

EXAMINING THE WELL-BEING OF PUPILS IN POLYGAMOUS HOUSEHOLDS

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Abstract

Pupils living in polygamous households often encounter complex family dynamics that influence their emotional well-being, social relationships, and school engagement; however, limited local research has explored their lived experiences within the Philippine context. This study aimed to examine the well-being of pupils in polygamous households, with particular focus on their emotional experiences, family support systems, and school life and friendships. Guided by Attachment Theory and Family Systems Theory, the study employed a qualitative narrative research design involving seventeen pupils from Grades 4 to 6 in Kidapawan City who were purposively selected as participants. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and a researcher-made questionnaire, and were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that pupils experienced emotional inconsistency arising from unequal parental attention, which led to feelings of jealousy, neglect, and insecurity. Many pupils relied on alternative support systems such as siblings, grandparents, peers, faith-based practices, journaling, and academic achievement to cope with emotional challenges. Additionally, social stigma, sibling rivalry, and restricted autonomy influenced their emotional well-being and social identity. Despite these difficulties, pupils demonstrated resilience, self-reliance, and adaptability, particularly in their academic motivation and peer relationships. The study concludes that although polygamous family structures pose emotional and social challenges for pupils, strong alternative support systems and positive coping strategies can foster resilience and overall well-being, underscoring the need for child-sensitive educational and social interventions tailored to pupils from polygamous households.

Keywords: *emotional development, family dynamics, polygamous households, pupil well-being, qualitative study, Kidapawan City, Philippines*

Introduction

Family structure plays a critical role in shaping children's emotional, social, and academic development; however, pupils living in polygamous households remain underrepresented in educational and psychological research, particularly in non-Western settings. Ismail and colleagues (2021) demonstrated that adolescents from polygamous families experience significantly lower levels of parental care, which are associated with heightened feelings of depression and emotional insecurity. Building on this finding, Wilson and co-authors (2023) observed that pupils from polygamous households in

Kenya faced academic difficulties largely due to reduced parental involvement and inconsistent caregiving. Together, these studies indicate that the division of parental attention and complex household arrangements inherent in polygamous families may pose distinct risks to pupils' emotional regulation, school engagement, and peer relationships.

Within the Philippine context, empirical research directly examining polygamous households remains limited; nonetheless, broader evidence on non-nuclear family structures offers relevant insights. The University of the Philippines Population Institute (2022) reported that a substantial proportion of Filipino youth grow up with one or no parent present, a condition linked to emotional and psychological vulnerability. Supporting this observation, Labasano (2023) explained that adolescents raised in non-traditional family arrangements often exhibit higher levels of stress and anxiety, which may adversely affect both mental health and academic functioning. Despite these documented risks, prior studies have largely emphasized measurable outcomes such as parental involvement and academic performance, leaving pupils' subjective experiences and coping processes insufficiently explored.

Addressing this gap, Mugambi and Kamau (2019) underscored the need to examine how socio-cultural and economic conditions within polygamous families shape children's access to support systems and psychosocial resources. Similarly, Oduor and associates (2020) argued that qualitative and context-specific investigations are necessary to understand how children interpret and adapt to complex family dynamics over time. Guided by these scholarly insights and anchored in Attachment Theory and Family Systems Theory, the present study aims to examine the well-being of pupils living in polygamous households by exploring their emotional experiences, sources of family support, and school life and friendships. By situating pupils' lived experiences within established theoretical and empirical literature, this investigation seeks to contribute evidence that can inform child-sensitive educational practices, social interventions, and policy development for learners from diverse family structures.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative narrative research design to examine the well-being of pupils in polygamous households by capturing their personal and social experiences within complex family structures. The narrative approach enabled participants to share their stories and reflections, allowing the researcher to interpret how pupils made sense of their emotional, academic, and relational experiences, insights that could not be adequately captured through quantitative methods alone. The study was conducted over a ten-month period from August 2024 to November 2025, encompassing proposal refinement, participant recruitment, data collection, analysis, and the reporting and dissemination of findings.

Research Participants

The study involved seventeen pupils from Grades 4 to 6 who were living in polygamous households in Kidapawan City. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that all had direct experience with the family structure under investigation and could provide relevant insights into its influence on their well-being. Of

the seventeen participants, ten took part in in-depth interviews and seven participated in focus group discussions. Inclusion criteria required participants to be enrolled in Grades 4 to 6, reside in Kidapawan City, and belong to a polygamous household, as well as be willing and emotionally able to share their experiences. Pupils who did not meet these criteria or were unwilling to participate were excluded from the study.

Research Materials

The primary research materials used in this study consisted of a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide, a researcher-made questionnaire, and audio-recording and documentation tools used during data collection. The semi-structured interview guide was designed to elicit detailed narratives regarding pupils' emotional well-being, family relationships, school experiences, and coping strategies within polygamous households. Open-ended questions were arranged from general to specific to allow participants to narrate their experiences freely while ensuring alignment with the study's objectives. The researcher-made questionnaire complemented the qualitative data by gathering structured information related to pupils' self-esteem, perceived family support, and school engagement. Both instruments underwent content validation by experts in educational psychology and sociology to ensure clarity, relevance, and appropriateness for pupils in Grades 4 to 6.

Audio recorders were used to capture in-depth interviews and focus group discussions verbatim, with the consent of participants and their parents or guardians. Field notes and reflective journals were maintained by the researcher to document non-verbal cues, contextual observations, and methodological reflections during data collection. Transcriptions were produced manually from the audio recordings to preserve accuracy and contextual meaning. As this study employed a qualitative, non-experimental design involving human participants, no specialized chemicals, laboratory reagents, or experimental materials were utilized. All research materials, including interview guides, questionnaires, consent forms, and transcripts, were securely stored and organized to ensure data integrity and to allow future researchers to replicate the procedures under similar research conditions.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the study reveal that pupils living in polygamous households experience distinct emotional, social, and academic challenges shaped by family dynamics, alternative support systems, and personal coping strategies. The results are presented as follows:

1. *Emotional Inconsistency Due to Imbalanced Parental Attention.* Pupils reported emotional insecurity arising from unequal distribution of parental time, care, and affection across multiple households. This imbalance led to feelings of jealousy, sadness, neglect, and uncertainty about their position within the family. These findings align with earlier research indicating that inconsistent parental attention in polygamous families disrupts children's emotional regulation and self-esteem, increasing vulnerability to emotional distress.

2. *Dependence on Alternative Emotional Support Systems.* In the absence of consistent parental presence, pupils relied heavily on siblings, grandparents, cousins, and close friends for emotional comfort and reassurance. These alternative support networks helped pupils manage feelings of neglect and fostered a sense of belonging, supporting previous studies that identify extended family and peer relationships as protective factors in complex family structures.
3. *Use of Faith, Journaling, and Academic Engagement as Coping Mechanisms.* Pupils employed personal coping strategies such as prayer, journaling, listening to music, and focusing on academic work to regulate emotions and regain a sense of control. Academic engagement, in particular, served as both an emotional outlet and a source of confidence. This finding supports literature suggesting that reflective practices and achievement-oriented behaviors enhance resilience among children facing familial instability.
4. *Coexistence of Belonging, Rejection, and Resilience.* Participants expressed mixed emotional experiences, oscillating between feeling accepted and feeling excluded within their families. Despite these contradictions, many pupils demonstrated resilience by adapting to their circumstances and reframing their family situation. Prior studies similarly note that children in polygamous or non-traditional families often develop adaptive coping skills in response to emotional ambivalence.
5. *Sibling Rivalry and Perceived Favoritism.* Unequal parental attention contributed to jealousy, rivalry, and emotional tension among siblings. Pupils frequently compared themselves to their siblings, which intensified feelings of resentment and insecurity. These findings are consistent with family systems research emphasizing the emotional impact of favoritism and competition in multi-child households.
6. *Social Stigma Related to Family Background.* Pupils experienced embarrassment and emotional discomfort due to teasing, judgment, or gossip about their family structure. This social stigma affected their confidence and willingness to discuss family matters, reinforcing previous findings that societal perceptions of polygamy can negatively influence children's social identity and sense of belonging.
7. *Restricted Autonomy Resulting from Strict Household Rules.* Participants described limited freedom caused by rigid household routines, curfews, and closely monitored activities. These restrictions led to frustration and reduced opportunities for independence, supporting existing evidence that constrained autonomy can hinder children's emotional development and sense of agency.
8. *Reconstruction of Social Identity Through External Relationships.* Pupils rebuilt their sense of identity and belonging through relationships with peers, cousins, and trusted friends. These connections provided emotional validation, confidence, and

social stability, confirming research that emphasizes the role of non-parental relationships in buffering emotional stress.

9. *Academic Motivation Shaped by Emotional Gaps at Home.* Academic achievement emerged as a means for pupils to seek recognition, validation, and emotional security. Many associated scholastic success with self-worth, indicating that emotional neglect and family tension can intensify achievement-driven motivation, albeit sometimes accompanied by stress.
10. *Development of Self-Reliance and Adaptability.* Living in polygamous households prompted pupils to become independent, manage responsibilities, and regulate emotions with minimal parental guidance. This self-reliance enabled them to remain engaged in school despite domestic instability, echoing studies that link family complexity to early development of adaptive skills.
11. *Extended Kin as Academic Support Systems.* Older siblings and extended family members played a critical role in providing academic assistance, encouragement, and guidance. These alternative learning supports helped pupils maintain school performance and confidence, reinforcing evidence that extended kin networks enhance resilience and educational engagement.
12. *Achievement as a Source of Validation and Stability.* Pupils viewed academic success as a pathway to emotional reassurance and social recognition. Achievement provided a sense of stability amid family uncertainty, supporting literature that frames achievement-oriented behavior as a coping mechanism for children in emotionally inconsistent family environments.

Conclusion

In light of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Pupils living in polygamous households experience emotional inconsistency and insecurity largely due to imbalanced parental attention, resulting in feelings of jealousy, sadness, emotional neglect, and uncertainty about their sense of belonging.
2. Despite emotional challenges, pupils demonstrate resilience and adaptive coping, navigating mixed experiences of belonging and rejection while gradually developing emotional strength and self-regulation.
3. When parental presence is limited, alternative support systems—including siblings, grandparents, extended kin, and close friends—serve as primary sources of emotional support, helping pupils cope with stress and maintain emotional stability.

4. Family dynamics in polygamous households often involve sibling rivalry, perceived favoritism, and restricted autonomy, which negatively affect pupils' emotional security, independence, and interpersonal relationships.
5. (RQ3: School life and friendships) Pupils reconstruct their social identity and sense of belonging through peer relationships and trusted social networks, which buffer the effects of social stigma and family-related emotional strain.
6. (RQ3: School life and friendships) Academic engagement and achievement function as a means of emotional validation and stability, motivating pupils to perform well in school as compensation for emotional gaps at home.
7. (RQ3: School life and friendships) Exposure to domestic instability encourages the development of self-reliance, adaptability, and responsibility, enabling pupils to sustain academic performance and social relationships despite family challenges.

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