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A Comparative Study of Academic Performance Between Students of Divorced and Intact Parents

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Abstract: This study is part of a series of studies assessing the effects of divorce on children's mental health. In particular, it focuses on school health through the grades of pupils in a number of schools in the city of Kinshasa. The aim is to compare the school performance of children of separated parents with that of children whose parents live together. The aim of this comparison is to identify the nature of the effect of divorce on pupils' academic success. To achieve this objective, a survey (using a questionnaire to identify the children of separated parents and documentary techniques) was carried out among 241 pupils in the final year of secondary education at two schools in the city of Kinshasa (Groupe Scolaire du Mont-Amba and Collège Saint Barthelemy). The results of the study revealed that 47.7% of the subjects surveyed had experienced their parents' divorce. This divorce had considerably affected their academic success, as their school marks were significantly lower than those of subjects whose parents had not separated. This negative effect of divorce calls for specific measures at family and school level to enable children to regain their academic equilibrium by achieving good grades. This study has the particularity of having results from a representative sample compared with other studies carried out in the DRC. It also documented the impact of parental separation on school performance, using a comparative approach instead of opinion questionnaires. We suggest that parents put their

children's interests first in all their vital decisions. They should also ensure the quality and nature of educational follow-up in the event of divorce. In view of our results, it would be desirable to extend the study to other provinces of the DRC, in order to get a general picture of the effects of divorce on pupils' academic success.

Keywords: parental divorce, parental separation, educational success, children, high schools.

Introduction

The main mission of school education is to transform people through the knowledge imparted in schools. Indeed, it is seen as a tool enabling the world's countries to considerably improve the quality of life of their citizens and to develop. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the State has assigned the Congolese school the mission of ensuring the harmonious, high-quality training of Congolese man, making him a responsible citizen, endowed with high civic sensitivity, useful to himself and to society, capable of assimilating his culture and the requirements of a democratic state to promote the country's development (Enguta Mwenzi, 2020; Direction des Programmes scolaires et Matériel didactique, 2011).

In order to evaluate the achievement of these objectives, the education authorities have introduced internal and external school assessments (National Primary School Leaving Test and State Examination). These assessments give rise to two possible outcomes for students: academic success and academic failure. Academic success is the successful completion of a course of study, justified by the achievement of learning objectives in a given school system. As a general rule, academic success is characterised by mastery of knowledge. The academic failure, on the other hand, is a situation in which educational objectives are not achieved. It is therefore the gap between expected and achieved results (Enguta Mwenzi & Bayenga Ndibeyang, 2023).

The academic failure, like the academic success, is influenced by two types of factors. There are endogenous and exogenous factors. Factors internal to the learner include cognitive, socio-affective and conative factors (Enguta et al., 2022b; Enguta Mwenzi & Bayenga Ndibeyang, 2023; Enguta Mwenzi & Andia Moyamani, 2023). Cognitive factors refer to intelligence, cognitive development, initial representations, attention, memorisation, metacognitive ability and so on. Socio-affective factors, on the other hand, refer to emotions and personal and social values. Finally, conative factors refer to motivation, cognitive styles, learning styles etc. (Enguta et al., 2022a; Bofula Lobebe et al., 2023).

The classroom context, teaching characteristics, family and societal context illustrate the environmental factors that influence school performance. With regard to external factors, research has shown that family context plays a very important role in academic success or failure compared to another external factor (Alokpo, 2021; 2023). Within this family context, studies have shown that the socioeconomic status, cultural capital, family social capital, parental practices and relationship with the written word are factors that particularly determine students' academic performance (Graovac, 2022; Augustijn, 2023). The school situation becomes more complicated when parents' divorce. In other words, parental divorce can have a considerable impact on children's school life. Several studies carried out outside the DRC have attempted to demonstrate the damaging effects of divorce on children's academic well-being.

In the DRC, studies assessing the effects of divorce on children's school life are very rare. For this reason, the present study sets out to fill this gap in the literature by seeking to specify the nature of the repercussions of divorce on children's success at school. Such a study is important because it enables parents to understand the dangers that await their children in the event of divorce. It can therefore contribute to parents' awareness of the psychological consequences of divorce on children, and lead them to appropriate psychological follow-up in such circumstances.

Research Problem

In the DRC, marriage is generally considered to be a union between two people of the opposite sex, who also swear fidelity and love to each other for the rest of their lives. Thus, the two spouses are called upon to love, support and live together until death do them part. However, not all marriages reach this level, and many turn sour even before death intervenes. Indeed, many marriages do not stand up to the vagaries of everyday life and are destined to break up. This breakdown, known as divorce, it demonstrates the flaws in the educational and family system. Indeed, in our society, divorce has become just as real and central an institution as marriage. The figures bear irrefutable witness to this: 1 in 3 marriages ends in divorce, and 40% of remarriages end in divorce (Le Forner, 2022).

In addition to its worldwide scope, the divorce is a highly complex phenomenon, since it can inaugurate a variety of trajectories, cause break-ups and serious harm, as well as providing examples of resilience. While the immediate post-divorce period is often marked by major disruptions for children (linked in particular to the reorganisation of the pace and conditions of living and housing, persistent tensions between the parents, the problem of conflicting loyalties, impoverishment of the household, etc.), the long term is likely to enable family relationships to stabilise and heal (Martin, 2007; Le Forner, 2022). In this respect, several studies cited by Haux and Platt (2020) point to the great diversity of children's reactions to their parents' divorce. Some children are able to cope with the separation process, while others experience a period of distress before regaining their equilibrium after two or three years. Others suffer long-term consequences. In short, parental conflict is a risk factor for children that must be taken into account in terms of their health and development (Keller & Lafont, 2020). Separations can have long-term effects on children's health. Of all the aspects of child health affected by divorce, we look at school well-being.

Studies assessing the effects of divorce on children's educational well-being do not produce convergent results. Some studies conclude that separation has no effect on the educational success of children of divorced parents (Haux & Platt, 2021; Raley & Sweeney, 2020; Sassler & Lichter, 2020), or only a very slight effect (Einiö et al., 2022). Other studies, on the other hand, find a negative effect of parental separation on professional and educational success (Arat et al., 2022; Le Forner, 2022). In this regard, Archambault cited by van Dijk et al. (2022) asserts that regardless of social background, the break-up of the parental couple influences children's school life in one way or another. Indeed, the divorce is associated with lower academic achievement in children. Parental separation before the child reaches the age of majority reduces the duration of his or her studies from six months to over a year on average. The educational advantage of growing up in a culturally and socially advantaged family seems to be greatly diminished in the event of family disunion (van Dijk et al., 2022). These authors also point out that young people faced with separation and divorce leave the parental home earlier, one to two years earlier, and form couples earlier (which may explain the potential fragility of these early couples).

On the other hand, they do not experience significantly greater difficulties in finding employment than other members of their age group (especially girls). Clearly, intergenerational conflicts play a very important role in these earlier exits from the parental household (especially in cases of family reorganization). Archambault, citing van Dijk et al. (2022), also shows that the desire for early independence is a key factor in the decision to stop studying. "Wanting to earn a living" is the decisive reason for leaving school for 66% of the low-graduation population. On the other hand, very few of them cite their "disrupted" family trajectory to explain their school career (5% in single-parent families and 10% in blended families). However, Paul Archambault does not overlook the effects of economic insecurity. He also points out that nearly 40% of the lower academic performance at baccalaureate level of children from dissociated families could be attributable to the reduced economic transfer between generations (pocket money, support for book purchases, etc.).

The results of Sun et al. (2020) are in line with those of Archambault. Indeed, Sun et al. (2020) confirm that the marital break-up negatively affects school performance, but add that the differences are often already visible in the years preceding the actual break-up. For these authors, the divorce is associated with a lower probability of obtaining a high school diploma for girls born in wedlock. In the same vein, Zhao et al. (2022) support the previous authors' point of view, reporting that adolescents who experience a divorce experience a significant drop in grade point average and an increase in the number of failed courses in the same year.

Fadaei-kenarsary et al. (2023) reached a different conclusion, finding that the transition from a married to a single-parent family was not associated with a decline in adolescents' level of school engagement in the same year. In the DRC, studies highlighting the impact of divorce on school life are rare. In most cases, they are based on opinion questionnaires without adopting a comparative approach (Kitumba & Enguta, 2022). What's more, these studies do not produce convergent results. For this reason, the present study sets out to fill this gap in the literature by comparing the school marks of children from divorced families with those of pupils from non-divorced families. To this end, two schools in Kinshasa were targeted. These are Groupe Scolaire du Mont-Amba and Collège Saint Barthelemy. In this way, the study will reveal which of the trends identified in previous studies is true in the Congolese context.

Research Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study was to assess the nature of the effect of parental divorce on the academic success of children enrolled in some schools in the city of Kinshasa. This general objective gave rise to the following question: Faced with this question, the following hypothesis was put forward: the divorce would have a negative effect on the academic success of children enrolled in some schools in the city of Kinshasa. In other words, the children of separated parents would perform less well at school than those living with their parents.

Research Methodology

General Background

The survey method in order to collect the study data in the target schools was used. This method was supported by a questionnaire to identify the children of divorced parents, which were administered to pupils in the target schools. This method was also supported by the documentary technique. The documentary technique enabled obtaining the academic results of the pupils in the schools targeted in the study. The school performances taken into account in this study were those relating to the results of the first semester of the 2021-2022 school year.

Sample / Participants / Group

The study focused on the population of students in the final year of secondary education at the two schools targeted in the study (Groupe Scolaire du Mont-Amba and Collège Saint Barthelemy). Specifically, these were 5th and 6th grade humanities students from these two schools enrolled for the 2021–2022 school year, with a total enrolment of around 482 subjects. Groupe Scolaire du Mont-Amba is an application school of the University of Kinshasa. It is located on the premises of the University of Kinshasa in the commune of Lemba. It provides education at three levels (nursery, primary and secondary). At secondary level, it organises the following streams: Commercial and Management, Literary (Latin-philo), Scientific (Chemistry-Biology and Math-Physics) and Pedagogical (General Pedagogy). The Collège Saint Barthelemy is located within the Saint Barthelemy parish in the commune

of Masina. It is a private Catholic school offering the following courses of study: Scientific (Chemistry-Biology), Technical (Business & IT) and Literary (Latin-Philosophy).

In terms of the study population, there were 286 pupils in the Groupe Scolaire du Mont-Amba (144 in the 5th year of the humanities and 142 in the 6th year of the humanities). At Collège Saint Barthelemy, there were 196 pupils, divided into 94 for the 5th year of the humanities and 102 for the 6th year of the humanities. From this population, a representative (simple random) sample of 241 subjects was drawn. The number of 241 was determined by our concern to have at least 50% of the population in the sample, due to the small size of the subjects concerned by the study. The drawing of lots using the ballot box technique was based on two modalities of our sample (school and level of education). Our sample varied according to the following socio-demographic variables: (1) school, (2) level of education or class, (3) gender and (4) age. At school level, we have 143 subjects from Groupe Scolaire du Mont-Amba versus 98 from Collège Saint Barthelemy. In terms of grade level, there were 119 students in the 5th year of humanities versus 122 in the 6th year of humanities. In terms of gender, our sample was made up of 130 boys versus 111 girls. Finally, in terms of age, there were 91 subjects aged 14–15 and 150 aged 16–18.

Instrument and Procedures

Two techniques were used in order to collect the study data. These were the questionnaire to identify the children of divorced parents and the documentary technique.

The questionnaire to identify children of divorced parents. The purpose of the questionnaire was to identify the children of divorced parents and to enable the division in the sub-study students according to whether or not their parents were divorced. To this end, the questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part concerned the students' identity. The second part related to the single question identifying the children of divorced parents. The question was worded as follows: Are your parents divorced? Yes or No.

Documentary technique. The documentary technique was used to obtain the school grades of the pupils targeted in the study in the first semester of the 2021-2022 school year through the points charts.

Data Analysis

Three statistical tests were used to process the study data. These were the Kolmogorov Smirnov test, Student's t-test and chi-square. The Kolmogorov Smirnov test was used to study the shape of the distribution of academic achievement scores. The Student's t-test was used to compare the school grades of students whose parents are divorced with those of students whose parents live together. It was also used to study the effect of socio-demographic variables on the school grades of the subjects surveyed.

Research Results

Overall study results

The following tables present the results of the study according to two study modalities: (1) school grades and (2) student enrolment of divorced parents.

Table 1

Results related to subjects' academic performance

Statistical indices	School performances
Mean	70,45
Standard error of the mean	0,69
Median	65,00
Mode	64,20
Deviation	8,13
Variance	66,16

Source: author 's own development.

To make easier the reading of the results recorded in Table 1, one referred to Ngub'Usim Mpey-Nka et al. (2016) classification of the quality of success in school assessments. Thus, three categories of pass quality were obtained: (1) category 1 (best quality pass): school marks with at least 60% of points; (2) category 2 (medium quality pass): school marks located in the interval 55 to 59%; (3) category 3 (low quality pass): school marks located in the interval 50 to 54% of points.

A reading of the data recorded in Table 1 revealed that the average of the subjects surveyed in the school assessments is 70.45. If situating this average within the Ngub'Usim Mpey-Nka et al. (2016) the scale for interpreting the quality of achievement, it is possible to deduce that it falls within the 60%+ range corresponding to higher-quality academic achievement. In other words, it can be assumed that students in sub study schools do better on assessments. From this success, it was deduced that the objectives set by teachers for these two years of study (5th and 6th years of the humanities) were achieved without difficulty.

Table 2

Identification of students with divorced parents

Statistical indices	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
Divorce of parents		
Yes	115	47,7
No	126	52,3
Total	241	100,0

Source: author 's own development

The results in Table 2 show that students whose parents are divorced are less represented in the sample than those whose parents are in a couple. Specifically, students whose parents are divorced represent 47.7% of the sample, compared with 52.3% of subjects whose parents are in a couple.

Table 3

Students of divorced parents by school

Divorce of parents	GSMA	CSB	Total	
			f	%
Yes	65	50	115	47,7
No	78	48	126	52,3
Total	143	98	241	100,0

Legend: GSMA: Groupe Scolaire du Mont-Amba, CSB: Collège Saint Barthelemy

Source: author 's own development

Table 3 shows that there are more subjects whose parents are divorced at Collège Saint Barthelemy (51% or 50/98 subjects) than at Groupe Scolaire du Mont Amba (45.5% or 65/143 subjects).

Table 4

Students of divorced parents by level of education

Divorce of parents	5th year	6th year	Total	
			F	%
Yes	62	53	115	47,7
No	57	69	126	52,3
Total	119	122	241	100,0

Source: author 's own development

Table 4 shows that there are more subjects whose parents are divorced in the fifth year of the humanities (52.1% or 62/119 subjects) than in the sixth year of the humanities (43.4% or 53/122 subjects).

Study of the normality of the distribution of school results

It is recommended that any researcher using metric data in his study should test the normality of the distributions relating to the results of the study. This test is very important, as the choice and type of statistical tests to be used in differential analysis depend on the shape or normality of the distributions of the results. Several tests can be used to test the hypothesis of distribution normality. These include: the chi-square test, the asymmetry technique, the voussure test, the Kolmogorov Smirnov test, etc. In the case of the presented work, the Kolmogorov Smirnov test was chosen for its practicality and ease of interpretation. The related indices are shown in the following table.

Table 5

Study of the normality of the study distribution (p.0.05)

Statistical indices	School performances
Kolmogorov Smirnov z	1,19
Sig. (associated probability)	0,03
Decision	Normal

Source: author 's own development

Table 5 shows that the probability associated with the distribution of school results (0.03) is statistically higher than the critical probability (0.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted that there was no difference between this distribution and a theoretically normal distribution. Thus, it can be concluded that the distribution of school grades was normal. This situation calls for the use of parametric tests in the differential analysis of results.

Differential analysis of results

The aim of this section was to assess the effect of socio-demographic variables on the study results. This analysis was carried out at the level of school grades only. To do this, Student's t-test was used.

Table 6

Effect of sociodemographic variables on school grades

Variables	Statistical indices		
	T	Sig	Decision
School	0,35	0,45	Non significant
Class	0,36	0,52	Non significant
Sex	0,25	0,09	Non significant
Age	0,31	0,08	Non significant

Legend: t: Student's t-test, sig: significance

Source: author 's own development

Table 6 shows that the study's socio-demographic variables (school, class, gender and age) had no influence on the school grades of the subjects surveyed ($p>0.05$).

The influence of divorce on academic success

In this part of the work, the concern is to assess the impact of the divorce on the academic achievement of the students involved in the study. For this reason, the academic results of subjects whose parents are divorced with those of students whose parents are still in a relationship were used. This comparison was preceded by the presence of school results according to the presence or absence of divorce.

Table 7

School results according to parents' divorce

Divorce of parents	Statistical indices	
	Mean	Deviation
Yes	59,84	4,91
No	81,16	3,02

Table 7 shows that subjects whose parents are divorced perform less well at school than those whose parents are still in a relationship. These differences are also observed when situating these scores on the Ngub'Usim Mpey-Nka et al. (2016) scale for interpreting school grades. Specifically, the grades of subjects whose parents are divorced fall within the 55-59% range corresponding to good academic achievement. On the other hand, the marks of subjects whose parents are in a relationship fall into the 60%+ range corresponding to better quality achievement. From this reading of the results, it can be concluded that the divorce has a negative impact on students' academic performance. To be valid, this numerical difference must be statistically confirmed. This is why the results of these two groups were statistically compared in the following lines. As normality is observed in the distribution of school grades, Student's t-test was used to compare the school results of these two groups (students of divorced parents and students of parents in a couple). Indeed, the choice of this test is justified by the fact that it

is currently considered a test that can be applied to both small and large samples (Dancey, & Reidy, 2023).

Table 8

Influence of divorce on school grades

t-test for equality of means	
t	Sig.
6,32	0,00

Table 8 also shows that the associated probability (0.00), obtained by comparing the school marks of students whose parents are divorced with those of students whose parents are living together, is statistically lower than the critical probability (0.05). It can be therefore concluded that divorce has a negative effect on students' academic success, as students whose parents live together achieve better grades than those whose parents are divorced.

Discussion

The results of the study reveal that in the sample, 47.7% of students have divorced parents. This proportion is very worrying and demonstrates the extent of the phenomenon. Moreover, our results go hand in hand with Le Forner's (2022) conclusion regarding the significant increase in the proportion of individuals whose parents are separated. For this author, nearly four million children have separated parents. These results go hand in hand with those of Gastebois (2012), who found that over 30% of marriages in France often end in divorce. They are also in line with those of Ngonzo and Enguta Mwenzi (2022), who found that over 40% of children in some schools in the DRC were divorced. The unavailability of statistics in the DRC does not allow relating this divorce rate among the study subjects to the rate for the entire Congolese population.

As far as our study hypothesis is concerned, it's clear that the divorce is a scourge that threatens many households. It is not without consequences for children's school careers. Indeed, when comparing the school marks of pupils of divorced parents with those of children whose parents are in a relationship, it can be found that pupils whose parents are in a relationship perform very well compared with those whose parents are divorced. In other words, students whose parents are divorced perform less well at school than those whose parents are in a relationship.

These results go hand in hand with those of several studies (Le Forner, 2022; Arat et al., 2022) where it was found that the breakdown of a marriage negatively affects children's school performance. Indeed, whatever the reason for parental separation, this situation is not without consequences for pupils' school health, for the simple reason that it considerably affects the children's psyche. As a result, these children's psychological state is affected, and it's only natural that they should be unable to mobilise their school skills, since good mental health is a determining factor in mastering school activities. These results confirm our first hypothesis.

These results call into question those of Fadaei-kenarsary et al. (2023), who found that the transition from a married to a single-parent family was not associated with a decline in adolescents' level of school engagement in the same year. They also call into question the results of several studies (Haux & Platt, 2021; Raley & Sweeney, 2020; Sassler & Lichter, 2020) where no effect of parental separation was found in terms of children's academic achievement. The discrepancy between these results and ours can be explained by the quality of psychological care offered to children of divorced

parents in the USA compared with the DRC. In the USA, there are several psychological structures offering psychosocial support to children separated from their parents (Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2021). These structures are also present in schools, whereas in the DRC, there are no psychological structures providing care for separated children.

As for the confirmation of the negative effect of divorce on children's school performance observed in the study, there are several possible reasons for this. Firstly, the divorce means that the child loses a parent who, in the systemic approach, is essential to his or her psychological equilibrium and optimal development. With this balance disrupted, it's perfectly normal for the child to have trouble concentrating and paying attention. In this context, he becomes very pensive and lost in thought. With his attention disturbed, his performance is bound to decline.

Another explanation is linked to the loss of a parent who used to provide educational support for the family. If the child is in his father's care, he loses his mother, who in the Congolese educational context is an important player in the educational follow-up process. The mother's move can only affect the quality of the educational follow-up, and put the child in difficult situations linked to the ineffectiveness of the maternal substitute in terms of educational follow-up. The most logical consequence is a drop in the child's school grades. This argument is also raised by Harkness et al. (2020).

In a context where the child is under the care of his mother, he loses an important player who, in the Congolese context, is responsible for taking care of all the family's needs. Moreover, taking care of the family's father allows the mother to have enough time for educational follow-up. With the father having moved away, the mother is forced to fend for herself or work to ensure her independence and care for her children. As a result, she no longer has enough time for the children's education. As a result, the children's performance at school is affected. This problem of parental involvement in educational follow-up after separation was also raised by Le Forner (2022).

When controlling for the influence of sociodemographic variables (gender, age, year of study and school), it was found that no moderating variable had a significant influence on the academic grades of the study subjects. With regard to the lack of influence of gender, our results refuting the influence of gender on school grades are in line with the results of Enguta Mwenzi and Bayenga Ndibeyang (2023), where there was no difference between girls and boys in terms of academic achievement. The lack of age influence, grade and school on school grades supports the conclusion of Bofula Lobebe et al. (2023) that these variables are determinants of school success.

Conclusions and Implications

Parental separation is a situation that disturbs children's psychology, and can have varying impacts on their school performance. With a view to specifying the nature of the effect of parental separation on children's school performance, an attempt was made in order to compare the school performance of children of separated parents with that of children of non-separated parents. Two secondary schools in the city of Kinshasa for this study were targeted. These were Groupe Scolaire du Mont-Amba and Collège Saint Barthelemy. Specifically, an identification questionnaire to 241 students in the final year of secondary education at the two above-mentioned schools were administered.

The results of the study revealed a prevalence rate of parental separation of 47.7% in the sample. This rate demonstrated the sheer scale of the phenomenon of parental separation. Comparing the school results of pupils of separated parents with those of pupils of non-separated parents, it was found that pupils of separated parents performed poorly at school compared with other children. These results clearly demonstrate the negative effect of divorce on children's academic success. In view of these results, it was suggested that parents first of all always put their children's interests first in all their

various life decisions. Secondly, that they pay close attention to the quality and nature of educational follow-up in the event of divorce, as poor educational follow-up can exasperate the negative effects of separation on children's school life. Parents can also consult psychologists to monitor their children's progress in the event of divorce. Finally, it was suggested that Congolese schools effectively organise a school psychology service to provide psychological support for pupils whose parents have separated. This support is important to reduce the negative effects of divorce.

Suggestions for Future Research

Unlike studies on the effects of divorce on children's school life carried out in the DRC (Ngonzo & Enguta Mwenzi, 2022), the present study was based on a representative sample. In addition, this study made it possible to document the effects of divorce on educational success in the school context, using a comparative approach instead of opinion questionnaires. Moreover, in studies carried out in the Congolese context, the concern to identify the divorce rate in samples is not present. The presented study has attempted to fill this gap by providing indicators of the divorce rate of parents based on samples of their schoolchildren. This rate can be an important estimate for understanding the scale of this scourge.

This study had several limitations linked to the study population, which took into account only two secondary schools in the city of Kinshasa. In this context, it would be interesting to extend the population to several schools in the city of Kinshasa in order to fully understand the effects of divorce on students' academic success. In addition, one focused on the overall trend in school grades, without taking into account areas of study (languages, mathematics, etc.). It would be interesting for future studies to be based on the academic success of children of separated parents in these two areas, in order to identify the area of learning most affected by divorce. There is also the possibility of extending the study to the various provinces of the DRC, as this study was limited to the context of the capital city of Kinshasa. Indeed, it would be possible to obtain different results if focused on the educational success of children of separated parents in remote areas of the DRC.

Finally, in this study, the focus solely on educational success was chosen, whereas the divorce can affect several antecedents of educational success. It would be desirable for future studies to look at other factors in children's schooling that may be affected by parental separation. Examples include school motivation, school engagement, school well-being, educational follow-up, etc.

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