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THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN'S ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

By  
Rachel Chimienti

A Major Paper  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
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Windsor, Ontario, Canada  
2004

The Effects of Divorce on Children's Academic Achievement

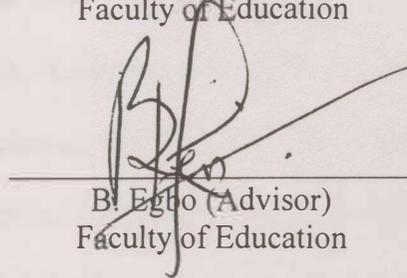
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## ABSTRACT

Given the prevalence of divorce in society, there is great concern for the well-being of children involved in these marital disruptions. This issue has become increasingly problematic for schools, in that teachers, school counselors and school officials recognize that there is need to provide practical strategies and coping skills for these children as well as those individuals that deal with them daily.

This literature study set out to examine the impact of divorce on children in relation to their school performance, particularly in the area of academic achievement. Studies have determined that many variables associated with divorce had an effect on children's academic achievement. In general, the results of these studies suggest that while divorce on its own can be a factor in children's lower academic achievement, variables such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, conflict prior to the divorce, and remarriage also have an impact on the level of children's academic success. Unfortunately, the results of this study show that there are limitations in the intervention programs that are implemented within schools because related studies do not often provide practical strategies to guide teachers who are involved with these children's education. To address this problem, a model of practical school based strategies is hereby proposed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## DEDICATIONS

This major paper is dedicated to my parents who provided me with the strength and constant encouragement to pursue my studies, and the courage and determination to strive for my academic and personal goals.

To my husband Domenic, who provided me with support, unconditional love and patience while obtaining my degree. Thank-you for helping me with the difficult tasks and providing me with just the right coaching I needed.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### A. General Statement of the Problem

Children experience many challenges throughout their educational careers. Parents, teachers, principals, and family professionals recognize that a child's home environment and family structure has an impact on his or her school performance and success. Over the past twenty-five years, the diversity of family structures has become more evident, most notably the increase of divorce within family dynamics. A substantial number of divorce involve couples with children. Sixty- one percent of families in which both the husband and wife are divorcing from a first marriage have children less than 18 years of age, (Rodriguez and Arnold, 1998).

Teachers in contemporary classrooms will encounter many children of divorce and must be aware of the students' needs relating to their family situation, as well as the difficulties associated with divorce that they may experience. Statistics show that almost 50% of marriages end in divorce, and by the time today's children reach age 18, 45% will live in a divorced family in Canada and the United States (Mulholand, 1991). Given these astounding statistics, researchers have devoted considerable attention to investigating the effects of parental separation and divorce on children's academic success.

Due to the increase of divorce in society, many studies have reported that children exhibit deterioration in academic performance and behaviour (in and out of the classroom), as a result of the emotional challenges they experience from the divorce or separation. It has been suggested that children from divorced families are on average,

somewhat worse off than children who live in intact families (Jeynes, 2000). These children have more difficulty in school, more behaviour problems, more negative self-concepts, more problems with peers, and more trouble getting along with their parents. The psychological and social disadvantages can significantly interfere with the students' ability to reach their full potential for success in school. Academic achievement is a major influence in a child's life. A myriad of research findings support the suggestion that the academic achievement of children of divorce is lower than that of the children whose parents are neither divorced or separated (Cherian, 1989). Researchers and educators understand that school becomes more important to children whose families are in transition because it offers them structure, stability, and continuity during a time when their home life is being disrupted. It is imperative that more research be done to provide school systems and educators with a better understanding and insights of the effects of divorce on children. In addition, such research should seek to discover practical learning strategies for children of divorce in order to improve their academic achievements while experiencing family disruption. This literature study examines the impact of divorce on children during their school years and, more specifically, the effects of divorce on their academic achievement.

### B. Significance of the Study

The aim of the literature study is to examine groups of children from divorced families most of whom are at increased risk of school failure. It is imperative that information regarding children of divorce and academic achievement be available, not only to provide information for researchers, but also to assist school-based professionals that deal with children. This study will be most beneficial to teachers and school officials,

as these professionals and practitioners deal with children on a daily basis. Teachers these days encounter an overwhelming array of divorce-generated behaviour in their classrooms that can range from minor disruptive behaviour , bullying and to sullen withdrawal, and to failing students (Nisivoccia, 1997). Though many teachers respond to the increased needs of these children, they are often uneasy about it. Despite school support, teachers are often unsure or relatively lost as to how to handle such students. However, most teachers are very open to suggestions, and strategies from outside support networks, to help them in their daily interactions with children of divorce, as well as their parents. Educators need substantial in-service training that provides them with information on the scope of divorce in contemporary society and its emotional, social, and academic effects on children.

It is important that information regarding the effects of divorce on children's school achievement be studied so that school counselors, teachers, and parents can collaborate in their efforts to help these at-risk children succeed at school. The ever increasing rise in the number of children from divorced households has generated concern among educators, mental health professionals, researchers and society as a whole. With schools and teachers often being blamed for students' low test scores and grades, one wonders what role changes in family structure may play in their academic measures. If it can be concluded that rising divorce rates may have an impact upon student academic achievement, then parents and educators alike may need to reexamine their roles for the purposes of finding out how to meet the needs of these children. (Ham, 2003)

In addition, teachers must be further educated on not only the academic needs of the children, but also the emotional and psychological struggles they may face. It is essential that teachers involved with children of divorce accommodate these children accordingly, through a variety of academic programs, involvement in activities that can help kids deal with their concerns and difficulties, a more understanding parent-teacher relationship, and giving these kids the opportunities to succeed in school. Studies like the one presented here, are significant in helping teachers and other school professionals in gaining the increased knowledge they need to provide a positive school environment for children of divorce.

### C. Definition of Terms

In the context of this study, several key concepts are defined as follows:

*Marital disruption:* Child experiencing his/her parents demonstrating signs of a disrupted marriage, and /or who have separated or divorced. (Kinard & Reinherz, 1996)

*Parental Divorce:* Parents of the child are legally divorced and are living in separate residences. (Hanson, 1999)

*Parental/Marital Separation:* Any marriage in which the marital couple is separated, but not divorced, from each other, each living in separate residences (Jeynes, 2000)

*Single-parent family:* The child lives with one parent, due to a divorce, separation, or death of another parent. This also includes no cohabitation with another adult. (e.g. Remarriage) (Jeynes, 2000)

*Intact families:* In intact families, (non-disrupted, two-parent) child lives with both biological/adoptive parents, and has never experienced marital disruption. (Ham, 2003)

*Non-intact families:* Child lives in a home with a single parent as a result of a divorce or separation, or lives in a reconstituted home, as a result of a divorce or separation.

(Ham, 2003)

*Divorce Remarriage:* a child whose natural parents have been divorced and the custodial parent has remarried. (Jeynes, 2000)

*Reconstituted home/family:* There has been a remarriage by one parent following a divorce or a death of a spouse; the new spouse lives in the residence of the child of the previously single parent. In some cases, the new spouse may have children of their own from a previous marriage, and one or more of those children may also reside in the new residence. (Ham, 2003)

*Recently disrupted family:* Marital disruption, including separation or divorce, has occurred for the child in the early years of schooling (i.e. JK), and/or within the same year that some studies were conducted. (Hanson, 1999)

*Predisrupted family:* Ongoing marital disruptions (e.g. financial difficulties, and/or physical and emotional abuse of spouse) before an actual separation or divorce occurs. (Jeynes, 2002)

*Cohabitation:* Two people not legally married, but living in the same residence, under common law status according to the laws of that state, province, or country. (Jeynes, 2002)

*Academic achievement:* Grades from a child's school records, results of standardized tests, and aptitude tests scores in accordance with grade level expectations for the purpose of academic achievement standards. (Hanson, 1999)

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Over the past twenty-five years, divorce rates have increased dramatically. During the late 1970s and 1980s, researchers began to examine the effects of divorce on children, with particular attention to its impact on their academic achievement. Much of the research indicated that, with respect to children from divorced families, there were many negative factors associated with this type of family dynamic. Additional factors contribute to the school performance of the child after divorce. These include variables such as gender of the single parent, timing of the separation in relation to the age and grade level of the child, the custody arrangements after the divorce, and the family's socioeconomic status (Bisnaire, Firestone, & Rynard, 1990). In addition, some of the research reviewed contend that the divorce itself *per se*, is not the primary influence on children's academic achievement, and that factors such as those previously mentioned, should be considered when examining a child's low academic achievement (Mulholand, 1991). Throughout the review of the literature, some of the factors associated with divorce will be further examined in an attempt to explore and better understand the negative effects divorce has on children.

Over 1 million children in the United States and Canada experience parental divorce annually. Although some children adapt well to this transition, approximately 20% to 25% develop mental health or adjustment problems twice the rate experienced by children from continuously married families (Winslow, Wolchik, and Sander, 2004). Meta-analyses of studies conducted between 1950 and 1999 indicated that children from

divorced homes function more poorly than children from intact married parents across a variety of domains, including academic achievement. (Amato, 2001)

A longitudinal study was conducted by Wadsby and Svedin (1996) in Sweden, which has similar divorce rates as other industrial countries, such as the United States and Canada. The study group consisted of children of divorced parents who were tracked for up to five years after parental divorce. Each child was matched with two classmates of the same sex from non-divorced homes born at approximately the same time (control group) with different socioeconomic status. The records of students' academic achievement were available through school records such as report cards. Results of standardized and aptitude tests were also collected to compile results for the study. The study found that the scores of the children of divorce and the controls were similar, but parental divorce did show significantly depressed outcomes in the final academic achievements of students. The study also showed differences in the mental health of children of divorce compared to children of intact homes in a normal population. The international research academic aptitude and achievement scores were reported to be inferior among children of divorced parents compared to children from intact homes. The study indicated that deterioration in school performance was one of the most consistent outcomes associated with parental divorce or separation. In terms of gender, boys displayed less optimal performance than did girls.

Ham (2003) also reviewed studies comparing the effects of divorce on academic achievement in other cultures, outside of Canada and the United States. Researchers often focus on the statistic that most marriages will end in divorce, resulting in many children feeling the negative effects of that marital disruption. However, it was interesting to note

that in some of Ham's research, compared to an American child, a Japanese child is four times more likely to be reared by both parents. It has been argued that the stability of Japanese families and the chaos of American and Canadian families is a major reason that Japanese students are so much more successful in school. (McManus, 1993)

Researchers have recognized that various explanations for lower academic achievement of children from divorced families seemed possible. Also, the fact that the effects of parental divorce could diminish over time may indicate that some other characteristics of disrupted families may have a greater impact on children's academic achievement than the disruption itself (Jared, 1993). The Massachusetts Family Institute (MFI) is an organization that seeks to educate policy makers on the value and importance of marriage and family to society, as well as advance public policies that enhance schools ability to support those values. MFI stands firmly on the premise that to raise successful children, the family dynamic must be of a non-divorced, two-parent nature. According to Willats (1999), decades of research has demonstrated that children do better in traditional families, those homes where both parents are raising and nurturing the child, and where strong parental involvement in their child's academics is supported by both parents. The research reported that children who experienced parental divorce exhibit lower academic achievement, especially in the areas of reading, spelling and math. At the elementary level, 50% of the children of divorced parents experienced almost a year of learning disruptions, which adversely affected their academic achievements for that particular year. (Amato, 1993; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1990)

A study by Cherian (1989) examined the academic achievement of 242 pupils whose parents were divorced and 713 pupils whose parents were married. A

questionnaire was administered to identify the children of divorced or separated parents. The analysis indicated that without control for socioeconomic status, the difference in the mean academic scores of the two groups of children was statistically significant. The academic achievement of children of divorced or separated parents was significantly lower than that of children whose parents were married. However, Cherian (1992) also reported that academic achievement of children was associated with family instability brought about by the broken homes, which were the result of separation. Divorced parents may create an emotional family dynamic which might be associated with depressed school performance, stressing the psychological effects on the child of divorce. The anxieties and quarrels of family members are likely to upset the balance of the child's self control and such pupils attend school worn out, unsettled or emotionally unstable.

A study by the National Association of Elementary and Secondary School Principals and the Kettering Foundation (cited in Bisnaire et al. 1990) revealed that a disproportionately large number of children from single parent families were in low achievement groups and a small proportion of these children in high achievement groups. The researchers noted that, on a number of measures, including reading achievement, there was no significant difference between children of divorced parents and those of intact families. However, they did recognize that the emotional stresses that the divorce may have imposed on the children interrupted the learning process and that this may have led to academic problems.

Interestingly, Reifman, Villa, Amans, Rethinam, Telesca (2001) examined a comprehensive meta-analysis in the 1990's by Amato and Keith (1993) of a variety of

differences in children from divorced versus those from intact families. Children of divorce appeared to experience slightly more negative behavioral outcomes in the 1990's than in the decades earlier. Also, the analysis showed that children's academic achievement was significantly lower than those from intact families, in that decade. Further examination of this issue in the 2000 decade may provide additional evidence regarding any long-term trends.

There is a great deal of research that controls for a variety of variables when conducting studies on the effects of divorce on the academic achievement of children. Much of the research reviewed in this study focused on the following variables when analyzing the literature: age, socioeconomic status, gender of the children, parental conflict prior to divorce and remarriage.

#### *Age*

Some of the relevant research suggests that age appears to be a factor regarding divorce as having a negative effect on children's academic success. It was argued that the negative effects of divorce on the academic achievement of adolescent high school students is significantly greater than students in elementary or middle school. Mednick, Baker, Reznick, & Hocevar (1990) studied the influences of children considered at risk for lowered academic performance because of parental divorce. The outcomes described the performance of the subjects, which were based on teacher ratings of math and reading proficiency at the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade levels. The findings supported the general premise that there was a significant relationship between parental divorce and decline in academic achievement for adolescent high school students.

During life transitions, especially those of adolescence, children may be more vulnerable to emotional distress. For adolescents, parental divorce has also been shown to have potentially grave consequences. (Nisivoccia, 1997) Parental separation and divorce may be a highly stressful life transition for adolescents. This transition appears to lead to heightened vulnerability and risk for emotional difficulties. Because of divorce, these children display patterns of problem behaviour including decreased academic performance.

Ham (2003) examined the impact of family structure on both grade point average and attendance of adolescent high school students. The research showed that adolescents from intact family structures outperform students from other family structures, including divorced households. Students from intact families scored higher on GPA's by nearly 11%, compared to high school seniors from divorced families. The research suggests that part of the problem for lower test scores is because of students' attendance. According to Ham, the high school students from divorced households missed almost 60% more class periods than those from intact families. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), Wojtkiewicz (1993) took particular interest in the living arrangements of children of divorce from birth to the age of 19. Wojtkiewicz discovered that any child that lived in a non-intact family, experienced a decreased chance of graduation.

In another study, Pong and Ju (2000) reported that high school dropout rates were significantly lower for students who resided with both parents than for adolescents of single parents. They suggest that the dropout rate is approximately double for any adolescent student in a family type other than an intact, two-parent family.

Considerable research has been done to determine the long-term effects of divorce on younger children through longitudinal studies. Kinard and Reindberz (1986) conducted a longitudinal study of elementary level students. Their research compared children of divorced parents, primarily from female headed single-parent families, those who experienced a recent marital disruption in the house, versus those children that came from never disrupted, two-parent families. Data was collected at several time periods from multiple sources. Parent questionnaires were completed at preschool screening and at the end of third grade. Teacher questionnaires were administered at the end of third grade. Children were given standardized tests of cognitive ability at preschool screening of academic aptitude and achievement and at grade 4. They found that children who had been through recent divorce within the time of the study, had the lowest scores on language tests and total academic achievement in grade 4. Students from the never disrupted two-parent families had the highest scores on aptitude tests and were rated the most productive.

A Canadian study (Wallerstein, 2000) found that there is a correlation between a student's age at the time of his or her parents' divorce. Wallerstein found that problems for children from divorce seemed to peak around the age of 12, or during middle school. Although much of the research did not examine one specific age group in terms of having the most school-related problems due to divorce, it could be argued however, that adolescents may have the most difficulties in school due to divorce, as they have more challenging academic expectations. Also, adolescents in middle school, or entering high school, tend to deal with many more social and emotional pressures relating to typical

teenage behaviours, and these pressures combined with divorce between parents can be very problematic for their school success.

### *Socioeconomic Status*

Many studies have focused on socioeconomic status as a predictor of schooling outcomes for children of divorce. Many children of divorce end up living with one parent, becoming a single-parent family. Due to limited economic resources, children in single-parent families may have more difficulties. Research suggests that single-parent families headed by mothers have less income than most two-parent families, and there is the common belief that many of the difficulties experienced by children in school are the result of the economic difficulties experienced by the families. (Hughes, 2004) Generally, family income is positively associated with children's well being. Therefore, when children are displaying negative behaviours in school, it may be related to the difficult economic circumstances they are in. Family income is very critical when examining problems children have after parental separation or divorce. Typically, the median income of one-parent homes is less than a third that of two-parent homes, and the lower a family's income, the more vulnerable the student. According to Statistics Canada 2000 Census, the average family income for couples with children is \$62,013. For single parent households, the figures are quite less in comparison. For female lone-parent families with never married children, the average income is \$35, 113. In single parent households where the father is the lone-parent income, the average is \$50,862. In both cases, the average income for single parent families is substantially less than two parent families. (Statistics Canada, 2000)

McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) notes that family disruption affected children's school performance due to the loss of certain resources, with the most significant being the loss of income. Parents with limited incomes have few options concerning the schools their children attend and these parents rarely can afford extra lessons, tutoring, or extracurricular activities. The loss of family economic resources may result in both decreased educational opportunities and the stresses associated with not having money. According to the literature, this is especially true for the 53% of children of female-headed single-parent homes who live below the poverty level. The research also suggests that the loss of economic and social resources due to divorce can also affect a child's self-motivation. The literature discusses the fact that children who do not expect to go on to college are less motivated to do well academically. According to Rodriguez and Arnold (1998), income differences account for between thirty and fifty percent of the overall differences in highschool graduation rates among children of two parent and single parent households.

Divorce is the principal reason for the large increase in one-parent families. According to Dixon (2003), school performance is highly affected by parenting. Single parents especially, have a more difficult task staying involved or helping to maintain their children's school success. Dixon suggests that there is direct evidence that children of single parent households do worse in school, and on average, academic achievement scores are less than those of children that come from two parent households.

Jeynes (1999) has conducted studies to examine the effects of remarriage following a divorce on the academic achievement of children. The results appear to challenge the belief held by some regarding the presumed natural benefits of remarriage.

Jeynes suggests that many people in society support the idea of remarriage because it is believed that children will benefit academically by living in a two-parent family. Jeynes suggests that it would be expected that as a result of the increase in socioeconomic status that generally accompanies remarriage, the academic achievement of children of divorce in reconstituted families would be higher than their counterparts in single-parent families. The results of Jeynes study showed that this is not the case. Instead, children of divorce from reconstituted families perform no better, and in many cases worse, than their counterparts in single-parent families. First, it could be argued that the increase in resources that generally accompanies remarriage does not usually benefit children living in this family structure. Second, to whatever extent children of divorce in reconstituted families do benefit from increases in economic resources, there are other factors involved in remarriage that exert a downward pressure on the academic achievement of children. As a result, the effects of these factors neutralize the otherwise positive effects of an increase in socioeconomic status. Jeynes suggests that whatever benefit arise in socioeconomic status does bring is small enough, so that the psychological distress of living in a home with one natural parent and the introduction of a stepparent into the home, outweighs such benefits.

### *Gender*

There is a great deal of research that shows that there is a consistent pattern of adolescent gender differences with regards to the adjustment to divorce. (Nisivoccia, 1997, Ham, 2003, Jeynes, 2000) Males are found to experience greater academic, behavioural, and social problems in comparison to both girls from divorced families and boys from two-parent families. The research suggests that the reason for sex differences

is parenting styles with custodial parents not providing emotional support for males. During and after divorce, the discipline procedures of most custodial mothers toward their sons often become inconsistent and possibly destructive. In these cases, boys are often dealing with greater amounts of stress, in which case, their academics success may not be of important priority.

Nisivoccia's (1997) study concurs with much of the research findings that boys of divorced families exhibit poorer academic successes than girls, but more because of their multiple behaviour problems. The grade point averages of many boys whose parents divorce show a decline, although the decline actually began in the pre-divorce time and continued post-divorce. The critical variable for this reaction in boys may be due more to the family conflicts prior to the divorce than the actual separation.

Ham (2003) study contradicts Nisivoccia's research in that Ham's literature suggests that for both grades and attendance, it was seen that females were more negatively impacted by divorce than males. It was found that males from divorced families had lower grade point averages than males from intact families. The same results were found in relation to females. However, the study suggests that females are the most impacted. It is suggested in the research that boys may maintain a closer relationship with their dads, than the girls do (Ham, 2003). Ham notes that family therapists recognize the importance of the father-daughter connection. Young women derive a significant degree of their self-esteem from their relationship with their father. If seems logical that if the relationship is weakened due to the divorce, the females' self-esteem suffers resulting in decreased academic success.

Rodriguez and Arnold (1998) provided a snapshot in their research that dealt with children of divorce. The research suggests that boys and girls have extremely different reactions to parental divorce. It was also noted that this is especially true during middle childhood and adolescence. Boys are more likely to respond with conduct problems and acting out at home and in school, whereas girls are more likely to respond with depression and withdrawal type behaviours. It is argued that boys from disrupted families have higher school drop out rates (28% for boys and 20% for girls) and behaviour problems scores (23% for boys and 12% for girls) than girls from disrupted families. Girls reading achievement is not significantly affected by divorce, even when pre-disruption characteristics are considered. The research does suggest however that girls hide distress in ways that are often difficult to observe or monitor, and may actually display over controlled "good" behaviour. (Ham, 2003)

#### *Parental conflict prior to divorce*

Much of the literature reviewed suggest that children witness a great deal of parental conflict prior to the actual divorce or separation, which must have a negative impact on the child's school performance before and during parental disruption (Milling & Reinherz, 1984). Marital disruption may or may not lead to divorce. In some studies, researchers indicated that children living in homes with high levels of marital disruption, but intact family structure did just as poorly academically as children of divorced families (Mechanic & Hansell, 1989). Children of parents who subsequently divorced exhibited more behavior and academic problems long before the parents break up than children of parents who stayed together. The results suggested that family processes that preceded

divorce were responsible for much of the negative effect on a child's well being, (Mechanic & Hansell, 1989).

An increasing number of family researchers have begun to view parents' marital disruption as a continuous process, where many children are affected both prior to and after parental divorce or separation. Sun and Li (2001) conducted a pooled time series analysis that compared children from divorced families with their peers from intact families. They used a pool time-series model which helps to study the effects of the disruption process over time because such models are particularly appropriate for assessing the time effects of an event such as academic achievement. They examined many different variables associated with children of divorced parents, but focused primarily on results from one and three years before parental divorce and approximately one and three years after a divorce. They examined whether social and financial resources in students' families mediate the effects of the marital disruption at these same times. As have other researchers, Sun and Li analyzed whether or not the marital disruption process affected girls and boys differently.

Much of the research discussed earlier viewed parental divorce as an isolated, single event. However, Sun and Li used the continuous process argument as their theoretical framework to challenge this viewpoint. According to this perspective, parents' marital disruption is an on-going process that may begin years before the event of the divorce. They suggest that families on the verge of a separation are characterized with more stressful elements, such as financial crisis, substance abuse, inadequate parenting, when compared with intact families.

They examined early longitudinal studies that support the continuous process argument. Some of these studies reported that personality and behaviour problems were observable for up to 11 years prior to parental divorce. Sun and Li's examination of another study noted that children who experienced parental divorce between ages 7 and 11 fared less well in academic performance and school behaviour. In Sun and Li's own pooled time-series models designed to study the effects of the disruption process over time, they found that adolescents appear to be more affected than children under the age of 10. They realized that adolescents are challenged simultaneously by the transition in family structure as well as their own transition or movement toward independence. However, the study is limited in its explanation of the continuous process argument as it relates to lower academic achievement scores.

An analysis of children of divorce by Rodriquez and Arnold (1998) emphasized a variety of elements and statistics of children and divorce. They explained the different outcomes associated with children and divorce. While they concur with much of the research, they suggest that divorce does have a negative impact on children, they are however of the opinion that it is not the primary indicator of children's academic, behavioural, and emotional issues. They note that parental discord can be more disruptive to children than parental absence through divorce. Also, pre-separation conflict, rather than parental separation itself, may account for much of the statistical differences in academic achievements among children.

According to the National Survey of Children (discussed in Rodriquez and Arnold 1998), the experience of parental separation has only modest effects when measures of children's well being before the actual separation or divorce are taken into account.

Rodriguez and Arnold note that the effects of divorce are found to be more negative on school achievement and behavior if the amount of conflict that precedes the divorce is greater. Their research also concludes that children of divorce are more likely to exhibit early signs of disengagement from school. Part of the decline in academic achievement can be explained by the fact that children of divorce report lower educational expectations on the part of their parents, less monitoring of school work by both their mothers and fathers, and less overall supervision of school and social activities than children from intact families.

An interview with Dr. Robert Hughes Jr., a Professor and Extension Specialist in the Department of Human Development and Family Science at Ohio State University revealed that there are several issues associated with children of divorce (discussed in Patten, 1999). Dr. Hughes Jr. is involved in many educational programs in family relations and family life professionals, with a primary emphasis on families at risk, family stress, and single parenting. According to Hughes, when analyzing children's grades, standardized test scores, or dropout rates, children from divorced families generally have poorer scores. Dr. Hughes recognizes that children's actual performance on tests consistently shows this difference, but results based on teacher or parent reports are less likely to show this difference. Patten asserts that these types of conclusions are found consistently throughout a variety of research studies over the past few decades.

Hanson (1999) conducted a study to explore why divorce is negatively associated with child welfare. In particular, the study focused on whether parental conflict prior to divorce could explain why children with divorced parents exhibited more academic difficulties than children with parents that stay together. The research suggested that

children whose parents were divorced were exposed to more conflict and emotional instability, than children who grew up in stable marriages. Hanson argued that the divorce itself as sole cause of lower academic achievement was not a credible conclusion. The researcher noted that the issue should not be framed as an either-or question, and many of the family processes leading up to the marital disruption were likely to have important influences on the child's welfare. For the average child, researchers concluded that because divorce is associated with other negative factors, such as income loss, residential mobility, and altered friendship networks, the child's adjustment to these issues may in fact be attributed to their lower academic achievement (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Hanson, McLanahan & Thomson, 1998; Jekielek, 1998).

Dixon (2003) suggests that traditional parenting is still the ideal. He refers to European nations such as Italy or Spain where there are more traditional families. The research shows that less than 35% of couples get divorced, and there is a direct relationship between children's high achievement and school success, because this traditional parenting style is more prevalent and stronger. Dixon recognizes that there is such a drive to address the needs of single parents because bringing up children on your own can be a real struggle and without help, children can suffer.

According to a 2003 report by NEA Standing Committee on Instruction and Professional Development on the education of students from divorced and single-parent homes, children from single parent homes develop higher risks of having problems in school. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) (discussed in the NEA report, 2003) and the Kettering Foundation's Institute for the Development of

Educational Activities (IDEA) (discussed in the NEA report, 2003) in the United States also conducted a three-year study of 18,000 students from fourteen states. This study concluded that as a group, one-parent children show lower achievement and present more discipline problems than do their two-parent peers in both elementary and high school. They are also absent and late more often, and show more health problems. (NEA, 2003)

According to the Canadian National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, Cycle 4 (Statistics Canada, 2000-2001), many young children in Canada experience changes in their family structures before they enter grade one, due to parental conflict usually resulting in divorce. Approximately 25 % of Canadian children experience parental separation before age six, compared to only 8% in the 1960's. Children from single parent families are slightly more likely to show signs of problematic behaviours, (17% of children from single parent families and 13% from two parent families). One of the most notable behaviours that many teachers and parents experience with children is hyperactivity and inattention. The survey shows that 14% of children from two parent families exhibit these behaviours while, 21% of children from single parent families show signs of hyperactivity and inattention, ( Statistics Canada, 2000-2001). It is clear that parental conflict leading to separation and divorce, has a negative impact on children.

#### *Remarriage and Blended Families (step-families)*

In many cases of divorce, remarriage often follows. Especially from mother led, single parent families. Research has suggested that divorce has a negative impact on children's academic achievement, and that remarriage could benefit children academically. (Cherlin, 1992) Research on stepfamilies has however lagged considerably behind that of divorce itself. Although the number of children living in stepfamily

situations has increased dramatically in the last decade, a small number of studies have been done on stepfamilies and their effects on children, psychologically, behaviorally, and academically. The primary reason is that most researchers believe that introducing an additional caregiver into the family to help raise the child is more beneficial to the child's future well being. (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1994)

Bisnaire et al.'s (1990) study suggested that children of divorce needed to keep close contact with both parents to be more successful in their academic achievements. In their study, children who maintained contact with both parents after separation or divorce managed to sustain academic performance, compared to those children who did not enjoy such a relationship with both parents following divorce.

Many researchers have studied family factors and life events as risk factors for behavioral and emotional problems in children. Harland et al. (2002) focused on the behavioral and emotional problems of children on the basis of socioeconomic characteristics and recent life events with a focus on unemployment and divorce or separation. A high number of characteristics of children and of their social environment were found to be predictors of behavioural and emotional problems or mental health service use.

Jeynes (1999, 2002) has conducted extensive research in the area of divorce, remarriage, and its effects on children. Jeynes suggests that it is more than a coincidence that the U.S. divorce rate rose sharply in late 1960's; almost exactly the same period as the standardized test scores showed a decline. Jeynes' many studies in the area of divorce and the school success of children, has shown that the increase in divorce rates can be related to the decrease in children's academic achievement. The further a family structure

is from the intact two-parent family, the more negative an impact that the family structure had on academic achievement. Jeynes (1998) argued that social scientists and educators have accumulated a sizeable amount of evidence indicating that remarriage may have negative effects on many children. For example, many children could experience difficulties coping with the challenges of accepting new parental figures, stepsiblings, and jealous feelings towards their stepparent.

In another study, Jeynes (1998) focused on a number of subjects which included students who participated in the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) for the years 1988, 1990, and 1992. Questionnaires with a vast array of topics were given to students, parents and teachers. Achievement tests in mathematics, reading, science, and social studies were also administered to the students. Variables including, family structure (intact, divorced and remarried, and divorced single-parent), race, and socioeconomic status were considered. Examining the hypothesis that academic achievement was negatively affected by divorce, the mean scores of the standardized tests for children from divorced and reconstituted families were lower than for both children from single-parent families and children from intact families.

Although Jeynes' results focused primarily on the achievement scores from standardized tests, other researchers suggest that family structure such as divorce would have a greater effect on school grades in general than on standardized test achievement. (Smith, 1995) Smith suggested that grades seemed to be more influenced by effort, parental availability and other social factors than standardized scores. Jeynes analyzed data from a group of students in middle school grades, and found that grades of children from divorced families were negatively impacted much more than they were for children

from stable intact families. However, the differences in standardized scores were much smaller. This disputes much of Jeynes research regarding the negative impact divorce might have on achievement scores. Smith's research suggests that the important difference is more accurate in measuring the effect of divorce on educational performance in general, rather than strictly the results of standardized tests and achievement scores.

Jeynes (2002) research addressed a theoretical framework focusing on three schools of thought that have become most prominent in explaining the effects of family structure on the academic achievement of children. Recognizing that divorce changes many elements of family dynamics, each school of thought relates to the changes and their impact on children's achievement levels. First, the absent parent school of thought asserts that the absence of a natural parent has a negative influence on the psychological well-being of a child, which could hinder their ability to perform well in school. Jeynes argues that certain advantages accrue from living with two natural parents. It is suggested that living with both parents allows children the opportunity for greater parental involvement relating to their academic achievement. Second, the socioeconomic school of thought emphasizes that the socioeconomic status of divorced parents are considered a factor influencing a child's achievement levels. Jeynes stressed the importance of controlling for socioeconomic status in every study of divorce. This perspective would predict that almost without exception, when non-intact family structures lower a family's socioeconomic status, where income, employment and education resources are reduced, the negative effects normally associated with coming from a family of lower socioeconomic status are evident. Following the socioeconomic perspective, the research

suggests that the act of remarriage after divorce would raise the socioeconomic status level of the family almost to the same point as that of an intact family. Therefore, indicating that those children would be comparable to children from intact families in terms of their academic achievement. However, Jeynes' (2002) examination of the third perspective, the non-parental school of thought, asserts that the presence of a caregiver that is not the child's natural parent is a source of stress for most children. The research indicated that children of divorce from reconstituted families do worse academically than one would expect under the assumptions of theorists that emphasized the benefits of increased family income.

Jeynes' (1998) research did not support the arguments held by many educators and social scientists that children of divorce from reconstituted homes are better off academically than children from single-parent homes. The research suggested that remarriage after divorce did not positively affect academic achievement and may have a negative impact on their academic achievement. Children in reconstituted families, specifically, struggle with rivalries with their stepbrothers and stepsisters; as well, jealous feelings emerge toward their new stepparent. Stepchildren often feel that the stepparent monopolizes the time and energy of their natural parent. Jeynes' research suggests that the presence of a stepparent often reduces the closeness of the relationship that children have with their biological parent. One study by Jeynes concluded that remarriage had the greatest negative impact on math achievement, which suggests that a child could fall behind in math and find it more difficult to catch up in other subject areas (Jeynes, 2002).

In Jeynes research focusing on the effects of certain family structures on the academic achievement of eighth graders, and through his examination of the different

schools of thought, it was concluded that the non-parental school of thought explained why children in reconstituted family structures, perform considerably worse than the single parent family structures. It should be noted that the widowed, remarried and cohabitation family structures performed the worst on measure of academic achievement than any of the other family structures.

As Jeynes and other researchers concurred, the relationship between children of divorce and the academic achievement is apparent. Most of the literature reviewed also concluded that there is a myriad of factors associated with divorce, that must undoubtedly be considered, when examining divorce and its negative effects on children's academic achievement. (Jared.1993) Much of the literature recognizes that researchers and educators need to increase the sensitivity to these children as well as increase their knowledge of the unique challenges children of divorce face. The next section will further discuss the findings from the literature study, including the limitations and weaknesses found in the literature.

## CHAPTER 3

### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The literature review identified many reoccurring themes. One of the most prevalent perspectives found in many of the studies, is the idea that it is not the divorce per se that has the negative impact on children. Rather, the stressors or conflicts that happen prior to and after a divorce has occurred, have the most negative effects on children's behaviours and academic problems.

#### A. Theoretical framework and perspective: Divorce as a Continuous Process

As the literature consistently suggests, the act of divorce itself is not the most significant contributing factor to children's problems in academic progress, psychological well being and behaviour. For many years, family research has treated parental divorce as an isolated event that affects children only after its occurrence. As Sun (2001) argues, divorce is not an isolated, single event that is detrimental to children only after its occurrence. This conceptual model of family dissolution suggests that marital disruption is an on-going process that may begin years before the event of divorce.

Sun contends that through the continuous process theory, marital disruption negatively affects children as a continuous process in its different phases. Sun's longitudinal analysis of family environment and children's well being before and after marital disruption suggests that deficits in children's well being are observable before the separation actually occurs.

In the longitudinal study, results showed that children from pre-disrupted families (families that will later divorce) scored significantly lower on math and reading tests than did their counterparts from families that stayed intact. Children from these families

seemed to have lower levels of academic aspirations and readiness for school. Parents in these pre-divorce families seemed to be less involved in their children's education, have lower expectations for their children's education, and less discussions of school related issues, or attendance at school events. According to the continuous process theory, divorce is not looked at as a single event that is a crisis for children, but rather divorce is seen as a process that unfolds over many years.

The continuous process theory recognizes the impact of the separation of divorce itself, and labels this the crisis stage of the process. It is at this point that both boys and girls are equally vulnerable and susceptible to show signs of maladjustment in indicators of academic progress. However, Sun's (2001) theory also suggests that compared to parents that remain continuously married, parents who later divorce are more likely to have various sorts of marital problems (e.g. personal, sexual, psychological or financial) throughout their marriage. These problems can continue to affect children negatively. Given the persistence of these problems, the divorce itself or separation may actually reduce the face- to- face inter-parental confrontations and emotional stress associated with such confrontation, resulting in relatively little further damage to child well being.

There is proven evidence to suggest that divorce has negative implications on children's well being. However, the continuous process theory is an acceptable explanation that pre-disruptions within a family put a substantial amount of additional stress on children. Hanson (1999) supports the idea of the continuous process theory and argues that pre-divorce conflict accounts for the apparent negative effects of divorce based on two assumptions: parents who subsequently divorce exhibit more conflict than parents who stay together and parental conflict reduces a child well being. Conflict also

may affect children indirectly by altering parent-child relationships. This can result in less consistency in trying to maintain a positive environment for their children. Most school, as the parental conflict is a stressor for the children, taking an emotional toll on them. Children living in these types of disrupted surroundings often will not perform well in school, as the parental conflict is a stressor for the children, taking an emotional toll on them.

### B. Limitations and weakness

While many researchers, social agencies, community groups and educators recognize the impact divorce has on children, there are many areas regarding divorce that need to be addressed, and further researched where children are involved in marital disruption. The findings of the present study on the effects of divorce on children, suggest that many factors relating to divorce contribute to the negative effects it has on their academic achievement. The findings present some limitations and weakness in the literature that divorce itself is directly related to lower academic achievement and school performance.

Patten (1999) suggests that roughly 20% to 25% of children from divorce will experience problems in school, including lower academic achievement. However, the research suggests that there are 75% to 80% of children that will not experience significant difficulties, including lower academic achievement. Consequently, while children of divorce are at greater risk, Patten implies that most will not have major problems. Even though there are many factors with which divorce is strongly associated, the majority of children with divorced parents do not experience negative outcomes. (Hanson, 1999) As Hanson noted in a related study, after adjusting for background

characteristics, nearly 90% of children with divorced parents had not been suspended from school, and 75% had not skipped school. While these figures compare unfavourably with those for children whose parents stayed married (95% and 92% respectively), Hanson suggests that many children do not experience negative consequences from divorce.

Much of the present literature support the argument that divorce in and of itself is not the single factor affecting children's academic achievement or school problems. There are a variety of factors associated with divorce that are significant when analyzing its negative impact on children. As Harland et al. (2002) discussed, family factors associated with parental separation or divorce have more significance than the divorce itself. They note that factors relating to children's stable social environment as well as their acute life events are associated with the risk of internalizing problems. A high risk for these problems was found in children who had recently experienced a divorce or separation.

As Jeynes (2000) suggests, a number of limitations arise that are common to examining large data sets, such as that of the NELS, and many other studies examining the effects of family structure even though many researchers make reference to the NELS, as well as similar types of longitudinal studies. It seems consistent in much of the research examined that in almost any study, certain relevant characteristics of the samples exist that one would like to know about but were not accessible. Other considerations would also add to the reliability of the results, such as the degree of parental conflict, age of the married or single parents, the age of the child at the time of the divorce, and the length of time that an unwed couple had been cohabitants, etc. The NELS study

conducted by Jeynes (2000) did not make this information available and it is quite likely, for example, that numerous children in the study experienced more than one parental family structure during the course of their lifetimes. Consequently, as in the case of the vast majority of studies examining the effects of parental family structure, the study focuses on the most recent family structure of which a child has been a member. As Jeynes notes, the fact that children from reconstituted and cohabitant families performed poorly academically suggests that more research needs to be done on the impact of these family structures on the achievement and well-being of children.

Throughout much of Jeynes extensive research on the subject of children of divorce, he discusses the fact that reliable measures of parental conflict are difficult to obtain. Also, information on the length of time since the divorce occurred would be particularly interesting, because the effects of divorce on academic achievement may or may not slowly decrease with time. There would be great advantage for every study on divorce to have more information about pre-divorced families. Research indicates that some of the effects of divorce occur prior to the actual divorce or marital dissolution. (Hanson, 1999) The literature recognized the fact that parental conflict accounts for as much as 50% of the "divorce effect" but does not necessarily mean that the other 50% of the negative effects of divorce on children is due to divorce itself. Parents who divorce are likely to differ from parents who stay married in ways other than conflict. Hanson suggests that unobservable behaviours in these homes like alcoholism, abuse, or unemployment could be potential alternative explanations for why children from non-intact families do less well than children from intact families.

Limitations of researching children of divorce and academic achievement are evident when considering age of children before, during and after a divorce. As Ham(2003) discussed in his research on high school seniors, many of the factors associated with divorce and school success may not be applicable to high school students. Ham argues that the academic demands and expectations of high school itself are often greater and more stressful than those students in elementary or middle schools. Ham's research makes reference to a study done in Canada that found that problems for children from divorce seemed to peak around the age of 12, often before high school.

Much of the literature reviewed examined many variables associated with children of divorce, which further limits the assumption that divorce itself is the contributing factor to children's lower academic achievement. Ham's study focused on other independent variables such as, gender, ethnicity, mother's level of education, father's level of education, age at time of divorce, single-parent homes led by mothers, and single-parent homes led by fathers. (Ham, 2003) Although the research was still consistent with the notion that children from divorced families do experience less school success, factors such as these may be just as significant as the divorce itself.

There is literature about cases where adolescents from single-parent families often experience greater stress than just from the divorce itself. (Morrison, 2003) In many mother led households, income levels are lower than that of father led households or two parent households. Therefore, many adolescents are left to support themselves and their basic needs financially. In these cases, children must work while attending school, which may also be a factor associated with lower academic achievement. Children that are expected to provide for their own basic needs, often have higher truancy rates as well as

absences. These factors are very influential in the children's academic success.

(Morrison, 2003)

Rodriguez and Arnold (1998) clearly emphasize how research on children of divorce contains limitations and weaknesses due to the other outcomes that relate in part, to differences in the parents and the amount of parental conflict prior to the actual divorce or separation. According to Rodriguez and Arnold, parents who will later divorce are more likely to have experienced pre-break-up difficulties such as alcoholism, drug abuse, physical and emotional abuse, disagreements about gender roles, and other incompatibilities than those who maintain their marriages. The factors clearly affect children and create marked differences in outcomes of children's schooling. Parental discord can be more disruptive to children than parental absence through divorce.

Pre-separation conflict, rather than parental separation itself, may account for much of the statistical differences in academic achievement scores between children whose parents have divorced and those whose parents stay together. High conflict in intact homes has been found to produce effects that are similar to and as strong as those associated with marital disruption. (Rodriguez and Arnold, 1998) Over time, children in intact but persistently high conflict homes show more negative effects than do children who have experienced divorce but go on to live in a relatively conflict-free post divorce situation.

As Rodriguez and Arnold (1998) suggest, it is not surprising that the effects of divorce are found to be more negative if the amount of conflict that preceded the divorce is greater. A high level of post-disruption also aggravates and prolongs the negative effects of divorce. They note that part of the reason for this is that parents engaged in

conflict are less consistent in the discipline they provide, have disrupted bonds of attachment with their children, serve as models for negative behaviour for their children, and/or place their children under emotional and cognitive stress. With all these factors considered, it is evident that it is not the divorce or separation itself that is most significant in children's decreased level of school success.

Hughes (2004) discusses research that has focused on the causes of children's difficulties in school in relation to divorce. The writer argues that research has proven that children from divorce are at greater risks for stressful life events. However, there is agreement among researchers that it is not the single most important cause of children's problems. (Amato, 1993) The literature discusses six major problems, other than the divorce itself, that children struggle with. The first is parental loss in which the children also lose the knowledge, skills and resources (emotional, financial, etc.) of that parent. Second, economic loss, whereas children living in single parent families are less likely to have as many economic resources as children living in intact families. Third, more life stress occurs because children go through many changes such as living situation, school changes, childcare, homes etc. Children often have to make adjustments to changes in relationships with friends and extended family members. Fourth, poor parental adjustment relating to how children fare in families is due in part to the mental health of the parents. Lack of parental competence is the fifth reason discussed. This perspective argues that much of what happens to children in general is related to the skill of parents in helping them develop. The competence of parents following divorce is likely to have considerable influence on how the children are doing. Lastly, exposure to interparental conflict, will affect the children in that the degree to which children are exposed to

conflict may have substantial effects on a child's well being. It is suggested by Hughes (2004) that these explanations can have significant implications to practitioners, and educators interested in designing interventions for children and adults in divorcing families.

It should be noted that the research does not minimize the negative effects that divorce itself has on children. However, after much review of the literature, it can be concluded that results of the many studies done on children of divorce may not be as reliable without consideration for other variables associated with divorce. As a result, researchers, practitioners, family advocates and educators should consider the significance of factors associated with pre-divorce marital disruption, and parental conflict and the negative impact these can have on children's success in school achievement.

In order to gain a complete understanding of divorce and its implications, more comprehensive research will be needed in all of the various aspects associated with it. Knowledge gained from continued research in a variety of areas can offer help to educators and families in dealing with children of divorce and help them create a more positive climate in school and at home following a separation and divorce.

Another and perhaps most important limitation in existing literature is the lack of practical information that can help educators develop strategies to help children of divorce in school. Most of the research focuses only on the negative effects that divorce has on children's academic achievement, but does not provide further research in the area of practical strategies for educators to help these at-risk children attain a more positive experience in school while going through parental marital disruption.

### C. Interventions

Considering the fact that almost 50% of marriages will end in divorce, and a large majority of them involve children, greater study must be conducted regarding what is working to reduce the impact of divorce on children. Any program or resource that can help to reduce negative impacts on children is worthy of research. In reviewing the literature, there was a great deal of agreement among researchers that further studies and research needed to be conducted to better understand the negative impact divorce has on children. However, in many cases, little information was discussed about successful programs or initiatives to help the children cope with and adjust to changes before or after a divorce. Most of the literature reviewed focused on studies involving certain variables and their relation to the divorce itself, as well as their impact on children throughout the process. (Ham, 2003)

It is necessary that the research on the psychological and social effects of children be used to develop effective interventions to help in the adjustment of the new family structure. Parents, teachers and others involved with children can help by creating a healthy environment, which will have a positive effect on the child's future. Teachers especially need to understand the child's struggles so as to provide committed support. By understanding and investing in the whole child with the insight into the emotional dimensions, educators and school counselors can genuinely help the child to succeed in school during a separation and divorce. (Nisivoccia, 1997)

There's a growing movement in Canada and the United States to provide parental divorce education programs that focus on the psychological and emotional needs of children. With an estimated 75,000 of Canadian children affected by divorce annually,

such programs are essential, say many lawyers, mediators, social workers and educators. (Boyd, 2002) Currently, about 140 parental education programs are available across Canada through schools and other community organizations. Some of the research on children of divorce, make reference to various suggestions and recommendations to help further research and educators understand the implications of divorce and children's school success. In some of the literature reviewed, there was a consensus that parents must be competent and have the coping skills themselves to adjust to marital disruption. (Hughes, 2003)

The province of Alberta recently completed a pilot program for parental divorce education in Edmonton. Approximately 4,000 people participated in the six-hour course, which is now mandatory for couples that file for custody, access, or child support through the court system. Funded by social services and the justice department, the course helps to provide parents with information about the effects of divorce on themselves and their children. (Boyd, 2002) Course evaluations have been positive, but no empirical studies have been done to give statistical feedback about the success rate in relation to children's adjustment to divorce in relation and academic achievement.

Toronto Father's Resources, a pilot project of Father's Resources International, is a divorce education program that teaches fathers how to make peace as a strategy during divorce to resolve disputes, (Boyd, 2002). Research shows that fathers play an important role in children's school success relating especially in cases of divorce or separation. (Ham, 2003) Most therapists recognize the importance of the father-child connection, especially for girls. Ham suggests that young women derive a significant degree of their self-esteem from their relationship with their fathers. Ham agrees with this idea and

argues that it is logical that if the relationship between father and daughter is weakened or non-existent, the girl's self-esteem suffers resulting in decreased academic success. With this type of research in place, Boyd emphasizes the needs for parental education programs like the seven-step "Divorce Healing" program to enable fathers to understand their important role in their children's lives.

Since July of 1992, all divorcing parents in Utah in the United States with children under 18 years old, are required to attend the "Divorce Education Course for Parents" The Utah program's goals are many including, giving parents information that will help them support their children's emotional well-being. After four years of the mandatory 18-month program, 93% of the parents felt it was worthwhile, and 90% of the parents involved felt that it increased their understanding of why they should get along for the sake of their children. (Boyd, 2002)

There are many court-ordered and court-supported programs in Canada and the United States that are designed to help parents and families cope with the struggles associated with divorce. For the purpose of this literature study, the emphasis will be on necessary recommendations and programs geared to children of divorce, and their school success.

There are a number of school based programs and initiatives in school within Canada and the United States. According to the 2003 report by the National Education Association (NEA) Standing Committee on Instruction and Professional Development, there are many ways schools can support students who are coping with divorce. However, the role of teachers in the lives of students whose parents have recently divorced is a sensitive one. While teachers should be alert to the possible appearance of

stress symptoms, they should not make the mistake of assuming that they will see them. According to the report, studies on teacher expectations of children of divorce reveal that teachers make unfounded negative assumptions about these children.

The NEA report (2003) also examines research by Wallerstein, and Kelly (1990) that discusses the potential importance of the elementary school teacher to young children who are hurt by parents' divorce. Because elementary students spend nearly one-third of their time with a single teacher, this adult can show anxious children that a vital part of their world is still safe and predictable. The report therefore, recommends divorce education for teachers and staff development to help deal with these children within the school environment.

The NEA report recognizes the benefits of such programs such as The Oklahoma Education Association (OEA). It has conducted teacher workshops on divorce for school districts and local associations throughout the state and for a number of individual schools. In Newton, Massachusetts, a group of teachers, counselors and social workers that calls itself the AdHoc Committee on Separation and Divorce provide two-day workshops for elementary and junior high school teachers. The committee has developed materials for teachers that include articles on the emotional and psychological impact of divorce on children, legal information, curriculum materials for elementary grades, lists of local community agencies and a bibliography. The type of program not only keeps educators informed, it helps them to design their own classroom program to better address the needs of these children within the classroom.

Also, the report (NEA, 2003) explains that school counseling and guidance departments offer a range of programs to help children cope with divorce. Examples

include Peer Divorced Kids Group in Lexington, Massachusetts and Youth of One Natural Parent in Quarryville, Pennsylvania. Parent groups are usually informational and focus on what can be done to help children with adjustment in school and at home.

Recognizing that outside support groups and agencies play an important role for providing parents with support networks to cope with divorce, a great deal of literature argues that programs and resources must be available and implemented for the children of divorce. Brown, Young and Allen (2003) on behalf of the National Association of School Psychologists, contend that school based professionals must ensure that their interventions for children coping with divorce are effective and supported by empirically validated research. Research informs educational professionals and parents that children benefit from experiencing emotional support, learning coping skills, sharing their feelings and normalizing their experiences with other children. (Rosen & Richardson, 1999)

The Center for Child and Family Development at the University of San Francisco (2004) is helping children at risk through a comprehensive program in School Based Family Counseling called Mission Possible. It is a new approach to helping children that are experiencing serious family problems such as divorce, to succeed in school. Through Mission Possible, family counselors are placed at the school site and work collaboratively both with families and with school staff to help children overcome their family problems and succeed at school. Mission Possible is one of the largest university –schools partnership in School Based Family Counseling in the United States. Since 1993, 9,000 at-risk children and their families have served in over 100 San Francisco Bay area public, private and religious schools. (Mission Possible, 2004)

According to the literature, in order to best help children of divorce maintain some success academically, school based interventions should follow certain guidelines. Interventions that target strong support systems will be most effective. Parents need to be involved in the intervention as much as possible. Teachers can be involved by referring children to the groups, monitor children's progress and coping skills, and provide emotional support to the student.

The Children's Institute in the United States is extensively involved in helping children of divorce. It is a foundation based on research and tests outcomes and provides on going evaluation and enhancement. An important program that has had a positive impact on children of divorce is the Children of Divorce Intervention Program. (CODIP) It is a school based support group using the curriculum to enhance children's adjustment to divorce in their school achievement. The children develop and practice interpersonal communication and problem solving skills regarding issues in their own lives as a means to dealing with family circumstances more effectively. Pedro-Carroll, Gillis and Cowen, (1992) contend that there are several factors about this program that probably has led to its success. First, it is based on literature about the effects of divorce on children. Second, the program uses intervention techniques that have been proven successful in others situations with children. Third, group leaders are given extensive training prior to implementing the program for these children. Also, group leaders were consulted by experienced clinicians, which helped them to gain knowledge and feedback. Research using the CODIP reports that it not only leads to short-term positive changes in student behaviour, but also affects student academic achievement as well.

School based child interventions have proven to have positive effects in providing direct help to children of divorce. Winslow, Wolchik, and Sander (2004) provide examinations of some preventative interventions for children of divorce. The Children's Support Group is a 14 session, school-based group program designed to give children emotional support, encourage parent-child communication, and teach cognitive-behavioural skills, including anger management; self-control; problem-solving; and identification of divorce-related thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Although this type of program does not necessarily focus on the academic performance of these students, the program does help to reduce negative behaviours in children, at home and school.

The Children of Divorce Intervention Project is a 12 session, school-based group intervention designed to give school-age children emotional support, help them identify their issues, and express feelings of concern. The program has been adapted for kids in kindergarten to grade 8 and from diverse sociocultural backgrounds. Through a series of evaluations, the research shows that there is some improvement in coping and problem-solving abilities, compared to those not involved in the program. Information regarding improvements in school performance is limited in these types of programs, as their main focus is to deal with the child's internal emotions and improving a positive image of themselves to cope with the adjustments of divorce and separation.

Mentoring programs are very effective in helping children cope with the stresses associated with divorce. Although there is no empirical evidence to conclude that mentoring programs help children increase their academic achievement, there is a great deal of feedback from educators and school boards on the success of mentoring programs within the schools. Many schools within Ontario have initiated mentoring programs such

as Big Sisters and Big Brothers of Canada. While there is also no empirical evidence of the success of this particular program, the general consensus is that the Big Sisters and Big Brothers Mentoring program helps many children who come from disrupted families. They provide the children with support and a chance to enjoy aspects of school without the stress or anxiety that may come from trying to cope with divorce. Many of these intervention programs assist the children during the disruptive time of divorce and separation. However, it is equally important that programs be developed to assist educators and school personnel that deal with the children everyday. Teachers are often very influential in children's lives, especially for children struggling through difficult times like divorce and marital disruption. Teachers provide a structured, safe environment for these kids, at times when they may be experiencing such confusion, and disruption. Consequently, teachers should be adequately informed and trained on how to better handle their vulnerable students, as well as provide them with the opportunity for academic success.

## CHAPTER 4

## RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

As suggested by many researchers, intervention programs for children of divorce are essential to help them cope with the negative effects marital disruption can have on their psychological, social, emotional and academic well being. There are many family based organizations available outside schools to assist children in dealing with the issues that arise from divorce. Groups that help children of divorce focus on the needs of children in the divorce transition. The number of times social services are used by children of divorce more than adequately indicates the need for some sort of intervention. (Stathakos and Roehrlle, 2003) Many social workers, child psychologists, court appointed officials, and lawyers are often involved in helping parents and children establish better communication, and talk more effectively about the divorce transition and the losses the families may be experiencing. In many of these support groups, goals are outlined to also help parents develop skills to assist them in the transition. However, very little support groups or programs are available for the educators that are involved with these children on a daily basis. Teachers are influential in helping children become successful, responsible citizens in our society. Unfortunately, teachers often struggle with how to provide children of divorce with the adequate resources they need to be successful in the school environment.

#### A. A Proposed Intervention Model

To deal with the limitations of practical strategies to help educators with the increasing need to help children of divorce, a model is hereby proposed to guide policy. (see Figure 1) Within the Canadian context, it is strongly suggested that the government

provide funding to carry out further research in the area of the effects of divorce on children's academic achievement, especially in Canada. It is important that our school systems have available to them, a wealth of information about children of divorce, due to the fact that more than half of the families in our society live in contexts of divorce. A substantial amount of children of these family structures are in schools. Policy makers need to recognize the desperate state children in Canadian school systems are in. The family structures they live in have a definite impact on their school success. Governments are often very eager to fund programs and strategies to improve academic achievement in schools, without considering the many factors, such as divorce, that may be hindering children from achieving higher academic standards. It is imperative that government funding be increased to implement proper training and practical programs that educators can use to assist kids in the classroom.

Second, once the required funding is available, it is essential that every school board provide in-service workshops and training for its teachers. In many cases, school boards already have on staff, trained school counselors that are experienced in dealing with children of divorce. These school counselors however, often deal with the psychological and emotional well being of the children, and leave the academic well being to the teachers. Unfortunately, due to the increased case loads that school counselors are faced with, it is often impossible for them to handle the many children that need assistance, and at the same time help teachers with their own concerns and needs in relation to helping these students. School boards must provide programs that can help to train teachers on the negative impact divorce has on children, as well as practical solutions to develop programs within the classroom that can better accommodate these

students. It is suggested that school boards have a mandate that individual schools, or clusters of schools, using the family of schools model, have at least one or two properly trained teachers, collaborating with school counselors and social workers, who can help develop and implement programs dealing with children of divorce, for the other teachers on staff. They should provide in-service training for these educators with pertinent and up to date information on divorce, especially issues like single-parent homes so that teachers' perceptions reflect the needs of the children from these households. Once these teachers are continually trained, they will become an additional and practical resource within schools and help to maintain a positive school experience for students and teachers. As much of the research indicate, many children of divorce struggle with behavioural problems due to the divorce transition, and for teachers, this is a growing concern. Schools with properly trained teachers that could develop and implement school and classroom based intervention programs, would help to alleviate the many stresses and concerns that classroom teachers face in dealing with children of divorce. In addition, trained teachers would work more intensively with smaller groups of specific students that are demonstrating problem behaviours and academic weaknesses due to separation and divorce. It is often very difficult for classroom teachers to provide more individualized attention for these children, as they must still adhere to the needs of other students in the class.

Finally, it is proposed that the trained teachers, social workers, and school counselors, also work closely with the parents of the children involved in divorce. There is an educational philosophy within school systems, that in order for students to be successful in school, there must be constant communication and partnership between

school, teachers and parents. This does not change simply because a child's family dynamic has changed. The trained teachers and other counselors would work with the parents in providing them with counseling, strategies and programs that they could continue to participate in with their children, so that, even during the difficult transition of divorce, the children's school success remains a priority. As much of the research suggests, parents deal with many changes during and following divorce, including loss in income or employment, absence of a parent, or new blended families, or lack of proper resources. Unfortunately, too often, children are left to fend for themselves in school. These trained educators could employ flexible scheduling when planning school activities so that single parents who must work, may be able to become more involved in their children's schooling. Much of the literature about children of divorce concurs that parental involvement does have an impact on academic achievement and it does in fact compensate for the downward pressure that is exerted by parental divorce, on the academic success of children. By schools providing the personnel and programs that could help parents and children achieve school success during these difficult times, parents might feel less stress and pressure about ensuring that their children are still getting the best education. Similarly, children will feel better about their personal successes and achievements in school. This combined with constant emotional and social support may provide children the opportunities they are entitled to in maintaining a positive school experience.

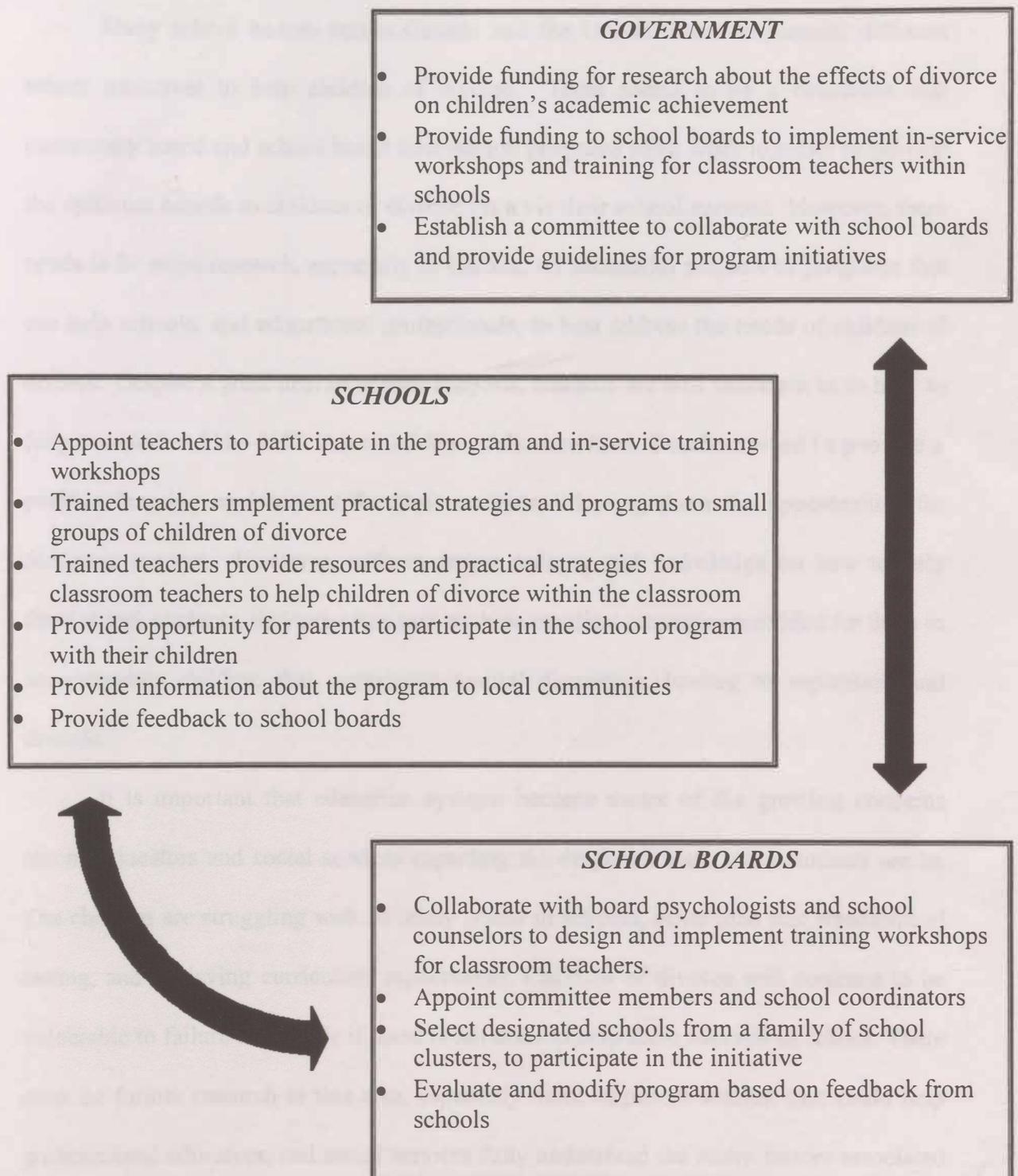


Figure 1: A Proposed Intervention Model

## B. Recommendations and conclusions

Many school boards across Canada and the United States implement different school initiatives to help children of divorce. There seems to be a consensus that community based and school based intervention programs must work together to provide the optimum benefit to children of divorce vis a vis their school success. However, there needs to be more research, especially in Canada, on successful projects or programs that can help schools, and educational professionals, to best address the needs of children of divorce. Despite a great deal of school supports, teachers are still uncertain as to how to fully comprehend the difficulties children of divorce face. Teachers want to provide a positive learning environment for their students, allowing them the opportunities for academic success. However, without proper training and knowledge on how to help these at-risk students, they are often lost, with no practical strategies provided for them to accommodate children that experience marital disruption, leading to separation and divorce.

It is important that education systems become aware of the growing concerns among educators and social services regarding the desperate state some students are in. The children are struggling with so many issues in schools, other than just standardized testing, and achieving curriculum expectations. Children of divorce will continue to be vulnerable to failure in schools if more is not done to help them succeed in school. There must be further research in this area, especially more empirical studies, that could help governments, educators, and social services fully understand the many factors associated with marital disruption and divorce, and their impact on children. More longitudinal studies would also be important in understanding the negative effects pre-divorce and

post-divorce situations have on children. A lot of research focuses on children's well being before or during a divorce transition, but fails to follow up on children's well being many years after a divorce. There are some adults who continue to struggle with the divorce of their parents, even years after the divorce took place.(Nisivoccia, 1997) These adults struggling with the issues of divorce, may transfer negative emotions to their own children, resulting in a cycle of psychological and emotionally strained children, who are trying to succeed in school. The focus of future research should be on what is working to reduce the impact of divorce on students. Any program that can help to reduce negative impact of divorce on children, is worthy of research. If successful methods were found to help families in crisis, it would be necessary to validate their success and then make more information available to people on a widespread basis. The ultimate goal of the research should not be just to do research for the sake of scholarly achievement. It should be for the purpose of helping to better the lives of children, parents and schools, and members of the community. This particular work is limited in that it is a literature study. Original data is therefore needed to better understand the negative effects divorce has on children's academic achievement. More research should be done within schools, taking on a more hands on approach, and not to only depend on school reports, standardized scores, parent information, national reports or census to derive information to base findings, all of which are anecdotal evidence. Also, future research should be more practical in nature (i.e. studies that can research children and their interactions in school during a divorce transition.) Many times, retrieving information strictly from standardized scores, school records, parent or teacher questionnaires, may not provide enough information about the effects of divorce on children's school success. In

addition, limitations to this study exist in that academic achievement is only a small part of children's school success. Just as divorce itself brings about a variety of changes in many areas of a child's life, children may experience positive school success in many aspects of their education, and not solely on academic achievement. Further empirical research needs to be available that examine the effects of divorce on children's entire school experience, and perhaps not strictly on academics as an indicator of negative or positive school success.

That said, educational systems in Canada can still benefit from the array of research on the projects currently being implemented in American schools. All sectors of the Canadian government should have an agenda to promote these types of intervention and support programs both politically and financially. This information would provide school boards and family agencies with suggestions on design and implementation of successful programs, and perhaps, address the issue of lower academic achievement among children of divorce.

Much of the research examined in this literature study provides vital information to educators, and parents on factors affecting children of divorce, but also the negative impact divorce has on children. In conclusion, the circumstances that frequently accompany divorce will often affect the children involved in many facets of their lives. By continuing to research this area, every single person that is involved with or comes in contact with children of divorce, will be able to provide the children with the best support possible, to become successful, and responsible citizens in the respective communities.

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