



THE INFLUENCE OF PEER COUNSELING SERVICES ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AS PERCEIVED BY TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN KAKAMEGA SOUTH, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

In the current education system academic-based peer counseling is increasingly becoming critical. Its success depends on the perception of teachers and students on the influence of peer counseling services. The purpose of the study was to establish the influence of peer counseling services on academic performance as perceived by teachers and students in Kaka mega South District. The study was based on the fifth stage of Erickson's theory of psychosocial development. A descriptive survey research design was adopted. The study population comprised of 23 principals, 349 teachers and 7160 students. Questionnaire and interview guide were used to collect data. Content validity was established by giving the instruments to experts in the department of Educational psychology. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts and percentages. Qualitative data was received in verbatim, transcribed and organized according to themes. A higher proportion of students compared to teachers in the district have a positive perception of participation in joint academic discussions, small subject-based peer counseling groups is perceived as having a direct influence on students' academic performance. The study concluded that, Joint academic discussions and small subject-based discussion groups are the key PC services. The study recommends that there is need for stakeholders in education to enhance academic performance through exploitation of the benefits of joint group discussions and small subject-based discussion groups.

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INTRODUCTION

Performance in its simplest sense refers to timely achievement of organizational goals (Cole, 1996). In the perspective of Kenyan secondary schools, academic performance of a school refers to the proportion of its students that attain the minimum university entry marks (MOE, 2003). In addition, Egan (1996) established that provision of direction and encouragement are key guiding principles for effective academic performance in secondary schools. Apart from the teachers, peers may influence academic performance of fellow students through provision of direction, encouragement and development of appropriate study habits. It is against this background that peer counseling practices can influence academic performance of secondary schools. Deutsch and Swartz (2002) define peer counseling as formal training of a people of youths to educate and influence their peers (not necessarily same age) under the mentorship of a qualified adult. The definition of PC in this study was adapted from Deutsch and Swartz (2002). PC is both a philosophy based on the important principle that people are capable of solving most of their problems if given a chance and that is why Carr (1994) refers PC to concerted attempts or efforts to harness the capacity that peers have to console, appease, befriend one another, to mediate in conflicts and record those alienated from each other. In Kenya, Ndichu (2005) established that the current socio-technological changes and educational demands call for continuous counseling for in-school youths. In addition, Arudo (2006) found that excess work pressure on the teacher counselors in a world where parents are spending less and less time with their children, leave children in the hands of their peers. This results to increased need for PC services among Kenyan high school students. According to MOE (2010) report by the District Education Officer of Kakamega South, the academic performance of secondary schools in Kakamega South is raising concern. This has challenged

all education stakeholders in the district to seek for possible solutions to the persistent low academic performance. Arudo (2006) observed that peer counseling is one possible solution to the problem. Similar observations about peer counseling services in Kenya, inclusive of Kakamega south district have been made by stakeholders (MOE, 2010). In America, Muro and Kottman (1991) found that when students are in middle school and beginning to gain freedom from their parents, it may be difficult for them to look for their parents for advice or confide in them over some issues. At this point in time, peer counseling is the critical focus because peer- based advice is potentially one of the earliest interventions outside the students' family. In addition, Levi and Ziegler (1993) established that peer linkages form a trusting relationship between students and teachers but the success of peer counseling (PC) depends on the perception of the students and teachers towards the counseling services.

According to M'nkanata (2009), the kinds of peer services offered depend on the needs of the school, the community and the expertise of the peer counselors. He further observes that school counseling services take different approaches which include; general approach, instructional counselor approach, outreach approach and advocacy approach. The services have been found to have significant influence on students' academics. In addition single sessions brief counseling in which students meet with a counselor for one session, lasting approximately 40 minutes, have been found effective in some instances (M'nkanata, 2009). He further noted that brief counseling is a desirable alternative for students with developmental concerns such as academic issues and peer conflicts. A research conducted in Canada in 1995, found that teachers using single session brief counseling were often able to help students use their time more wisely and form concrete, attainable goals with their students (Litell, Malia and Vanderwood, 1995). Baker and Gerler (2001) found that students who participated in a school counseling program had significantly less inappropriate behaviour and more positive attitudes

towards school than those students who did not participate in the program. A study conducted to Illinois high school seniors, established that though the profession of counseling exist, students are not comfortable with it. The strongest response from the students as to why they did not pursue professional counseling was because they did not feel comfortable talking things to a stranger. The second response was that counselors would pass this information to other people (Kayser and West, 1991). Peer counseling is therefore very important in such situations. This means peers are freer to one another and that is why the study conducted on students in Illinois school reveals that the students do not appreciate the counseling program offered by the teacher counselors.

According to Gladding (2004), effective application of PC is a foundation for team building among teachers and students. This encourages teachers to have common goals and direct the student peer counselors towards their achievement. Peer counseling are based on the assumption that individuals as natural helpers provide spontaneous and informal support to peers experientially. When supported and developed they may become the best group to reach out to the needy students (Ndichu, 2005). Such natural helpers when provided with counseling skills may be of greatest assistance where authority and professional services may be inadequate or not readily available. According to Arudo (2006) it is for this reason that students are likely to contact fellow students when they are experiencing problems and concerns before they approach their teachers especially on matters they consider embarrassing such as rape, STIs among others.

Peer mentoring process benefits all participants. In a study at the University of Western Sydney, Watts and Thomas, (1997), a review of strategies for student learning support for all students revealed that amongst these is the use of mentoring. The study revealed that questionnaires given to mentors and mantees on how the scheme had benefited them showed that members valued a gain in confidence, improvement in the ability to communicate ideas and enhanced understanding of the subject (Maloney, 2003). Morrey *et al.* (1989) assessed a high school peer counseling program by surveying 893 10th–12th graders on the level of student concerns and on satisfaction with counseling. They used peer counseling more on either juniors or seniors, suggesting that such usage is a consequence of transition from junior high to high school. A majority of Students (703) reported satisfaction with peer counseling. Besercker and Aug (1985) carried out a survey study on effectiveness of PC programs in Indiana high school, in Cincinnati, Ohio. They gathered data by administering questionnaires to teachers in the school to assess their views on the effectiveness of PC. They concluded that PC services were most effective if teachers were good role models and peer tutors.

METHODOLOGY

The paper sought to document teachers' and students' perception of the influence of peer counseling services on academic performance. The study was conducted in secondary schools in Kakamega south district. The study was based on the 5th stage of Erickson's theory of psychosocial development, developed by Erick Homburg Erickson in America (1902-1994).

In this study a descriptive survey research design was adopted. The dependent variable was the academic performance while the independent variable was teachers' and students' perception. The study population comprised of 7260 students, out of which 4662 were boys and 2554 were girls. Of the 23 secondary schools, there was 1 boys' school, 3 girls' schools, 11 mixed day and boarding schools and 8 mixed day schools. The teacher population was 349 and 5 school principals. Therefore the sample size comprised of 5 school principals, 30 teacher counselors and 180 students from five randomly selected schools in the study area. Multi-stage sampling was applied to facilitate fair coverage of all sub-groups of respondents in the study as recommended by Kathuri and Pals (1999).

In this study the respondents were from girls,' boys,' mixed day and boarding types of secondary schools from the two divisions in the study area. Purposive sampling technique was first applied to identify each administrative division as a cluster in the study. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data was assessed in verbatim then transcribed and organized into themes and sub-themes. Descriptive statistics particularly frequency counts and percentages were applied during analysis. The results were organized in a variety of presentation styles which included tables and graphs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section established the perception of teachers and students on the influence of peer counseling services on academic performance. In order to achieve this objective the extent to which students' academic performance is influenced by PC services was sought from respondents. The frequency of participation in joint discussion was assessed on a Likert scale that stretched from very frequent, moderately frequent, not sure, rare and very rare levels. The responses are summarized and presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participation of Students in Joint Academic Discussion

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Very frequent	75	41.7
Frequent	86	47.8
Not sure	6	3.3
Rare	10	5.6
Very rare	3	1.6
Total	180	100

From Table 1, 75 (41.7%) student respondents participated very frequently, 86 (47.8%) participated moderately frequently, 10 (5.6%) participated rarely and 3 (1.6%) participated very rarely. This results show that an overwhelming majority of students 161 (89.5%) participated in joint academic discussion frequently, compared to only 13 (7.2%). The high proportion of students who participated in the discussions is an indicator of the presence of strong PC services and networks within the schools. The wide gap (7.2% - 89.5%) between the two levels could be attributed to very strong and positive influence of the joint academic discussions on academic performance as perceived by students within the schools in the district. Those who participated very frequently are most likely to have been form four students who were candidates at the time of the study while those who participated moderately frequently are likely to have been the ones in form three and two who were potential candidates. This meant that participation in joint academic discussion is dependent on ones' academic level. The high proportion of students who participated in the discussions is an indicator of the presence of strong PC services and networks within the schools. These findings are related to Maloney (2003) who noted that a counselor advises students but it is up to individual students to join or commit themselves to small groups in order to gain maximally from on going PC programs.

Table 2. Acquisition of Study Techniques

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Very many	102	56.7
Many	50	27.8
Not sure	15	8.3
Few	8	5.0
Very few	5	2.8
Total	180	100

From Table 2, findings reveal that 152 (84.5%) of students felt that they acquired many techniques through joint discussion while approximately 13 (7.8%) felt that they acquired few techniques. The gap (84.5-7.8%) is an indicator of the academic logic or value of joint academic discussions.

Table 3. Involvement of Students and Joint Discussions Benefits

Form	Frequency	Student (%)	Benefit Indicator Score (%)
1	39	21.7	3.5
2	40	22.2	14.3
3	47	26.1	34.5
4	54	30.0	47.7
Total	180	100	100

Findings reveal that, form 4 students are the most active 54 (30.0%), followed by 47 (26.1%) Form 3, then 40 (22.2%) Form 2, and lastly 39 (21.7%) Form 1. This trend could be because as students advance academically their valuation of the benefits of joint academic discussion also increases. The proportion of students who participate actively in joint academic discussion is directly proportional to academic advancement. This is justified by the trend in the score or the proportion of active participants which increases from Form one to Form four. This trend could be because as students advance academically their valuation of the benefits of joint academic discussion also increases. This is consistent with the views of Carmichael (2003) who notes that, knowing what peer counseling services are available to students and how to receive them may benefit their academic progress in school, hence the students perception on the PC services may make it succeed. To gain more understanding on joint discussions, an assessment of the benefits of joint academic discussions was analyzed so as to establish the influence of PC services on academic performance as perceived by teachers and students as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4. Benefits from Joint Academic Discussions

Benefit	Frequency	Benefit indicator score (%)
Identification of academic weaknesses	130	72.7
Developed capacity for free discussion	130	72.7
Learnt from peers	115	64.2
Acquisition of Question-answering techniques	108	60.2
Making of personal time table	101	56.3
Learning to take corrections	60	33.6

According to the study findings in table 4, identification of academic weakness and development of capacity for participating in academic discussions freely were the greatest benefits of joint academic discussions with a benefit indicator score of 130 (72.7%). Sharing of information and skills is one of the basic concepts of PC services. It is on this basis that students can identify their academic weaknesses and learn to deal with them. Eventually this helps in improving students' academic performance. This is close to the findings of Saunders' survey (1992) on high school helpers in Canada, who were matched for a number of informal sessions with students who had failed two or more courses, the failing students' grades improved and they were less likely to drop out of school. 115 (64.2%) of students perceived that they benefited from academic discussions by learning from peers. One other basic concept of PC services is about sharing of information and knowledge towards betterment of the peers which is a critical indicator score of academic discussions on academic performance of students. In addition, 108 (60.3%) of students benefited from the joint academic discussion by acquiring better question-answering techniques from peers. 101 (56.3%) of students gained from joint academic discussions through acquisition of knowledge and skills for development of effective study timetables which are essential academic tools. Students' Academic attainment is partly dependent on students study habits that are controlled by a study timetable. Therefore the ability of a student to develop an effective study timetable is a foundation of academic excellence. 60 (33.6%) of students who participated in joint academic discussions benefited by learning to take corrections. Findings in the study show that respondents acquired the ability to improve in academic performance by identifying their previous mistakes and learning to

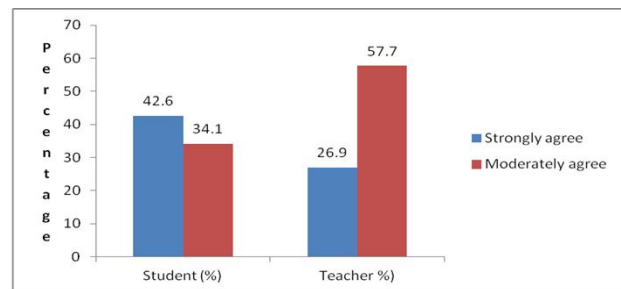
take up necessary corrective measures towards better academic performance. Improvement in academic performance is only achievable when the learner is able to identify previous mistakes because this is the foundation of all corrective practices. This is close to the study of Watts and Thomas, (1997) at the University of Western Sydney, where mentees noted gains in leadership, improved communication skills, seeing how others study, refreshing the work, and exchange of ideas.

Table 5. Value of Small Subject-based Groups

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	16	53.3
Agree	13	46.2
Not sure	-	-
Disagree	1	0.5
Strongly disagree	-	-
Total	30	100

According to the findings in Table 5, approximately 16 (53.3%) of the teachers strongly agree while 13 (46.2%) moderately agree to the fact that students' participation in small subject-based counseling groups has a direct influence on students' academic performance. Teachers' perception about the students' value of small subject-based counseling groups indicated they strongly agree to the fact that students' participation in small subject-based counseling groups has a direct influence on students' success in the classroom and beyond. This could be due to their experience of having interacted with peers closely. This is close to the findings of Borders and Drurry (1992) whose research showed that school counseling interventions like small subject-based counseling groups have a substantial impact on students' academic performance.

More insight into the investigation of teachers and students perception of the influence of PC services on academic performance was carried out by determining students and teachers perception about the value of one-to-one counseling services as presented in Figure 1. This could be because they perceive it to cater for students' individual academic needs and problems.

**Fig.1. Teachers and Students Valuation of one-to-one Peer Counseling Services**

Findings reveal that 60 (57.7%) teachers strongly agree while 40 (26.9%) moderately agree. Among students, 45 (42.6%) strongly agree whereas 37 (34.1%) moderately agree that one to one counseling is important. This implies that a higher proportion of teachers 60 (57%) than students 45 (42.6%) felt that one-to-one peer counseling services are beneficial to the students' academic performance. However, only 30 (26.9%) of teachers strongly felt it was very beneficial when compared to 45 (42.6%) of students who felt the same. This corroborates with the findings of Otunga (2006) who observed that every PC client is unique and each individual's concerns should be handled at individual level in a special way as they are manifested.

Conclusion

With regard to the findings of the study, it was concluded that a higher proportion of students compared to teachers in Kakamega South District have a positive perception of the influence of

participation in joint academic discussion as a PC intervention on academic performance. The proportion of the students benefiting from this intervention increases progressively from Form 1 to Form 4. In addition, small subject-based peer counseling groups are perceived as having a direct influence on students' academic performance and a higher proportion of students than teachers perceive that one-to-one peer counseling service is beneficial to the students' academic performance. According to teachers and students, the perceived benefits of joint academic discussions as a PC intervention on students' academic performance in decreasing order of influence are: identification of individual academic weaknesses, development of capacity for free discussions, acquisition of question - answering techniques, acquisition of ability to make personal time table, and learning to take corrections. There is need for principals, teacher counselors and student peer counselors to facilitate adoption of peer counseling services that have been perceived or identified to have positive influence on academic performance and scale up or modify those perceived to have a negative influence.

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