

Parental Absence Experiences and Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being Among Students in Catholic Boarding Schools: A Mixed-Methods Study

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51584/IJRIAS.2026.11060016>

Received: 22 May 2026; Accepted: 27 May 2026; Published: 17 June 2026

ABSTRACT

Parental absence experience is not a new phenomenon among students living in school hostel environments. This may influence their emotional and psycho-spiritual well-being. This study therefore examined the relationship between parental absence experiences and psycho-spiritual well-being among students in Catholic secondary school hostels in Osogbo Diocese. A convergent mixed-methods design was employed, which integrated quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data were collected from 67 students with the use of Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) and the Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being Scale (P-SWBS), while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with five students selected purposively. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson Product Moment Correlation, and thematic analysis. Findings revealed a moderate level of parental absence-related emotional experiences ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.68$) and a moderate level of psycho-spiritual well-being ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.72$). Correlation analysis showed a weak positive but non-significant relationship between parental absence and psycho-spiritual well-being ($r = 0.17$, $p > .05$). Coping strategies such as prayer, peer support, emotional expression, and institutional support were revealed by qualitative findings. The study concludes that although parental absence creates emotional challenges, spiritual engagement and supportive school environments play protective roles in sustaining psycho-spiritual well-being.

INTRODUCTION

The presence of parents plays a fundamental role in the emotional, psychological, and spiritual development of adolescents. Parents provide attachment security, emotional regulation, and developmental guidance (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1989). Structured separation from parents experienced by students in boarding school settings, may influence emotional stability.

Attachment theory explains that early caregiver relationships form the foundation for emotional security (Bretherton, 1992). Prolonged separation may lead to loneliness, anxiety, and emotional distress (Blau & Blau, 2021).

Psycho-spiritual well-being is indispensable in Catholic education, which means the integration of psychological health and spiritual meaning (Egunjobi et al., 2023). Spiritual practices such as prayer, Mass, and pastoral care serve as coping mechanisms (Mathad et al., 2019; Manning, 2014).

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping theory explains that individuals manage stress through cognitive and behavioral strategies. Limited studies have examined parental absence and psycho-spiritual well-being in Catholic boarding schools despite increasing research (Annor et al., 2024; Mao et al., 2020). This study addresses this gap.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine parental absence experiences among boarding students

2. To assess psycho-spiritual well-being levels
3. To determine the relationship between parental absence and PSWB
4. To identify coping strategies used by students

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A convergent mixed-methods design was adopted (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Population and Sample

Population: 90 boarding students

Sample: 67 quantitative respondents

Qualitative: 5 purposively selected students

Instruments

Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21)

The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) was employed to assess the participants' emotional and psychological state. This instrument is a standardized self-report scale designed to measure levels of depression, anxiety, and stress through a series of Likert-type items. It was used to capture the emotional experiences of students in relation to parental absence in this study, hence, the indicators such as tension, sadness, irritability, and emotional are overwhelming. The DASS-21 has been broadly used in adolescent and non-clinical populations to evaluate psychological distress and has proven strong reliability and validity in prior studies (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).

Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being Scale (P-SWBS)

The Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being Scale (P-SWBS) that was developed by Pius Joyzy Egunjobi et al. (2023) was used to evaluate the psycho-spiritual functioning of students living in the hostel. The scale measures the integration of psychological health and spiritual well-being across dimensions such as self-awareness, connectedness, meaning in life, compassion, and self-transcendence. It is a Likert-type instrument designed to evaluate how individuals combine emotional stability with spiritual meaning in their daily experiences. The P-SWBS was used to determine the level of psycho-spiritual well-being among Catholic secondary schools students living in the hostel.

Semi-structured interview

The researcher used semi-structured interview guide to collect qualitative data from selected participants. The interview focused on the lived experiences of parental absence of students living in the hostel, emotional challenges encountered, and coping strategies adopted within the hostel environment. Five students were purposively selected for in-depth interviews to supply comprehensive qualitative insights that complemented the quantitative findings. This approach permitted participants to articulate their experiences in their own words and also ensuring that important research areas were covered consistently across all interviews. The qualitative component was analyzed thematically aligned with standard qualitative research procedures (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data collected from the participants were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. To establish the levels of parental absence experiences and psycho-spiritual well-being among the

students, mean and standard deviation were used. The mean provided information on the average responses of participants, and the standard deviation indicated the extent of variation in their responses. This assisted greatly in elucidating the variables into levels such as low, moderate, or high.

Pearson Product Moment Correlation was employed to examine the relationship between parental absence experiences and psycho-spiritual well-being. This statistical technique was used to find out the strength and direction of the relationship between the two variables. The level of significance was set at 0.05, and the correlation coefficient (r) was used to interpret the degree of association between the variables.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze responses obtained from the semi-structured interviews. The interview data were firstly transcribed, coded afterwards, and later organized into themes that reflected common patterns in the experiences of the participants. This method enabled an in-depth understanding of students' lived experiences of parental absence and the coping strategies they adopted, in this manner enhancing or boosting and explaining the quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

RESULTS

Demographic Data

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants ($N = 67$). The results show that there were more female respondents (62.7%) than male respondents (37.3%), indicating a higher female representation in the sample.

In terms of age distribution, the majority of respondents were within the early to mid-adolescent stage. Specifically, 31 participants (46.3%) were between 13–15 years, 21 participants (31.3%) were between 10–12 years, 14 participants (20.9%) were between 16–18 years, while only 1 participant (1.5%) fell within the 19–21 years category. This indicates that most of the students experiencing parental absence in the study are in early adolescence, a developmental stage highly sensitive to emotional and social adjustment.

Parental Absence Experiences

The analysis of parental absence experiences showed that students experienced a moderate level of emotional and psychological challenges associated with being away from their parents.

- Mean (M) = 3.19
- Standard Deviation (SD) = 0.68

This result indicates that although students are not experiencing severe emotional breakdown, they still face noticeable challenges such as loneliness, homesickness, emotional sensitivity, and occasional difficulty in emotional regulation. The relatively moderate mean suggests that parental absence has a persistent but not extreme emotional impact on students.

Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being

The results show that students demonstrated a moderate level of psycho-spiritual well-being.

- Mean (M) = 3.53
- Standard Deviation (SD) = 0.72

This suggests that students generally maintain a stable level of emotional and spiritual functioning despite being away from their parents. What contributed positively to their sense of meaning, emotional stability, and inner peace was engagement in spiritual practices such as prayer, Mass attendance, and reflection.

Table 2

Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being Descriptive Results

Dimension	M	SD	Interpretation
Self-awareness	3.57	[SD]	Moderate
Connectedness	3.39	[SD]	Moderate
Meaningfulness	3.56	[SD]	Moderate
Compassion	3.51	[SD]	Moderate
Self-transcendence	3.62	[SD]	Moderate
Overall PSWB	3.53	[SD]	Moderate

The table indicates that all dimensions of psycho-spiritual well-being are within the moderate range. The highest mean was observed in self-transcendence (M = 3.62), suggesting that students have a relatively strong sense of spiritual connection and purpose beyond themselves. The lowest mean was recorded in connectedness (M = 3.39), indicating that relational and emotional bonding remains the most vulnerable feature of their well-being.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to examine the relationship between parental absence experiences and psycho-spiritual well-being among students.

The analysis disclosed a weak positive and statistically non-significant relationship between parental absence and psycho-spiritual well-being:

- $r = 0.17$
- $p > 0.05$

This finding indicates that although there is a slight positive relationship, it is not statistically important. Parental absence therefore, does not significantly predict psycho-spiritual well-being among students in Catholic secondary school hostels within Osogbo Diocese.

The result suggests that other factors such as spiritual practices, peer relationships, as well as institutional support may play a major role in shaping the psycho-spiritual well-being of students than parental absence alone.

DISCUSSION

Findings indicate moderate emotional challenges among students, consistent with Bowlby’s (1969) attachment theory. Separation from caregivers contributes to emotional vulnerability. However, the weak correlation suggests that parental absence is not a strong predictor of psycho-spiritual well-being. This is in line with Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) coping theory, emphasizing the role of coping strategies. Spiritual engagement enhances resilience (Fisher, 2011; Manning, 2014), while peer and institutional support fortify emotional stability (Blau & Blau, 2021).

Qualitative Findings

Theme 1: Spiritual Coping

Students reported that spiritual practices such as prayer, participation in Mass, and confession provide emotional

alleviation and help them manage parental absence. These practices serve as sources of inner strength, emotional stability, and meaning-making in stressful situations, reflecting the role of spirituality in coping and resilience (Fisher, 2011; Mathad et al., 2019).

Theme 2: Peer Support

The findings showed that peer relationships play an important role in students' adaptation to hostel life. Friends help to reduce loneliness, provide emotional comfort, and create a sense of belonging among students living away from their parents, in compliance with literature emphasizing peer support as a key coping resource in adolescence (Shrestha et al., 2023; Ahmed et al., 2023).

Theme 3: Institutional Support

Teachers, house parents, and school chaplains according to students, offer emotional stability and guidance. This institutional support system helps students get by emotional challenges and adapt more effectively to hostel life. Structured school environments also add to well-being of students (Wannebo et al., 2018; Blau & Blau, 2021).

Theme 4: Emotional Expression

Some students reported coping with emotional distress through crying and withdrawal. These responses were used as ways of releasing emotional tension associated with parental absence. This explains emotion-focused coping strategies depicted in coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Compas et al., 2001).

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the relationship between parental absence experiences and psycho-spiritual well-being among Catholic secondary school students living in the hostels within Osogbo Diocese. The findings therefore revealed that although students experience moderate emotional challenges like homesickness, anxiety, and emotional instability because of separation from their parents, these experiences do not translate into severe psycho-spiritual dysfunction. The study therefore found the relationship between parental absence and psycho-spiritual well-being to be weak and statistically non-significant. This simply means that parental absence alone is not a strong determinant of students' psycho-spiritual outcomes.

The study further established that students demonstrate considerable resilience through the use of adaptive coping mechanisms. These include active engagement in spiritual practices such as prayer, active participation in the Holy Mass, confession, and other sacramental activities. Reliance on peer relationships and support from teachers, house parents, and school chaplains also play important role. These findings support the view that coping strategies play a central role in moderating the effects of stress and emotional challenges in adolescence (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Compas et al., 2001).

Furthermore, the Catholic secondary school environment appears to provide a significant protective structure that supports psycho-spiritual development of students. Engaging in spiritual activities within the school context fosters meaning, hope, and emotional stability. These also enhance students' ability to adapt to parental absence. This aligns with literature emphasizing the role of spirituality and religious engagement in promoting psychological resilience and well-being among adolescents (Fisher, 2011; Mathad et al., 2019; Manning, 2014).

In summary, while parental absence presents emotional challenges for students living in the hostel, its impact on their psycho-spiritual well-being is moderated by strong coping strategies, social support systems, and the Catholic schools' spiritual environment. Therefore, holistic support systems that integrate psychological care, social support, and spiritual formation are important for promoting balanced adolescent development (Blau & Blau, 2021; Wannebo et al., 2018).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Informed by the findings of this study, it is therefore recommended that Catholic secondary schools should employ trained professional counselors. The study disclosed that hostel students experience moderate emotional challenges for instance homesickness, anxiety, and emotional restlessness. This suggests the need for structured psychological support. Hence, there is need to establish Counseling services within school systems which includes regular emotional screening, confidential counseling sessions, and preventive mental health programs focus on identification and management of emotional distress at early stage. This is uniform with literature that stresses the importance of structured psychological support and coping assistance in adolescent well-being (Compas et al., 2001; Bulanada et al., 2020).

Furthermore, this study recommends the integration of psychological support and spiritual formation in hostels within Catholic secondary schools. Although students demonstrated moderate psycho-spiritual well-being and engaged in spiritual practices like prayer and active participation at Mass. The findings suggest that spirituality alone is not adequate for most favourable emotional adjustment. School chaplains and counselors should therefore team up to design integrated programs that combine spiritual guidance with psychological education, which include emotional regulation, resilience building, and stress management. This is in line with studies that emphasize spirituality as a coping resource when integrated with psychological support systems (Mathad et al., 2019; Fisher, 2011; Manning, 2014).

There is also a need to strengthen parent–child communication systems within school hostel settings. Although the study found a weak and non-significant relationship between parental absence and psycho-spiritual well-being, students still reported emotional experiences linked to parental absence. This reveals that involvement of parents in the development of their children remains a significant protective factor in adolescent adjustment. Therefore, it is crucial that schools should facilitate regular communication through organized phone calls, virtual meetings, and visitation opportunities. This recommendation is supported by research showing that continued parental involvement contributes positively to adolescent emotional and psychological well-being (Cong et al., 2020; Reuven-Krispin et al., 2020).

The development of peer mentorship and support programs within hostel environments is also recommended in this study. Qualitative findings revealed that students rely extremely on peer relationships as coping mechanisms in managing emotional challenges related to parental absence. A well planned peer mentorship programs in which senior students guide and support junior students, can help reduce loneliness, and improve adaptation. It will also strengthen a sense of belonging. This is supported by studies indicating that peer support plays a significant role in adolescent coping and resilience (Shrestha et al., 2023; Ahmed et al., 2023).

Lastly, the study recommends the improvement of hostel welfare systems as part of promoting holistic psycho-spiritual well-being. The role of environmental and institutional factors in supporting students' adjustment is also emphasized in the findings and discussion. Attention should therefore be given to improve living conditions such as sanitation, ventilation, nutrition, personal space, and recreational facilities. A supportive and balanced hostel environment enhances emotional stability and overall well-being, consistent with findings that highlight the importance of residential living conditions in student wellness (Wannebo et al., 2018; Weitzel-O'Neill & Scheopner Torres, 2011).

Limitations

This study is not without its limitation. One of the limitations is the small sample size used in the quantitative phase. Although 67 valid responses were obtained, the number remains relatively limited for broader generalization. Hence, this may trim down the extent to which the findings on parental absence experiences and psycho-spiritual well-being can be applied to a wider population of students beyond the selected schools.

The reliance on self-report measures for data collection is another limitation. The employment of instruments like the DASS-21 and Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being Scale needed participants to supply personal responses about

their emotional and spiritual states. A lot of responses may be influenced by social desirability, misinterpretation of items, or hesitation to disclose true feelings, which could bring about response bias into the findings.

The study was also restricted to just only one Diocese which is Osogbo Diocese and on selected Catholic secondary school hostels within this context. This geographical and institutional limitation may limit the generalizability of the findings to other dioceses, regions, or non-Catholic school settings where environmental and spiritual structures may differ.

Lastly, a cross-sectional research design was adopted in this study. This captured the experiences of participants at one point in time. Thus, it does not provide insight into how parental absence experiences and psycho-spiritual well-being may change over time. A longitudinal approach would have offered a deeper perceptiveness of developmental trends and long-term effects.

Suggestions for Further Research

This current study used small samples drawn from just one diocese. Hence, future studies should consider the use of larger samples drawn from different Catholic dioceses and school settings. This recommendation is essential because the present study involved a relatively small sample. This may limit the generalizability of the findings. If the sample size could be expanded, it would help to confirm whether the moderate levels of psycho-spiritual well-being and the weak relationship observed in this study are consistent across wider populations.

It is essential to have longitudinal studies that follow students over time. The current study adopted a cross-sectional design and captured students' experiences at a single point. Nevertheless, students demonstrate coping and adaptation through spiritual practices and support systems as discussed in the findings. Longitudinal research would assist to investigate how these coping strategies develop and influence psycho-spiritual well-being over time.

Further research should carry out comparative studies between hostel and day students, as well as across different school environments. Considering the discussion highlighted the protective role of Catholic school structures like prayer, pastoral care, and communal living, comparative studies would assist in determining if these protective effects are unique to school hostel contexts or applicable to other educational settings.

Lastly, it will also be outstanding if future studies could examine additional variables such as personality traits, attachment styles, and socio-economic background. The present study found a weak and non-significant relationship between parental absence and psycho-spiritual well-being, which proposes that other factors may play a moderating role. When these variables are investigated, it would provide a deeper understanding of why some students cope better than others despite similar experiences of parental absence.

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