed on education."

5.2. Integration of findings with theories

Phenomenology is one of the theories adopted for this study, the study relied on the lived experiences of the three (3) cohorts of respondents, that is, the students, teachers, and the parents while the overall or summation of all the experiences is the comprehensive, rich and multi-cohort based viewpoints with which the researcher was able to carry out an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis which culminated in a most robust the findings of the study. Functionalism is excellent at explaining social stability, in this study, this stability was viewed using the "analytic lenses" of the three groups of respondents of the three cohorts interviewed.

In integrating the structural-functionalist theory to the influence of parental death on academic performance in the study, with the background understanding of the structural functionalists' viewpoint, that disorganization in the system, such as deviant behavior or in the case of this study –loss of a parent, leads to change which social components must adjust to achieve stability the researcher discovered that attaining and maintaining a level or state of academic stability interpretable as "good academic performance" within the context of this study involves the many "parts" working together to ensure that the particular orphan in question "succeeds". The study showed that despite the death of one or both parents –a kind of intrusion to bring about loss of balance and equilibrium which structural-functionalism upholds (social stability), restoration and/or maintenance of academic balance is feasible when sufficient relevant forces, stakeholders -such as the right coping strategies, adequate and timely support from surviving parent (if available), siblings, extended family members –uncles, aunts, grandparents, and even step-parents come to the fore. Therefore, for this cohort of students to enjoy a state of academic "equilibrium" all stakeholders vis-à-vis relatives, teachers, parents, the community at large, and the government must work together to contribute their "individual" quota.

On a wider scope, according to functionalists like Talcott Parsons, the family is the cornerstone of society and the most important factor in maintaining its efficiency and order. Additionally, they hold the opinion that the nuclear family is more mobile and economically viable than the traditional extended family because it has fewer members, making it best suited for a sophisticated industrial society. In their eyes, a nuclear family consists of a "breadwinner" husband (instrumental superior), a dependent wife (expressive superior), and children, in other words, the fathers are the breadwinner who is more instrumental with power to make practical decisions while the mothers are the expressive charismatic leaders who take care of the family (UKEssays, 2018b). Although mothers can play dependent roles, in the event of the loss of their husbands, they as well play dual roles of instrumental and expressive

superior.

Functionalists like Emile Durkheim hold the view that every institution helps to ensure the smooth operation of society, with the family serving the most important role in preventing "society from anarchy" by creating social actors who are "socialized stable individuals." (UKEssays, 2018b). This is the more reason why all hands must be on deck to ensure that orphans get the needed attention to become "stable adults".

In integrating the phenomenological theory to the influence of parental death on academic performance in the study, the researcher discovered that the lived experiences of the three (3) categories of participants though varying, was unique and provided very essential perspectives needed to understand the phenomenon of the aftermath of parental death on the academic performance of students that were studied. Worthy of note is the fact that speaking from a standpoint of directly lived experience gave meaning and "life" to the study. It also helped to understand and appreciate variables that would have been lost if other approaches were employed. The respondents were free to express themselves without any shred of fear or misgivings and the researcher also was able to "bracket" himself as expected and respectfully respond accordingly during emotional zeniths during the interviews shrouded with the outburst of tears and other personal expressions of burden. For the students, it was also a time of "un-bottling" repressed emotions which have been suppressed for years since in our clime; such matters are rarely discussed with children.

6. Summary

This study made the following discoveries; firstly, mothers are the gatekeepers of their children's education, and when they are absent, no other caregiver is as attentive in ensuring that children attend a school or that money for school fees and uniforms are available, most cases of maternal influences are more felt by maternal orphans in secondary and as such, they are likely to do more poorly academically. Allowance must however be made for a few exceptions such as pertains to the educational background of the father, the innate ability of the student, variation in personal experiences, and other variables.

7. Conclusion

From the interviews and subsequent analysis done, it is concluded that even though the death of one or both parents to a child or an adolescent is a grievous, pathetic, and quality of life-defining occurrence, attaining and maintaining excellent academic performance is an achievable goal with self-determination irrespective of the nature of orphanhood (maternal or paternal). The reality from the study however is that majority of the victims of early parental death are adversely affected academically; most are forced to drop out, many lose years at home, and very few of those eventually continue to maintain good academic performance.

Importantly, this study has been able to find the missing link between the varying outcomes of previous studies (Case & Ardington, 2006; Berg et al., 2014; Apelian & Nesteruk, 2017; Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist & Kotimäki, 2020; Liu et al., 2022). In other words, the academic outcome of orphans or bereaved students is not primarily a function of the gender of the deceased parent, the support systems available to the student, and by extrapolation is not essentially a product of the cause of death

Furthermore, the study discovered that maternal death has a greater influence on the students; hence maternal orphans are the worse off as far as their academic performance is concerned when compared with paternal orphans. Succinctly, this study has shown that for any orphaned student, among the three intervening variables, what is most essential is the coping strategies adopted by the student, that self-determination is the most important factor in determining academic performance and that what inspires self-determination can be any other factor/variable like paternal or maternal influence, support systems, et cetera

8. Recommendations

1. Government should work towards having a veritable database especially for orphans. This will help access, assist, and keep a track of their academic progress.
2. Scholarship programmes for the confirmed orphans up to the tertiary level.
3. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) should prioritize orphans and orphan-focused projects in their budgets and programmes.
4. The Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) Platform should be used as an opportunity to enlighten and counsel parents/guardians as regards ways to assist orphans to cope with their peculiarities.

9. Contributions to knowledge

1. Following the inability of the researcher to see any double orphan in both schools selected, the study has raised a red flag by creating awareness as to the need to investigate and track the dropout rates in recent times amongst double or full orphans.
2. This study also contributes to the existing body of knowledge by revealing that self-determination is the most important motivational factor that an orphan needs to perform well academically.
3. The study adds to knowledge by revealing surprisingly several stories of students and even of their parents doing better than they were before they lost one of their parents. Thus, revealing the chances of few positive outcomes despite the parental loss.

10. Take home points

Firstly, this study has shown the importance of the qualitative approach method in having deeper understanding of and gaining insight to missing links in research work. Secondly and related to the first, the study, the importance of primary data especially from the units of analysis in sensitive subjects can never be over emphasized.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Supplementary materials

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