

Exploring the Impact of Absent Fathers on Children: Lived Experiences of Students in Two Secondary Schools in the Leri be District, Lesotho

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ABSTRACT

The absence of a father in the family is becoming a serious issue in many countries, often affecting students' social, emotional, and academic development. This study uses Attachment Theory to explore the experiences of students in two secondary schools in the Leri be district, focusing on how father absence impacts their psychological, emotional, and economic well-being. Using a qualitative approach, the research involved interviews with ten students, gathering their thoughts and experiences about living without a father. The study found that father absence is linked to lower self-esteem. Students reported feelings of abandonment and emotional instability, but many developed coping strategies by seeking support from other sources. Socially, these students are more at risk of engaging in delinquent behaviours, with girls particularly struggling with unhealthy relationships and risky sexual activities. Economically, not having a father increases financial difficulties, leading to poverty and limited access to educational resources. Despite these challenges, many students show resilience by finding support in romantic relationships, hobbies, friendships, and community activities. These findings help us understand the important role fathers play in children's development and highlight how students can adapt to their situations. They also emphasise the need for targeted support in schools and communities to help students facing the challenges of growing up without a father.

Keywords: Absent fathers, Lived experiences, Academic performance, Emotional well-being, social development

INTRODUCTION

A family is often regarded as the foundational institution in any society, playing a critical role in the upbringing and socialisation of children (Ashari, 2018). Within the family structure, the presence and involvement of both parents have traditionally been emphasised as pivotal for the holistic development of children. However, in many societies, including the Leribe district of Lesotho, the phenomenon of father absenteeism is increasingly prevalent, presenting significant challenges to the traditional family dynamic (Van der Gaag et al., 2019). Moreover, research has proven that there is an increasing number of children growing up without the physical or emotional presence of their fathers, leading to adverse outcomes such as school dropout, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and even incarceration (Ramatsetse & Ross, 2023). The absence of a father—whether due to family breakdown, divorce, or parental conflict—can fundamentally alter family dynamics, relationships, and economic stability, forcing children to adapt to challenging circumstances Kalmijn (2017). These disruptions often result in diminished family roles, strained relationships, and financial hardships, all of which compound the emotional and psychological burden on children.

Studies across the globe concur that the absence of a father is associated with cognitive, physiological, and socio-emotional challenges for children as Ashari (2018) highlighted that while children may not always be disadvantaged solely by their father's absence, they are significantly impacted when households lack the social status, labour and financial support typically provided by men. In the United States, Markowitz & Ryan (2016) indicate that there is a strong correlation between father absence and negative outcomes, with approximately one-half of children in the U.S. experiencing father absence before reaching age 18 and this leads to socio-

emotional challenges. Similarly, a study involving 4,274 Chinese middle school students found that positive relationships have a greater impact on students' interest, self-esteem, and well-being than negative relationships (Liu et al., 2022). In contrast, negative social relationships had a stronger effect on academic performance. The influence of teacher relationships on motivation and achievement was greater than that of relationships with peers. However, for students who do not have a father present, friendships are particularly important in helping them develop self-esteem, which can lead to better academic success. Kesebonye and Amone-Polak (2020) also studied University students in Botswana and results show that having a father figure during childhood are associated with better emotional well-being.

In Lesotho, studies related to this phenomenon are related to parent involvement in their children's studies (Teba-Teba, 2016) as well as impacts of labour migration, as many men leave their families to seek employment opportunities in neighbouring South Africa or urban centres. It is anticipated therefore that the Leribe district, like other regions, faces challenges related to family breakdowns, socio-economic disparities, and the shifting dynamics of parental roles, necessitating a localised exploration of how students navigate these complexities. While economic remittances from absent fathers may address material needs, the lack of emotional and social support from these fathers can have far-reaching consequences on children development (Ashari, 2018).

Research suggests that the absence of a father figure can influence various aspects of a child's life, including emotional well-being, academic performance, social behaviour, and identity formation (Kesebonye & Amone-Polak, 2020). For instance, Teba -Teba and Thabane (2021) infer that children without active paternal involvement may experience feelings of abandonment, low self-esteem, or a lack of guidance during critical developmental stages. These challenges are often compounded by societal stigma and peer comparisons, further affecting the psychological resilience of such children. Despite the growing body of international literature on father absenteeism, there remains a paucity of research specific to Lesotho and the Leribe district in particular. Understanding the lived experiences of students in this unique cultural and socioeconomic context is therefore essential to provide insights into the localised impacts of this issue.

This study therefore aims to explore the lived experiences of students in two secondary schools in the Leribe district, focusing on how father absence impacts their psychological, emotional, and socio-economic well-being. By examining both the negative and potential positive effects, the research seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the subject and provide insights for targeted interventions that can support affected children in Lesotho.

Research questions

1. What are the psychological and emotional impacts of father absence on students' mental health, self-esteem, and overall well-being?
2. What coping strategies do students use to manage the challenges associated with growing up without a biological father?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The study employs Attachment Theory, developed by John Bowlby, which underscores the essential role that early relationships play in a child's emotional, social, and psychological development. According to Holmes (2014), a child's bond with a caregiver serves as a "secure base" from which they can explore the world, promoting resilience, self-esteem, and social competence (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2004). When this bond is disrupted or absent, such as in cases of father absence, children may experience emotional insecurity, anxiety, and challenges in forming and maintaining relationships (Fredricks et al., 2016). Such disruptions can significantly affect their academic performance, emotional well-being, and social development (Renk & Phares, 2007).

Attachment Theory provides a crucial framework for understanding how the absence of a father figure influences students' lived experiences. It helps elucidate how the lack of essential attachment can contribute to increased

anxiety and reduced confidence in navigating social and academic challenges. This theoretical framework was instrumental in interpreting themes related to insecurity, emotional resilience, and interpersonal difficulties. In analysing the findings, Attachment Theory was utilized to contextualize observed behaviours and draw meaningful conclusions regarding the impact of father absence on students' development.

Overview of father absence

A father's absence can take many forms, including emotional, financial, or physical absence. Physical absence occurs when a father is not present due to divorce, moving away, death, or desertion (Zafar, 2023). Economic absence means that a father is not providing financial support, while emotional absence happens when a father is physically there but not emotionally connected (East et al., 2018; Madhavan et al., 2008). The effects of father absence can be serious, leading to anxiety, emotional instability, and difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships (Luo et al., 2011; Lawson et al., 2016). According to Dearden et al. (2011), these issues can manifest as problems with friends, behavioural challenges, or poor academic performance.

Additionally, the timing of a father's absence can affect how a child adjusts. Younger children often struggle more with the emotional and psychological impacts of their father's absence because they may not fully understand the situation (Culpin et al., 2013). In contrast, older children may have more resources and skills to cope with family challenges (Reuven-Krispin et al., 2020). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for the current study, as it highlights the need for targeted support and interventions that address the specific challenges faced by children at different developmental stages.

Emotional and psychological consequences

Perceived abandonment

Children growing up without a father often struggle with feelings of abandonment and low self-worth. The emotional burden of a father's absence can lead to anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts (Liu et al., 2021). Many children report feeling unloved or unwanted, which can result in behavioural issues or social withdrawal (Flouri et al., 2015). This absence creates a significant void, fostering a sense of loss and beliefs that they are unworthy of love (Laurent et al., 2008). These feelings can have a severe impact on emotional and psychological development. Children from father-absent homes frequently experience low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy, and challenges in forming healthy relationships (Kalmijn, 2017). The lack of a secure attachment can hinder their ability to trust others and navigate social interactions effectively (Laurent et al., 2008; Flouri et al., 2015).

Moreover, the timing of a father's absence plays a crucial role in its effects. Younger children, who may lack the understanding to cope with their father's absence, are particularly vulnerable (Luo et al., 2011). In contrast, older children might have more resources and skills to adapt to the situation, although the impact can still be significant (Reuven-Krispin et al., 2020). These insights are vital for the current study, as they underscore the importance of addressing the emotional and psychological needs of children at different developmental stages. This study aims to inform interventions that promote healthier emotional development and support systems for affected youth.

Mental health issues

Father absence has serious psychological effects, particularly for children from fatherless households, who are at a greater risk for mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Fu et al., 2017). Additionally, these children are more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviour and struggle in social situations (Liu et al., 2023). The absence of a father figure can hinder a child's ability to form stable attachments, impacting their relationships well into adulthood (Xiang & Zhou, 2023). Research indicates that children from fatherless homes often experience feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem, making it difficult for them to engage socially (Fu et al., 2017). These psychological and emotional challenges can manifest as behavioural problems, social withdrawal, or even suicidal thoughts.

Moreover, the timing of a father's absence significantly influences the severity of these mental health effects. Younger children may be especially vulnerable to the negative impacts of father absence, as they often lack the cognitive capacity to fully understand and cope with the loss of a parent. In contrast, older children may have more opportunities and personal resources to adjust to family disruptions, although the impact can still be considerable (Culpin et al., 2013). In the context of secondary school students in Leribe, Lesotho, these insights highlight the critical need for support systems that address the unique challenges faced by adolescents dealing with father absence.

Academic challenges

Poor academic performance

Studies have consistently shown that children without involved fathers tend to perform poorly academically. They are more likely to drop out of school and less likely to pursue higher education (Madhavan et al., 2008; Renk & Phares, 2007). Furthermore, several studies have identified parental involvement and support as crucial factors in reducing student absenteeism and enhancing academic performance (Gubbels et al., 2019; Islam & Shapla, 2021; Robinson et al., 2018). Research indicates that father absence is linked to lower academic achievement, as children without active paternal involvement often lack the emotional and financial support necessary for educational success. For instance, Guay et al. (2021) found that fathers play a vital role in fostering self-determined motivation in their children. This suggests that the absence of a father figure can significantly hinder a child's educational outcomes, ultimately impacting their future opportunities and life trajectory. In the context of secondary school students in Leribe, Lesotho, these findings underscore the importance of addressing the academic challenges faced by youth from father-absent homes. Understanding the role of paternal involvement can inform strategies to enhance educational support and engagement, ultimately helping to improve academic performance and broaden future prospects for these students.

Social implications

Increased risk of delinquency

The absence of fathers is associated with higher rates of delinquency among youth. Many students report succumbing to peer pressure and engaging in risky behaviours as coping mechanisms for the emotional struggles stemming from father absence (Nura marina, 2023). This trend is supported by national statistics showing that a significant percentage of youth offenders come from father-absent households. Research indicates that children without involved fathers are more likely to engage in delinquent behaviour, as the lack of paternal guidance and supervision increases their vulnerability to negative peer influences (Ellis et al., 2003). For example, studies have found that youth from father-absent homes face a greater risk of developing behavioural issues, which can manifest as delinquency, substance abuse, and criminal activity (Liu et al., 2023). These findings highlight the urgent need for interventions that address the behavioural challenges faced by youth from fatherless homes in Lesotho.

Relationship difficulties

Students from fatherless homes often encounter difficulties in forming healthy relationships. Girls, in particular, may seek validation from male peers due to unresolved feelings related to their fathers' absence, which can lead to unhealthy relationship dynamics. This pattern can create cycles of instability and emotional distress throughout their lives. Research has shown that father absence significantly impacts daughters' self-esteem and their ability to form secure attachments, often resulting in a reliance on peer relationships for emotional support (DaViera & Roy, 2020). As a consequence, these dynamics can increase the likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behaviours and experiencing relationship difficulties, further complicating their emotional and psychological well-being (Roy et al., 2021). Ultimately, the absence of a father figure creates a void that affects not only academic performance and delinquency but also the overall emotional health of children. This underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to support these vulnerable youth. This highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions that provide support to these vulnerable youth, helping them navigate their challenges and develop healthier relationships.

Economic consequences

Poverty and economic hardship

Children from father-absent households are disproportionately impacted by poverty and economic hardship (Yucel & Yazarbas, 2023). The absence of a father figure, who typically provides financial support, guidance, and stability, leaves these children vulnerable and struggling with the harsh realities of life without paternal presence (Osinga et al., 2021). This financial instability can significantly limit their access to educational resources and extracurricular activities that are essential for personal development (Kalmijn, 2017).

Many students report needing to work part-time jobs to support their families, which further detracts from their academic pursuits (Osinga et al., 2021). Additionally, the lack of a father's involvement and financial contribution can exacerbate maternal stress and depression, leading to harsher parenting practices that compound the challenges these children face (Jackson et al., 2019). This cycle of poverty and emotional distress can have far-reaching consequences, increasing the risk of substance abuse, behavioural problems, and poor academic performance (Langley, 2015). In the context of secondary school students in Leribe, Lesotho, these dynamics illustrate how father absence not only affects emotional and psychological well-being but also has significant implications for educational outcomes and future opportunities.

Interventions and support mechanisms

Interventions and support mechanisms

Community and school-based programs play a crucial role in supporting children with absent fathers. These initiatives can offer mentorship, academic assistance, and emotional support, helping to mitigate the negative effects of father absence. By engaging local organizations and schools, such programs foster a sense of belonging and community, promoting resilience and academic engagement (Baker & Mutchler, 2010). For example, after-school programs that emphasize skill development and emotional well-being empower students to overcome the challenges associated with father absence and poverty.

The role of alternative caregivers, such as mothers, grandparents, and mentors, is also essential in supporting children from fatherless homes. Research indicates that strong relationships with these caregivers can provide the emotional and financial stability necessary for children to thrive (Nyakutsikwa et al., 2020). Grandparents, in particular, can offer additional support and resources, contributing to a more stable living environment. Moreover, mentors can provide guidance and encouragement, helping children set and achieve educational goals. By nurturing these supportive relationships, communities can assist children in navigating their circumstances and promote healthier development. By nurturing these connections, communities can promote healthier development and improve educational outcomes for youth affected by father absence.

Policy implications

Addressing father absence and its effects requires comprehensive policy interventions that prioritize family stability and economic support. Policies aimed at strengthening family structures such as promoting responsible fatherhood programs and providing resources for single-parent households can help mitigate the negative impacts of father absence (Lee & Schoppe Sullivan, 2017; Parolin, 2019). In addition, increasing access to educational resources and support services for children in father-absent homes can enhance their academic performance and overall well-being. Policymakers must acknowledge the crucial role of family dynamics in shaping children's futures and implement strategies that support both fathers and families. By fostering healthier environments for children, these efforts can lead to positive long-term outcomes in Lesotho.

METHODOLOGY

Context of the study

The absence of a father figure in the family is becoming an increasingly serious problem in many nations as it

frequently affects students' social, emotional, and academic growth. Similar to many other nations, families in Lesotho struggle with absent fathers as a result of labour migration, family dissolution, or socioeconomic constraints.

According to research, children who experience a father's absence may be particularly susceptible to low self-esteem, social adjustment issues, and emotions of abandonment, all of which may have effect on their behaviour and academic performance. Using two Leribe secondary schools as our examples, there is little study on the impact of absent fathers on the lived experiences of secondary school students in Lesotho, despite the importance of this issue. The purpose of this study is to investigate how absent fathers affect students' lives, with a particular emphasis on their emotional well-being, social relationships, and academic performance in the selected schools.

Research design

Using a case study research approach, this study aims to investigate and record the lived experiences of high school students raised without biological fathers. Specifically, it seeks to offer insights into how father absence affects their social interactions, education, and development. To begin with, Nieuwenhuis (2011) describes case study research design as a qualitative approach that emphasizes a thorough examination of a specific instance, event, or situation within its actual environment. This emphasis on context is crucial, as it allows researchers to delve deeply into individual experiences. Furthermore, Ridder (2017) notes that the case study approach enables the collection of detailed, contextualized information, which can illuminate the dynamics of the case under investigation. Consequently, this study will analyse students' experiences at two secondary schools in the Leribe district. By examining these separate cases, the research offers a comparative perspective, thereby enhancing our understanding of how contextual factors may influence the impact of absent fathers on students.

Data collection methods

The study utilized focus group discussions (FGDs) to collect information from participants. Specifically, the data collection occurred between November 20 and December 20, 2024. FGDs are a qualitative research method that involves guided conversations among a small group of participants, typically ranging from six to twelve individuals who share common characteristics or experiences relevant to a specific research topic. This methodology is particularly effective for exploring participants' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions. It allows researchers to gather rich, contextualized data through dynamic interactions (Akyıldız, 2020; Rizona et al., 2022). Moreover, FGDs provide a platform for participants to share their personal stories and experiences of growing up without a biological father. Importantly, for sensitive topics like father absence, FGDs can create a supportive environment where participants feel less isolated in their experiences. This supportive atmosphere encourages open dialogue, enabling participants to express their feelings and thoughts more freely, which can lead to deeper insights into the impact of father absence on their lives.

Sampling

Site sampling

Convenience sampling was used in the study to choose the research sites. In particular, this approach entails selecting locations according to their suitability for the study's goals and ease of access (Cohen et al., 2007). Two secondary schools in the Leribe district were chosen to serve as the research sites in this instance. Accessibility to the researchers, logistical viability, and the schools' pertinence to the study's emphasis on students without biological fathers were among the selection factors. This strategy made sure the locations were appropriate for efficiently reaching the target audience. Notably, schools identified students who fulfilled the inclusion requirement of having been raised for at least 1 year without a biological father by the help of principals or teachers.

Furthermore, school A, located in an urban area, is a government secondary school with a larger and more socioeconomically diverse student population. In contrast, School B is a rural mission school with a smaller student body, primarily serving students from low-income families. The two schools were intentionally selected to represent diverse contexts within the Leribe district. The intentional selection of schools from different regions

and proprietorship intents to achieve maximum variation, as emphasised by Mokotso (2017), which allowed for a comparative exploration of the issue, providing valuable understanding into how different environments and support structures may influence the experiences of students affected by father absence.

Participants

In this study, the researchers employed purposeful sampling. In qualitative research, purposeful sampling, sometimes referred to as purposive sampling, is a sample approach that chooses participants according to particular features or qualities pertinent to the study problem (Creswell & Clark, 2023). According to Mokhets'engoane et al. (2024), this approach works especially well when researchers seek to get exhaustive data from a specific group of people who have experience or expertise related to the goals of the study. Purposive sampling was utilised in this study to choose a total of 10 secondary school students (5 students from each school) who, according to the principal or teachers, had been raised without a biological father for at least a year. The following table 1 shows the participant's biography:

Table 1 Participants biography

School	Participant	Age	Gender	Grade	Father's absence duration	Primary caregiver	Socioeconomic status
A	1	16	Male	10	6 years	Motherland grandmother	Middle-income
A	2	15	Female	10	5 years	Maternal aunt	Low-income
A	3	17	Female	11	Entire life	Single	Middle-income
A	4	16	Male	11	8 years	Stepfather	Low-income
A	5	15	Female	10	5 years	Grandmother	Low-income
B	6	16	Female	10	6 years	Single mother	Low-income
B	7	17	Male	11	5years	Elder sister	Low-income
B	8	15	Male	10	7 years	Grandfather	Low-income
B	9	16	Female	11	8 years	Maternal aunt	Low-income
B	10	15	Male	10	Entire lifetime	Grandmother	Low-income

Sample size

Five students from each school, for a total of 10 participants, were chosen for the sample size. This minimum number's justification is in accordance with the data saturation concept. Data saturation, according to Malterud et al. (2016), guarantees that participants have used up all of the information in the data until no new information or themes are revealed, proving that the sample size is sufficient to effectively address the study issue.

Data analysis

Thematic data analysis was employed in this study. There is a structured six-phase approach to thematic analysis. Thematic data analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), is a structured six-phase method for assessing qualitative data. These stages usually entail getting acquainted with the data, creating preliminary codes, looking for themes, evaluating and characterising those themes, and then creating an extensive report based on the themes found. By classifying and identifying important themes pertaining to the psychological and emotional effects of father absence and the coping strategies employed by the students, the researchers employed thematic analysis

to examine the data. One essential element of the data analysis was the inclusion of verbatim quotations. The use of verbatim assisted the researchers to gain a comprehensive and in-depth explanation of the data while also gaining an in-depth knowledge of the context and significance of participants' comments. Above all, the use of verbatim, aligns with Kurata' (2024) recommendation that verbatim usage enhances the reliability and rigor of the research.

Ethical considerations

The current study is dedicated to adhering to the ethical standards in its investigation. By ensuring that students and their guardians are fully informed about the study's objective, the nature of their involvement, and their freedom to withdraw at any moment, researchers were able to get informed consent. Additionally, by anonymising data and safely archiving the transcripts, the researchers protected participant names and maintained confidentiality. In order to maintain sensitivity, they also approached the focus groups with compassion and empathy, acknowledging the possible emotional burden of talking about personal experiences. We made arrangements in advance for counsellor referrals in case they became necessary.

RESULTS

Research question one: What are the psychological and emotional impacts of father absence on students' mental health, self-esteem, and overall well-being?

An extensive examination of the psychological and emotional effects of parental absence on students' mental health, self-esteem, and general well-being is given by this qualitative analysis. Emotional well-being, confidence and self-worth, and mental health issues were the three main themes that emerged from the generated replies using inductive analysis. Students from School A and School B are the two separate categories in which the results are given.

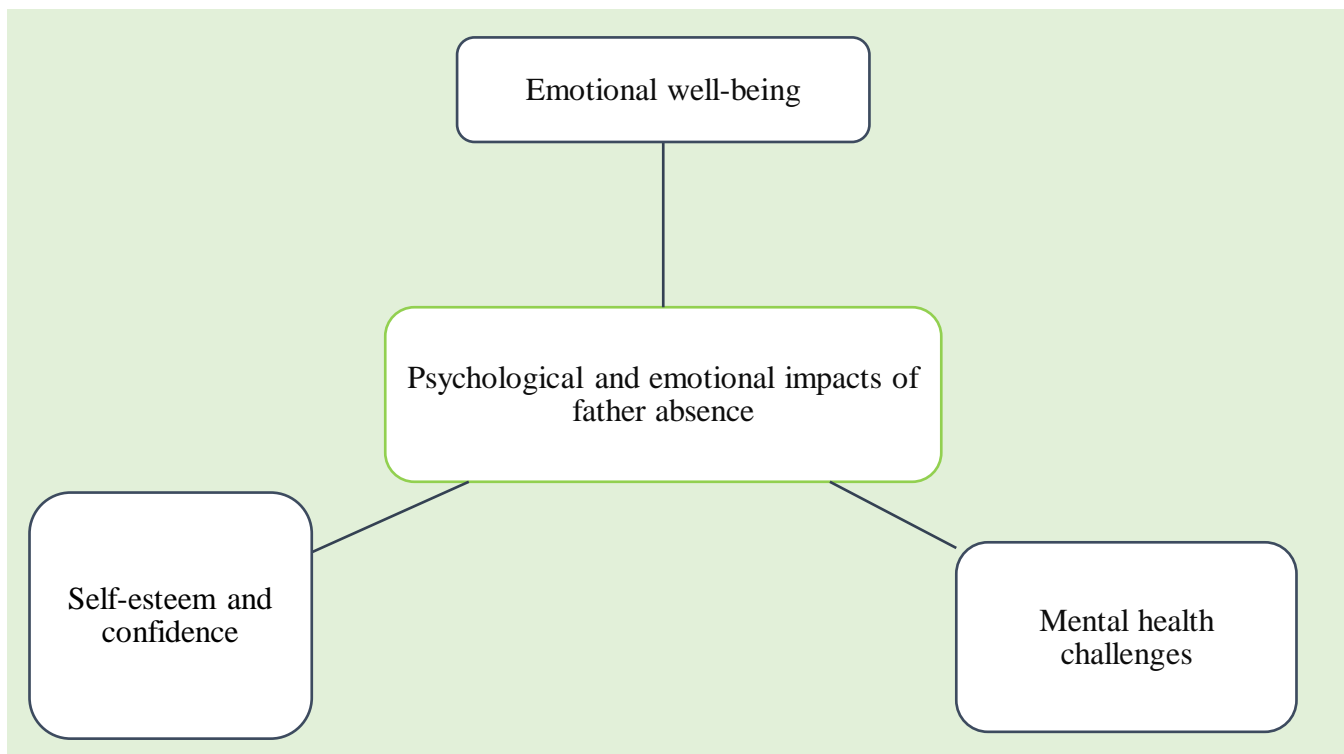


Figure 1 Key themes for impacts of father absence

Emotional well-being

Participants from School A described a persistent sense of longing and sadness. One participant remarked:

“I feel incomplete when my father is not around.”

Another participant noted that these emotions often intensified during significant events, such as birthdays or school functions:

"I feel like someone who is left out when classmates are at school events with their fathers. It gives me an upsetting reminder of what my life is lacking."

Students in School B expressed similar feelings but emphasized socio-economic challenges linked to father absence. One participant shared:

"It is difficult to describe, but I feel both sad and angry. If my father were here to provide for us, my life would be very different."

Another participant added:

"I sometimes feel hopeless because can't help but wonder if things would have been easier with my dad around."

The researcher also probed how participants reacted when other children talked about their fathers. The responses varied between feelings of sadness, anger, and indifference, with some differences observed between the two schools. Participants from School A reported feeling deeply saddened when hearing others talk about their fathers. One student shared:

"When my friends talk about how their fathers spent time with them or taught them things, it hurts. I wish I had those experiences too."

In School B, participants echoed similar sentiments but also expressed how these moments reinforced their sense of loss. One participant commented:

"When people casually bring up their fathers, it makes my heart twitch like a knife. I feel like leaving the conversation because of that."

However, another participant from school B expressed:

"I just feeling normal because I never got the chance to know my father."

The second theme examined how father absence influenced participants' self-esteem and confidence. Some reported engaging in self-destructive behaviours as coping mechanisms, including binge eating, substance use, self-harm, and impulsive actions.

Participants from school A described using food and alcohol to numb emotional pain:

"I find myself overeating. It helps me fill what's missing inside of me."

Another participant admitted to experimenting with alcohol as a coping mechanism:

"I sometimes feel like starting drinking to forget the pain, even if it's just for a little while."

Others reported no risky behaviours or self-harm:

"My mother took care of us even before my father died. I therefore don't experience that agony."

One male student commented:

"I cannot spend all of my pocket money on smoking or gambling right now to prove something to myself or to fill what's missing because I did not have a father when I was growing up."

Participants from school B linked self-destructive behaviours to socio-economic pressures:

“I eat a lot when I am stressed or thinking about my dad not being around.”

Another participant from school B highlighted a risk-taking behaviour:

“I sometime steal. I think if my father was there, he could not have tolerated this.”

Father absence shaped participants' expectations in romantic relationships, particularly regarding financial stability and emotional support. Participants from school A prioritized financial stability:

“I have witnessed the hardships of life without a father's support, so I want a partner who can support me financially.”

Students in School B expressed similar sentiments but also emphasized emotional stability due to the challenges they faced. One participant remarked:

“I look for someone who is emotionally available and caring because I didn't have that from my dad.”

Mental health challenges linked to father absence

Participants' answers to the researcher's questions indicated serious mental health issues, such as panic attacks, depression, anxiety, and suicide thoughts. The results, which include observations from both groups (School A and School B), are shown below. Both groups' participants reported having panic attacks, which they connected to feelings of uncertainty and extreme stress brought on by their father's absence. When reminded of their father's absence, participants from School A reported experiencing quick episodes of panic and physical discomfort. A school A participant reported experiencing panic attacks:

“My chest aches and I sometimes feel like I can't breathe when I hear other kids talk about their dads.”

Participants often tied their depression to feelings of abandonment and loneliness. One student remarked:

“It is hard to feel happy when I know my dad is not there for me.”

Anxiety emerged as a common issue, with participants reporting excessive worry about their future, relationships, and social interactions. Participants expressed anxiety about academic performance and their ability to succeed without a father's guidance. One student from school A commented:

“I always worry about whether I'll be able to achieve my goals without a father to guide me.”

Students in School B also reported panic attacks but often linked them to uncertainty about their future. A male participant noted:

“When I think about not having a father to guide me, I get this fear that I won't succeed in life.”

Another participant from school B identified depression tied to economic struggles:

“Knowing my family struggles financially because my dad is not around makes me feel bad.”

The results demonstrate how parental absence has a substantial psychological and emotional impact on students, as evidenced by their continued melancholy, sense of isolation, low self-esteem, and self-destructive behaviour. Along with changing their expectations for partnerships to emphasise emotional and financial stability, students also reported mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and suicide thoughts. These findings highlight the urgent need for focused school-based mental health and emotional support programs to address the multifaceted issues experienced by children whose fathers are absent.

Research question 2: What coping strategies do students use to manage the challenges associated with growing up without a biological father?

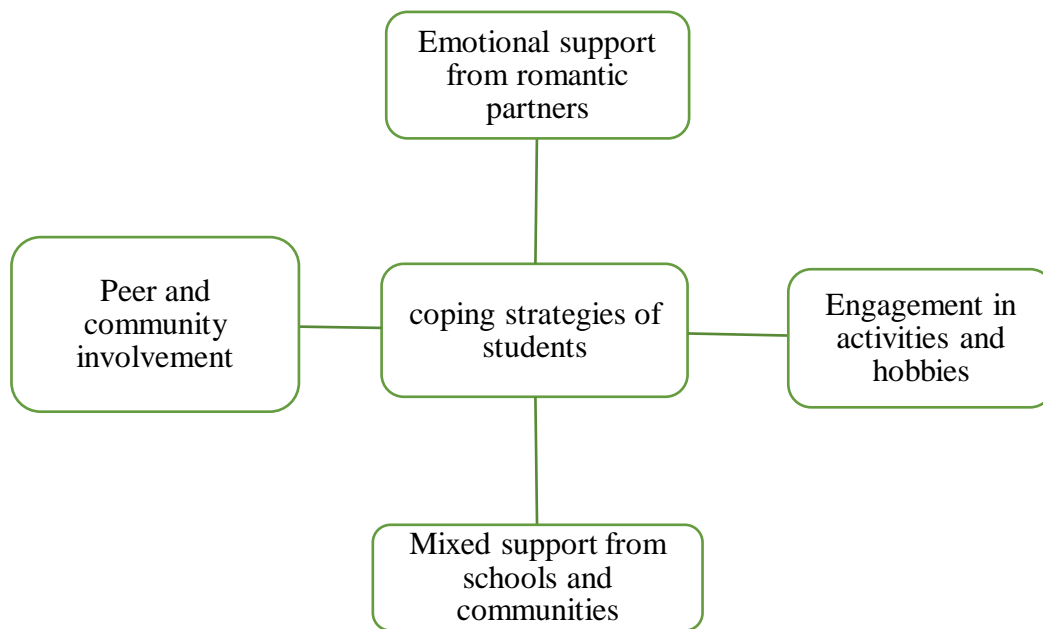


Fig 2 key themes for coping strategies

Participants were asked, "What relationships or support networks have helped you deal with your father's absence?" by the researcher. In order to deal with the difficulties of growing up without a biological father, many students turn to their spouses as a major source of emotional support, according to the responses. Below is a thorough summary of the findings.

Emotional Support from Romantic Partners

One of the most important coping strategies for participants was found to be romantic connections. In many respects, partners offered consolation, support, and emotional stability. Numerous participants mentioned how their friends served as safe havens, providing understanding and nonjudgmental support. Participants from School A observed:

"Having someone who listens to me and understands what I'm going through makes all the difference."

A female participant from School B explained:

"When I'm upset, just having him hold my hand or hug me makes me feel better."

Engagement in activities and hobbies

Numerous participants stated that physical activities, like sports or exercise, assisted them in coping with mental difficulties and stress. Exercise and sports were commonly cited as ways to manage stress and preserve emotional health. Self-expression and emotional escape were frequently achieved through writing, drawing, and music. One of the students from School A stated,

"I write poetry whenever I feel sad. It helps me express my feelings without having to talk to anyone."

Another from School B added,

"When I'm feeling down, I play music since it helps me process my emotions."

Participants described creative hobbies, such as writing, drawing, or playing music, as meaningful practices that provided emotional relief. A participant from School B stated:

“I pray every night. It’s the one time I feel connected to God.”

Peer and Community Involvement

Both groups emphasised how crucial it is to interact with peers or neighbourhood organisations in order to combat feelings of isolation and loneliness. Clubs such as study groups and discussion clubs gave participants the chance to gain confidence and divert their attention. One of the participants from School A stated,

“Being part of the debate club has taught me to be confident and focus on my strengths.”

Church youth groups and community events were described as safe spaces for emotional connection. A participant from School B shared,

“At church, I feel like I’m part of a family.”

Relatives such as grandparents were key sources of support. One participant noted,

“My grandmother is my rock. She’s always there to encourage me and make me feel like I can achieve anything.”

Mixed support from schools and communities

Participants reported varying degrees of community and school support. Some participants valued attentive teachers, motivational speakers, and guidance counsellors. One of the participants from School A observed:

“Our guidance teachers are very understanding. They make inclusive classrooms.”

However, others highlighted a lack of resources and personalized attention. A student from School B expressed:

“My class teacher is not so open.”

Religious institutions were highly valued for providing emotional and spiritual support. A participant from School B shared,

“Our pastor gives us advice about life and how to stay strong. It helps a lot.”

Yet, some participants felt stigmatized or judged by their communities due to their family situation. A participant from School A said,

“People in the community often undermines my family since there is no father. It makes me feel like, they judge single-parent families.”

The results demonstrate a wide variety of coping mechanisms, ranging from seeking assistance from the community and practicing mindfulness to depending on romantic partners and taking up hobbies. Nonetheless, the disparity in community and school support networks points to the necessity of focused efforts to give students reliable, significant assistance. Students dealing with the difficulties of father absence may greatly benefit from the promotion of inclusive community programs, the improvement of school-based resources, and the encouragement of creative and physical outlets.

DISCUSSION

An initial objective of the project was to explore the lived experiences of students in two secondary schools in the Leribe district, focusing on how father absence impacts their psychological, emotional, and socio-economic well-being. The current study indicates that students experiencing father absence reported feelings of abandonment, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Furthermore, the majority of respondents struggled with forming healthy interpersonal relationships and exhibited symptoms of emotional instability, such as withdrawal or aggression. For example, one participant stated, “I feel incomplete when my father is not around.” This study

produced results that corroborate the traits of Attachment Theory. According to Pietromonaco and Barrett (2000), this theory highlights that early bonds with caregivers are crucial for emotional security and social competence. Moreover, this finding resonates with literature showing that the disruption of this bond, as seen in father-absent homes, fosters emotional insecurity and anxiety (Lawson et al., 2016). A possible explanation for this might be that the socio-economic context of father absence in Lesotho further exacerbates these challenges. Although the students rely on alternative caregivers, such as single mothers, grandmothers, or aunts, which may provide a level of stability, these alternatives often lack the emotional or financial resources equivalent to those of a father figure. Consequently, this gap contributes to their struggles with low self-esteem and difficulties in social adjustment, as noted in the literature. There is abundant room for further progress in determining how schools and communities in Lesotho could address the psychological needs of these students by offering counselling and emotional support services.

Another important finding of this study is that father absence negatively affects students' academic performance. Specifically, students reported lower motivation, difficulties concentrating, and, in some cases, dropping out of school to support their families financially. These results align with earlier studies, reinforcing the significance of parental involvement in education. For instance, Gubbels et al. (2019) and Robinson et al. (2018) emphasized that active parental engagement can reduce absenteeism and foster academic success. Furthermore, Guay et al. (2021) highlight that fathers play a pivotal role in instilling self-determined motivation, a factor often lacking in father-absent students. To elaborate, the absence of a father figure removes a crucial source of emotional, motivational, and financial support, all of which are critical for academic achievement. Fathers frequently serve as role models, providing guidance, structure, and encouragement, which collectively contribute to fostering perseverance in educational pursuits. In conclusion, these findings underscore the critical need for targeted educational interventions aimed at supporting students affected by father absence. Addressing these challenges can help enhance their academic experiences and outcomes.

The study also reveals that father-absent students are more likely to engage in delinquent behaviours and struggle with forming healthy social relationships. Specifically, girls demonstrate a tendency to seek validation through unhealthy relationship dynamics. This finding aligns with Nuraqmarina's (2023) research, which indicates that fatherless youth are at a higher risk of delinquency. Furthermore, Ellis et al. (2003) document that the absence of paternal guidance increases vulnerability to negative influences, contributing to the behavioural challenges observed among the students in this study. In particular, for girls, father absence often results in difficulties establishing secure attachments and an increased likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behaviours, as noted by DaViera & Roy (2020) and Roy et al. (2021). Thus, the social challenges faced by these students underscore the importance of community-based initiatives, such as mentorship and after-school programs, to provide the necessary support and guidance.

The study also revealed that the economic impact of father absence was significant, with many students experiencing poverty and limited access to educational resources. Participants frequently noted the financial struggles associated with father absence, echoing findings by Yucel and Yazarbas (2023), who highlight that father absence often results in economic hardship, leaving children with fewer resources and opportunities. Similarly, Osinga et al. (2021) noted that the financial burden on single mothers often results in heightened maternal stress, which negatively affects children's emotional and academic outcomes. Additionally, Langley (2015) found that children from fatherless homes are more likely to face substance abuse and behavioural problems, further compounding the economic and emotional challenges. A possible explanation for these findings is that the absence of a father figure creates not only financial instability but also a lack of emotional support, both of which are crucial for a child's development and well-being. Addressing the economic implications of father absence requires multifaceted interventions. For instance, schools can collaborate with NGOs to provide scholarships and resource support for affected students.

In regard to the coping mechanisms students employ, the study's findings reveal that many students turn to romantic partners for emotional support. This highlights the role of alternative attachment figures in the absence of a father figure. Participants indicated that partners often provide a safe space for expressing emotions, with one stating, "having someone who listens to me and understands what I'm going through." Furthermore, the emotional comfort offered by these relationships aligns with Bowlby's notion of the "secure base," which provides stability, understanding, and affection in the face of adversity (Holmes, 2014). However, an important

implication of this dependency on romantic partners for emotional support is that, while these relationships can offer comfort, they may also lead to unhealthy dynamics. Specifically, students may become overly reliant on their partners to fulfil their emotional needs. This dependency can hinder the development of self-reliance and effective coping skills, making students vulnerable to further emotional distress if these relationships become unstable. Additionally, such reliance may negatively impact their academic performance and social interactions.

The study also reveals that students often turn to activities like sports, music, writing, and prayer as emotional outlets. These coping strategies provide students with opportunities for self-expression and emotional release. For instance, a participant from School A shared, "I write poetry whenever I feel sad. It helps me express my feelings without having to talk to anyone." This finding aligns with the prominent traits of Attachment Theory, which suggest that such activities can serve as forms of self-soothing and emotional regulation in the absence of a secure attachment figure (Laurent et al., 2008). Additionally, Liu et al. (2021) indicate that these hobbies allow students to externalize their emotions, thereby reducing the internalized anxiety and frustration that often accompany father absence. It is possible, therefore, that engaging in these activities not only helps students cope with their emotional challenges but also fosters resilience and personal growth. By channelling their feelings into creative outlets, students can develop a sense of identity and self-worth, which may counteract the negative effects of father absence.

The study also found that students find support through peer relationships and community involvement, which are essential for fostering a sense of belonging and emotional security. For example, participants described their involvement in school clubs or church activities as a source of confidence and social engagement, further emphasising the importance of these relationships in the absence of a father figure. However, the study highlights the varied levels of support that students receive from schools and communities. While some students benefit from understanding teachers and guidance counsellors, others report feeling stigmatized or unsupported. To understand these discrepancies, it is important to consider Attachment Theory, which suggests that children with secure attachments develop the social competence necessary to build positive peer relationships (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). In this context, peer and community connections act as external sources of stability, helping students develop resilience in navigating the challenges of father absence (Baker & Mutchler, 2010).

It seems possible that these results are due to several factors. For instance, the availability of resources within schools and communities plays a significant role. Schools in more affluent areas often have better funding, enabling them to provide comprehensive support services, such as counselling and mentorship programs. In contrast, schools in under-resourced communities may struggle to meet the emotional and academic needs of their students. Additionally, the level of awareness among educators and counsellors regarding the challenges faced by father-absent students can significantly impact the support they receive. Moreover, community involvement, such as local organizations offering youth programs, can vary widely, leading to disparities in opportunities for emotional and social development. These factors collectively contribute to the differing levels of support experienced by students, ultimately influencing their resilience and overall well-being. Therefore, the study's findings suggest that schools and communities need to offer more consistent and targeted support to students from father-absent homes, helping them develop the resilience and coping strategies necessary to thrive academically and socially.

CONCLUSION

In this investigation, the aim was to explore the lived experiences of students in two secondary schools in the Leribe district, focusing on how father absence impacts their psychological, emotional, and socio-economic well-being. In regard to the psychological and emotional impacts of father absence on students' mental health, self-esteem, and overall well-being the current study has found that generally fathers' absenteeism on secondary school students in the Leribe district of Lesotho have detrimental effects on their wellbeing. The emotional, psychological, academic, social, and economic consequences experienced by these students underscore the critical role of father figures in the development and well-being of children.

The study highlights several key findings that resonate with existing literature, confirming that father absence significantly disrupts the emotional security and social competence of students. For the sake of clarity, one of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that emotionally, students from father-absent homes

often face feelings of abandonment, anxiety, and low self-esteem. The results of this research support the idea that secure early bonds are crucial for emotional stability. The lack of paternal involvement leads to emotional insecurity, resulting in withdrawal, aggression, and difficulty in forming healthy relationships. These emotional struggles are particularly evident among younger students, who are less equipped to cope with the absence of a father figure. The empirical findings in this study they reveal how the absence of a father figure not only impacts emotional and psychological health but also extends to academic performance and social interactions.

The second major finding of this study is that academically, father absence is linked to lower motivation, concentration difficulties, and, in some cases, higher dropout rates. Specifically, students from father-absent homes face greater disadvantages due to the lack of paternal influence, which is crucial for fostering academic motivation and self-determination. Moreover, the current study provides additional evidence regarding the critical role that fathers play in shaping their children's educational aspirations and achievements. For instance, many students reported feeling unsupported in their academic endeavours, a sentiment that correlates with the emotional struggles stemming from father absence. This lack of support often leads to decreased motivation and engagement in school activities, as students may lack a reliable figure to encourage persistence when facing academic challenges. Consequently, these findings reinforce the importance of parental involvement in academic success. The absence of a father figure creates a significant gap in students' ability to engage fully and perform well in school. Therefore, it is essential for schools and communities to recognize this gap and implement targeted support programs that address the unique educational needs of students from father-absent homes.

This study has also found that socially, father-absent students are more likely to engage in delinquent behaviours, with girls particularly vulnerable to unhealthy relationship dynamics. The absence of paternal guidance leaves students exposed to negative influences, increasing the likelihood of risky behaviours such as early sexual activity and substance abuse. The present study provides additional evidence with respect to the correlation between father absence and the development of social competencies. Specifically, the findings indicate that students lacking a father figure often struggle to establish secure attachments and healthy interpersonal relationships. This instability can lead to a reliance on peers for validation, which may manifest in seeking acceptance through risky behaviours. This highlights the need for targeted interventions to address the social challenges faced by these students, particularly in fostering healthy relationship skills and promoting positive peer interactions.

Economically, the absence of fathers places a significant financial burden on families, often resulting in poverty and limited access to educational resources. Many students from father-absent homes experience financial hardship, which compounds their emotional and academic struggles. The evidence from this study suggests that the absence of fathers significantly impacts students' social and emotional well-being, leading to increased vulnerability to delinquent behaviours and unhealthy relationship dynamics. These findings enhance our understanding of the multifaceted consequences of father absence, particularly regarding how it shapes students' interactions and choices in their formative years.

Despite these challenges, the study also highlights the resilience of students who develop coping mechanisms to manage the emotional and social impacts of father absence. Many students find emotional support through romantic partners, hobbies, and involvement in peer and community activities, which provide a sense of belonging and stability. The study has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of how these coping strategies can serve as vital resources for students navigating the difficulties associated with father absence. By seeking support from peers and engaging in meaningful activities, students can foster emotional resilience and develop essential social skills. Furthermore, these positive interactions can counterbalance some of the adverse outcomes linked to the absence of a father figure, illustrating that while the challenges are significant, the capacity for adaptation and personal growth remains strong. Ultimately, this underscores the need for Leribe secondary schools and communities to cultivate supportive environments that empower students to leverage these coping mechanisms effectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made to address the multifaceted challenges faced by students experiencing father absence in Leribe district. By implementing these recommendations, schools,

communities, and policymakers in Lesotho can create a more supportive environment for students affected by father absence:

1. Schools should enhance offering more comprehensive counselling services to address the emotional needs of father-absent students.
2. Community-based support programs should be expanded, particularly mentorship initiatives that provide alternative role models to father-absent students.
3. Collaboration between schools, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local communities could provide students with scholarships, resource support, and career development programs. This would alleviate the economic burden on students from father-absent homes.
4. Schools should encourage student involvement in extracurricular activities, such as sports, music, and clubs, which can provide emotional outlets and opportunities for social engagement.

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