

Coping styles, School Engagement and School Burnout: A comparison of Grade Levels in Secondary Schools in Kenya

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Abstract- The purpose of this study was to determine whether transition and examination pressure affect the lives of form ones and form fours respectively. The objectives of the study were to: compare coping styles used by form ones and form fours, compare school engagement of form ones and form fours and to compare levels of school burnout between form ones and form fours. The study was guided by Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional theory, Work Engagement theory and Work Burnout theory. A descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The study population consisted of 9000 students. A sample size of 900 was selected based on Nkpa's formula. Stratified random sampling technique was used. Questionnaires were used for data collection. Reliability was computed using Cronbach's alpha:- 0.6 for coping style 0.8 for school engagement and 0.8 for school burnout. Face and content validity were ascertained by experts in the Department of Educational Psychology and the author respectively. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics as well as inferential statistics. There were significant differences in both emotion focused coping style and problem focused coping styles. For school engagement there were significant differences in dedication and absorption. For Burnout, there were significant differences in reduced efficacy with form fours reporting higher levels than form ones. The study may be useful to teachers, counselors, administrators and parents who may be able to assist students reduce burnout. This research is also important for policy. The government may enforce school holidays devoid of tuition. It is recommended that programs be developed that enhance school engagement.

Index Terms- Coping Style, School Burnout, School engagement, Problem Focused Coping, Emotion Focused Coping,.

I. INTRODUCTION

Kenya follows the 8-4-4 system of Education. The students undergo eight years of primary school education followed by four years in high school and four years at the university. Form one therefore is a transition class and the focus is that students have just moved into secondary school or high school. Some of them may be grappling with adjustment issues but generally by third term most have acclimatized. Form four class on the other hand is a final year class in which students do the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education Exam (KCSE) which determines college entrance. The form fours are therefore

stressed and academically engaged. It is against this backdrop that the author compared school engagement, burnout and coping styles used by form ones and form fours.

Grade Level and Coping Style

Coping style refers to the set of behaviors that an individual employs to successfully handle stressful experiences (Plotnik 2005). The present study examined problem focused and emotion focused coping styles. Problem focused coping means stress is decreased by solving the problem through seeking information, changing our own behavior, or taking whatever action is needed to resolve the difficulty. It tends to predominate when people feel that something constructive can be done (Plotnik, 2005). Emotion focused coping on the other hand means that we do things primarily to deal with our emotional distress, such as seeking support and sympathy or avoiding or denying the situation. It tends to predominate when people feel that the stressor is something that must be endured. The present study investigated coping styles used by form fours and form ones.

Grade Level and School Engagement

Salmela Aro have defined school engagement from the work engagement definition given below:-
.... a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption. Rather than a momentary and specific state engagement refers to a more persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behavior. Vigor is characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work and persistence even in the face of difficulties. Dedication refers to being strongly involved in ones work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge. Absorption is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work. (Schaufeli & Bakker 2003)

School engagement encompasses three areas: Behavioral, emotional and cognitive. Behavioral engagement includes participation in school related activities, involvement in academic and learning tasks, positive conduct and the absence of disruptive behaviours. Emotional engagement consists of relationships with teachers, peers and academics. Cognitive engagement consists of an investment in learning and a willingness to go beyond the basic requirements to master

difficult tasks. (Lappman & Rivers 2008). School engagement has been on the decline. Half the girls and 25% of the boys aged 14 – 15 were engaged in 1999. By 2002, these levels fell further: only 39% of girls and 20% of boys were reported by their parents to be engaged in school.

Brenneman (2016) pointed out that the Gallup student poll finds engagement in School dropping by grade level. In grade five engagement was at 75%, grade six 67%, grade seven, 55% grade and eight. 45 % . The descent continues with grade nine 41%, grade ten 33% grade eleven 32% and grade twelve 34%.

Besides according to UCLA engaging adolescents is difficult since academic motivation decreases steadily from the early grades of elementary school into high school.

The current study compared form four and form one school engagement in order to find out differences.

Grade Level and School Burnout

Burnout, is a work-related disorder, that has been applied in the school context. School burnout is described along three dimensions namely:- exhaustion due to school demands, cynical and detached attitude towards ones' school and feelings of inadequacy as a student (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, & Nurmi, 2008).

Salmela-Aro et al (2008) conducted a longitudinal study comparing school burnout levels amongst ninth graders. They filled in questionnaires twice during their final term of comprehensive school and once after the transition to post comprehensive schooling. They found that the academic environments per se affected school burnout rather than transition. The current study used a cross-sectional approach and compared school burnout amongst form ones and form fours.

Schorn and Buchwald (2007) in their study student teachers burnout sampled 75 student teachers in an attempt to discover whether or not a specific personality structure was more susceptible to the onset of burnout at an earlier stage. They also investigated whether the length of study time affected burnout. They found that burnout was not affected by time ($p = .272$)

Limitations of the study

The stress that the students could be undergoing was overlooked.

II. METHODS

Population

The study population comprised of Form one and Form Four students in Kisumu East Subcounty. The target population was 9000 students. (Kisumu East Subcounty Education Office 2013).

Sample and Sampling Techniques

A sample constituting 10 % of the target population was used giving a total of 900 students. This was in line with Nkpa (1997) who points out that for populations that run in thousands, 5% to 20% samples may be drawn. However a total of 834 questionnaires were analyzed. Out of these 455 were boys and 379 were girls. A total of 12 schools were used in the study. The schools ranged from County schools to Subcounty schools to ensure that high achievers as well as low achievers were captured. Stratified sampling technique was used in this study.

Stratification was done by grade level and by type of school. According to Gall, Borg and Gall (2007), in stratified random sampling technique certain subgroups or strata are selected for the sample in the same proportion as they exist in the population. The advantage is that it increases the likelihood of representativeness.

Students' Questionnaire

In the current study, a students' questionnaire was used for data collection. The students' questionnaire consisted of three subscales:-

- A-COPE (Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences)
- School Engagement
- School Burnout Inventory

Biographical data was used to get information on the students' background variables. Coping was measured using the ACOPE (Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences).

The ACOPE Subscale has 54 items which are used to measure coping styles used by adolescents. It was developed by Patterson and McCubbin in (1987). The scale was chosen because it measures coping styles used by adolescents and hence was appropriate for the present study population. The scale consists of appraisal coping, emotion focused coping and problem focused coping. Problem focused coping involves using direct action to tackle the problem, appraisal coping involves changing the meaning of the stressor and emotion focused coping means managing the emotion and stress.

The School Engagement Subscale was derived from the Utrecht Work engagement scale which was originally developed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2003). The current study used the abbreviated student version developed by Salmela Aro (2008). It is further divided into three subscales which are:-

Vigor (eg when I study I feel that I am bursting with energy)
Dedication (eg I am enthusiastic about my studies)
Absorption (eg Time flies when I am studying).

The School Burnout Subscale was originally developed by Salmela Aro and Naatanen 2005.They derived it from the Maslach burnout scale (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter 1996). The scale consists of three dimensions which are:-

Exhaustion due to school demands (eg I feel overwhelmed by my schoolwork)

Cynical and detached attitude towards one's school (eg I feel that I am losing interest in my work and Feelings of inadequacy as a student.(eg I often have feelings of inadequacy in my school work)

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. Differences were compared using independent samples t-tests.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 Problem Focused Coping Style

	Grade	mean	SD	t	df	Sig
Family Support	1	18.05	3.56	2.6	797	.009*
Spiritual Support	4	17.37	3.90			
Social Support	1	11.31	2.05	3.96	780	.000*
Self Reliance	4	10.70	2.35			
	1	19.78	3.42	-.266	831	.790
	4	19.84	3.62			
	1	19.62	3.12	2.17	831	.031*
	4	19.15	3.15			

Where SD – Standard Deviation

t – test statistic for t test

df – Degrees of freedom

Sig. - Significance

Table 1 shows that there were significant differences in the use of problem focused coping styles. Form ones used more problem focused styles than form fours

Emotion Focused Coping Style

	Grade	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig.
Diversions	1	10.40	2.76	-5.4	831	.000*
	4	11.47	2.90			
Ventilating	1	8.66	3.23	-1.27	831	.205
	4	8.95	3.20			
Avoid Problems	1	2.18	.80	-2.77	734.2	.007*
	4	2.36	1.02			

Specifically form fours sought more diversions and avoided problems more than form ones did.

This could be as a result of the national exams they are facing.

Disadvantages of using emotion focused coping styles are evident in Thuen (2007) study in which aggressive coping was

highly associated with emotional problems. Further MacCann et al, 2012 found that emotion focused coping style was significantly related to lower life satisfaction and negative feelings towards school.

Table 3 A Comparison of School Engagement Amongst Form Ones and Form Fours

	G	M	SD	t	df	sig.
Vigor	1	3.97	1.26	.654	766.9	.509
	4	3.90	1.47			
Dedication	1	5.06	1.33	-2.92	831	.004*
	4	5.32	1.20			
Absorption	1	4.86	1.27	-2.801	828.8	.005*
	4	5.09	1.18			
Engagement	1	9.16	1.22	-2.136	830	.033
	4	9.24	1.32			

Table 3 shows that there were significant differences between form ones and form fours in dedication and absorption. As stated earlier in the paper form fours were to sit for exams in two months time. They therefore became more dedicated to their

work and time nonetheless flew fast for them. This result is not in agreement with Gallup poll findings which indicate that the higher the grade the less the engagement.

Table 4 A Comparison Between School Burnout Amongst Form Ones and Form Fours

		M	SD	t	df	sig.
Exhaustion	1	3.57	1.15	-1.817	832	.070
	4	3.71	1.09			.069
Cynicism	1	2.60	1.12	1.586	832	.113
	4	2.48	1.11			.113
Reduced efficacy	1	3.00	1.10	-2.116	832	.035*
	4	3.16	1.05			.034*
Burnout	1	3.06	0.86	-1.008	832	.314
	4	3.12	0.82			.312

Table four shows that with regard to school burnout, there were significant differences in grade level in reduced efficacy. Specifically form fours had higher levels of reduced efficacy. Some of them may have been feeling that they couldn't improve very much as there was very little time left just before they commenced their national examinations. This finding is in agreement with Schorn and Buchwald who also found that the length of time of study did not affect school burnout.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It was found that form fours used more emotion focused styles whereas form ones used more problem focused styles. Students should be trained on their use of coping styles.

It was also found that form fours were more engaged than form ones which is a good sign for educationists in the country. It was also found that form fours experienced reduced efficacy as a result of the national exams they were facing. A repeat of the study probably in Term one January may clarify these findings.

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