

Exploring the lives of senior high school students from broken families: Stories of struggle, uncertainty and hope amidst challenges and adversities

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Abstract: This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of senior high school students from broken families, focusing on how they navigate emotional, academic, and social challenges. Conducted at General Santos City National High School, the research involved in-depth interviews with ten purposively selected students for the school year 2024–2025. Thematic analysis revealed five major thematic areas: the emotional impact of being in a broken family, academic struggles due to unmet needs and weak parental support, various coping strategies, the role of support systems (family, peers, school, and community), and the overall impact on academic and personal well-being. Despite recurring challenges such as financial stress, loneliness, and insecurity, many participants exhibited resilience, self-discipline, and a positive outlook that helped them persist in their academic and personal pursuits. The findings underscore the importance of comprehensive support mechanisms from educational institutions and communities to promote the psychological resilience and academic success of students from disrupted family structures. The study also suggests policy-level interventions to better accommodate the unique needs of this vulnerable student population.

Keywords: Broken Families, Lived Experiences, Senior High School Students, Coping Strategies, Academic Well-Being, Emotional Resilience

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INTRODUCTION

The study's focus on the lived experiences of adolescents from broken families is critical for understanding the different factors that influence their emotional, social, and educational well-being. Children from broken families frequently suffer major obstacles that have an impact on their academic achievement, mental health, and coping methods. This background captures the spirit of these encounters while also contextualizing the study's significance.

Broken families, defined as those established by divorce, separation, or the death of a parent, are becoming more common in modern culture. About 37.6% of marriages in the United States end in divorce, with roughly half of all children seeing their parents' breakup (Lazic, 2023). In 2018, it was stated that 70% of children under the age of 18 lived with both parents, while 23% lived with their mother solely, 3% with their father only, and approximately 4% with neither parent (Youth Statistics, 2024). This backdrop emphasizes the importance of investigating the actual experiences of students transitioning from such household structures. UP Population Institute research revealed a disturbing tendency among Filipino youth. Specifically, just 67% of young people were reared by both parents, implying that one in every three Filipino

children grew up without both biological parents. Several factors contribute to this circumstance, including parental separation and job mobility. The 2021 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFS5) revealed a significant decrease in the percentage of youths reared in intact homes when compared to prior decades, indicating a steady shift in familial structure across the nation.

Students from broken families frequently experience emotional and psychological difficulties such as anxiety, sadness, and behavioral problems as a result of family separation and instability (Felisilda & Torreon, 2020). These issues may come from a lack of emotional support and solid connections, leading to uncertainty, bewilderment, guilt, and shame (Admin, 2023). According to Magazine Desk (2024), emotional distress can have a substantial impact on academic achievement and social interactions, resulting to isolation and difficulty in building healthy connections.

The academic impact on students from broken families is significant. These students are more prone to engage in disruptive behavior and perform poorly academically (European/American Journal, 2024). Unstable family relationships, as well as limited parental involvement and resources, all play a key role in their academic challenges (Admin, 2023). The emotional anguish caused by their home situations frequently interferes with their focus and concentration at school, complicating their educational path.

Despite the difficulties, many students from broken families devise various coping mechanisms to deal with their situations. The students may seek out pleasant experiences, cultivate independence, and strive to remain optimistic even in difficult situations. Some students also form greater bonds with their friends and family members as a source of support. However, negative coping tactics, such as substance misuse, have been observed, demonstrating the complexity of their coping systems (Magpantay, et al, 2014).

Understanding the lived experiences of students from broken families is crucial for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals to identify effective support mechanisms tailored to their needs. This study sheds light on the challenges these students face and promotes awareness and understanding of the long-term effects of familial structure on children's lives (Felisilda & Torreon, 2020).

This background provides a foundation for future research on the lived experiences of students from broken families, ultimately leading to the development of targeted interventions to assist their educational and psychological development.

Problem statement

This study investigated the lived experiences of students from broken families at General Santos City National High School in terms of coping with the hardships and anxiety that come with being in that circumstance.

This study answered the following research questions:

1. What is the state of being a broken family as described by the senior high school students?
2. How do the senior high school students from broken families describe the struggles, uncertainties, and hope in their academic and personal journey in life?
3. What strategies do senior high school students from broken families adopt in coping with the challenges and adversities that come along the way in their academic and personal life?
4. What support systems do senior high school students from broken families receive to overcome the challenges and adversities?

5. How do lived experiences of senior high school students from broken families impact their academic performance and personal well-being?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design. The qualitative phenomenological research design is a qualitative research methodology that seeks to understand and explore individuals' lived experiences with a specific phenomenon. This technique aims to discover the essence of experiences by examining how people perceive, understand, and make meaning of them in a given context. Qualitative phenomenological research design is characterized by, first, exploration of lived experiences, in which the primary focus is on the subjective experiences of individuals, stressing their viewpoints and feelings regarding a phenomenon; second, understanding meaning because the researchers seek to understand the meaning that participants place on their experiences, attempting to capture the essence or core nature of these encounters; third, a descriptive approach; this strategy allows for a rich, detailed account of the participants' experiences rather than explaining or predicting results (LaiYee, 2023).

The participants in qualitative phenomenological research usually consist of a small number of participants chosen based on certain criteria related to the phenomenon of interest. Participants should have intimate knowledge of the subject under investigation. The data collection methods in this research design may include in-depth interviews and written accounts. In in-depth interviews, researchers use semi-structured interviews to extract detailed narratives about participants' experiences, while in written accounts, participants may be requested to provide written accounts or diaries that represent their life experiences over time. In terms of data analysis, thematic analysis is the frequent technique used in qualitative phenomenological investigations to uncover patterns and themes in data that reflect the essence of the participants' experiences. This includes coding the data, creating key themes, and interpreting these themes in light of the study question (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022).

The research was conducted in General Santos City, a first-class highly urbanized city in the SOCCSKSARGEN region of the Philippines. This study involved senior high school students of General Santos City National High School (GSCNHS) who come from broken families, covering school year 2024-2025. They were enrolled in General Santos City National High School. Purposive sampling was used in selecting 10 (ten) volunteers for the study. The data saturation principle led to interviews with fewer participants than needed after the data saturation was achieved.

The researcher used an Interview Guide which consists of two sections. The first section was an interview script, which serves as a preparatory step to make the participant feel comfortable and to orient him/her on the goal of the study, data handling, and ethical guidelines was observed during the research.

Prior to collecting data, the researcher obtained a certification from the University Ethics Committee. Next, her thesis Adviser and the College Dean signed a letter addressed to the Principal of General Santos City National High School, requesting permission to conduct an interview to the identified students. The researcher delivered the written or electronic informed consent forms to the participants and were present during the conduct of the study. Semi-

structured, one-on-one, in-depth interviews was held in person and videotaped. The researcher asked open-ended questions, record interviews, and transcribed data for analysis.

Thematic analysis was applied in the processing and interpretation of data. Coding of data was done manually. It provides the necessary components for the naturalistic inquiry technique, which is better suited for small groups and seeks to study social issues in depth. Coding relates to "the process of analyzing qualitative text data by taking them apart to see what they yield before putting the data back together in a meaningful way" (Creswell, 2015). Furthermore, for Alhazmi and Kaufmann (2022), coding is "a way of essentially indexing or mapping data to provide an overview of disparate data that allows the researcher to make sense of them in relation to their research questions."

After the interview, the researcher evaluated and read the participants' reactions to extracting the most important components. The researcher created interpretations and clusters for each meaning. The researcher created a complete description of the phenomena by integrating theme clusters and identifying a key statement.

Before starting the data gathering phase, the researcher got informed consent that was written or electronic, and data confidentiality was ensured. To ensure anonymity, data from this study was used solely for research purposes and was not shared with anybody. After data analysis or study completion, all collected data was securely saved on a single device to protect participants' identity and privacy.

State of being a broken family

The state of being a broken family are circumstances and feelings that the students experienced coming from a broken family that affected their academic and personal well-being. In this study, four themes emerged, namely: Acceptance of Reality; Difficult Situation and Self-Pity.

Majority of the participants said that they accepted the reality that they will no longer have complete family and they can do nothing but to accept the fact that they already belong to broken family, that all they need to do is go on with their lives.

Based on the statement of the participants, the researcher can say that being in a broken family is not always negative, it still depends on the person on how he will perceive the situation. As what Cullen, 2021 said, many students who grew up in broken families eventually create healthy relationships with the right assistance and rehabilitation, it is achievable. Participants often blame themselves for their family orientation (Lanozo, et al. 2021). While self-pity is a natural response to pain of coming from a broken family, it can be a barrier to growth and healing for a student. It is important to recognize that this feeling, though valid, does not define one's worth or future.

Struggles, uncertainties, and hope in academic and personal journey

Students from broken families sometimes encounter major academic difficulties, affecting their educational performance and overall well-being. When the participants were asked about these, three themes emerged: weak parental support, unmet school needs and loneliness resulting in difficulty meeting educational goals. Based on the sentiments of the participants, weak parental support can decrease social well-being, and impede academic achievement. Strengthening parental participation and providing targeted support within the school environment are critical to helping these adolescents overcome challenges and achieve their full potential. Active parental

support may reduce the harmful effect of family disturbance specifically on the students' academic achievement (Alexandre, et al. 2024)

Students from broken families frequently have unmet school needs, which can have a substantial influence on their academic performance and overall well-being. These demands stem from a variety of issues, including lack of financial support and unstable home circumstances, all of which can impede their ability to perform in school. Seven participants share the same sentiment, their unmet school needs roots from financial instability.

Students from broken families sometimes encounter personal struggles affecting their educational performance and overall well-being. When the participants were asked about their personal struggles, four themes

emerged: longing for love and attention, insecurity, financial stress and positive outlook.

Longing for love and attention is a powerful emotional experience shared by students from broken families. More than half of the participants shared that they have this feeling. These students frequently experience emotions of insecurity and emotional neglect as a result of the disturbance in family structure, which can have a negative influence on their general health and development. Studies show that emotional support successfully reduces emotions of loneliness and despair among persons in difficult situation (Sugai, 2024).

Furthermore, Financial stress was faced by majority of the participants; this is a major worry that affects their overall well-being and academic progress. The upheaval created by family breakdown frequently results in economic difficulty, increased emotional strain, and limited access to resources, all of which contribute to increased stress levels among these students. As Anderson (2023) mentioned, single-parent households frequently have financial difficulties.

Students from broken families frequently endure considerable emotional and social difficulties, but many have a good attitude on life by fostering perseverance, adaptability, and inner strength, instilling hopeful thinking in students, increasing their ambition to succeed and effectively manage challenges (Lafair, 2023). Six out of ten participants possess this perception. Despite the challenges given by family disturbances, this foster growth, motivation, and a positive outlook on the future.

Strategies in coping with challenges and adversities

Dealing with challenges and adversities is an important aspect of life that necessitates effective strategies. Developing these talents allows people to handle challenging situations, learn through adversity, and emerge stronger. The deliberate application of coping techniques is essential as it influences both mental and physical health outcomes (Algorani & Gupta, 2023).

When students were questioned on what strategies they used, five themes emerged: Applying the two categories of coping strategies by Kuznetsova et al (2023), working student, time-management and focus in studies belongs to problem-focused strategies while sports and recreation and communication and prayer are under emotion-focused strategies.

Support systems students from broken families received

Students from broken families require support structures to assist them navigate the emotional, social, and academic issues that come with family disruptions. These networks offer a network of care, stability, and resources to help students cope with struggles, preserve their well-being, and achieve in their educational pursuits.

When students were questioned on what support system they received, five themes emerged family, friends, community and school.

Students, particularly those from broken families, rely heavily on their families for emotional stability, direction, and a feeling of belonging. For these students, family assistance can have a substantial impact on their academic achievement and overall well-being, assisting them in navigating the problems associated with family disturbance (Chen, 2024). In family as support system, four subthemes emerged: advice, love, moral and financial support.

Receiving advice from family members acts as an important support system for students from broken families, assisting them in navigating emotional issues and academic strain. This familial assistance was received by all of the participants, which offers stability, reassurance, and practical coping methods that encourage resilience and well-being during challenging times. Five participants narrated that they have received advices from their family members which were instilled to their minds and help them to be a better person.

Interpersonal contacts, particularly peer support, play an important role in increasing hope (Nicol, 2023). Friendships provide a safe area in which students can communicate their views and emotions without fear of being judged. Friends' support and counsel can often serve as a buffer against the negative impacts of family disintegration. Asking the participants about friends as support system, three subthemes emerged: comfort, advice and togetherness.

Friends provide consolation by listening without judgment, sharing their experiences, and giving comfort. Friendships assist students develop resilience and sustain their well-being in the face of family difficulties by creating a comfortable and supportive environment.

Community as a support system usually provides most of the participants with emotional, practical and social assistance that promotes well-being, resilience and personal growth, community participation strengthens individual social bonds and collaboration (Burde & King, 2023), however in this study, when participants were questioned. two subthemes emerged: material support and advice.

The material support received by Participant 3 from their community is in the form of monetary assistance amounting to 2,000 pesos, this is a program of their community in extending help not just for broken families but also for youth and senior citizens as well.

Schools play an important role in supporting students from broken families by offering stability, routine, and a safe environment in the midst of home issues. They provide both intellectual and emotional support to these students as they navigate the complications of family separation and the stress that comes with it. Positive relationship with teachers and community activities promotes social-emotional learning (Yarza, et al. 2024). When students were asked about school as a support system, three subthemes emerged; emotional support, advice and scholarship.

Impact of lived experiences to academic and personal well-being

Students from broken families frequently encounter unique problems that have a tremendous impact on both their academic and personal well-being. These adolescents' lived experiences include emotional, psychological, and social problems caused by familial instability, all of which can have impact on their academic performance and personal growth.

Academic well-being is the general state of a student's mental, emotional, and physical health in relation to their educational experience. It includes elements like motivation, stress management, learning satisfaction, and a healthy lifestyle, all of which contribute to effective learning and personal development. In this study, four themes in the impact of broken families in

academic well-being emerged : out of focus sometimes, difficulty in meeting academic needs and optimism.

Optimism is an internal aspect of psychological characteristics (Xue, 2021). Despite the negative effects of being part of a broken family, there are still positive ones. This is the positive view of most of the participants, such as Participant 8 who stated that although being a broken family had a big impact on him, he realized that he had to work hard in school and work hard in life because he wanted to repay his mother's sacrifices for him.

Usually, students from broken homes' personal well-being suffers as a result of emotional pain, social issues, and barriers to academic progress, however, in this study, when participants were asked, three themes emerged (see Figure 10 below): resilience, self-discipline and strength in character.

CONCLUSIONS

The study highlights the multifaceted experiences of senior high school students from broken families, revealing both the emotional and academic challenges they face. These students navigate complex feelings including acceptance of their family situation, confusion, and moments of self-pity, which deeply influence their perspectives and coping mechanisms. Their emotional journeys underscore the inherent difficulties linked with family disruption and how these perceptions shape their day-to-day lives.

Academically, the students confront significant obstacles such as weak parental support and unmet school needs, often feeling isolated or lonely in their pursuit of education. These factors contribute to a challenging learning environment that tests their perseverance and commitment to their studies. Loneliness and lack of guidance exacerbate the struggle to stay motivated and meet academic expectations, impacting their overall performance. On a personal level, the students express a profound longing for love and attention, coupled with insecurities and financial burdens that weigh heavily on their emotional well-being. Despite these hardships, a notable positive outlook emerges among some participants, demonstrating resilience and hope that propel them forward even amidst adversity. Financial stress remains a pervasive concern that influences both their academic and personal lives in substantial ways.

The coping strategies employed by these students are diverse and resourceful, reflecting their determination to overcome adversity. Engaging in work, sports, recreation, communication, prayer, and effective time management illustrates how they balance their multiple responsibilities. These strategies not only help them manage stress but also provide a pathway to maintain focus on their goals and foster personal growth.

Support systems play a crucial role in the students' ability to navigate their difficult circumstances. Family support, characterized by love, advice, and financial assistance, remains foundational despite the challenges posed by a broken family structure. Friends offer emotional comfort, companionship, and shared advice, which help mitigate feelings of loneliness and foster a sense of belonging amidst turmoil. Community involvement provides material support and guidance, serving as an additional safety net for these students. This broader social network supplements the immediate family and friend groups, showing the importance of collective support in sustaining academic and emotional well-being. Likewise, the school system contributes emotional support, counseling, and scholarships, highlighting the essential role educational institutions play in supporting vulnerable student populations.

The impact of these challenges on academic performance is palpable, with participants reporting moments of being out of focus. Such effects underscore the difficulty of balancing emotional distress with academic demands, often leading to struggles in meeting school requirements. However, an underlying optimism persists, indicating a resilient spirit determined to succeed despite setbacks. In terms of personal development, the students exhibit significant growth in resilience, self-discipline, and strength of character. These traits are cultivated through their lived experiences and coping efforts, revealing a capacity to adapt and thrive in spite of adversity. The development of such qualities not only supports their current academic endeavors but also prepares them for future challenges beyond school.

The findings of this study have significant implications. They highlight the necessity for continued and enhanced support systems within families, schools, and communities to foster resilience and promote academic success among students from broken family backgrounds.

The findings imply that focused interventions and organized support programs suited to the specific requirements of students from broken families should be designed. Educational institutions should acknowledge the multifaceted nature of these students' issues and provide proactive counseling services, mentorship programs, and financial support to meet both their psychological and material requirements. These approaches can help to establish a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, reducing feelings of alienation and increasing academic engagement. The findings also signify the need of strengthening family relations, especially in broken family systems.

Finally, this study highlights the resilience and personal growth demonstrated by students who have experienced family disturbance, implying that adversity can be a driver for the development of key life skills such as self-discipline, time management, and emotional regulation. Educational and community programs can strengthen this resilience by providing opportunities for skill development, leadership development, and peer support, allowing these students to turn their challenges into strengths that not only improve their academic performance but also prepare them for future challenges.

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