



Economic Hardship in Single-Parent Families: Investigating Impact on Adolescent Socialisation and Academic Achievement

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of Junior High School (JHS) teachers of English in Ghana, as manifested through their motivation and engagement in everyday classroom practice. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory and Engagement Theory, the study adopted a qualitative multiple case study design. Data were generated from semi-structured interviews with ten teachers of English and 20 JHS learners from public and private schools in Kpando municipality, and from classroom observations of routine English lessons. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across the data. Findings showed that teachers relied mainly on praise, questioning, group work, code-switching between English and Ewe, and game-based activities to stimulate learners' interest. These strategies tended to enhance behavioural and emotional engagement, although opportunities for deeper cognitive engagement were less frequent. Teachers also reported contextual constraints, including large classes, limited teaching resources, and learners' low proficiency, which sometimes reduced their capacity to sustain motivation. Learners valued supportive teacher-student relationships, clear explanations, and varied activities, but expressed frustration with excessive teacher talk and chorus responses. The study highlights the need for targeted professional development on motivational and engagement-oriented pedagogy in Ghanaian JHS English language classrooms and offers context-specific recommendations for curriculum planners and teacher educators.

Introduction

Adolescents raised in single-parent households often face multifaceted challenges that impact their socialisation and academic achievement, particularly in areas where financial constraints, limited opportunities, and inadequate resources prevail. Despite widespread understanding of the consequences of economic hardship for child development, relatively little research has examined teenagers' lived experiences in rural South African communities. This gap necessitates an investigation into how economic hardship affects social connections, educational performance, and coping techniques among youths in Muraga Village (Ahiaku & Ajani, 2022).

Economic hardship in single-parent households places a double strain on parents, particularly mothers, who frequently bear responsibility for both caregiving and financial provision (Guzman, L., & Oby, M., 2025; Reyes, M. A. B., & Santos, E. L., 2024). Adolescents in these households may struggle with school attendance, concentration, and participation in social activities while feeling pressure to contribute to household income or domestic duties Chavda, K., & Nisarga, V., 2023; Roberts, D. D.,



2023). Even with support measures such as social grants and community initiatives available, teenagers in Muraga Village continue to experience low academic performance and impaired social development. Economic hardship in Muraga Village not only restricts access to educational resources but also impairs parents' ability to provide guidance, emotional support, and social opportunities (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023). The aim is to inform the development of evidence-based solutions to enhance social and educational outcomes among adolescents from economically disadvantaged single-parent families.

The Effects of economic hardship on adolescents' academic achievement

School Dropout

Financial difficulties can have profound and lasting impacts on students' education. According to Wang et al. (2022), when families experience financial hardship, teenagers often struggle to focus on school, resulting in poor academic performance, frequent absenteeism, and, in severe cases, complete withdrawal from education. Research indicates that financial difficulties not only affect students' ability to pay for school-related expenses but also contribute to feelings of social isolation and mental health challenges. Students from affluent families typically have access to more resources, support networks, and opportunities that enable academic success. Conversely, those from underprivileged backgrounds may face constant stress related to school fees, transportation, and even basic necessities such as food and clothing (Wang et al., 2022).

Jacob et al. (2023) note that children from underprivileged households have fewer opportunities for development and learning. Compared to their classmates from wealthier backgrounds who have greater access to educational resources, these adolescents often encounter major obstacles to academic achievement. Many drop out of school, leaving them with fewer skills, less knowledge, and a diminished quality of life. Numerous studies demonstrate that teenagers from low-income households lag behind in various well-being indicators. Financial restrictions often prevent parents from providing adequate academic support. Growing up in poverty, these children frequently lack strong role models to help them build self-esteem and establish future goals (Jacob et al., 2023).

Limited access to quality education and educational resources

Access to quality education, from early childhood programmes to higher education, is critical for children's growth and future success. Education provides children with the knowledge and skills necessary to thrive, but without essential resources, many students face obstacles that prevent them from reaching their full potential. A supportive learning environment and access to educational resources are vital to academic performance. When children lack these elements, they may struggle to keep pace with peers, increasing inequity and restricting future opportunities (Echave et al., 2023).

According to Mistry and Elenbaas (2021), economic difficulties combined with family stress can have a detrimental impact on both parental well-being and overall family functioning, which in turn affects academic performance and motivation among teenagers. Financial difficulties can increase parental stress, impairing parents' ability to provide emotional and educational support. A child's educational trajectory is significantly influenced by their family's economic circumstances. Socioeconomic status, specifically household income and wealth, indirectly affects child well-being by determining the availability of resources and opportunities, including access to quality schools, extracurricular activities, and academic support. When families struggle financially, they may be unable to afford better schooling options, private tutoring, or basic learning materials, hindering children's academic growth (Mistry & Elenbaas, 2021).



Poor performance and lack of motivation

Adolescents from single-parent families often struggle academically due to financial constraints and inadequate parental support. According to Mistry & Elenbaas (2021), adolescents who are consistently concerned about their family's financial situation tend to perform poorly in school. Similarly, those who perceive themselves as having lower status than their peers often struggle academically.

According to Kersi and Nisarga (2023), children raised in single-parent families are more likely to struggle with academic performance, motivation, and creativity. Many students struggle to achieve satisfactory grades, face an increased risk of dropping out, and frequently work outside of school to support their families. Financial constraints in single-parent households can result in fewer educational resources, limited access to extracurricular activities, and decreased parental involvement in school-related matters, all of which contribute to lower academic achievement. Furthermore, studies indicate that adolescents from single-parent homes are more likely to repeat a grade and to perform poorly in subjects such as mathematics and science. The lack of consistent academic guidance at home may further hinder their performance, making it more challenging for them to compete with peers from two-parent families (Kersi & Nisarga, 2023).

Theoretical framework

This study employs two complementary theoretical frameworks to examine the complex relationships between economic hardship, socialisation, and academic achievement among adolescents from single-parent households: Social Exclusion Theory and Intersectionality Theory.

Intersectionality theory

Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory was employed to investigate how gender, socioeconomic class, family structure, and other identity markers interact to shape adolescents' experiences. Intersectionality emphasises that individuals do not experience inequality in separate categories but rather through the intersection of different social identities, resulting in various forms of disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989).

The study examined how girls and boys in single-parent households may face different challenges. Girls in single-mother families may face increased economic pressure, affecting their mental health and educational aspirations, whereas boys in single-father households may struggle with emotional expression and identity formation due to a lack of nurturing support (Brown & Lopez, 2022). Intersectionality Theory offers a more nuanced understanding of how economic hardship combines with gender norms, family dynamics, and broader social disparities to shape teenage well-being.

Social exclusion theory

Social Exclusion Theory examines how poverty and disadvantage systematically marginalise individuals from full participation in society (Silver, 2019). Social exclusion is a multidimensional process involving the lack of resources, rights, goods, and services that prevent individuals from participating in normal relationships and activities available to the majority of people in society. This exclusion affects not only material circumstances but also social relationships, civic engagement, and psychological well-being (Halkos & Aslanidis, 2023).

For adolescents in economically disadvantaged single-parent households, social exclusion operates through multiple mechanisms. Material deprivation limits access to education, social activities, and peer interactions. Stigmatisation creates barriers to social acceptance and belonging. The cumulative effect is marginalisation from mainstream adolescent experiences during a critical developmental period when peer relationships and social identity formation are paramount. Social Exclusion Theory thus provides a framework for understanding how poverty translates into social isolation, reduced self-esteem, and limited opportunities for positive development.



Theoretical integration

These two theories work synergistically to provide a comprehensive understanding of how economic hardship affects adolescents in single-parent households. Social Exclusion Theory illuminates the structural processes that marginalise disadvantaged adolescents from full social participation. Intersectionality Theory reveals how multiple dimensions of identity and disadvantage intersect to create unique experiences. Together, these frameworks guide the analysis of participants' lived experiences and help interpret the complex relationships between economic hardship, socialisation, and academic achievement.

Research methodology

Research design and approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilising a phenomenological design, to gain a comprehensive understanding of teenagers' experiences in single-parent households facing economic challenges. Phenomenology focuses on the exploration and description of individuals' lived experiences from their own perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This methodology was ideal for investigating the personal and subjective effects of economic challenges on social and academic development, as it allows participants to articulate their experiences in their own words while the researcher seeks to understand the essence and meaning of those experiences.

Research setting

The study was conducted in Ha-Muraga Village, Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, a rural community in South Africa. This setting was chosen because rural communities frequently face distinct challenges related to economic hardship, including limited access to essential services, employment opportunities, and educational resources. Ha-Muraga Village represents a typical rural South African community, where single-parent households constitute a significant proportion of households and economic hardship is prevalent.

Participant selection

The study participants consisted of adolescents aged 14 to 19 from single-parent households experiencing economic hardship. Five adolescents, two males and three females, were purposefully selected to participate in the study. Purposive sampling was employed as a non-probability sampling method, allowing the researcher to select information-rich cases relevant to the study's objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The inclusion criteria were: (1) age between 14 and 19 years; (2) residence in a single-parent household; (3) experience of economic hardship as reported by the adolescent or caregiver; (4) residence in Ha-Muraga Village; and (5) willingness to participate in the study. Participants were recruited through collaboration with local schools and community organisations, ensuring that selected individuals had firsthand experience with the challenges of economic hardship and could provide rich, detailed insights into their lived experiences.

The limitation of purposeful sampling is that participants were purposefully selected based on specific criteria (adolescents aged 14-19 from single-parent households in Ha-Muraga Village experiencing economic hardship); therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to other populations, contexts, or geographic locations. The experiences of these five participants may not accurately reflect those of adolescents in urban settings, in different provinces, in two-parent households facing economic challenges, or in other rural communities with varying cultural or socioeconomic characteristics.



Data collection

Data were gathered using face-to-face, semi-structured interviews conducted in a private, comfortable setting chosen by participants. Semi-structured interviews combined predetermined open-ended questions with the flexibility to explore emerging themes and probe deeper into participants' responses (Kallio et al., 2016). This method allowed the researcher to maintain focus on key research questions while enabling participants to openly express their perspectives and experiences.

The interview guide included questions addressing: (1) experiences of economic hardship in the household; (2) impact on social relationships and interactions with peers; (3) effects on academic performance and school engagement; (4) emotional and psychological responses to economic stress; (5) coping strategies employed by adolescents and families; and (6) experiences with support systems and interventions.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were taken during and immediately after interviews to capture non-verbal cues, contextual information, and the researcher's reflections. All interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred language (English or Tshivenda) to ensure comfort and the accurate expression of experiences.

Data analysis

The collected data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, which provides a systematic approach to identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The six phases include:

1. Familiarisation with the data: Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the content. Initial notes and impressions were recorded.
2. Generating initial codes: Systematic coding of interesting features across the entire dataset was conducted. Codes identified relevant segments of data related to economic hardship, socialisation, academic achievement, and coping mechanisms.
3. Searching for themes: Codes were organised into potential themes by grouping related codes together. Preliminary theme maps were developed to visualise relationships between codes and themes.
4. Reviewing themes: Themes were reviewed against coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure they accurately represented the data. Some themes were refined, combined, or separated to create a coherent thematic structure.
5. Defining and naming themes: Clear definitions and names were developed for each theme, ensuring they captured the essence of the data they represented and related clearly to the research questions.
6. Producing the report: A scholarly narrative was constructed that weaved together analytic claims, data extracts, and theoretical interpretation to tell the story of the data in relation to the research questions and existing literature.

Throughout the analysis, attention was paid to ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' actual words and experiences, while also connecting the findings to the theoretical framework and existing research.



Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to rigorous ethical standards throughout all phases of the research process:

Voluntary Participation: Participation was entirely voluntary. All potential participants and their guardians (for those under 18) were informed that involvement was optional and that they could withdraw at any time without consequences. **Informed Consent:** Before data collection, participants and their guardians received clear information about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and their rights as participants. Written informed consent was obtained from participants aged 18-19 and from guardians of participants under 18. Written assent was obtained from participants under 18 (Nafsi, 2022, p. 10). **Anonymity and Confidentiality:** To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were assigned and used throughout the research report. All identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports. Data were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the researchers (Nafsi, 2022, p. 10). **Minimising Harm:** Given the sensitive nature of discussing economic hardship, the researcher approached interviews with sensitivity and empathy. Questions were carefully worded to avoid causing distress. Participants were informed of available counselling services and could skip any questions that made them uncomfortable. This study aimed to establish a respectful and safe environment where individuals can freely express their opinions and experiences without fear of criticism or any form of harm (Nafsi, 2022, p. 11).

Throughout the analysis, attention was paid to ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' actual words and experiences, while also connecting the findings to the theoretical framework and existing research.

Limitations of the study

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size ($n = 5$) limits generalizability, which is consistent with the phenomenological research priority of depth over breadth. Despite these limitations, the study lays the groundwork for future research on poverty, family structures, and adolescent outcomes. The study relied on a small sample of five participants, which limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised to all adolescents in Muraga Village or other communities. This number is justified by the power of qualitative research, which enables a deeper exploration of phenomenology through unstructured questions. When researchers are unable to obtain new data from respondents, they assume that saturation has been achieved. The study also only focused on single-parent households, excluding adolescents from other family structures who may also experience economic hardship. Additionally, the research did not fully consider broader external factors, such as community infrastructure, local employment opportunities, or the wider economic environment, all of which may influence adolescent development.

The aim of the study was to inform the development of evidence-based solutions to enhance social and educational outcomes among adolescents from economically disadvantaged single-parent families. Eight themes emerged from data analysed from participants who experienced financial struggles stemming from single parenthood. From these themes, further sub-themes emerged as discussed below.

Findings and discussion

The thematic analysis of interview data revealed five major themes that illuminate the complex interplay between economic hardship, socialisation, and academic achievement among adolescents from single-parent households. Each theme is presented with supporting data from participants and discussed in relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature.



To obtain the results, the interview audio recordings were transcribed verbatim to accurately capture the participants' narratives. This stage was critical to ensuring the authenticity of their voices. Each transcript was reviewed multiple times to ensure familiarity with the content, yielding preliminary notes highlighting recurring themes and notable insights. The transcripts were subjected to open coding, during which significant statements and phrases were identified. This involved highlighting key thoughts regarding economic hardship, social interactions, academic challenges, and coping mechanisms. The codes were grouped into broader categories, including: Economic Stressors, which encompassed participants' experiences related to financial insecurity, such as difficulties meeting basic needs or affording educational resources. Social Isolation: Many participants reported feelings of loneliness and withdrawal from peer groups, which were directly linked to their economic situations. Impact on Academic Performance. Codes in this category captured how financial constraints hindered school attendance, participation, and overall academic engagement. Coping Mechanisms. This category included strategies adolescents employed to mitigate the effects of their economic challenges, such as reliance on social grants, support from extended family, and community programs. The thematic analysis illuminated the complex interplay between economic hardship, socialisation, and academic achievement. Economic stress was found to restrict not only material resources but also emotional and social support, leading to adverse outcomes in academic performance and social interactions. Participants articulated a clear correlation between economic strain and reduced engagement in school-related activities, which often led to lower academic achievement and higher dropout rates. Moreover, while economic hardship posed significant barriers, the adolescents' accounts revealed a strong sense of agency in their efforts to overcome them. The reliance on coping mechanisms, such as community and family support, underscores a vital aspect of their resilience and underscores the need for integrated support systems within rural communities to foster positive adolescent development.

Aggressive behaviour, emotional instability and anger

This theme emerged from major categories detected during data analysis, based on participants' descriptions of how economic hardship in single-parent households affects their social interactions and emotional responses. The goal is to examine how these experiences reflect the social realities of adolescents living in financial hardship in Muraga Village.

Wang, Li, and Ai (2022) support these findings, asserting that family economic stress causes emotional instability, anger, and anxiety, which may manifest as inappropriate behaviour. Similarly, Chavda and Nisarga (2023) discovered that adolescents from single-parent or divorced households are more likely to engage in substance abuse and risky behaviour due to decreased parental supervision and higher stress.

In this context, anger is a symptom of deeper emotional issues resulting from poverty, stigma, and loss. The participants' stories illustrate how economic hardship and distress are interconnected, influencing social behaviour and relationships in ways that, if left unaddressed, could perpetuate cycles of marginalisation.

The study aimed to investigate the impact of growing up in a single-parent household with limited financial resources on teenagers' interactions with classmates, family members, and the broader community. Participant 4 and Participant 5 shared:

"My life changed after my mother died, and I started living with my grandmother. I began using drugs and alcohol because I wanted to forget the pain and stress. Most of my friends also use drugs, so we spend time together, but others do not want to be my friends because of my situation." (Participant 4)



"I do not have friends because other learners laugh at me for being poor. They tease me about living in an old house near the school. This makes me angry, and I prefer to stay alone." (Participant 5)

Participant 4's experience reveals how emotional pain combined with economic pressure can lead young people to substance use as a coping mechanism. His story shows that aggressive behaviour and dangerous coping strategies often stem from unresolved grief and a lack of support. Participant 5's experience demonstrates how poverty-based bullying and humiliation at school can trigger anger and withdrawal, shaping negative social interactions.

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In this context, anger is a symptom of deeper emotional issues resulting from poverty, stigma, and loss. The participants' stories illustrate how economic hardship and distress are interconnected, influencing social behaviour and relationships in ways that, if left unaddressed, could perpetuate cycles of marginalisation.

Social exclusion and isolation

This theme emerged from participants' descriptions of how poverty limited their participation in social activities and how financial constraints affected their sense of belonging. The goal is to better understand adolescents' subjective experiences of loneliness, isolation, and shame.

Feelings of difference and loneliness

The study investigated whether participants perceived themselves as different from other young people due to financial difficulties at home. Participant 2 and Participant 3 responded:

"Yes, I sometimes feel different because other young people enjoy going out with friends, but I cannot do that. I spend my time helping at home and studying. This makes me feel lonely at times, but I remind myself that education is my way out of poverty." (Participant 2)

"Yes, I feel different from other learners because I do not have nice uniforms or money to spend at school. Some learners laugh at me because of my old uniform, and this makes me feel left out. Sometimes I wish I could just disappear." (Participant 3)

Participant 2's narrative illustrates how financial stress limits teenagers' social participation, causing them to prioritise schoolwork and duties over friendships. Participant 3 emphasises the emotional strain imposed by poverty-related bullying, which causes feelings of shame and withdrawal from school activities.

These experiences align with Lenoir's (1974) concept of social exclusion, which describes how poverty isolates individuals both materially and socially. Halkos and Aslanidis (2023) expand on this concept by characterising poverty-based rejection as a significant contributor to social isolation among underprivileged individuals.

Poverty serves as a barrier to social belonging, causing anxiety, loneliness, and loss of self-esteem. Adolescents' diminished participation in social settings during a critical developmental period may lead to long-term issues with trust, relationships, and mental health unless addressed through supportive school and community contexts.



Theoretical interpretation

These experiences align with Social Exclusion Theory, which describes how poverty isolates individuals both materially and socially from full participation in society (Silver, 2019). Halkos and Aslanidis (2023) expand on this concept, noting that poverty-based rejection is a significant contributor to social isolation among underprivileged individuals. The visible markers of poverty, old uniforms, inability to spend money at school, and lack of resources for social activities create boundaries that exclude adolescents from the social world of their peers.

Lister (2020) argues that poverty is not merely a lack of material resources but also involves symbolic violence through stigmatisation and social devaluation. For adolescents in this study, poverty operated as a barrier to social belonging, generating anxiety, loneliness, and diminished self-esteem. The adolescents' reduced participation in social settings during a critical developmental period when peer relationships are central to identity formation may have long-term consequences for their ability to form trusting relationships, develop social skills, and maintain mental health.

Intersectionality Theory adds further insight by highlighting how multiple disadvantages intersect. For instance, being from a single-parent household in a rural area with limited income creates a compounded disadvantage that differentiates these adolescents from peers who may face only one or two of these challenges.

School Dropout

This theme highlights participants' perspectives on how economic difficulties influenced their academic paths, focusing on how poverty, caregiver responsibilities, and emotional demands shaped adolescents' educational trajectories.

Early School Leaving Due to Financial Responsibilities

When asked how financial issues influenced academics or learning, Participant 4 responded:

"My studies were affected badly because I had to drop out in Grade 10. I couldn't cope with school and the responsibility of providing for my family at home. Drugs also made me lose focus and motivation to continue."
(Participant 4)

Participant 4's experience illustrates how financial pressure can lead adolescents to assume adult responsibilities, such as caring for families. His experience demonstrates that dropping out of school is often a survival decision rather than a lack of desire to study.

These findings align with Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural capital, which describes how a lack of resources leads to exclusion and discouragement in school settings. Sosu et al. (2021) found that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds have higher absenteeism rates and poorer academic achievements.

Poverty influences educational opportunities by imposing emotional burdens, financial responsibilities, and social barriers that limit academic persistence. Adolescents like Participant 4 are more likely to drop out of school without targeted support, contributing to intergenerational poverty.

Limited Access to Quality Education and Resources

This theme examines how poverty limits access to essential educational resources, resulting in absenteeism, embarrassment, and low academic self-confidence.

Lack of Uniforms, Books, and School Materials

The findings revealed how poverty-induced embarrassment contributes to absenteeism and how insufficient resources lead to feelings of exclusion even when attending school. Poverty's emotional



impact undermines self-esteem and academic engagement. This was demonstrated as seen through Participants 3 and 5:

"Yes, I have missed school because I did not have a proper uniform or shoes. I stayed home because I was afraid of being laughed at. This has affected my progress in class." (Participant 3)

"I do not miss school a lot, but I sometimes feel embarrassed to go when I do not have proper things like books or a uniform. Even when I attend, I feel shy and left out. This makes learning difficult for me." (Participant 5)

Participant 3's narrative illustrates how poverty-induced embarrassment contributes to absenteeism, whereas Participant 5 highlights how insufficient resources lead to feelings of exclusion even when attending school. Poverty's emotional impact undermines self-esteem and academic engagement.

These findings align with El-Baraka's (2023) argument that socioeconomic class has a significant impact on academic achievement, primarily due to access to resources, learning environments, and motivation. Students from low-income families face numerous material and social challenges that hinder academic progress. In this context, adolescents in Muraga Village were expected to compete academically under unequal conditions, with poverty influencing their preparedness, participation, and overall learning experience.

Poor Performance and Lack of Motivation

This theme examines how economic hardship influences motivation, emotional well-being, and academic achievement. Adolescents from single-parent families often struggle academically due to financial constraints and inadequate parental support. According to Mistry and Elenbaas (2021), adolescents who are consistently concerned about their family's financial situation tend to perform poorly in school. Similarly, those who perceive themselves as having lower status than their peers often struggle academically.

According to Chavda and Nisarga (2023), children raised in single-parent families are more likely to struggle with academic performance, motivation, and creativity. Many students struggle to achieve satisfactory grades, face an increased risk of dropping out, and frequently work outside of school to support their families. Financial constraints in single-parent households can result in fewer educational resources, limited access to extracurricular activities, and decreased parental involvement in school-related matters, all of which contribute to lower academic achievement. Furthermore, studies indicate that adolescents from single-parent homes are more likely to repeat a grade and to perform poorly in subjects such as mathematics and science. The lack of consistent academic guidance at home may further hinder their performance, making it more challenging for them to compete with peers from two-parent families (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023).

Participant 2's perspective highlights how family responsibilities hinder their ability to study, whereas Participant 3 illustrates how shame associated with poverty leads to withdrawal from school. These experiences demonstrate how poverty impacts emotional experiences such as shame, stress, and lack of focus, all affecting academic performance. Chavda and Nisarga (2023) and Munir et al. (2023) found that low socioeconomic status negatively impacts motivation, attendance, academic performance, and overall educational outcomes. Without consistent support, emotional and academic barriers accumulate, exposing teenagers to long-term educational disadvantages.



Balancing School and Household Responsibilities

Participants reported:

"There were times when I struggled to balance school and responsibilities at home. Sometimes I had to stay home to care for my grandmother or siblings. But I pushed myself not to give up because I knew education was the only way to change my life." (Participant 2)

"Yes, I have missed school because I did not have a proper uniform or shoes. I stayed home because I was afraid of being laughed at. This has affected my progress in class." (Participant 3)

Participant 2's perspective highlights how family responsibilities hinder studying, whereas Participant 3 illustrates how shame associated with poverty leads to withdrawal from school. These experiences demonstrate how poverty impacts emotional experiences such as shame, stress, and lack of focus, all affecting academic performance.

Kersi and Nisarga (2023) and Munir et al. (2023) found that low socioeconomic status negatively impacts motivation, attendance, academic performance, and overall educational outcomes. Without consistent support, emotional and academic barriers accumulate, exposing teenagers to long-term educational disadvantages.

Theoretical interpretation

These findings align with Social Exclusion Theory's emphasis on how poverty creates multidimensional exclusion. Lister (2020) argues that the shame and stigma associated with poverty can be as damaging as material deprivation itself. The inability to afford school uniforms and materials not only creates practical obstacles but also inflicts symbolic violence through social judgment and exclusion.

El-Baraka (2023) argues that socioeconomic class has a significant impact on academic achievement, primarily through differential access to resources, learning environments, and motivational support. Students from low-income families face numerous material and social challenges that hinder academic progress. In the context of Muraga Village, adolescents are expected to compete academically under profoundly unequal conditions, with poverty influencing their preparedness, participation, and overall learning experience. Cooper and Stewart (2021) found that household income affects children's educational outcomes through both direct (ability to purchase educational materials) and indirect (parental stress, quality of home learning environment) pathways. The experiences of Participants 3 and 5 illustrate both pathways: direct resource constraints create immediate barriers, while the psychological burden of poverty undermines confidence and engagement.

NSFAS and access to higher education

Participant 2 explained:

"After finishing high school, I was fortunate to receive an NSFAS bursary, which now covers my tuition and provides an allowance for food and books... These programs really changed my life..." (Participant 2)

Participant 2's story illustrates how government-funded programs such as NSFAS enable adolescents from low-income households to access higher education despite significant adversity. Research by De Villiers (2023) indicates that NSFAS was established to address historical inequalities in higher education and remains a significant pathway for social mobility among disadvantaged youth. However, Participant 2's comment about being "lucky" suggests that many deserving students do not receive such opportunities, emphasising the need for wider program accessibility.



Emotional and Academic Support

Participant 5 shared:

"Youth like me need emotional support because anger makes us feel like giving up. We also need help with basic school necessities... Support gives us hope." (Participant 5)

Participant 5's perspective highlights the potential of nonprofit organisations to provide emotional support, counselling, and school resources. These interventions can help reduce the emotional strain associated with poverty and strengthen students' coping abilities. Raes et al. (2023) support this view, arguing that NGOs play crucial roles in filling gaps left by formal institutions, offering counselling, school support, and community engagement programmes. The findings suggest that collaboration between government, schools, and nonprofit organisations can create comprehensive support systems that meet both material and emotional needs of adolescents from single-parent households.

Theoretical Integration

The identification of support systems and coping mechanisms demonstrates that adolescents facing economic hardship are not passive victims but active agents who seek resources and strategies to navigate their circumstances. Social Exclusion Theory recognises that re-inclusion requires both material resources and social integration. Government programs, such as NSFAS, address material barriers, while NGO interventions address the social and emotional dimensions of exclusion.

Intersectionality Theory reminds us that support systems must be tailored to the unique intersection of disadvantages faced by different groups. For instance, girls may need different forms of support than boys, and adolescents in rural areas may face different access barriers than those in urban settings.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of adolescents from single-parent households facing economic hardship in Muraga Village, Vhembe District. The findings reveal that economic stress has a profound impact on both socialisation and academic achievement, creating interconnected challenges that affect multiple dimensions of adolescent development.

The research demonstrates that financial constraints do not merely limit material resources but fundamentally shape adolescents' emotional well-being, social relationships, and educational trajectories. Participants' experiences revealed patterns of aggressive behaviour stemming from emotional instability, social exclusion and isolation driven by poverty-related stigma, school dropout resulting from financial responsibilities, limited access to quality education and resources, and diminished academic performance coupled with reduced motivation.

The application of Social Exclusion Theory and Intersectionality Theory provided a robust framework for understanding these complex phenomena. Social Exclusion Theory highlighted how poverty systematically marginalises adolescents from full societal participation, while Intersectionality Theory revealed how gender, family structure, and socioeconomic status intersect to create unique experiences of disadvantage.

The study demonstrates that economic hardship in single-parent households is not merely an individual or family challenge, but a societal concern that requires coordinated responses from government, educational institutions, community organizations, and civil society. Addressing these challenges effectively requires moving beyond recognition of problems toward implementation of sustainable, evidence-based solutions that support holistic adolescent development.



Despite these challenges, the study also identified resilience and coping mechanisms among participants. Government assistance programs, particularly NSFAS, emerged as transformative interventions that enable access to higher education. Social grants provide crucial financial relief for single-parent households, while nonprofit organisations offer essential emotional and academic support. These findings underscore that adolescents from economically disadvantaged backgrounds possess strength and determination but require appropriate support systems to realise their potential.

The research contributes to the limited body of empirical evidence on the experiences of rural South African adolescents in single-parent households, offering a contextualised understanding that can inform policy and practice. Participants' voices highlight the urgent need for comprehensive interventions that address both material deprivation and emotional well-being. Without such interventions, cycles of poverty and educational disadvantage are likely to persist across generations, limiting social mobility and perpetuating inequality.

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