

Systemic Interactions of Melting port families, Covid 19 contexts and Children's Educational Attainment in Eswatini

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Abstract

This study examines children's lives in a melting port family and Covid 19 contexts, in relation to their educational attainment. This was achieved through the use of social networks analysis, a data collecting mechanisms and analysis. It enhanced the process of observing family contexts, members and children. The data was collected from family contexts and six sampled participants. The study revealed that the interaction of social forces emanating from melting port family and Covid 19 contexts produced disastrous patterns of children's behaviours. These negatively influenced their educational attainment. This was caused by parents' conflicting advises and information given to children, absence or invisible central power to manage conflicting influences from distant "parents", parents' failure to locate their practices within an inclusive framework of mind. The absence of mind- set, brought a sense of hopelessness, despair and lack of children's motivation towards educational matters. It concludes that melting port family contexts destabilised the household and family stabilities necessary for educational attainment. It challenges the common misconception that raising children is a collective family and community responsibility.

Key words: Children, Covid 19, education, melting port family,

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I. Introduction

The study examines children's lives in melting port family and their educational journey in the schooling system in eSwatini. This is a unique type of a family which consists of parents and children with biological and non-biological connections. Some of the children have a history of household instability and family instability.

This is reflective study; it reflects on the changes in the households that children experiences and how these experiences influenced their educational attainment. It further, reflects on the household family competencies on enhancing children's development and educational journey. Reflection aims at examining the ways in which melting port family's members' behaviours and practices influence children's behaviours and their educational attainment. Children's educational attainment cannot be viewed in isolation from other key occurrences, such as the Covid 19 pandemic.

The Covid 19 educational contexts and the melting port families were in continuous interaction in influencing children's educational attainment. More often, the changes in which children are exposed to, are a product of both household instability and family instability (Perkins, 2019).

For the past five decades, the Eswatini melting port families and their interactions with others have undergone the process of systemic metamorphosis. Some families have changed their cultural modalities and structures. Others have built strong working relationships in their effort to raise their children while other deteriorated their working relationships.

Despite good intentions and continued efforts by eSwatini government to improve the quality of the education system, Covid 19 pandemic and the new emerging melting port type of families exacerbate the visible and invisible forces that reproduce social exclusion in schools and societies. These had made the education system to appear drifting away from its core function of developing peoples' mind-set that has high set of competencies, and the role of families in supporting children's learning is under microscopic view because of continuous family changes.

In e-Swatini, families and their structures are experiencing changes and social dynamics. These include the new emerging families which are characterised by new complex combination of members. The members include the right owner of the household (could be the surviving men or woman), parents, non-parents, siblings, non-siblings and distance household members from the family tree. Family structure is ever changing dynamic

process unfolding over both adults and children's lives. This has produced a new complex culture within families with a negative effect on students' educational attainment. More often, the changes to which the children are exposed to, are a product of both household instability and family instability caused by different social forces (Perkins, 2019). The change in household composition beyond parents and blood related siblings is an indicator of volatility in children's educational attainment and lives. These are disruptive to children's lives and their educational attainment, especially their likelihood of graduating from secondary schools and then proceed to training institutions (Perkins, 2019).

The family structural changes involve multiple transitions among parents, children and other parental figures such as grandfathers and grandmothers. This transition is often associated with disintegration of families into either functional and dysfunctional families, and lower children's educational attainment, early home leaving, delinquency and drug use among adolescents (Walberg, 1984), this notes that the family structure itself has negative effect for children upbringing and teaching and learning.

Functional families in e-Swazini and elsewhere continue to influence students' behaviours, learning and educational attainment in a positive way. For example, some adolescents from functional families use information from home and the community to make choice about their schooling (Perkins, 2019; Marrow, 1995). These families bring stability and cohesion and these influence students learning positively. Cohesion within the family enhances the bonding of the family members and emotionally development of the children and their capability to respond to stressful situations or adaptability to challenges.

The change in Eswatini families is characterised by less marriage and more undocumented young adults which also challenge the effectiveness of the family contributions to students' effective teaching and learning. The changes in family structures have led to high percentages of children born outside of marriages and cohabiting relationships. This has created a situation where children find themselves having multiple adults who are considered as parents who provide different confusing advises (Vandewater and Lansford, 1998). This made it difficult for the children to find someone who care for them and ready to launch them into adulthood. The changes have further produced complex types of families such as the melting port families (Cherlin and Seltzer, 2014).

II. Melting port families

The melting port families more often draw its members from both functional and dysfunctional families and it has a weaker centre of power of control. Its management is influenced by different inside and outside social forces from different family members and "parents". These families are characterised by a failure to engage effectively in the guidance and educational processes of children. This is caused by the different conflicting advises and information children receive from different family members. Members of the family often appear to show little interest in individual children. The children tend to be subjected to crude stereotyping and their behaviour is sometimes interpreted as an expression of deviance. Sometimes, some of the children adopt intentional disruptive and oppositional patterns of behaviours influenced by the prevailing culture of the few influential family members.

The disruptive and oppositional patterns of behaviours among children became more pronounced during the Covid 19 era when the e Swazini education system landscape was changed dramatically. For example, the schools attendance rotational system introduced by the Ministry of Education and training directly and indirectly exacerbated the culture of absenteeism in schools. School children were disrupted from their known routine of attending classes on daily basis. This system made it difficult for parents to monitor their children, particularly those from dysfunctional families.

Covid 19 urged educational institutions to refocus on E-learning, which involves the use of electronic media and information and communication technologies. This included different forms of educational technologies in teaching and learning-web based learning which were not accessible to most children. Though, the E-learning was not intended to eliminate the conventional classroom, but to improve access to additional information and offer students different pathways of learning and thinking (Phelan, 2015), but indirectly it promoted subtle culture of invisible social exclusion because children from dysfunctional families had challenge to no access such learning resources.

The educational landscape was changed and learning modalities transformed, some learning processes became synchronous and asynchronous. In high institutions learning materials were sometimes presented in real time or live-webinars (synchronous) and also presented or made available anytime (taped video) (Asynchronous). Though the e-learning was appreciated because it was perceived as effective as face to face learning in encouraging engagement, inquiry but with some educational expectations, building social skills among the children were irreplaceable (Phelan, 2015). For example, the fact that teaching is a social process, with humane connection so embedded in the teaching profession, which should not be compromised. The direct human connections make students' engagement more meaningful for their learning. It further gives the students an experience for which they can reflect upon the experiences on both learning and in their adult life.

Teaching and learning are reflective processes achieved through social interactions, which creates opportunities for students to gather information which supports their learning and participation. Social interaction stimulates individual and collective interests in their educational related activities-attending schools. The social interaction that occurs in interpersonal networks enhances parental sensitivity, friendship among students and participation in any educational activity and inclusion (DePasquale et al., 2020). Social interaction further increases interpersonal trust and mutual trust among students and between teachers.

Both students and teachers are exposed to a wide range of information that may enhance their educational related activities. When students are interacting and discussing with colleagues, friends, who are interested in education influence each other and re-in force the idea that education is the key to success. Social interaction provides the students with more opportunities to accrue resources and exposes them to different set of stimuli and sense of hope, which enhances peoples' learning (Thomas-Miquel et al, 2016). All people learn from each other and develop a sense of professional belonging. Professional social tiers developed by students and professionals create informal professional networks which help them to establish professional friendship and trust-based relationships and a culture of exchanging ideas and knowledge (Thomas-Miquel et al, 2016), which contributes to students learning. The professional friendship ties are considered as a source of psychosocial support, which may help in dealing with stress caused by the demanding learning activities. Psychosocial support is important in enhancing teaching and learning because these educational entities are embedded in social and emotional experiences.

III. Empathy

Covid 19 disrupted some key educational practices and elements such as empathy, yet they have a key role to play in teaching and learning. Empathy is more relevant on a face to face learning, where professionals can observe, respond to students' observable and non- observable needs for educational support from different officials within the school. Covid 19 contexts disrupted and alienated the students from the known, formal culture of schooling and developed the deviant and anti-schooling culture, hopelessness and self-conflict. Some students became alienated and disengaged from schools and felt disconnected and uncared for, both at school and family level. This has a potential of enhancing the existing societal stratification of resources and opportunities (Niyozau, 2013), and discrimination, which operates through hidden and subtle ways.

The alienation of students disadvantaged more those from poor backgrounds and dysfunctional families. More often, children born to parents who are from functional families and possess significant material wealth are advantaged over others by being socialised in ways that enable them to outperform their less well prepared peers from dis dysfunctional families. The power of material wealth from functional families is also associated with values and knowledge which enhances children's learning. Children born to parents from dysfunctional families are always in deficit of values and knowledge because of different factors such as poor parents-children interaction. The manner in which family members interact with their children, more often are powerful predictors of children's school achievement (Ametea et al, (2006)). Ametea et al, (2006) also claimed that reading achievement was once explained by the particular interactions that family members engaged with the children. Parents-children interaction inspires children, teaches them to be optimistic, psychological resilient, develop a sense of purpose, self-efficacy and be committed to their educational goals (Ametea et al, (2006)).

Empathy has remained the main ingredient in any human contact-oriented activities such as teaching and learning. Teachers' capabilities to practice empathy became more problematic today's era of online learning and Covid 19 educational challenges. Teachers and others' requirement and expectations of identifying and understanding student and other situations and feelings and to establish rapport to build a basis for mutual trust and trustworthy communication were undermined by Covid 19 related challenges. Covid 19 pandemic left some students paralysed in different ways, for example, their abilities to cope with and adapt to challenges. Students' beliefs in their academic capabilities to achieve academic goals were undermined (self-efficacy). This influenced their behaviours, trust, how they feel towards education, how long they persevere, in the face of Covid 19 related obstacles.

Teachers and others have to be sensitive to key practices (establishing rapport and building trust) because they could be easily undermined by lack of visual expressiveness by the participants in the learning process. Teachers have to conceptualise empathy, trust and mistrust in educational matters because this can make a difference between students' success and failure (Levi et al, 2014), as they have power to ignite students' hope or sense of determination to achieve their educational goals. Levi et al, (2014) claimed that students with hope or who exhibits high level of hope are more likely to achieve their academic goals by investing in school activities. Hope may help students to reflect on different ways in which to respond to demanding family related problems and educational challenges (Levi et al, 2014).

IV. Methodology

The study examines children's lives in melting port families and their educational journey to post-secondary education in eSwatini. It is an observational and reflective study, reflecting on a melting port family practices and their influence on children's educational attainment.

Social Networks analysis

The social networks analysis (SNA) was used in this study to examine melting port family members or "parents" behavioural patterns. It helped in studying of social systems (such as families) through the identification of parents behavioural patterns and children's behaviours and their academic activities (Miller and Walls, 2011). It helped in exploring social behaviours and identifying relations among the family members. The density of interactions within the family members help to identify and facilitated the search of rich information, a sense of belonging in the family setting and feeling of connection to the family, love and care. In theory, families are viewed as a happy place where children are nurtured under a caring and loving community. They are expected to promote the development of children's wellbeing, attitudes towards life and schooling.

Method

Sample- One melting port family was sampled through the stratified sampling procedures. It was purposively sampled from many melting port families. Data was collected by observing the melting port family contexts as it unfolds. Some studies in the field of family research have used direct observation as the main method for data collection. Taylor and Barnett, (2005) noted that observational method is useful for improving peoples' understanding of family dynamics; and by observing how family members interact each other, communicate with one another. This could help researchers to draw conclusions about fundamental dimensions of family interactive processes (Margolin, et al. 1998), and their influences.

Observation allows the researcher to observe and identify manifested family members' behaviours, thus, provide unique information different from those obtained from interviews and other forms of data collection tools (Taylor & Barnett, 2005). The household situations and six children's practices and their interactions were observed. The six children were purposively sampled because were part of this melting port household and actively involved in shaping the family structures and decision making processes.

The observed children were second and third generation of this melting port family, together with the household contexts. The children were not observed in isolation from the other family members of similar type. These children were observed for twenty years on daily basis as they were interacting among themselves, with other family members and the researcher as an inside or member of this family.

These children were observed as they interact with different members of the melting port family and the researcher. These children consisted of second and third generation siblings. These children were observed as they interact with nonparents or grandparents and other extended kin and non-kin. They were observed in relation to their educational journey or attainment.

The researcher's observations were focusing on different family issues such as changes in family composition, children's living conditions, household instability, presence and absence of household central power, parental visible and invisible contributions, open family communication, family cohesion and family emotional sharing, support and warm (see Table 1). Some of these concepts are intertwined and embedded to each other.

Table 1. Observation of children

Observed family practices and issues	Observations which were linked to children's educational attainment
The children's household status and economic standing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children were living with grandparents and had access to more economic support but this did not enhance their educational ambitions; • The absence of central power and invisible extended influence from different members of the melting port family pulled the children in different directions-thus brought confusion to children or great deal of instability in their thinking; • Children's developmental contexts within the household which improves their well beings were disrupted, • The uncontrolled involvement extended family members and non-relatives became disruptive, due to conflicting advises given, • Household instability-caused by inter -parental conflict between unmarried parents. These worsened the children's negative behaviours-withdrawals, aggressiveness, delinquency, school absenteeism.

<p>Uncontrolled conflicting influences from visible and invisible members of melting port family</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The uncontrolled influences forced some members to withdraw their natural responsibilities to guide the children or usher them to adulthood, • Family safety net which protects all children, including vulnerable children in society disrupted; • The sense of family community was disrupted; • The unpaid adult care was also disrupted by uncontrolled conflicts.
<p>Family culture of building sense of hope to children</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The invisible parental conflict and selfishness among family members influenced the nurturing of hope among the children; • Family members attitudes, beliefs demonstrated through verbal and nonverbal behaviours disrupted children's hope; • The children had no hope for improved life in future or family members' attitudes disrupted children's future orientation mind set; • Children's disruption of hope also disrupted students' motivation, passion for education; children became less motivated towards their education; • Children's hope, motivating power to withstand uncertain and demanding educational circumstances or situations were diminished; • The family contextual factors distorted children's hope and became despair, turned away from their desired educational objective, gave up with education; turn away from moral good; • Children's hope was impacted by family contexts; • Children gave up not only in their education but in themselves • Children's little or absence of hope made them subjected to frustration, burn out, irresponsible and failure; • In essence raising children and promoting teaching and learning require children's hope for the present challenges and the future lives,
<p>Family cohesion and family exclusion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family dislocation denied the children opportunities to access someone who can care for them and launch them into proper adulthood-through empathetic skills; • This family was not viewed as a happy place where all children were nurtured under a caring and loving community; • Children's sense of belonging at the family was not visible and the acceptance of the family values, and participation in family activities'
<p>Hidden, subtle and normalised forms of family racism, and discrimination</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family as a source and reproducer of different forms of subtle forms of racism and discrimination; • Family practices were not located within the inclusive framework; • Family structural changes, multiple transitions among parents, children indirectly introduced family racism.

V. Discussions

As shown above in table 1, the children's lives and their educational journeys were influenced by different social forces within the family boundaries or contexts and beyond. The social influences were in continuous interaction and some emanated from within and beyond family members. These social forces negatively influenced children's learning because the majority of them drop out of schools.

Complexities of the family and education of the children

The melting port family was of multifaceted in nature; it consisted of grand parent, non-parents, siblings, non-siblings and distance household members from the family tree. Some children were of the third generation of the family, with multiple influences from their relatives and parents who were not directly involved in their daily lives. It was characterised by lack or absence of parental sensitivity and nurturance, key mechanisms for establishing cultural, emotional and social functioning contexts for children. The various family members' behaviours affected other "parents" abilities to provide sensitive, nurturing care and advice to the children. Other parents' conflicting statements and messages sent or received by the children introduced the culture of invisible form of social exclusion. These multiple, adults brought confusion to the children and deviation from the known e Eswatini cultural norms of raising the children.

Indirect rule

The grandparent was in charge of the family but with limited powers to bring order to family members because of some invisible and visible influences from siblings who were indirect managing the family at a distance. They were managing the family through indirect rule. The indirect rule worsened the culture of respect within the children because of the invisible divide and rule mechanisms which were prevailing within the family members. This situation led to invisible parental conflict which created an aversive and toxic home environment, which was disastrous for the children's development because it affected their well-being. The indirect rule further increased fragmentation rather integration in the family. Fragmentation within the family is disastrous for children's education because their educational journey is a collective process, which depends on collective action from all family members including the outside community members.

The spirit of connectedness and empathy, which more often promote mutual respect and interdependence in families were undermined. These are key factors in promoting pro-social behaviours among people, through dissolving family social barriers. The absence of connectedness and empathy among some family members affected them in their effort of acting in ways that could benefit children and enhances outcomes of others within the family and beyond. The family became the producer and reproducer of multiple forms of inequalities in society because the family situations did not enhance children's education, which is the key in addressing inequalities in society. Some children within the family were not accessing educational guides and educational help and this indirectly perpetuated family racism and inequality.

Family members' interaction and patterns

The family members' interaction patterns and behaviours undermined other members' willingness to build the sense of hope among the children. These children were in need of someone to build a sense of hope for success in their education and in life, and passion for their educational future careers. This type of children was in a state of despair, as some had lost either their mothers or fathers still experiencing some invisible pains.

Some parents' behaviours and actions were moving the children away from something good, desirable, desired moral goal and their academic progress. Some gave up on their ability to learn. Their motivation of hope to succeed in their educational project reversed into despair because they were overwhelmed by educational and other related challenges. They began to focus on self-distraction goals, smoking, and other ill-informed practices within the family and society. The children hope became vulnerable and defeated by the parents' patterns of behaviours and family relations overwhelming circumstances. Their hope for learning and for succeeding in life faded away or ship into hopelessness because of the poor or non-support from their biological parents and the arrogance some had developed.

The absence or lack of the culture of adults sharing their life or work experiences and enjoyment with their children deprived them, opportunity to learn positively educational and work values, and the culture of interaction. Some members of the family behaviours were not located within the sharing inclusive framework. This distorted children's thinking towards other family members and this disadvantaged them. It became difficult for some children to access educational help from well informed family members on educational related matters. This was problematic because all people learn from each other and develop a set of social values, family belonging and in the long term professional belonging.

Grandparents' complex economic contributions

Grand children had access to more economic support but this did not enhance their educational ambitions. The quality of economic support did not contribute in strengthening social interaction through motivating the children to develop pro-social behaviours and thoughtful actions. It was observed the grand parents led family provided a household composition which negatively influenced the children's wellbeing, self-efficacy, interpersonal skills and learning. Some of the children approached their school contexts and school work without feelings of conviction.

The household composition deprived the children the social and emotional experience provided by stable household, and good parental relationships. Children are expected to develop parental relationship, firstly with their peers and family members. It is usually, the relationships with parents that are important for children's future engagement with their learning. It forms the access route through which they will or not engage with their family members and learning processes (Cooper, 2007, p91).

These children from poor parental relationships household contexts and poor interaction with other family members made their education an exercise in frustration. Peoples' interaction or face to face communication remains one of the key elements for enhancing peoples' relationships and learning. Children as human beings are physically embodied and social animals above all, which they continue to interact (Miller and Walls, 2011, p124). Children develop thoughts and ways of being together through activities which allow them to copy good habits and interact. More often, children's inability to interact with family members exacerbated the feelings of loneliness and frustration at the household level (Barnes and Olson, 1985), which eventually affected children's education. The feeling of loneliness and frustrations are hardest challenges to combat in schools and in other sectors of society (McLinnerney and Robbert, 2004). Children's feeling of loneliness undermined the family's capabilities to contribute to processes that build more ethical and vibrant family contexts that encourage the development of children's different competencies.

VI. Findings

The findings of the study indicated that the ever-changing melting port family contexts, together with the unique Covid 19 contexts produced new disastrous patterns of family members and children's behaviours. These negatively influenced children's educational attainment. Family member's failure to engage effectively in the guidance and educational processes of the children exacerbated their disengagement from their educational project or schooling. The new disastrous patterns of children's behaviours were mainly caused by the different conflicting advices and information children received from different family "members" and strangers.

The melting port family uncontrolled contexts encouraged the children to adopt unintentional unsustainable, disruptive and oppositional patterns of behaviours which were incongruent with schools' expectations and societal norms. This negatively influenced their educational attainment. The family uncontrolled contexts encouraged and forced the children to be alienated and disengaged from other family members and sort comfort and ideas from strange people, who misled them. The family environment became toxic; it was not social and emotional involving. The family members drifted away from their core functions; promoting the culture of a caring society, faithfulness, positive feelings within the family and the development of empathetic communication skills.

The study findings revealed that the absence or the invisible central power to control and manage the conflicting influences from distant "parent" brought confusion to children, increased anxiety, aggressiveness, delinquency, social withdrawals and school absenteeism among some children. The conflicting influences from distant "parent" forced some "parents" to withdraw their expected natural responsibility to guide the children to adulthood and succeed in education and life. Perkins (2019) study findings also indicated that changes in family contexts had reduced the likelihood of children's educational attainment.

The study findings revealed that quality of economic support did not contribute in strengthening social interaction through motivating the children to develop pro-social behaviours and thoughtful actions, and their educational attainment. Though quality of economic support were provided to children but the family members practices remained a source and reproducer of different forms of subtle forms of racism and discrimination, because they were not located within the members' inclusive framework of mind.

The findings indicated that children's hope, motivating power to withstand uncertain and demanding educational circumstances or situations were diminished and their little or absence of hope made them subjected to frustration, burn out, irresponsible and failure; they became despair, turned away from their desired educational objective, gave up with education; some turn away from moral good and some drop out of school.

VII. Conclusion and recommendations

The study concluded that the melting port families' contexts did not permit the children to develop their reflective skills which are needed in schools or the culture of reflection which helps people to draws on their past experiences, reflects on them, and use them to inform present and future practices. The melting port families' contexts are products of household instability and family instability. These were reversing the e Swatini government's effort of addressing the problem of social exclusion in society through education. The melting port family practices challenged the common misconception that raising children it's a collective community responsibility. The melting port family practices promoted family racism or the family's failure to provide appropriate guidance to all family children, which enhances their schooling processes and adult life. The family practices did not modify children's characters, which underpin their behaviours and educational attainment; instead they increased the culture of fragmentation rather than integration.

The study further concluded that the drastic change in Eswatini families systems now characterised by less marriage and more single young adults also challenge the effectiveness of the family contributions to students' effective teaching and learning. The absence or lack of central power or control within the family destabilised the expected functions of family members, and all its activities were disintegrated. Melting port families are not new 21st century challenges but as old as humanity itself. They were managed through appropriate central power from a legal accepted authority or figures within the family. It may be recommended that family changes and other related matters should form part of the schooling system and national policies.

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