



ORIGINAL PAPER

Divorce's consequences on children's academic achievements. Results of a sociological survey on teachers

Gabriela Motoi¹⁾, Alexandrina-Mihaela Popescu²⁾

Abstract:

This study aims to address divorce, a phenomenon that represents a reality of modern life and which with an exacerbated rapidity has gained momentum in today society, a society in a continuous change, its consequences looming dangerously over its victims, the children, but also on the whole society, jeopardizing a normal development of events of social life. Also, the theme has an importance from a social point of view, psychologically, pedagogically, and it is also closely related to the constraints that society produces on both the two members of the couple, as well as the children. Children of single-parent families are classified as high-risk groups not only in terms of the risk of educational failure, but also in terms of the possibility of social progress and the acquisition of emotional well-being and mental resilience, i.e. psychosocial adaptation. The current communication presents the results of a research on the effects of divorce on the school results of students both quantitatively (from the teachers and school counsellors' perspective) and qualitatively (from the perspective of the parents remaining in the family).

Keywords: *divorce, vulnerable groups, behaviour, academic achievement, resilience*

¹⁾ Associate Professor, Ph.D., Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Craiova, Romania, Email: gabriela.motoi@edu.ucv.ro., ORCID-ID: 0000-0002-5333-6216.

²⁾ Associate Professor, PhD Department of Teacher Training, University of Craiova, Romania, Email: alexandrina.popescu@edu.ucv.ro., ORCID-ID: 0000-0003-2276-3941.

1. Importance of the topic from a social and educational point of view

Divorce is a complex and emotionally charged event that can have far-reaching consequences, particularly on the academic achievements of children. From both social and educational perspectives, understanding these impacts is crucial for addressing the well-being of children and fostering a supportive educational environment.

From a social standpoint, divorce can disrupt the stability and security of a child's life. Children often experience emotional distress, feelings of abandonment, and increased stress during divorce proceedings (Anderson, 2014: 379; Amato and Sobolewski, 2001: 910-913). These emotional challenges can directly affect their ability to focus on academics. Furthermore, the changes in family dynamics and living arrangements can result in reduced parental involvement, which is known to be “a critical factor in a child's academic success” (Jeynes, 1998). This lack of parental support and guidance can hinder a child's motivation, study habits, and overall academic performance.

Educationally, the consequences of divorce on children's academic achievements are evident in various ways. Research consistently shows that children of divorced parents are more likely to have lower grades, higher absenteeism, and a greater risk of dropping out of school (Brand, 2019; Matthijs, 2023; Wadsby and Svedin, 1996: 325-326). The increased stress and emotional turmoil can lead to concentration difficulties, disrupted sleep patterns, and a decreased capacity to engage in learning activities. These effects can extend beyond elementary and secondary education, “impacting a child's long-term educational and career prospects” (Guetto, Bernardi and Zanasi, 2022: 68).

Moreover, the financial strain that often accompanies divorce can limit access to educational resources, extracurricular activities, and tutoring, further exacerbating the educational disparities faced by children of divorced parents. These disparities can perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality, with long-lasting consequences for both individuals and society as a whole.

Addressing the consequences of divorce on children's academic achievements requires a multifaceted approach. Schools and educational institutions must recognize the unique challenges these children face and provide support services such as counseling, mentoring, and academic assistance. Additionally, society should promote co-parenting strategies that prioritize the well-being and educational success of children during and after divorce (Sigal et al., 2011). Encouraging open communication between parents, fostering emotional resilience in children, and advocating for policies that reduce the financial strain on divorced families are all essential steps.

2. Divorce as a social phenomenon

Divorce is a social phenomenon that refers to the legal termination of a marriage between two individuals, which has become increasingly common in many countries, with rates varying depending on cultural and societal factors. From a sociological point of view, marriage can be defined as “the socially accepted way in which two or more people establish a family” (Goga and Niță, 2019: 36). One reason for the rise in divorce rates is the changing societal attitudes towards marriage and relationships. Today, many people view marriage as a partnership based on love and mutual respect, rather than a duty or obligation. This shift in attitudes has made it easier for couples to separate when their relationships are no longer fulfilling or sustainable.

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Another factor contributing to the increase in divorce rates is the changing role of women in society. Women are now more likely to have careers and financial independence, which means they are less likely to stay in unhappy marriages for economic reasons (Wagner, 2020). Divorce has a significant impact on individuals, families, and communities. It can be a traumatic experience for all involved, especially children. It can also have financial implications, as it often involves the division of assets and can lead to the need for two households instead of one.

Divorce carries significant consequences for individuals and society. On the personal level, it often leads to emotional distress, especially for children who may experience feelings of abandonment and instability. The division of assets, custody battles, and legal fees can also cause financial strain. Furthermore, the experience of divorce may affect an individual's mental and physical health, leading to higher rates of depression and stress-related illnesses.

Divorce has far-reaching effects on society as well, because it challenges the traditional family structure and contributes to the rise of non-traditional family units, such as single-parent households and blended families. These new family dynamics require adjustments in societal norms and support systems. Additionally, the economic consequences of divorce can strain social welfare programs, as single parents may require more financial assistance (Stack and Meredith, 2018).

3. Sociological theories on divorce and its implication on children educational achievement. A brief literature review.

Studying divorce from a sociological perspective helps us understand the broader social context, inequalities, family dynamics, and policy implications associated with divorce. It provides valuable insights into the impact of divorce on individuals, families, and society, "contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of this complex social phenomenon". (Amato and James, 2010).

a) **Social control theory.** According to social control theory, divorce weakens the social control mechanisms that parents have over their children, such as setting rules and monitoring behaviour. This can lead to a lack of discipline and structure in the child's life, which can have a negative impact on their academic performance (Hirschi, 2015: 289-305).

b) **Family stress theory** suggests that divorce can lead to significant stress and disruption in the child's life, which can have a negative impact on their academic performance. This theory emphasizes the importance of social support and coping mechanisms in helping children to navigate the challenges of divorce (Lareau, 1989: 246-247; Lareau, 2000).

c) **Life course theory.** Life course theory suggests what divorce can have long-term effects on a child's academic performance by disrupting their life trajectory and creating additional challenges and barriers to success. This theory emphasizes the importance of addressing the root causes of divorce and providing long-term support and resources for children who are affected. Glen H. Elder Jr has conducted extensive research on the long-term effects of social and historical changes on individuals and families across the life course. Elder's work has contributed to our understanding of how early life experiences, such as divorce, can have long-lasting effects on educational outcomes and other aspects of life (Crosnoe and Elder Jr, G. H., 2004: 571-602). Another important scholar for this theory is Karl Ulrich Mayer, who has conducted research on a range of topics, including educational attainment, social mobility, and

family dynamics. Mayer's work has emphasized the importance of examining the ways in which individual life trajectories are shaped by social structures and institutions and has highlighted the role of social policies in supporting positive life outcomes for individuals and families (Settersten Jr and Mayer, 1997).

d) **Resilience theory** examines how individuals can adapt and thrive despite adversity (Masten, 1994, Ionescu, 2013: Otovescu C. et al, 2015: 32-33), this concept “demanding a multisystemic response and participation from all areas of the society: community, society, institutions etc” (Olimid, Georgescu and Gherghe, 2022: 38). It suggests that some children may exhibit resilience in the face of their parents' divorce, while others may be more vulnerable to negative consequences. This theory focuses on understanding the protective factors that can help children overcome the challenges associated with divorce (Masten, 2018: 12-14).

Overall, these sociological theories provide different perspectives on the complex relationship between parents' divorce and children's educational outcomes. While each theory emphasizes different factors and mechanisms, they all underscore the importance of providing support and resources to help children navigate the challenges of divorce and succeed academically.

4. Divorce's consequences on children educational achievement. Results of a sociological research

Divorce can have significant consequences on children's educational achievement. Research has shown that children whose parents divorce are more likely to experience a range of negative outcomes, including lower academic performance, lower graduation rates, and reduced educational attainment. First of all, divorce often brings significant changes in a child's life, such as “moving homes, changing schools, and adjusting to new family dynamics” (Cao, 2022). These disruptions can be challenging for children, making it harder for them to maintain their routines and focus on their studies. Also, it can cause children to experience emotional and psychological stress, such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Amato, 2000). These negative emotions can affect their academic performance and make it harder for them to concentrate and learn.

Children affected by divorce can be considered a vulnerable group. Vulnerable groups are those who are at a higher risk of facing adverse outcomes due to various factors beyond their control, such as socioeconomic status, family circumstances, or personal characteristics. Children with divorced parents often experience reduced parental involvement in their education. Parents who are no longer living together may have “difficulty coordinating their efforts to support their child's education, and one or both parents may be less available to help with homework, attend parent-teacher conferences, or volunteer at school” (Miller, 2021: 170). Also, we can analyse divorce in terms of financial difficulties. It is a problem that can lead to financial strain, which can limit a child's access to educational resources and opportunities, such as after-school activities and tutoring. Children from divorced families are more likely to live in poverty, which can also affect their academic performance.

From a psychological point of view, one of the most important consequences of divorce is the stress and anxiety (for couple and, of course, for children also). The stress and conflict that often accompany divorce can spill over into the child's life and create a negative learning environment. Children may feel caught “in the middle of their parents' conflicts, which can make it difficult for them to concentrate on their studies and feel

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comfortable at school". (Amato, 1991). Thus, the impact of divorce on children's educational achievement is complex and can vary depending on a range of factors, including the child's age, gender, and temperament, as well as the quality of the parent-child relationship and the level of support available from family and community resources.

4.1. Methodological framework

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the present research was the comparative research of the behaviour and academic performance of pupils from single-parent families after parental separation/divorce and pupils from nuclear families. Pupils' behaviour was studied in three dimensions: school adjustment, interpersonal and intrapersonal behaviour. The present study is based on the estimations of the pupils' teachers but also on the perception of the school counsellors. Therefore, the present study represents an important approach to the subject from a new perspective, because the school and, consequently, the teachers are considered key factors for the good socialization of the child.

Type of research

This quantitative research study aimed to provide valuable insights into how teachers and school counsellors perceive the consequences of divorce on students' educational achievement. The findings of our research contributed to a better understanding of the role of teachers and counsellors in supporting students from divorced families and inform interventions aimed at improving academic outcomes in this context.

Thus, our study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the perceptions and experiences of teachers and school counsellors regarding the impact of divorce on the educational achievement of students. A cross-sectional survey approach was utilized to collect data, providing a snapshot of respondents' perspectives at a single point in time.

Sample

The study targeted a diverse sample of teachers and school counsellors from various educational institutions across Dolj County (rural and urban areas). Participants were selected through stratified random sampling, ensuring representation from different types of schools (e.g., public, private) and grade levels (e.g. secondary, high-school). The target sample size was estimated at 90 participants (80 teachers and 10 counsellors).

Data collection and data analysis procedure

A structured questionnaire was developed based on a comprehensive review of relevant literature and prior research in the field. The questionnaire consists of closed-ended questions, open questions, and demographic questions. We have used 3 types of variables: **Independent Variables** (Divorce and its associated factors - e.g., family structure); **Dependent Variables**: Educational achievement, as perceived by teachers and school counsellors; **Control Variables**: Demographic characteristics (e.g., age, years of experience).

Quantitative data were analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques, namely SPSS Data Editor software. Descriptive statistics will be used to summarize demographic characteristics and the responses to each question. Inferential statistics, such as Pearson correlation, t-tests and regression analysis, were used to examine relationships between divorce-related factors and perceived educational achievement.

Research hypothesis

- H1: There are statistically significant differences in the behaviour of pupils with divorced parents compared to those from nuclear families.
- H2: The type of single-parent family statistically significantly influences the pupil's behaviour in the school environment.
- H3: The type of single-parent family has a statistically significant influence on the school performance of pupils.

4.2. Results. Statistical analysis related to the research hypothesis.

This section unveils the empirical findings regarding the multifaceted impact of divorce on the educational outcomes of children. In the preceding sections, we delved into the theoretical underpinnings and methodological framework that guided our investigation into this critical sociological issue. Now, we present a comprehensive analysis of the data collected.

We explored whether there are statistically significant differences in the behaviour of pupils from divorced families compared to those from nuclear families, as hypothesized in H1. This section provides a detailed examination of behavioural patterns within these groups. Hypothesis H2 posited that the type of single-parent family significantly influences a pupil's behaviour in the school environment. The results shed light on the associations between specific types of single-parent families and varying behavioural profiles among pupils. Lastly, we examined the impact of family structure, particularly the type of single-parent family, on the school performance of pupils, as hypothesized in H3. This section presents a comprehensive analysis of academic outcomes among different family structures.

Figure 1. Differences in the behaviour of pupils from divorced families compared to those from nuclear families (statistical analysis)

	Types of family				<i>p</i> Mann-Whitney
	Nuclear family		Monoparental family		
	Mean ±SD	Median (Interq. Range)	Mean ±SD	Median (Interq. Range)	
This student has difficulty participating in the lesson	2.3 ± 1.26	2 (1-3)	2.76 ± 1.14	3 (2-4)	0.001
This student does not like school and shows no interest in lessons	1.78± 1.09	1 (1-2)	2.3 ± 1.03	2 (1-3)	<0.001
This student has learning difficulties	2.12± 1.26	2 (1-3)	2.43 ± 1.1	2 (2-3)	0.005

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The average participation level for students from nuclear families is 2.3, with a standard deviation of 1.26. This indicates that, on average, students from nuclear families have a participation level of 2.3 in lessons. The median participation level is 2, and the interquartile range (IQR) is 1-3. The IQR shows that the middle 50% of students from nuclear families have participation levels ranging from 1 to 3.

The average participation level for students from single-parent families is 2.76, with a standard deviation of 1.14. This indicates that, on average, students from single-parent families have a slightly higher participation level of 2.76 in lessons compared to nuclear families. The median participation level is 3, and the interquartile range (IQR) is 2-4. The IQR shows that the middle 50% of students from single-parent families have participation levels ranging from 2 to 4.

A p-value of 0.001 is typically considered very low, indicating strong evidence against the null hypothesis. In other words, the data suggests that there is a significant difference in participation levels between these two groups, and this difference is unlikely to have occurred by chance. In summary, the statistical results suggest that there is a significant difference in participation levels between students from nuclear families and those from single-parent families. Specifically, students from single-parent families, on average, have a slightly higher participation level in lessons compared to students from nuclear families, and this difference is statistically significant with a very low p-value of 0.001.

Figure 2: School adjustment, interpersonal behaviour, and intrapersonal behaviour in the two types of families (nuclear and monoparental) – statistical analysis

	Types of family		p Student's t-test	Cohen d*
	Nuclear family	Monoparental family		
	Mean ± SD			
School adaptation	15,44 ± 4,22	13,7 ± 3,6	<0,001	0,43
Interpersonal behaviour	16,35 ± 3,82	14,88 ± 3,72	0,001	0,39
Intrapersonal behaviour	12,85 ± 2,52	11,1 ± 2,41	<0,001	0,71

Factor scores for school adjustment, interpersonal behaviour, and intrapersonal behaviour are noted to differ significantly between groups ($p < 0.001$) with students from a single-parent family exhibiting more behaviour problems. Family type, according to effect sizes (Cohen's effect size=ES) had a greater effect on intrapersonal behaviour (ES=0.71), less on school adjustment (ES=0.43), and even less on interpersonal behaviour (ES=0.39).

Intrapersonal Behaviour (ES=0.71): The relatively large effect size here implies that family structure strongly influences a child's inner emotional and psychological world. Single-parent families may lack the resources or support systems necessary to address children's emotional needs adequately.

School Adjustment (ES=0.43): While family structure still has a significant effect on school adjustment, it's somewhat less pronounced than intrapersonal behaviour. This may indicate that schools can provide some level of support and stability for children, mitigating the impact of family structure to some extent.

Interpersonal Behaviour (ES=0.39): The smallest effect size for interpersonal behaviour suggests that family type has a lesser direct impact on how children interact with others. It's possible that factors outside the family, such as peer relationships and community influences, play a more substantial role in shaping interpersonal behavior.

These findings underscore the sociological importance of considering family structure when examining child behaviour and development. They suggest that single-parent families may face unique challenges that can affect different aspects of a child's behaviour, with intrapersonal difficulties being the most pronounced. Understanding these dynamics is vital for developing targeted interventions and support systems to promote the well-being of children from diverse family backgrounds.

Conclusions

Children of divorced parents often face a range of challenges in their educational pursuits, including lower academic performance, decreased graduation rates, and a higher likelihood of behavioral and emotional difficulties in school. These consequences are not uniform and can vary depending on a multitude of factors, including the child's age, gender, socioeconomic status, and the post-divorce family environment. Moreover, it is evident that the negative effects of divorce on educational achievement are not solely confined to the immediate aftermath of the separation. The long-term repercussions can extend well into adulthood, affecting an individual's educational attainment, career prospects, and overall life outcomes.

As we conclude this study, it is imperative to recognize the need for a holistic approach to support children experiencing the challenges of divorce. Parents, educators, and policymakers must collaborate to implement strategies that mitigate the negative impact on educational achievement. Encouraging open communication between parents, ensuring stable living arrangements, and providing access to counseling and support services are just a few of the potential interventions.

In conclusion, divorce exerts a profound influence on children's educational outcomes, with a multitude of short- and long-term consequences. As researchers and practitioners, it is our responsibility to continue studying this complex phenomenon and developing strategies that empower children to overcome the challenges posed by divorce. By doing so, we can contribute to the creation of a more equitable educational landscape, where all children have the opportunity to thrive, regardless of their family circumstances.

Authors' Contributions:

The authors contributed equally to this work.

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