RESEARCH ARTICLE

Influence of Teacher-Student Relationships on Students' Loneliness in Coeducational and Single-Gender Public Secondary Schools in Kenya: a case of Murang'a County

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A B S T R A C T

The objective of this study was to compare the influence of teacher-student relationship on students' loneliness in single-gender and coeducational schools. The study was conducted in 312 sub county public secondary schools in Murang'a County, in central Kenya. A cross-sectional survey design was used. Stratified random sampling was used to get a sample of 435 participants out of 12,400 students in coeducational and single gender boarding schools. Loneliness was measured using Perth A-loneness (PAL) loneliness scale, whereas TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS was measured using 10 statements with graded responses in a five-point Likert scale developed for this study. The PAL and TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS scales together with personal data questions formed parts of the self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered by research assistants during normal school days. Correlation and regression analysis were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences(SPSS) version 20. TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS s were found to be inversely and highly significantly related to loneliness. Regression analysis revealed that TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS s predict between 3.0% and 8.0% of loneliness among students, depending on gender and school type.

Keywords: coeducational, Gender, Loneliness, students, Teacher-Student Relationships

1. INTRODUCTION

Loneliness is an unpleasant emotion arising from awareness of social deficiency. It is the

perceived difference between the desired and the present levels of quantity and quality of relationships. Loneliness is not synonymous with solitude, aloneness, or isolation (Peplau & Perlman, 1979). A person can be lonely amidst a crowd to which they desire no connection. It is also possible that one is alone and not lonely but enjoying the solitude. It is a dissatisfaction that is felt subjectively and may be perceived as temporary or enduring because the person assesses self as able or unable to cope with the situation. If a person attributes the cause of loneliness to something beyond his or her control, it can become painful and depressing. Loneliness can be due to limited social-emotional contact and isolation. People at every age, such as children, adolescents, and adults, describe the experience of loneliness as undesirable, painful aloneness (Galanaki &

Vassilopoulou, 2007; Houghton, Hattie, Wood, Carroll, Martin, &Tan, 2014). Many negative outcomes in life have been significantly linked to loneliness; for example, low academic engagement and achievement, poor psychological adjustment, poor social skills acquisition, mental and physical health challenges, and truancy and dropping out of school (Murphy, Murphy,& Shevlin, 2015; Stickley, Koyanagi, Koposov, Schwab-Stone, & Ruchkin, 2014; Frostad, Pjil, & Mjavaatan, 2015). Loneliness has been shown to be the most powerful predictor of mortality in longitudinal studies of older adults (Qualls, 2014). Loneliness is a major source of distress and a developmental risk that can predispose children to immediate and long-term negative consequences (Sharabi, Levi,& Margalit, 2012). Students who experience loneliness more often and intensely than others are at risk of poor development in multiple domains of functioning and are more prone to emotional problems such as depression and anxiety (Jobe-Shields, Cohen,& Parra, 2011). Thus both intensity and frequency are important aspects in the outcomes of loneliness.

In an inviting school model, people, policies, place, programs, and school processes were identified as important components in determining school climate. Furthermore, people factors were singled out as the most important of factors influencing the school climate (Novak & Purkey, 2008). In a school, the people that interact with students the most are teachers, other students, and support staff. This was highlighted by Vickers, Finger, Barker and Bodkin-Andrews (2014) who, while developing a measure for the impact of social relations and values on education, identified teacher-student and student-student relationships as key areas contributing to the social environment in a school. Later, Latsch (2018) found that social relationships in school play a critical role in adolescents' wellbeing and states that teacher-student relationships and student-school belongingness are the major contributors to students' emotional and psychosocial wellness and, specifically, to students' stress, depression, and loneliness. Mouratidis and Sideridis (2009) observed that perceived social relationships in schools' context shape the life of a student, making school a major contributor to socialization and psychological wellbeing.

1.2 School contexts

In Kenya, public schools can either be of mixed gender or single gender. The school can also be a boarding school or day school. Boarding schools are characterized by restriction of movement in and out of school for students, except during open days when parents and guardians can visit the students. The schools are manned by teachers, and students' time is programmed in such a way that they have little time for self-directed activities. A major portion of their time is taken by academics. The boarding facilities are more likely to be outstretched and congested. Students' diets are usually repeatedly monotonous. In mixed gender schools, facilities like fields, halls, means of transportation and classrooms are shared. Only the sleeping areas are assigned separately according to gender Students in Kenya spend more than 75% of their time in school; the school environment impacts the growth and development of the students more than other social environments.

In school, learners interact with teachers in a bidirectional way, whereby learners cause changes in teachers' behaviors and teachers' actions influence the students. Shaunessy and McHatton (2008) found that students described a caring teacher as one who knows the subject matter, teaches for the students' understanding, maintains high expectations, provides constructive feedback, and models a caring attitude. These teachers' attributes communicate care to the students; thus, teachers' with such behaviors are likely to get a positive response from students. Teachers and students interact formally in the classroom and informally during school functions and co-curricular activities. The quality of interactions in the two dimensions could lead to closeness and warmth or to a distant, cold, and conflictual relationship.

Teachers coach and encourage students to adopt gender stereotypes in the community, which influences the relationships in schools and serves to perpetuate the stereotypes. Clark (2004) remarked that schooling is a social process through which social values and statuses of the community are maintained because teachers seize the opportunity to guide the students into the desired behaviors required to fit in the society. Girls were affected

more in a coeducational school because they adopted the role of 'caretakers' for the boys (Jackson, 2002), which matches well with the patriarchal society where femininity was strongly identified with serving the male. Moreover, compliant girls were popular among their peers and teachers, thus reinforcing their behavior.

Huyge, Dimitri, and Houtte (2014) reported that boys' behavior tallied with hegemonic masculinity characterized by self-determination, competition, assertiveness, rejection of authority, aggression, and defiance. Schools did not tolerate boys' behavior because rules and regulations of learning institutions favored the unquestioning compliance of femininity. Clark (2004) noted that many school hours were spent managing boys' behavior, denying girls opportunity to interact with teachers. Boys' behaviors would affect the teachers' response and most likely lead to a negative relationship. Conversely, girls would be praised and have positive relationships because they comply with school expectations, (Huyge, Dimitri,&Houtte, 2014).Popularity among peers is one of the social needs of students. Boys and girls are likely to compete for teachers' attention in coeducational schools. Thus, we suspect that gender is a factor that affects teacher-student relationships and, by doing so, varies its power in determining loneliness.

Cross-gender interactions and relationships are a major developmental task during adolescence. When genders are segregated, cross-gender anxiety may take root and hinder attempts by a boy or a girl in starting and establishing a stable, lasting relationship. Wong, Shi,& Chen, (2018) observed that cross-gender anxiety may lead to low self-esteem, low assertiveness, depression, and loneliness. It was noted that gender anxiety was more in boys than girls. This means that boys in coeducational schools will have less successful relations with girls, which may aggravate loneliness levels. Therefore, we predict higher loneliness levels for boys in coeducational schools than for girls.

Picho and Stephens (2012), in their study on gender and performance, described a phenomenon of stereotype threat as fear to confirm a negative belief associated with a group. Stereotype threat was found to be correlated with gender identity, locus of control, and stigma consciousness. It was also noted that the threat was higher in coeducational schools than in single gender schools. This means gender stereotypes' vigilance can be observed in the presence of the opposite gender and may be a source of anxiety and loneliness.

Poulou (2015), while studying teacher-student relationships concluded that supportive teacher-student relationships resulted in good connectedness to the school and low level of loneliness. Latsch (2018) sums it up by stating that an environment where a student does not experience support from teachers and acceptance by peers increases the risk of loneliness.

Students long for relationships in which they are respected and their opinions are accommodated. This acceptance satisfies their need for belongingness and they will likely display higher commitment and effort toward school work. However, conflictual relationships result in disengagement for students and stress and burn-out for teachers. Students who had conflictual relationships with teachers had more behavior problems and poor academic performance (Baroody, Kaufman, Larsen, & Curby, 2014).

Stereotype stress is the fear or anxiety to confirm a stereotypic behavior and is more real when the opposite gender is present. Clark (2004) pointed out that in presence of boys, girls will be more conscious of their behavior and strive to comply with social expectations than when they are with other girls. Coeducational schools provide an opportunity for cross-gender relationships, which could influence the quality and quantity of student-student relationships. In addition, the presence of boarding and day schools brings in the difference in restrictions to the boarders, because they have limited interaction with neighbors and family members. The day scholars lack time to interact with teachers as opposed to boarders, who are under the care of the teachers most of the time. Therefore, differences in teacher-student relationships as well as in levels of loneliness are expected owing to the differing contexts, calling for different loneliness management approaches.

Baig (2014) observes that teacher-student interactions are a reflection of the society's way of life and usually loaded with gender stereotypes. Some teachers take it on themselves to guide students into appropriate gender roles. This, taken together, implies that gender segregation in schools will elicit different teacher expectations and behaviors. Despite loneliness being an important health concern among the adolescents and the teacher-student relationship being a major defining relationship in schools, few studies were found to investigate the influence of teacher-student relationships on loneliness under varying school contexts. Therefore, this study seeks to establish how teacher-student relationships vary and influence loneliness among students in different schools' contexts.

The following questions guided the study :(a) Is there a difference between coeducational and single gender schools' in teacher-student relationships by gender?(b) Is there a difference between coeducational and single gender schools students' loneliness by gender?(c) How do teacher-student relationships determine students' level of loneliness in coeducational and single gender schools and by gender?

2. METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research approach using a cross-sectional survey design was used in this study. The research was conducted in public sub county secondary schools in Murang'a County, which is in the central region of Kenya. Stratified random sampling method was used to select 12 out of 312 schools to participate in the study, with each school type forming a stratum. From the selected schools, form two students were randomly selected to participate in the study. Form two students were chosen because they had interacted with teachers over a significant amount of time and they were in middle adolescence—when loneliness is at its peak (Ugur &Tarik,2008). Out of a population of 1,340 students of form two in the sample schools, 435 students were selected for the study from the two types of schools. There were 243 participants (144 boys and 105 girls) from single gender boarding schools and 192 (87 boys and 105 girls) from coeducational boarding schools.

After obtaining permission from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation, State Department of Early Learning& Basic Education, and school administration, the research instruments were administered to students during regular school hours by trained research assistants. The collected data were coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences computer program (SPSS, version 20). First, descriptive statistics of the data were obtained. Spearman rank correlation coefficients were calculated, and regression analysis was performed to determine the influence of teacher-student relationships on students' loneliness and the extent to which it teacher-student relationships predicted loneliness.

2.1 Instrumentation

A personal data form was used to capture students' age, gender, and school type. Loneliness, being a deficit measure of desired and current satisfaction in a relationship, can be viewed in a continuous spectrum from zero to a full manifestation. The words describing the level of loneliness help participants to locate the deficit according to their subjective experience. Designating numerals in a Likert scale helps express loneliness in a continuous manner, with measures ranging from least to highest. Similarly, the teacher-student relationships were viewed as dynamic and could assume any position in the scale, from lowest to highest, depending on students' perception. Thus, the two instruments resulted in a continuous data scale.

2.2 Teacher-student relationship scale

The teacher-student relationships scale was adopted from the study by Vickers et al. (2014) developed by the researchers for this study. It comprised 10 statements articulating various aspects relations between teachers and students. The responses were noted in a Likert scale. Positively worded statements like "Teachers in this school are friendly to students" were scored from 5 to 1(*strongly agree*= 5;*agree*=4;*not sure*= 3;*disagree* = 2; and *strongly disagree*=1),whereas negatively worded statements such as "I have no teacher whom I can tell my problem" were scored in a reverse manner (*strongly agree* = 1; *agree* = 2; *not sure* = 3;

disagree = 4; and *strongly disagree* = 5), so that higher scores reflected better relationships with teachers. The average score for teacher-student relationships was calculated by dividing the raw score for the 10 items by 10. Thus, the final representative scores for respondents ranged from 1 to 5. Higher teacher-student relationships' scores corresponded to better relationship between the student and the teacher. The scale was piloted in similar schools in Kiambu County and improved by faculty members. The reliability index of this scale was calculated and found to be good ($α=0.82$; $p<0.05$).

2.3 Loneliness scale

Perth A-loneness (PAL) loneliness scale, which is a multidimensional scale that measures loneliness using 24 Likert-scaled items covering four dimensions, namely friendship, isolation, positive attitude toward solitude(PATS), and negative attitude toward solitude(NATS) (Houghton et al., 2014) was used. Each subscale used six statements

and six point descriptors: *never=1, rarely=2, sometimes=3, often=4, very often=5, always=6.* These items were worded such that there was a balance of negative and positive items. Thus, each subscale had a minimum of 6 marks and a maximum score of 6×6 or 36. The total for each subscale was divided by six to get a representative score for the participant. A total loneliness score was calculated as a total of the four representative scores from the four subscales divided by four. Cronbach alpha coefficient for reliability of the subscales was acceptable: friendship (0.79), isolation (0.86), PATS (0.84), and NATS (0.75) for this study. A personal data form was also used to capture demographic data of gender, age, and type of school.

3. FINDINGS

The variables of age, teacher-student relationships and loneliness were analyzed by gender in the study. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Gender, Type of School, Age, Loneliness Score, Teacher-Student Relationships/Loneliness Correlations, and Coefficients of Determination

School type	Gender	N	Age (years)		PAL scores		TSR scores		R	R^2
			Mean	Std dev	Mean	Std dev	Mean	Std dev		
Single-sex boarding	Boys	144	17.09	1.19	2.81	0.65	3.76	0.89	−0.288**	0.083
	Girls	99	15.86	1.23	2.94	0.83	3.96	1.00	−0.114	0.013
Mixed-sex boarding	Boys	87	16.71	0.91	2.79	0.63	4.06	0.67	−0.244*	0.060
	Girls	105	16.59	1.15	3.02	0.79	3.61	0.82	−0.283**	0.080

Key: *Level of significance p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01. R = correlation coefficient between loneliness and teacher-student relationships. R^2 = coefficient of determination.

The sample comprised of 231 boys (53.1%) and 204 girls (46.9%); thus, each gender was fairly represented. The average age of the boys was 16.95 years, whereas that of girls was 16.25 years. The sample mean age of 16.61 years indicates that the students were in the middle adolescence stage of development, which is known to be a peak for loneliness in life.

3.1 Teacher-students relationships by school type and gender

Boys' teacher-student relationships level was better in coeducational boarding schools (4.06) than in single gender boarding schools (3.76). It was further observed that teacher-student relationships

scores (3.76) of boys who went to single gender boarding school were significantly lower than those (4.06) of boys who went to coeducational boarding schools. It can be concluded that separating boys from girls leads to poor teacher-student relationships. For girls, better teacher-student relationships scores were noted in single gender boarding schools (3.96) than in coeducational boarding schools (3.61).T-tests were conducted, and the mean score (3.96) for girls' teacher-student relationships in single gender schools, was found to be significantly higher than the (3.61) for coeducational boarding schools (p<0.05). Thus putting boys and girls together in a school led to poorer teacher-student relationships for girls. Coeducational schools favored boys' relationships with teachers but not that of girls.

3.2 Loneliness scores by school type and gender

Loneliness mean score for girls in coeducational boarding schools was 3.02 which was higher than the score 2.94 for girls in single gender schools. T-test between the loneliness scores showed that the difference was not significant (p > 0.05). Boys in single gender schools had a loneliness mean score of 2.81 which was higher than 2.79 for boys in coeducational boarding schools. Although girls are lonelier than boys in both coeducational and single gender boarding schools, t-test revealed that there were no significant differences between the scores(p>0.05). Thus, we can conclude that boys are as lonely as girls because there were no significant differences in their loneliness scores and the differences could be only by chance. This finding agrees with that of Ilhan (2012).

3.3 Correlations between teacher-student relationships and loneliness

This study sought to establish a relationship between teacher-student relationships and loneliness among students in different schools' contexts. Pearson correlation coefficients between teacher-student relationships and loneliness were calculated in Table 1. In single gender boarding schools, boys' Pearson correlation coefficient was r= −0.288; (p<0.01). In same category, girls' correlations were weak and non-significant (r= −0.114; p>0.05). The relationship between teacher-

student relationships and loneliness was highly significant and fairly strong for boys and not girls in single gender boarding schools. Both girls and boys in coeducational boarding schools, had highly significant correlations between teacher-student relationships and loneliness of fair strength of r= −0.244, p<0.05 and r= −0.283, p<0.01, respectively. Although similar in strength and direction, the dynamics behind the observations could be different for the genders.

It was found that the correlations between teacher-student relationships and loneliness were negative in the two types of schools. Inverse relationship means that improvement in teacher-student relationships led to a decrease in students' loneliness. It is observed that good teacher-student relationships act as a protective factor against loneliness.

It was observed that there were highly significant relations between teacher-student relationships and loneliness for boys in both single gender and coeducational boarding schools. Thus, it is likely that restriction to the school compound resulted in greater amount of attention given to teachers by boys. For girls there is highly significant relationship between teacher-student relationships and loneliness in coeducational boarding and not in single gender schools. May be the presence of boys raised girls' sensitivity to the relationships' compliance and girls competed for teachers' approval in coeducational school more than those in girls-only schools.

3.4 Regression analysis and teacher-student relationships' power to determine loneliness

This study sought to find out to what extent teacher-student relationships can predict levels of loneliness in varying schools' contexts. The power of teacher-student relationships in predicting loneliness was investigated. Teacher-student relationships scores were regressed against loneliness scores. Coefficient of change (R^2) was calculated for different schools' contexts (Table 1). In single gender schools, teacher-student relationships could predict 8.3% of cases of loneliness for boys and only 1.3% for girls against 6.0% and 8.0% in coeducational boarding schools, respectively. It was observed that the ability of teachers-student

relationships in determining levels of loneliness varied from 1.3% to 8.3%. Teacher-student relationships impact was more in coeducational schools than in single gender schools for girls.

4. DISCUSSION

As the students grow older, there is an emergence of great interest in them to contact others and establish permanent social bonds with other students as well as with other adults in their environment. This makes students' relationships with teachers at school become important in determining their behavior and hence a tendency to develop loneliness. Boys' loneliness in single gender boarding schools had a significant relationship with teacher-student relationships. This relationship had a coefficient of determination of $R^2=0.083$. In coeducational boarding schools, both girls' and boys' loneliness had a significant relationship with teacher-student relationships and a factor of determination of $R^2=0.080$ and $R^2 = 0.060$, respectively. The boys had lower than girls weighting of the teacher-student relationships-loneliness bond. In the coeducational boarding schools, girls seemed to be reacting to the presence of boys and the apparent attention boys got from teachers. This finding is in line with the observations of Clark (2004) and Milligan (2014) that teachers gave more attention to boys than girls in coeducation classrooms. Whether the attention to boys was due to indiscipline or good behavior, the boys ended up enjoying it. Thus, the boys would be reaping from the teachers' behavior. The girls' response could be that of feeling neglected and discriminated against boys. With such perception, girls may respond by increased sensitivity and constant negative evaluation of teacher-student relationships.

Velasquez, Santo, Saldarriaga, Lopez, & Bukowski (2010) found that the presence of the other gender reinforces group-stereotyped behavior. Boys and girls interact, influence each other, and amplify gender stereotyping of behaviors, and attitudes are likely to be more pronounced in coeducational schools than in single gender schools owing to stereotype accessibility (Brutsaert, 2006). Thus, the differences observed by valuing teacher-student relationships of boys and girls in mixed- and single gender schools could be sustained by the presence

of the other gender. Girls seem to be more sensitive to teacher-student relationships gaps when boys are present (Clark, 2004). However, it was not established as to the number of boys that would make girls respond sensitively or compete for teachers' attention.

5. CONCLUSION

The importance of teacher-student relationships in determining students' loneliness has been established in this study. The factor of determination of teacher-student relationships was varying depending on the school contexts. Single gender boarding schools' students' loneliness was found to be highly and significantly influenced by teacher-student relationships. We conclude that teacher-student relationships are a major factor in determining loneliness in boarding schools for both girls and boys.

The role of teacher-student relationships in determining students' loneliness becomes less significant when the opposite gender is present, and shifts to weak and non-significant levels for boys. This observation can be explained by the compensatory ability of relationships. The boys tend to focus more on peer relationships in the presence of girls, thus diminishing the impact of teacher-student relationships on their loneliness. The dynamics of gender interactions that reduced the importance of teacher-student relationships as a major determinant of loneliness to an insignificant one needs to be investigated further.

The cultural background of the students determines their values and definition of femininity and masculinity. This study was conducted among the Kikuyu ethnic group, which is highly patriarchal. A study in another community may bear different results. Further research is needed to look into the dynamics of teacher-student relationships in influencing students' loneliness in various schools' contexts and cultures.

Gender variations were observed in the way teacher-student relationships influenced loneliness in single gender and coeducational schools. The number of students of the opposite gender to be present in a school in order to strike a balance point, where teacher-student relationships has equal

influence on loneliness for both genders needs to be investigated for the benefit of coeducation schools.

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