

INFLUENCE OF PARENTAL BEREAVEMENT ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY, ZARIA, KADUNA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

*This study examined the Influence of Parental Bereavement on the Academic Achievement among Undergraduate Students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The study was guided with Two (2) objectives which were transformed into research questions. The study used a descriptive survey research design, with the population of 182 undergraduate students whom were purposively selected based on their loss of parents. Parental Bereavement Questionnaire (PBAQ) was used for data collection, after an in-depth content validity. Pilot study was conducted in the faculty of nursing science which is not part of the research of the research faculty, the reliability index of the instrument after the pilot study was 0.83 respectively. The data were collected across 17 faculties of ABU Zaria. The data collected was analyzed using Descriptive Statistics using SPSS version 26. Findings of the study revealed that; the death of a father exerts a **significant emotional and academic toll** on students' academic achievement of ABU students with the average mean (2.9) and Mothers' bereavement also negatively influence the Academic Achievement of ABU Zaria Students (3.13) Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were raised: Ahmadu Bello University should strengthen the counseling and human development center to be more equipped and accessible to all undergraduate students, 2 Awareness campaigns on bereavement and mental health and Psychological supports should be organized periodically by the Department and the Counselling Center for the students who lost their parents.*

Keywords: Influence, Parental Bereavement, Academic Achievement, Undergraduate Students.

Introduction

Death is a natural and unavoidable process that all living creatures will experience at some point in life, whether it is their own death or the death of a close friend or family member. Along with the experience of death comes the process of grieving, dealing and coping with the loss of a loved one especially the parents. The death of a parent is sometimes referred to as parental loss or bereavement. Normally, children are likely to live with two parents while few children have a parent which could be due to parental death of one of the other parents. Nigeria's culture of close-family ties and collectivism has been salient characteristics in the country and the void of a family member, especially a parent, may create not only an internal turmoil but also a developmental hazard to a child's well-being. This has been a concern since the minority of children conflicted with having only one parent affects their emotional, personal, and social lives. Cerel, Fristad, Verducci, Weller, & Weller (2006) discovered that the risk of depression is three times higher in bereaved children than in non-bereaved children. Bereavement of a parent as a kid has also been linked to an increased incidence of depression in adulthood (Kendler, 2002). As a result, bereaved teenagers have greater levels of despair, more health issues, statistically significant indicators of inferior academic performance, anxiety and dread, lower self-esteem, a larger external locus of control, and less hope for future achievement (Schuurman, 2003). This initiates a period of substantial change and redirection in the way children view themselves, their relationship with others, and their perception of their place in the world.

The loss of a parent can have a substantial detrimental influence on a child's personality development. For example, children's self-esteem has been linked to increased mental health problems in children who have lost a parent (Haine, Ayers, Sandler, Wolchik, and Weyer, 2003; Wolchik, Tein, Sandler and Ayers, 2006). Following the death of a parent, children often suffer negative occurrences that lower their self-esteem, such as the loss of pleasant interactions with significant individuals and/or harsher parenting from a sad remaining parent. Children who have lost a parent may feel more powerless and believe they have less internal control over circumstances than their non-bereaved peers (Worden and Silverman, 1996). Apart from personality concerns, losing a parent has an impact on overall relationships, beginning with the connection with the remaining parent and peers. Following the loss of a parent, some children become closer to the remaining parent, while others' relationships are strained. Peer relationships may shift as well. Many children avoid discussing their sentiments about a parent's death because they don't want to stand out among their classmates, or because they believe other children won't understand. Some kids retreat from social activities, which harm peer relationships.

Parental bereavement refers to the death of one or both parents and specifically pertains to the emotional, psychological, and sometimes financial impact experienced by individuals after such a loss (Balk, 2011). The death of a parent is one of the most life-changing and potentially traumatic events a child can experience. Whether it involves the loss of a mother or father, parental bereavement is a significant life event with potential long-term impacts on a child's well-being (Wolfet, 2007). Students who have lost a parent are at greater risk of experiencing a wide array of adjustment problems compared to their non-bereaved peers. It can trigger emotional distress, mental health challenges, and difficulties in social and academic adjustment (Kaplow, Saunders, Angold, & Costello, 2010). The loss of a parent can disrupt a child's sense of security, lead to feelings of vulnerability, and affect their ability to

form healthy relationships (Cluver and Gardner, 2006). This loss can have long-term psychological and developmental implications, particularly for young adults navigating the transitional phase of university life. The intensity of grief often depends on the nature of the relationship with the deceased parent, the age at which the loss occurred, and the support system available (Stroebe, M. S., Schut, H., and Stroebe, W., 2007). In the university context, parental loss may affect students emotionally and result in significant life changes such as the loss of financial sponsorship, displacement, or increased family responsibilities. The American Psychological Association (2021) describes bereavement as a highly personal yet socially influenced process, highlighting the complexity of its impact on cognitive and emotional functioning.

Parental bereavement is not a uniform experience; its effects are shaped by cultural, socio-economic, and personal factors. In many African societies, including Nigeria, grief is deeply influenced by cultural expectations (Adejumo and Adeoye, 2022). In some communities, public expressions of grief may be discouraged, while in others, ritual mourning is considered essential. These cultural practices can shape how bereaved individuals process their loss. A student raised in a context that discourages open emotional expression may internalize their grief, leading to psychological strain and academic disengagement (Uroko, 2025). Moreover, parental bereavement during young adulthood, a period typically associated with the pursuit of higher education can significantly interfere with developmental tasks. According to Erikson's psychosocial theory, this life stage is characterized by the pursuit of identity and independence (Erikson, 1968). The sudden loss of a parent during this phase may force students to assume adult responsibilities prematurely, including financial burdens and caregiving roles, which can hinder their academic progress and personal development. (Robert, 2016; Stack and Meredith, 2018).

Research indicates that bereaved students often report feelings of isolation, guilt, anger, and helplessness, which, if not addressed, may evolve into more severe mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety disorders (Kaplow, Saunders, Angold, and Costello, 2010). These emotions can interfere with students' concentration, memory retention, and motivation; a key factors that determine academic performance. For example, a student who previously excelled may begin to miss classes, submit assignments late, or lose interest in group activities. This decline is not necessarily due to a lack of intelligence or capability, but rather a reflection of unresolved grief (Robert, 2016).

Academic achievement refers to the extent to which a student, teacher, or institution has accomplished their educational goals. It is often measured through grades, test scores, and the completion of academic benchmarks such as degrees (Steinmayr, Meißner, Weidinger and Wirthwein, 2014). Essentially, it reflects a student's success in mastering academic content and skills (OECD, 2013). Moreover, academic achievement represents performance outcomes that indicate the extent to which a person has accomplished specific goals that were the focus of activities in instructional environments specifically in schools, colleges, and universities (York, Gibson, and Rankin, 2015). School systems mostly define cognitive goals that either apply across multiple subject areas (e.g., critical thinking) or include the acquisition of knowledge and understanding in a specific intellectual domain (e.g., numeracy, literacy, science, history). (Brookhart, 2011). Therefore, academic achievement should be considered a multifaceted construct that comprises different domains of learning. Because the field of

academic achievement is very wide-ranging and covers a broad variety of educational outcomes, the definition of academic achievement depends on the indicators used to measure it (Steinmayr, Meißner, Weidinger and Wirthwein, 2014). Among the many criteria that indicate academic achievement, there are very general indicators such as procedural and declarative knowledge acquired in an educational system; more curriculum-based criteria such as grades or performance on an educational achievement test; and cumulative indicators of academic achievement such as educational degrees and certificates (York, Gibson and Rankin, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

Parental bereavement is a profoundly distressing and life-altering experience, particularly for young adults navigating critical developmental and academic milestones. The university phase is marked by increased academic demands, growing independence, and emotional volatility. When students experience the loss of a parent during this transitional period, it can disrupt their psychological equilibrium, diminish their sense of security, and overwhelm their ability to cope. For many, this loss is not only emotional but also practical, particularly when the deceased parent was a primary caregiver or financial provider. Such grief may manifest in diminished academic motivation, poor concentration, anxiety, depression, and absenteeism, all of which can negatively affect academic performance (Burrell, Lars Mehlum and Ping Qin, 2020). In the Nigerian, grief is often dealt with within the bounds of cultural and religious norms, which may not always permit open expressions of sorrow or emotional vulnerability. This can lead bereaved students to suppress their feelings or internalize their struggles, further exacerbating their emotional and academic challenges. At Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria; one of Nigeria's largest and most diverse institutions, numerous students silently navigate their grief without structured support. Yet, there is a noticeable gap in institutional interventions tailored toward students coping with parental loss. While academic achievement is routinely monitored through assessments and exams, the emotional underpinnings that might explain sudden declines in student outcomes often go unnoticed or unaddressed (Ogunsola, Ajayi, and Ogunleye, 2021).

This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by investigating the influence of parental bereavement on the academic achievement of undergraduate students at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Specifically, it aims to determine the extent to which the loss of a father or mother affects students' academic engagement and achievement. By doing so, it aims to contribute meaningful knowledge that can guide educational counselors, university administrators, and policymakers in providing targeted and compassionate support to bereaved students.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the influence of Fathers' Bereavement on Academic Achievement among undergraduate students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.
2. To examine the influence of mothers' bereavement on academic achievement among undergraduate students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Research Questions

1. What is the influence of Father's bereavement on the Academic Achievement of undergraduate students at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria?
2. What is the influence of mother's bereavement on the Academic Achievement of undergraduate students at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria?

Methodology

The study employed a Descriptive Survey Research Design. Descriptive research is a type of quantitative research that aims to accurately and systematically describe a population, situation, or phenomenon. The population of this study comprises all the undergraduate students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. According to the university's portal, there are 18 faculties, 110 departments, and a total of 43,319 undergraduate students. Purposive sampling was used to select students who have experienced parental bereavement (i.e., lost one or both parents before or during their time at the university). This ensures that the sample includes individuals directly affected by the phenomenon under investigation. This research targets a specified population of students; therefore, the purposive sampling technique was employed. The research instrument (questionnaire) was carefully prepared by the researcher and validated by experts in the field of Educational Psychology and Counselling, Department of Guidance and Counselling, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. These experts assessed the face, construct, and content validity of the instrument. Their feedback guided the refinement of the items for clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness. To establish the reliability of the instrument, fifteen copies were administered, and the Cronbach Alpha method was used to analyze the data. The reliability index obtained was 0.83, indicating a high level of internal consistency. After obtaining ethical clearance and permission from the university authorities, the researcher have distributed the questionnaire electronically via Google Forms to ensure wider reach, assure respondents of confidentiality and anonymity to encourage honest responses, and retrieve the completed questionnaires within two weeks for analysis. The data collected in the study was subjected to statistical analysis using descriptive statistics. The analysis was conducted using statistical package for social science (SPSS version 26).

Results

Answering Research Questions

Table 1: Table showing the Father's Bereavement

Item Description	Mean (M)	SD
Emotionally overwhelmed after father's death	3.40	0.70
Decline in academic motivation	3.20	0.80
Difficulty focusing on lectures/assignments	3.30	0.60
Missed deadlines or classes	3.10	0.90
Experienced anxiety or depression	3.40	0.60
Grades declined	3.30	0.70
Social withdrawal from classmates	3.00	0.80
Received academic accommodations	2.10	0.90
Continued studies as coping	2.80	0.80
Felt unsupported by university	3.00	0.90

Change in sleep/eating habits	3.20	0.70
Considered taking time off	3.00	0.80
Felt guilt or regret	3.10	0.80
Found academic work meaningless	2.90	0.90
Academic identity changed	3.20	0.70
Average	2.9	0.77

The results in Table 4.5 suggest that students who experienced the death of their father reported high emotional and academic disruption. The highest mean scores were recorded on: Feeling emotionally overwhelmed (M = 3.40), Anxiety or depression (M = 3.40), Difficulty concentrating (M = 3.30), and Decline in grades (M = 3.30). These indicate that paternal loss had a **noticeable negative influence** on students' cognitive and emotional stability, with academic decline being a direct outcome. Conversely, the lowest mean was recorded for access to academic accommodations (M = 2.10), showing that **institutional support may be lacking** for grieving students.

Table 2: Table showing the Mother's Bereavement

Item Description	Mean (M)	SD
Emotionally overwhelmed after mother's death	3.50	0.60
Decline in academic motivation	3.40	0.70
Difficulty concentrating	3.20	0.70
Missed academic responsibilities	3.10	0.80
Anxiety or depression	3.40	0.60
Grades negatively affected	3.30	0.60
Felt isolated from classmates	3.10	0.80
Accessed academic/counseling support	2.30	0.90
Felt unsupported by institution	3.00	0.80
Physical health declined	3.20	0.70
Considered academic leave	3.10	0.80
Unresolved emotional pain	3.30	0.70
Lost interest in academic achievement	3.00	0.80
Student identity impacted	3.20	0.70
Continued studies helped cope	2.90	0.80
Average	3.13	0.73

The highest mean value in Table 4.6 was for emotional overwhelm after mother's death (M = 3.50), indicating **intense grief reactions**. Similar to father bereavement, other prominent effects included: Anxiety/depression (M = 3.40), Decline in academic motivation (M = 3.40), Negative impact on grades (M = 3.30), and Unresolved emotional pain (M = 3.30). Again, a relatively low mean was recorded for access to academic/counseling support (M = 2.30), reinforcing the **gap in institutional support structures**. Many students also considered taking academic leave (M = 3.10), suggesting the **potential long-term academic consequences** of unresolved maternal grief.

Discussion

Analysis concerning the first finding revealed that, the death of a father exerts a **significant emotional and academic toll** on students. This finding aligns with research from Haine et al. (2003), which indicates that paternal loss, especially in socio-economically vulnerable contexts like Nigeria, disrupts both emotional development and academic stability. Given that many Nigerian fathers are primary breadwinners, the loss likely results in **financial strain**, increased responsibilities, and psychological destabilization, all of which threaten academic progress. The results affirm the hypothesis that father's bereavement influences academic achievement. Students affected by paternal loss experience multiple dimensions of educational disruption.

The second finding of this study highlights several maternal loss-related effects on Academic functioning. This finding is consistent with Wolfelt (2007), who observed that maternal loss leads to **emotional suppression**, especially in societies where grieving norms are rigid or stigmatized. Mother's bereavement has a measurable negative effect on student achievement, particularly in emotional domains such as motivation and cognitive engagement. Students affected by maternal loss are likely to exhibit **behavioral disengagement and academic withdrawal**, justifying targeted emotional support programs.

Conclusion

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that parental bereavement significantly influences the academic achievement of undergraduate students at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The loss of a father or mother disrupts students' emotional and psychological stability, which in turn affects their ability to concentrate, stay motivated, and meet academic demands. The emotional toll of grief, combined with possible financial hardships and shifting family responsibilities, places bereaved students at a disadvantage compared to their non-bereaved peers. In conclusion, parental bereavement is not just a personal or emotional issue, it is an academic and institutional concern that requires the attention of educational authorities, counselors, and policymakers to ensure that affected students are given the necessary tools to cope and succeed.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to improve academic outcomes and emotional well-being for bereaved undergraduate students:

1. **Establish University Grief Support Policies:** Ahmadu Bello University should implement formal policies for responding to student bereavement. This could include provisions such as academic flexibility, compassionate leave, deadline extensions, and temporary academic accommodations for grieving students.
2. **Strengthen the Counseling and Human Development Unit:** The university's existing counseling center should be expanded and adequately staffed with trained grief counselors. Specialized support services, such as grief therapy, trauma counseling, and support groups for bereaved students, should be introduced to meet their unique psychological and emotional needs.
3. **Early Identification and Referral System:** Lecturers, academic advisors, and hall wardens should be trained to identify signs of grief-related distress among students and refer them promptly to appropriate support services. Confidentiality should be ensured to protect the dignity and privacy of grieving students.

4. **Awareness Campaigns on Bereavement and Mental Health:** Regular workshops, seminars, and campaigns should be conducted to raise awareness about grief, mental health, and emotional resilience. These initiatives will help reduce stigma and encourage students to seek help when needed.

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