

# **The Relationship Between Coping Style and School Adjustment Amongst Secondary School Students in Kisumu East Subcounty, Kenya**

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## **Abstract**

The objectives of the study were to: establish gender differences in coping style; to establish differences amongst high and low achievers in their use of coping style and to determine the relationship between coping style and school adjustment. The study was guided, by Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional theory, and Utrecht Work Engagement theory by Schaufeli and Bakker A descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The study population consisted of 4500 students. A sample size of 450 was selected using Stratified random sampling technique. Questionnaires and document analysis guide were used for data collection. Reliability was computed using Cronbach's alpha and the results were as follows:- 0.6 for coping style 0.8 for school engagement and 0.7 for satisfaction with school. Content validity was ascertained in literature by the author. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics as well as inferential statistics. It was found that there were no gender differences in coping style used. Low achievers reported more use of problem focused coping style. There were significant positive correlations between problem focused coping style and absorption as well as engagement. There were significant negative correlations between emotion focused coping and school adjustment among high achievers. The study may be useful to teachers, counselors, administrators and parents who will be able to assist students use appropriate coping styles.

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**Keywords:** School Adjustment, High Achievers, Low Achievers, Problem Focused Coping, Emotion Focused Coping

## **Introduction**

Most adolescents are secondary school students who are not only experiencing difficulties related to transition to adulthood but are grappling

with schooling as well (Yusoff, 2010). As adolescents chart their career paths they are forced to contend with fierce competition in order to attain the few opportunities available for higher education (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru and Nurmi 2008). This has been reported as a source of anxiety and consequently stress. Indeed Yusoff (2010) in his study on stressors and coping styles among secondary school students in Malaysia pointed out that 26 % of the students were distressed. Their greatest source of stress was the possibility of not getting a place at the university. Other stressors were lack of time for revision, too much content, too many assignments and a competitive learning environment. For these students these academic demands constituted the greatest stressors over and above relations with their teachers or even their peers. It is against this background that research on coping style and school adjustment is necessary to shed more light on how these variables interact and impact on the lives of adolescents.

Coping style refers to the set of behaviors that an individual employs to successfully handle stressful experiences. According Nicolotti, El-Sheikh and Whitson, (2003) cited in Butler-Sweeney (2007) inappropriate and unproductive coping styles have been linked with adjustment difficulties and health problems. The studies which have investigated coping style and school adjustment have not only used different theoretical underpinnings but have also been conducted amongst students in college and mainly from the west (Belvedere, 2000). Feenstra, Banyard, Rines and Hopkins (2001) noted that a number of studies had investigated the connection between individual coping and adaptation to college and found that active coping styles were related to more positive adaptation to college.

Loxton (2008) examined 152 children aged between 5 and 7 years in South Africa and found that the use of coping methods starts early in life and the most commonly used coping strategy was social / spiritual support. Another study by Kurui (2007) examined coping strategies employed by students at a university in Kenya. They used a locally made instrument measuring the students' perception of stressors at the university as well as coping strategies. There is need to look at coping styles used by secondary school students using standardized instruments, a gap the current study will address.

The trend in research on school adjustment shows that the phenomenon is no longer only a transitional concern (Belvedere 2000; Vasalampi, Salmela-Aro, Nurmi 2008). The formulation of school engagement scales adapted from work engagement scales attests to this. It explains the reason why educationists need to know what they can do to help their students adjust and benefit from school (Knyazev, Slobodskaya, Safronova & Kinsht, 2002).

School adjustment is a broad construct which consists of many different aspects such as academic achievement, school satisfaction, school

engagement, prosocial behavior, school attachment and inattention problems (Wei & William, 2004; Kiuru, Nurmi, Aunola & Salmela – Aro, 2009). Well adjusted students usually value what they are learning, are positively involved in classroom activities and receive high grades (Kiuru et. al, 2009). School adjustment has also been envisaged as social- emotional development touching on attention, activity level, anxiety, conduct problems and learning (McGhee & Mangrum, 2007). McGhee and Mangrum designed an inventory which measures attention and academic problems, hyperactivity and impulsivity, anxiety and oppositional behavior. A number of studies have been conducted analyzing coping style and school adjustment but to date none has focused on school adjustment envisaged as school engagement.

Studies in Kisumu East Subcounty, Kenya in which pupils and teachers both report high work load and scarcity of time for relaxing, coupled with low academic achievement are strong pointers for the need to investigate coping style and school adjustment ( Nzomo, Kariuki and Guantai 2001,Ahawo 2010 and Mboi 2010). Knowledge of the methods used in coping with the academic challenges as well as school adjustment is important in ensuring that adolescents navigate this developmental stage successfully.

The fact that a number of students could be struggling with their academic endeavors and the stressful nature of academic studies amongst students, makes analyzing coping styles employed and their association with school adjustment pertinent. The current study sought to find out the coping styles and school adjustment of secondary school students in Kisumu East Subcounty. The specific objectives of the study were to:-

1. Determine gender differences in coping style
2. Determine differences amongst high and low academic achievers in their use of coping style,
- 3, Establish the relationship between coping style and school adjustment.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Transactional and Work Engagement theory were integrated in the present study and relevant portions of these theories were applied to the variables in the present study.

### **Transactional theory**

The transactional model of stress and coping was formulated by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The model posits that a potentially stressful event will trigger the primary appraisal process in which an individual assesses the degree of threat in relation to his or her well being. When an event is perceived as threatening, the secondary appraisal process provides a global assessment of the individuals coping resources and ability to manage the

threat. Coping responses are initiated after the cognitive appraisals and the eventual psycho-physiological experience (stress outcomes) of this potentially stressful event depends on the effectiveness of one's cognitive appraisals and coping processes. The stress outcomes will then feed back to the cognitive appraisal stages for further action if required.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) in their model also posited that coping styles were classified into problem focused coping style and emotion focused coping style. Problem focused coping style is one in which 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. Emotion focused coping style on the other hand is one in which people do things primarily to deal with their 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 (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). In the present study, coping strategies employed by the students were measured and classified into emotion focused and problem focused coping style. Trait coping was measured and an assumption was made that students experience various types of stress and stressors while in school. The reported coping styles were then correlated with school adjustment.

### **Work Engagement Theory**

School engagement was derived from the Utrecht Work Engagement Theory which was originally developed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2003). The current study used the abbreviated student version developed by Salmela Aro (2004). They defined work engagement as

*.... 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)*

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale manual posits that burnout and work engagement are two distinct concepts that should be assessed independently. This makes it possible to establish the strength of the

association between work engagement and burnout. Work engagement is a positive quality while burnout is a negative quality. An employee who is burned out may score high or low on engagement while on the other hand an engaged employee may score high or low on burnout. In the current study, students' engagement levels were measured.

### **Population, Sample and Sampling Technique**

The study population comprised of Form Four students in Kisumu East Subcounty. The target population was 4500 students. This comprised of 2650 boys and 1850 girls (Kisumu East Subcounty Education Office 2012). A sample constituting 10 % of the target population was used giving a total of 450 students (Nkpa 1997). Out of these 265 were boys and 185 were girls. Stratified random sampling technique was used. Stratification was done by gender and by type of school. The schools ranged from county schools to subcounty schools to ensure that high achievers as well as low achievers were captured.

### **Instruments**

The students' questionnaire consisted of four subscales:-

- A-COPE (Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences)
- School Engagement
- Satisfaction with School
- Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education Examinations K.C.S.E

Biographical data was used to get information on the students' background variables. Coping was measured using the ACOPE (Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences). School adjustment was measured using three subscales namely: KCSE results, school engagement and satisfaction with school.

The A-COPE scale 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. Only emotion focused coping style and problem coping style was analyzed.

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 (2004). It is divided into three subscales which are:-

- Vigor (e.g. when I study I feel that I am bursting with energy)

- Dedication (e.g. I am enthusiastic about my studies)
- Absorption (e.g. Time flies when I am studying) .

Satisfaction with School Subscale consists of four uni-dimensional statements two of which are concerned with schooling and two with subject choices. It was adapted from Salmela- Aro (2008) and modified to suit the Kenyan educational system.

For the current study, the alpha reliability coefficient for two emotion focused coping styles were ventilating feelings 0.60 and seeking diversions 0.60. The alpha reliability coefficient for the problem focused behaviors include developing social support 0.50, solving family problems 0.60, seeking spiritual support 0.60 and seeking professional support 0.60. The Cronbach's alpha for the problem focused scale was 0.70 while for the emotion focused scale was 0.60. Reliability for the whole instrument was 0.60. It should be noted that items which had very low internal consistencies were deleted. Although the Cronbach's alphas for the present subscale were not above 0.70 the scale was used because it was the only suitable accessible scale to the author. Kline (1999) points out that when dealing with psychological constructs values below 0.70 can be expected because of the diversity of constructs being measured.

Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the School Engagement Subscale for the current study were vigor 0.50, dedication 0.70, absorption 0.50 and school engagement 0.80 for the seven items. Reliability coefficient for the Satisfaction with School Subscale was 0.70 for the four items.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The School of Graduate Studies – Maseno University issued a letter that enabled the processing of a research permit. The research permit was sought from the National Council for Science and Technology in Nairobi. The District Education Officer of Kisumu East Subcounty was informed of the impending study in March 2012. Visits were made to the schools where the research was to be carried out to inform them and to seek consent on behalf of the students some of whom have not attained 18 years of age. Data was collected in two phases. The first phase involved students filling in questionnaires. The second phase of data collection involved collecting Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education Examination (KCSE) results of the students from schools.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed in the following manner. School Adjustment was computed by adding Satisfaction with School, School Engagement and the KCSE examination results. School Engagement was computed by averaging Vigor, Dedication and Absorption.

Coping style was computed by summing up problem focused coping items and emotion focused coping items.

Data on gender differences in coping style was analyzed using independent samples t test.

Data on differences in coping styles used by high achievers and low achievers was analyzed using independent samples t test. An average score was used to differentiate high achievers from low achievers.

Data on the relationship between coping style and school adjustment was correlated using Pearson's correlation.

## Results and Discussions

Objective 1 was to establish gender differences in coping style used by the respondents. The objective was addressed using independent samples t test (see Table 1)

**Table 1:** Gender differences in Coping Style

Coping Style	Gender	Mean	S.D	t	df	Significance (two tailed)
Emotion Focused	Boys	4.90	1.02	-1.53	388	.127
Problem Focused	Girls	5.07	1.12			
	Boys	41.23	6.95	-.901	388	.368
	Girls	41.85	6.19			

The result showed that there was no significant gender differences in coping style used.

This result is in agreement with Mundia (2010) who found that there were no significant gender differences in the way Brunei teacher trainees used task, emotion and avoidance coping strategies. However, it is not in agreement with Rafnsonn et al (2006) who found that there were significant gender differences in the use of emotion oriented and avoidance coping styles. Specifically girls used more emotion oriented as well as avoidance coping styles when compared with boys. Boys used more alcohol than girls. The result is not in agreement with Kurui (2007) who carried out a study amongst Moi University students in Kenya and found that 14% of the male students at the university attended religious meetings to reduce stress as compared to 30% of the females. The higher percentage of female students attending religious meetings meant that females use more spiritual support in the study. This result is not similar to Stoeber and Rennets (2008) findings which revealed that gender was a significant predictor of active coping styles with females showing higher levels. In this case active styles can be equated to the problem focused coping style in which seeking spiritual support is one of the subscales in this study.

Studies in which the same instrument was used yielded different results from that of the present study. Chapman and Mullis (1999) who used the A-

COPE instrument found that more female adolescents used spiritual support when compared to male adolescents. Using the A-COPE, Recklitis and Noam (1999) also found that there were significant gender differences, with girls using more interpersonal coping and boys using more physically active strategies.

The implication of this finding to theory is that boys and girls may both be using spiritual support in the Kenyan population.

The second objective was to determine the coping styles used by high achievers and low achievers.

The objective was addressed using independent samples t test and the results are displayed in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Differences in Coping Style among high Academic Achievers and low Academic Achievers

Coping Style	Level of Achievement	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (two tailed)
<b>Emotion Focused</b>	High Achievers	4.97	1.09	.180	388	.857
<b>Problem Focused</b>	Low Achievers	4.95	1.04			
<b>Problem Focused</b>	High Achievers	40.78	6.50	-2.60	388	.010*
<b>Problem Focused</b>	Low Achievers	42.58	6.90			

\* $p < .05$

Table 2 shows that there were significant differences in the coping styles used by high achievers and low achievers. The results indicate that low achievers reported the use of more problem focused coping style ( $M = 42.8$   $SD 6.50$ ) as compared to high achievers ( $M = 40.78$   $SD 6.50$ )  $t = -2.60$   $p < .05$  (388). From these results it can be inferred that low achievers use more problem focused coping styles. A great majority of low achievers are day scholars whose parents are not well endowed (Table 2). However it is also possible that many low achievers live with their family members as opposed to high achievers who are boarders, hence the low achievers end up doing more activities with their family members. A lot of the problem focused coping style clusters involved activities that deal with family members. The other interpretation to this result which does not conform to findings in other related studies is that another related variable altogether could be differentiating high achievers from low achievers.

These findings however are not in agreement with Rafnsonn et al. (2006) who found that higher task oriented coping predicted higher Grade Point Average (GPA) whereas higher avoidance oriented coping predicted lower GPA. In the study by Rafnsonn et al. (2006), task oriented coping would be likened to problem focused coping whereas avoidance oriented coping would be coping style is associated with higher GPA and achievement in general. The result attained is unlike what Alimoglu et al. (2010) got. They found that both emotion focused coping and problem focused coping style

predicted student success in practical exams. However problem focused coping also predicted satisfaction with practicals. Their study was not in relation to achievement, but the results indicated that different coping styles are associated with different academic outcomes. In regard to the results of the current study probably other variables not used in the study may help in further explaining the outcome.

The third objective was to determine the relationship between coping style and school adjustment. The research question was addressed using Pearson's correlations and the results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Correlations Between Coping Style and School Adjustment

Coping Style	Vigor	Dedication	Absorption	Engagement	School Adjustment
	High Achievers		Low Achievers		
Emotion Focused	-.234**	-.246**	-.236**	-.279**	-.158*
Problem Focused	$p = .00$	$p = .00$	$p = .00$	$p = .00$	$p = .02$
Emotion Focused	.107	.114	.151*	.144*	-.047
Problem Focused	$p = .10$	$p = .08$	$p = .02$	$p = .03$	$p = .48$
	High Achievers		Low Achievers		
Emotion Focused	-.003	.060	.123	.065	-.032
Problem Focused	$p = .97$	$p = .46$	$p = .13$	$p = .42$	$p = .69$
Emotion Focused	.007	.052	.077	.051	.015
Problem Focused	$p = .93$	$p = .52$	$p = .34$	$p = .53$	$p = .85$

\*\*P < 0.01 (2 tailed)

\*p < 0.05 (2 tailed)

Table 3 shows that emotion focused coping style is negatively significantly correlated with vigor,  $r = -.234$   $p < .01$  dedication,  $r = -.246$   $p < .01$  and engagement  $r = -.279$   $p < .01$  and school adjustment  $r = -.158$   $p < .05$ . Problem focused coping style is associated with absorption  $r = .151$   $p < .05$  and engagement  $r = .144$   $p < .05$ . Students who reported the use of emotion focused coping style also reported low energy when it came to their work, found that time did not pass quickly and were lowly engaged. These students were not well adjusted in school.

On the other hand students who reported the use of problem focused coping style were more absorbed in their work and were also more engaged. This finding is only applicable to the high achievers. Among the low achievers there were no significant results for both coping styles.

This result is in agreement with Feenstra et al. (2001), who found that more active coping was correlated with positive adjustment to college. Although this particular study used Holohan and Moos coping scale and Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) for adjustment, the trend in the findings is the same. This implies that problem focused coping is associated with school adjustment. Problem focused coping style is positively related to components of school adjustment in the current study. The negative

relation with school adjustment is probably due to the effect of the aggregate of KCSE, satisfaction with school and school engagement. Recent studies examine school engagement as opposed to school adjustment because it is not combined with academic achievement (Vasalampi et al (2009) This result is in agreement with Smith et al (2008) who found that more positive perception of the transition to university was associated with higher levels of adaptive coping, lower levels of daily hassles, higher levels of vigorous and strength building physical activity and better academic achievement. All these show that active coping styles are associated with better school adjustment.

The implications of this finding to theory is that school engagement and consequently school adjustment are partially related to problem focused coping style (absorption  $r = .151$   $p < .05$  and engagement  $r = .144$   $p < .05$ ). School adjustment as defined by the construct measured by SACQ has been found to be associated with problem focused coping style (Feenstra et al. 2001). It can now be confirmed that school adjustment as measured by Salmela- Aro (2008) which is the integration of school engagement, satisfaction with school and academic achievement is also associated with problem focused coping style.

Another implication of this finding to theory is that school adjustment as defined by the construct measured by SACQ has been found to be associated with emotion focused coping style. The negative relation of vigor, dedication, absorption, engagement and school adjustment as measured by Salmela- Aro (2008) with emotion focused coping style means that to a great extent the instruments measure the same construct.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The result showed that there was no significant gender differences in coping style used. It is recommended that a bigger population and other instruments be used to ascertain that there are no gender differences.

There were significant differences in the coping styles used by high achievers and low achievers. The results indicate that low achievers reported the use of more problem focused coping style as compared to high achievers. This is a good sign and awareness campaigns should be encouraged.

Emotion focused coping style is negatively significantly correlated with vigor, dedication, and engagement and school adjustment. Problem focused coping style is associated with absorption and engagement. It is recommended that awareness campaigns be made especially amongst low achievers to educate them on the need to avoid the use of emotion focused coping styles with regard to the solvable challenges they face.

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