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Issues and Challenges that Students from Single-Parent Households Face in Their Academic Performance at Senior Secondary Level

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Abstract

An increase in single-parent households is noticeable in modern society and the academic performance of the senior school students living in single-parent households is affected negatively at large. Therefore, this study aims to discover the issues and challenges that single-parented students face in their academic performance at the senior secondary level. This study involved a hundred senior secondary students (Grades 10 & 11) from single-parent households, fifty of their parents, and fifty class teachers from the Moratuwa Educational Division. The sampling method was stratified random sampling and the strata are three school types. Primary data was acquired through three structured questionnaires and the secondary data was collected through test scores and school-based assessments. Only descriptive statistics were used to derive the inferences. The analysis found that the students from single-parent households experience low parental involvement in their academic activities for many reasons, confirming that 24% of single parents rarely attended parent-teacher meetings, and 38% never attended. The three main causes are stressful responsibilities (92%), lack of finance (88%) and no external help at home (82%). About 70% of students have expressed their dislike in attending school as well as engaging in academic work. Furthermore, 88% of the students have claimed that they have lost confidence in their single parents as well as their class teachers. 76% and 68% of grades ten and eleven students have obtained the class positions between (31-50) while only 4% and 2% of grade ten and eleven respectively have acquired the class positions between (1-10). It was revealed that psychological, social and economic aspects contribute to the achievement levels of the students. This study recommends that ground-level stakeholders in school management pay more attention to and help single parents and their children cope with their situations and enhance their academic performance.

Keywords: Academic, Challenges, Performance, Senior Secondary, Single-Parent, Students.

Introduction

Family is an agent of culture and socialization and is the basic unit of human civilization. Family serves as the nursery for the citizens that become a society's population. In a family, parents are the primary caregivers of children. When considering a child's optimal social and cognitive growth, the presence of the parents is essential. When the parents live in a family, the child is likely to receive the love, care, and concern needed to grow into a healthy human person (Ortese, 1998). When one of the parents is absent from a child's life, a void is formed because the child loses the support that would have come from that parent. Therefore, it is best for the children to grow up in a family where both mother and father play their respective roles in children's upbringing. Many scholars and researchers have affirmed that a balanced and conducive family situation contributes not only to the social, physical, spiritual and psychological development of the children but also to the children's educational performance (Amato, Patterson & Beattie, 2015).

Azar, Naughton & Joseph (2009) stated that a single-parent household has only a father or a mother and a child or children resulting from divorce, loss of one parent, never married, separation or desertion. Single-parent household is an ever-increasing phenomenon in contemporary societies. The reasons for the increase of single-parent households are varied. Some observe that the high rate of divorce and non-marital childbearing has caused this situation at large (Amato, Patterson & Beattie, 2015). On 13th March 2019, Anna Nagy, head of the Single Parent Families' Foundation at the United Nations, revealed that currently, there are three hundred

and twenty million single-parent families in the world (Wutz, 2019). Although the actual percentage is unknown, practical experience and newspaper reports revealed an increase in single-parent households in Sri Lankan society. Jordal, Wijewardena & Olsson (2013) researched the topic of unmarried women's ways of facing single motherhood in Sri Lanka, which revealed that single motherhood is an increasingly global phenomenon. As single-parent households continue to grow in numbers and become more common, there has been a notable adverse effect on students' education. The management of the schools has started to feel the importance of paying more attention to these students whose issues and challenges have begun to affect the whole system in some way or the other (Rubamande & Mukadi, 2021). Lange, Dronkers & Wolbers (2014) reported that attending a school with more children from single-parent families negatively affects the educational performance of all children.

Fotoh (2021) concluded that the children with experience of separation, divorce, or death of a parent do not perform well or achieve academically. However, the student's academic performance is a prime concern in the teaching-learning process. Thus, schools prioritise the teaching-learning process by drawing all the possible resources to equip the teaching-learning process and facilitate the students to achieve better academic performance. Against this scenario, it is exciting to explore how the senior secondary students from single-parent households perform academically as they encounter many issues and challenges in their lives.

Literature Review

Throughout a person's life, family ties play a decisive role in shaping their well-being. It is accepted and believed that family relationships can provide a greater sense of meaning and purpose and social and tangible resources that benefit the well-being of children (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Single-parent households have gained the spotlight over the nuclear family in the recent past, consisting of a father, mother, and children. Single-parent households emerge mainly due to parental separation or divorce, children born out of wedlock, and a parent's death. Children of such families face various disadvantages and challenges. For example, they are less likely to attend school; become school dropouts; show less academic performance, score lower marks, etc. (McLanahan & Schwartz, 2002). Thus, the absence of a parent is seen as impacting the social cognitive growth of their children because each parent has distinct roles to play in the lives of their children.

Why were senior secondary students selected for the study? They are considered middle adolescents who are in a time of transition. The stage of adolescence can be understood as the phase between a child beginning to develop above the ordinary childhood stage and becoming an adult. Children of the adolescent age group are highly energetic and active, and very curious (Okaka, 2016). Their attitudinal formation, the social cohesion of different types and levels which shape their educational attainment and perception for the future, will be determined by various factors such as parents, relatives, teachers and peers (O'Connor et al., 2013).

In school education, the senior secondary level occupies a unique position as one of the significant government examinations; the G.C.E. O/L Examination which is very decisive in one's life, is held at this level. Moreover, at this level, the students give much thought to their future academic and professional careers as well. Thus, this stage of life is very decisive and challenging. Hence, the students in this stage should be carefully guided and helped.

The situation in single-parent households directly affects the adolescents in the family. Several studies have indicated this fact through scientific research (Oluwatosin & Joseph, 2011). There are lots of materials concerning this topic. However, this particular study has a theoretical and empirical background. Therefore, it is essential to study those backgrounds to get a clear and in-depth understanding of this topic. Thus, within this literature review, there will be further discussion on single-parent households and their influence on adolescents' academic performance.

Theoretical perspective

Through scientific research, it is proven that the situation in single-parent households directly affects the adolescents in the family. Several theories describe the psychological significance of the relationship between parents and children and why it is strongly linked to the children's well-being and educational achievement (O'Connor et al., 2013).

This research is based on two prominent theories related to this aspect.

Social learning theory

This is one of the most influential theories of parent-child relationships. It is closely associated with the ideas and findings of Albert Bandura. Behavioural principles often used in social learning theory are widely used in parenting programmes for school-aged children. Social learning theory argues that the children's real-life experiences and exposure directly or indirectly shape their behaviour. Children's strategies for dealing with emotions, managing conflict, and interacting with others are developed through experience. The primary source of these experiences is the parent-child and family relationship environment (O'Connor et al., 2013).

The concept of Reciprocal Determinism developed by Bandura (1977) highlights that a person's behaviour is influenced by a person's individual factors and environment. Each could affect one and be affected by the other. Therefore, children's individual factors like cognitive skills, attitudes and behaviour are influenced by the environment in which the parents are included. O'Connor et al. (2013, p. 359) mentioned, "the specific parenting behaviours targeted for assessment and treatment are positive attention; praise for the child's desirable behaviour, contingency of parental response, directions, clear instructions and limits on undesirable behaviour and criticism". Therefore, parenting involvements that improve the parenting dimensions mentioned above can improve children's positive behaviour while reducing negative behaviour. On average, children living in dual-parent households experience better educational, social, cognitive, and behavioural outcomes than

children from single-parent homes (Brown, 2010). Consequently, it is obvious that the children should experience both their parents and benefit from the distinctive roles of father and mother to perform better in their academic achievements.

Attachment theory

Attachment theory which was developed by John Bowlby (1969) and colleagues, was conceptualized as a model for understanding how experiences with the caregiver shape social and personality development in the child (Scott et al., 2011). In simple terms, attachment can be defined as an emotional bond with another person. This theory is focused on the relationships among people. Hence, attachment theory explains how the parent-child relationship emerges and influences a child's subsequent development. Bowlby and other attachment theorists have developed a model of parent and child relationships from a broad theoretical base that includes cognitive, psychological and control systems. Therefore, based on the attachment to the parents; children's behaviour, psychological development, and achievements will be decided (O'Connor et al., 2013).

Students of senior secondary level who can be considered middle adolescents are experiencing a transitional period in their psychological, biological and social aspects. Scott et al. (2011) highlighted a particular challenge for research in this age group because of the absence of conceptual-methodological work on what contributes to attachment processes in this age group and how attachment relates to adjustment. They come across opportunities in building

up new connections with peers and other social groups. However, if parental affection is not dominant, then there is a tendency for them to make strong attachments with other social groups, negatively affecting their academic achievements. Therefore, parent-child relationships built during infancy and childhood should continue with more vigour and spirit during this stage of children's lives and have become very challenging, especially in single-parent households. In addition, Scott et al. (2011) mentioned that in adolescence, it is likely that a warm, involved parenting style will be associated with security and an angry style with insecurity.

Thus, social scientists in general, and psychologists in particular, principally agree that parent-child relationships play a vital role in shaping children's development and adjustments in life. After much research work in this field, Epstein (1990) and his collaborators highlighted that parental involvement is a significant factor in a child's education (Anyakoha, 2016). Epstein's Theory of Family Deflect Model, which anchors family on the Family Deficit Model in Hunter & Donahoo (2003), also sees a two-parent family as the ideal family structure and a single-parent household as deviant from the model family. This Family Deficit Model upholds that single-parent households negatively impact children since such families are not nuclear in structure. Furthermore, the structure plays down the effects of economic and other background factors on learners' academic attainment (Hunter & Donahoo, 2003). The family deficit model assumes that single-parent households are deficient in some critical ways for practical child training. This could be so as there may not be any single

parent (father or mother) that can fully play the roles of father and mother in the child's upbringing in all these areas such as housing, feeding, clothing, shelter, and education.

Despite such negative impacts, some scholars hold a different stance by arguing that children from single-parent homes can grow and develop as normal children from two-parent homes with good and quality socialisation. Abbott (2012) holds the view that single parenting can contribute to a child's academic performance just like in a two-parent family, provided that the single parent is well equipped to handle the challenges that are present due to the absence of the other parent (Okaka, 2016). Supporting this view, Anyakoha (2016, p. 838) affirmed that "Epstein's Risk and Protective Factor Model does not regard single-parent families as irregular because the foundation for the model is that all families have both strengths and weaknesses". Besides these findings, many other researchers still believe that the issues and challenges that single-parented students face; affect their academic performance more negatively than positively (Abudu & Moses, 2013). The implication of these theories to the present study lies in the fact that students' performance in school is facilitated by their upbringing, which perhaps is influenced by their family background.

Empirical perspective

Ali and Soomar (2019, p. 1) defined single parenting as "a parent, either father or mother alone practising and taking responsibility of nurturing children in the absence of another parent." There are several reasons, such as divorce, desertion, separation, unintended pregnancy or death of a spouse, which have

caused the emergence of single-parent families (Ali & Soomar, 2019). Therefore, the home that is being managed by only a father or a mother due to one of these reasons is a single-parent family. It follows that the children brought up under this family structure are likely to have challenges because it is not the ideal family in accordance with the family deficit model; hence such children may be lacking in one way or the other.

The researchers observe that children's success depends on the early intervention of parents for them to achieve their future potential, and this intervention is in many ways at home and in doing their school work, monitoring their work after school. Therefore, the direct encouragement by parents for children is a vital aspect of parental involvement in the educational success of their children (Fantuzzo et al., 2004).

Schultz (2006) believed that higher levels of emotional, social and academic problems are recorded among children from unstable households than from the other types of families with both mother and father. Furthermore, the study reveals that the children living with their both parents do significantly better than children from single-parent households regarding educational achievement.

Moore and Valladares (2009) have found that a mix of poverty and single parenthood poorly and negatively affected the educational attainment level of affected children. In addition, the parental distress with less supervision found among single-parent households brings about persistent tension capable of affecting children's social as well as educational attainment (Moore & Valladares, 2009).

Usdansky and Parker (2011) indicated that a single-parent family directly influences the academic achievements of adolescents in the family. Abudu and Moses (2013) revealed through their study that most students from single-parent households experience low parental involvement in their academic activities. They also provide evidence to show that single parenting has an adverse effect on the academic performance of the students, and there is a difference between the academic performance of male students from single-parent households and the female students from the same family type (Abudu & Moses, 2013).

Contrary to the above findings, some studies reveal that the absence of a parent doesn't necessarily have an influence on the academic performance of the child, and there is no relationship between the single parental impact and the academic achievement of students (Oluwatosin & Joseph, 2011; Rubamande & Mukadi, 2021).

Supporting the above findings, Ushie et al. (2012) provided evidence to show that there is no remarkable difference in the academic performance of students from single-parent households and those from two-parent families. This might have been due to the disagreements that exist despite the single parent's inability to give the child all the necessary care. Moreover, with time, the child can adjust to the environment; as such, the performance that was poor earlier, might later improve.

After critically analyzing the existing literature, it is evident that there are issues and challenges that students from single-parent

household face in their academic performance at the senior secondary level. However, available literature shows that no sufficient research is being conducted into this matter in the Sri Lankan context. Thus, it is timely and necessary to investigate and find solutions to this research problem and create enthusiasm in the research field for further investigation. Therefore, this study is beneficial in guiding the stakeholders in the field of education when focusing on the senior secondary level academic achievement of students who come from single-parent families.

Research objectives

In view of the above, the objectives of the study are to:

- identify the issues and challenges that students from single-parent households face in their academic performance at the senior secondary level.
- examine the causes for the identified issues and challenges and their effects on the senior secondary level academic performance of students from single-parent households.
- explore the possible solutions to address the identified issues and challenges and to improve the senior secondary level academic performance of students from single-parent households.

Materials and Methods

Population and sample

Moratuwa Educational Division (MED) was purposively selected for this study. The target population in this study, therefore, was the senior secondary level students (Grades 10 & 11) who come from single-parent households from the MED. In the MED, there are 30 schools in total. However, Tamil medium schools and the schools with no secondary levels were not included in the sample. So, the total number of schools considered in the study comprises twenty-seven schools. A stratified random sampling method was used to determine the schools proportionately from different types of schools, which can be considered as different strata. The three strata are the three different types of schools within the Moratuwa educational zone, namely: national schools (1AB), provincial schools (1C, type 2 & type 3) and semi-government schools as shown in Table 1.

Ten schools selected randomly out of twenty-seven were allocated proportionally between three strata (Table 1). Hundred randomly selected single-parented senior secondary level students, fifty class teachers from the senior secondary level and fifty single-parents from Moratuwa Educational Division, based on their readiness and willingness to participate in the study, were proportionally allocated among three strata (Table 1).

Table 1.
Distribution of sample size between strata.

Category of Schools	Schools in Educational zone	Selected Number of Schools	Number of Students	Number of Teachers	Number of Parents
National Schools (1AB)	2	1	10	5	5
Provincial Schools	23	8	80	40	40
Semi Govern- ment Schools	2	1	10	5	5
Total	27	10	100	50	50

Data

The primary data was collected from a pre-tested questionnaire. The secondary data was extracted from the test scores and school-based assessment reports. Furthermore, three self-developed questionnaire items were employed to collect relevant quantitative data from the senior secondary students from single-parent households, their single parents and the class teachers who consented to participate in this research study. These questionnaires were divided into two sections. Section A contained the respondents' demographic data, and section B had the questions that prompted the responses from the respondents concerning the objectives of the research study. These questionnaires were given to all hundred senior secondary students (fifty students from each grade) from single-parent households, fifty single parents and fifty teachers from ten schools. Necessary approval was obtained to collect information from the students. The principals and sectional heads in the respective schools helped in administering the questionnaires to single-parented students, their parents and class teachers at the senior secondary level.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages and standard deviations were used.

Results and Discussion

The analysis found that many senior secondary students from single-parent households experience low parental involvement in their academic activities for many reasons. The class teachers too have notified the lack of parental participation concerning the matters of the schools. Results found that 25% of single parents rarely attended parent-teacher meetings, and 38% never attended. Attending talent shows, activities and programmes of the students have a low percentage (38%). In addition, many single parents show inadequate constant supervision of students' academic progress (72%) and less interest in teacher-parent communication (73%). The causes for these issues are shown in Table 2. The leading causes are stressful responsibilities, lack of finance, and no external help at home.

Table 2.
Causes for the Issues and Challenges.

Causes	Percentage (%)
Lack of finance	88
Lack of help in homework	72
Stressful responsibilities	92
No external help at home	82
Informal employment	38
Stigmatization	62
Others	78

It is also alarming to notice that many students would like to be away from the school and home. The questionnaire for teachers revealed that 62% of students' attendance is below the average. This is mainly due to poor relationships and less attention from single parents and class teachers. Figure 01 shows students' interest in doing academic work and attending school.

Figure 1.
Students' interest in doing academic work and attending school.

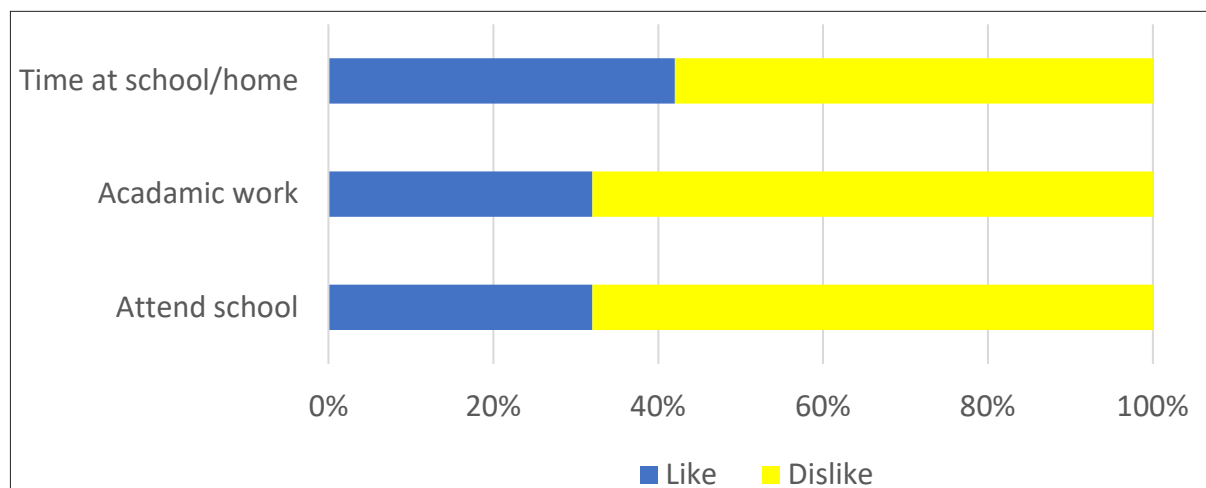


Figure 1 reveals that 68% of the single-parented students have expressed their dislike in attending school as well as engaging in academic work. Their interest in attending school and engaging in academic work is diminished mainly due to the psychological disturbances caused by being single-parented students (82%). For example, most students do not like others to know that their parents are divorced or separated. In addition, some single-parented students also feel inferior to the other students as their single parents find it challenging to meet the requirements of the school. There are also other reasons like: not having close friends at school, being unable to

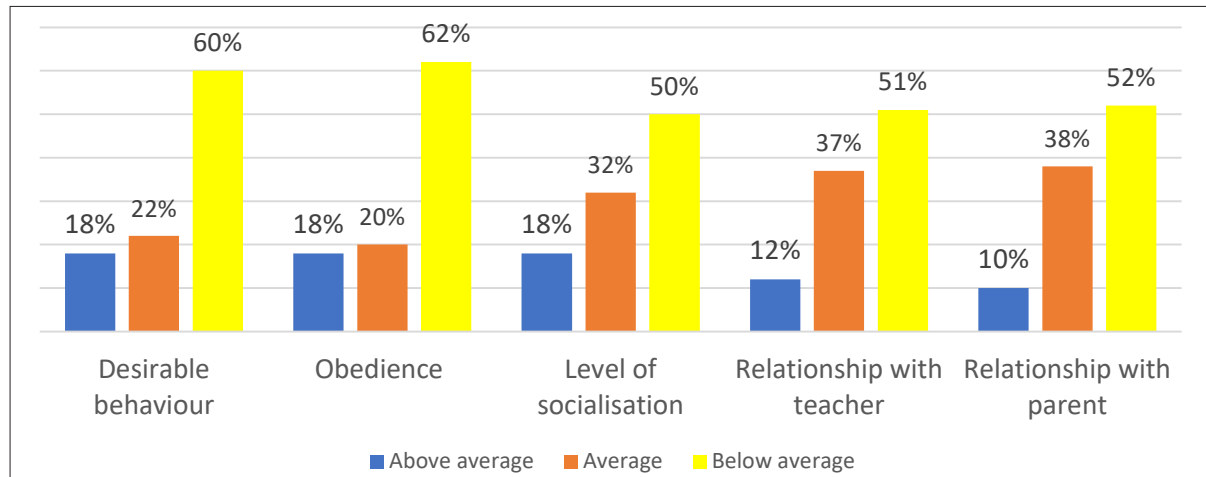
get extra help to understand the lessons that they cannot apprehend during school hours, less motivation to engage in academic activities and feeling less fortunate. Furthermore, 58% of single-parented students do not like to spend their time at school and home because they think they are not welcomed and have negative life experiences.

A considerable number of students (78%) have issues with their behaviour and face challenges in building better relationships with parents, peers, and single parents. These students have felt that they are being neglected, not welcomed and not cared for.

Due to the effects of behavioural issues and challenges in relationships, these students have become victims of unhealthy relationships

and social vices like being addicted to drugs and illicit liquor, addicted to social media and phonographies and engaging in cybercrimes.

Figure 2.
Students' relationship status.

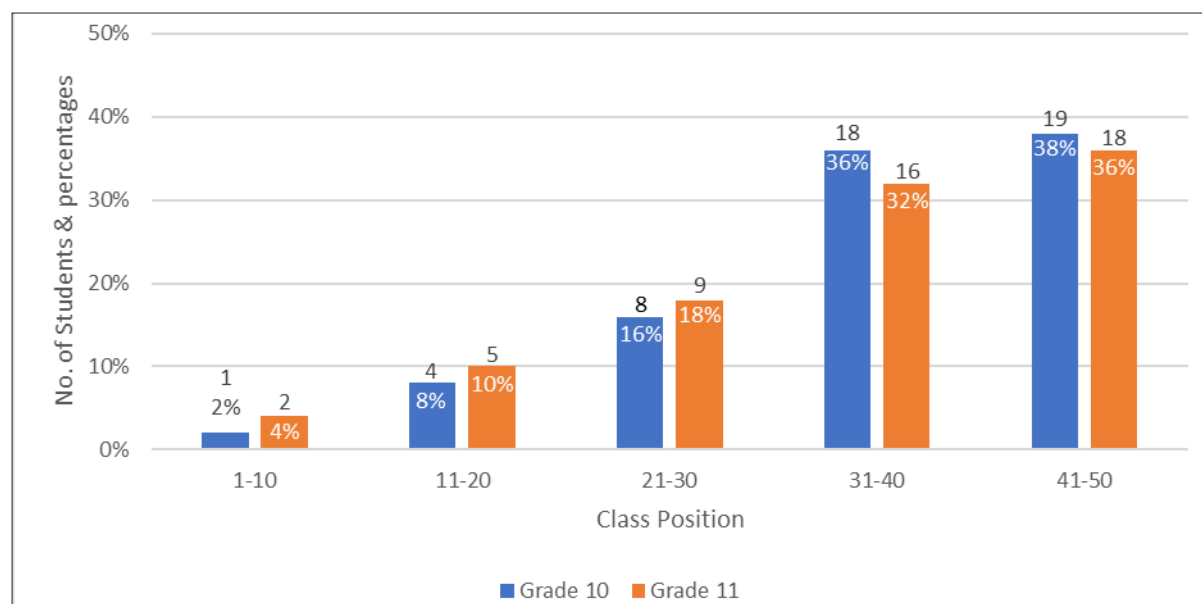


The results mentioned above indicate that around 50% of single-parented students are not happy with their relationship with their single parents and class teachers. Furthermore, 88% of the single-parented students have mentioned that they have lost confidence in their single parents- and class teachers. Based on the information provided by single parents and class teachers, 62% of the single-parented students show a lack of obedience to them, mainly due to the stubbornness (77%) that these students have developed in themselves over time. From the side of the single-parented students, one of the main reasons for being disobedient is their parents' and class teachers' indifference to their life situations (73%). On the other hand, 40% of single-parented

students have shown desirable behaviour as their single parents and classroom teachers have attended to these students' psychological, social, economic, and physical needs. 50% of single-parented students have shown a poor level of socialisation due to reasons like not being able to trust others, not being straightforward, not being able to adequately explain their feelings and emotions, showing attitudes and experiencing a sense of timidity.

The evidence mentioned above, and many other factors have proved that the issues and challenges that students from single-parent households face have adverse effects on their academic performance at the senior secondary level. Students' class positions based on test scores prove this fact in Figure 3.

Figure 3.
Class positions based on test scores.



According to the results shown in Figure 03; respectively, 76% and 68% of single-parented students in grades ten and eleven have obtained the class positions between thirty-one to fifty. On the other hand, only 2% of grade eleven and 4% of grade ten single-parented students have acquired the class positions between one to ten. This shows that an alarming majority of the single-parented students have shown very low performances in their classroom subjects. When the data , the single-parented students who have secured classroom positions between one to ten have received psychological, social and economic support to a satisfactory level. Furthermore, this finding is strengthened by the data about the students who obtained the class positions between thirty-one and fifty. These single-parented students have not received psychological, social and economic support sufficiently. Furthermore, the data of single-parented students who secured their class positions between twenty-one and thirty shows that they have received more or less external support in the spheres mentioned above. Therefore, it is evident that if the issues

and challenges that single-parented students face are addressed adequately; it will help raise their academic performances to higher levels.

It was revealed that psychological, social and economic aspects contribute to the achievement levels of the students. Therefore, considering the above facts and data from school based assessments, the overall academic performance of senior secondary students is evaluated, and the results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3.
Overall academic performance.

Performance Level	Number of Student
Poor	46
Below Average	12
Average	14
Above Average	26
Excellent	02
Total	100

The test scores, class positions, school-based assessments, behaviour, student-teacher relationship, student-parent relationship, engagement in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, and engagement in studies at home were considered in finding the percentages of the overall academic performances of single-parented students who are in the senior secondary level.

When single parents and their children received help in different forms, the latter showed desirable academic performances. For example, according to Table 03, 28% of students have performed above the average level. These students have received three or more types of help like; financial aid, scholarships, free tuition, free meals, counselling and guidance, assistance at home, attention of the class teacher, etc.

On the other hand, 58% of students who have performed below the average level have not received much help to face the issues and challenges. Furthermore, 46% of the students who have shown poor performances have not received any assistance to effectively address the issues and challenges. Most of the students who have come under the category of below average or average (26%) have received just one help like free tuition, free meal, a scholarship or counselling and guidance to both the student and the parent. On the other hand, the majority of the students who perform at the average level (14%) have received two kinds of help simultaneously. Findings also showed a significant correlation between students' academic achievement levels and the support they receive from the single-parent and society.

However, the findings give hope that, if additional help is provided to both single parents and their children, not only the academic performance of the students but also their social, physical, psychological and spiritual well-being can be positive.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Conclusions

It is evident from the study that the issues and challenges that single-parented senior secondary students face have adverse effects not only on their academic performance but also on the overall well-being of the students. In addition; low parental involvement in students' academic careers and less attention from school administration, teachers, welfare societies and educational counsellors have worsened the issue.

However, senior secondary level students from single-parented households can successfully overcome the issues and challenges to their academic performance if the causes that create the adverse effects are adequately addressed by the ground-level stakeholders of the education management system, together with the single-parents and their students. This will result in better academic performance by senior secondary students in single-parented households.

The findings of the study will be helpful to researchers in the field of education when planning or carrying out research on senior secondary students' academic achievement. Policymakers, teacher trainers and curriculum developers can pay attention to the findings of the study in performing their respective responsibilities and help school

administrators, the teachers and the students in experiencing a fruitful and successful teaching-learning process. Teachers are the immediate contactors to the students in the teaching-learning process. Therefore, this study will be helpful for the teachers to have a better understanding of the students who come from single-parented families and help them to perform well academically.

Parental involvement is a strong indicator of how well children will perform academically. Therefore, this study is also vital for the parents to understand the value of parenthood in the family and throw some light on how they should help their children achieve better academic performance while facing social, economic, and psychological challenges and difficulties courageously. Similar studies can be extended to different educational divisions to find the differences among educational divisions.

Suggestions

As the results obtained are subjective, a sound statistical analyses should be incorporated to derive inferences to avoid the subjectivity. Single parents should be guided in the psychological management of their single parenthood and deal with being single parents and face the challenges and issues. This is essential because it will affect the school administration, teachers and educational counsellors to be more productive in assisting single-parented students in performing well academically.

School management, teachers, and the members of the welfare societies should have a joint mechanism to help single parents and their

children to face the difficulties and challenges they come across in their journey in academia. For example, trying to get them scholarships, free tuition, free meals, psychological support etc., are prominently recognized. In addition, religious leaders, educational counsellors and government organizations should be prepared to provide the necessary help and psychological guidance for single parents and their children while promoting the values of family life.

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