

# PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF EARLY ENROLLMENT TO BOARDING PRIMARY SCHOOLS ON PUPILS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN MALAVA SUB-COUNTRY, KENYA

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(Received 01<sup>st</sup> July 2020; accepted 15<sup>th</sup> July 2020)

**Abstract.** Psychological trauma is a type of mental damage due to exposure to or experiencing of a traumatic event. Sending children to boarding schools early when they are still under age has been classified as form of traumatic event with undesired outcomes. Guided by Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, this study set out to establish the psychological effects of early enrolment to boarding schools on pupils' academic performance in Malava Sub-County in Kakamega County, Kenya. The total study population was 1479 respondents comprising of 1139 pupils, 103 teachers, 228 parents, an education officer and 8 head-teachers. Using descriptive research design, the study sampled 381 respondents from the 8 schools within the sub-county comprising of pupils, teachers and parents. The data was collected using questionnaires and interviews schedules. The study employed test-retest reliability method to pilot study instruments in two schools. The collected data was cleaned, coded and analyzed using SPSS 20.0. Study findings indicate that pupils who were enrolled to boarding schools before attaining 12 years of age performed poorer in general terms compared to those pupils who joined after attaining 12 years. The study concluded that early enrolment to boarding schools is associated with psychological effects which may affect academic performance. The study therefore recommends that pupils be enrolled to boarding schools after 12 years of age.

**Keywords:** *academic performance, boarding school, early enrolment, psychological trauma*

## Introduction

Psychological wellbeing is the ultimate goal of every well-functioning human being. According to Ryff (1995), there are six dimensions of psychological wellbeing. First, self-confidence where an individual likes most aspects of one's personality. This includes having a positive view of one's self and feeling positive of one's past. Secondly, positive relations with others which entails having a satisfying relationship with others, through being concerned with the welfare of others, being empathic, affectionate and understanding the reciprocity of relationships. Thirdly, autonomy where an individual is confident in one's opinions, being independent and determining one's own life; being able to resist social pressures to think or behave negatively and evaluating one's life by internal standards. Fourthly, purpose in life where an individual should have a strong belief that there is purpose and meaning to life based on the feeling that one's present and past have meaning and life is being directed with goals and sense of direction. Fifth, environmental mastery where an individual is able to manipulate, control and effectively use the resources and opportunities available in one's environment. Lastly, personal growth which includes the feeling and a need for continued personal improvement; seeing oneself as getting better and being open to new experiences and growing in self-knowledge and personal effectiveness.

According to American Psychological Association (2013), posttraumatic stress disorder is the disturbance, regardless of its triggers, that causes clinically significant distress or impairment in the individual's social interactions, capacity to work or other important areas of functioning. This may be due to exposure resulting from directly experiencing a traumatic event, witnessing traumatic event in person, learning that traumatic event occurred to a close family member or close friend or experiencing first hand repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event (May and Wisco, 2016). Children sent away to school at an early age suffer from bullying, sexual abuse by staff or other children may follow and so new attachment figures may be unsafe. Therefore, in order to adapt to the system, a defensive and protective encapsulation of the self may be required hence concealing the true identity (Schaverien, 2015).

According to Buss et al. (2015), researchers have spent little time and energy researching on the effects of traumatic exposure in early childhood with the misconception that infants and young children lack the perception, cognition and social maturity to remember or understand traumatic events. Trauma is physical or psychological threat or assault to a child's physical integrity, sense of self, safety or survival or to the physical safety of significant other to the child. Traumatic events are incidents that involve the threat of bodily injury, death or harm to the physical integrity of self or others and often lead to feelings of terror or helplessness (American Psychological Association, 2013). The current study therefore set out to establish whether enrolling pupils to boarding school before attaining age twelve causes any form of trauma which might be exhibited through poor academic outcomes.

Bowker (2007) while examining the effects of boarding school life to Lakota Women found out that the psychological alienation presented untold torture to the women more than the physical punishment of separation from their families. She further observed that the effect of boarding school experiences on families is often a hidden legacy. She therefore recommended that providing a forum for these stories to emerge, as well as making such stories available to other survivors will encourage healing for family and communities as well as individuals. Consequently, the current research was carried out as an effort to bring out this hidden family legacy especially in the Kenyan context at an early age to advance the discourse of the discussion on boarding schooling and its resultant effect (Maluccio, 2018). It is therefore advisable that corrective measures are put in place to ensure that an individual's childhood is as conducive as possible. For instance, the Uganda Counselors Association observes that the act of taking young children to boarding schools as "psychologically destroying them". As such, children miss parental contact in the initial developmental stages because of class work. This effect could echo as they grow up with no love for others and lack self-esteem (Kato, 2015). It is against this background that the current study set out to establish whether adequate measures are put in place for pupils' early enrolment to ensure that their psychology is safeguarded as they pursue formal education.

Due to perceived negative psychological effects of boarding schools, a team of civil society organizations in the United Kingdom have launched a campaign for boarding schools to stop accepting young children claiming that boarding is mentally damaging and that it is detrimental to children's wellbeing that can lead to emotional deprivation (Laiser and Makewa, 2016). The study was guided by Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development which requires successful completion of each stage results in a healthy personality and the acquisition of basic virtues. Basic virtues are characteristic

strengths which the ego can use to resolve subsequent crises. Failure to successfully complete a stage can result in a reduced ability to complete further stages and therefore unhealthy personality and sense of self (Erickson, 1950).

A school environment comprises of systematic and predictive operations with severe penalty in case of deviation (Schaverian, 2015). This is in contrast with home environment where children are allowed to engage in childish play in a non-critical environment. In addition, it is argued that the early social environment that a child interacts with early age from infancy to ten years greatly influences personality development which is reflected later in life. Therefore, the school environment influences personality development as well as academic performance (Laiser and Makewa, 2016; Gulzar et al., 2010). Conceptually, the current study postulated that psychological effects in form of low self-esteem/worth and fear due to early enrolment to boarding school leads to low academic performance. This may be due to the fact that early dissociation from their parents may be perceived that their parents do not love them anymore, hence the decision to send them away from home to boarding schools. At school, these young pupils may be negatively socialized by their older peers through bullying, sexual harassment and loosing of personal effects. The young boarders then underrate their self-worth and ability to make it in life. This is exhibited through poor academic performance and other short term academic outcomes.

## Materials and Methods

The study employed descriptive research design so as to allow the researcher to describe the situation of boarding schools as it is in Malava Sub County. The design was used to find out the respondents' attitudes towards boarding school life and its resultant effects on pupils' academic performance. According to Kothari (2003), descriptive research design facilitated the use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection. The current study area was carried out in Malava sub-county, one of the 9 sub-counties in Kakamega County. It lies between 0°26'N and 34°51'E covering an area of 425 KM<sup>2</sup> and borders the following sub-counties; Kakamega South to the south, Nandi north to the east, Mumias to the west, Bungoma east to the North and Lugari to the northeast (County Government of Kakamega, 2013). According to Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, the current population of the Malava Sub-County is 222,298 people. In terms of culture, Malava sub-county is inhabited by the Kabras dialect of the Luhya community. Their economic activities include farming and livestock keeping. In terms of the main cash crops, the Kabras people practice sugarcane farming that is harvested and taken to West Kenya Sugar Company within the Sub County or Mumias, the neighboring sub county for processing (MPND, 2010).

The study used questionnaires and interview schedules as the main data collection instruments. This is because questionnaires allow the collection of large quantities of responses. Consequently, questionnaires were used to collect responses from pupils and teachers (Rowley, 2014). Interview schedules are also appropriate for collecting views and opinions from a small sample size. In this regard, the interview schedules were used to collect views from the education officer, school head teachers and from parents to supplement the information collected through questionnaires. Content validity was ascertained by an assessment of whether the proposed measures incorporate all contents of the study constructs. Reliability was estimated using test retest approach where a pilot study was carried out in 2 boarding primary schools within a span of two weeks.

The pilot involved education officer, school heads, parents, teachers and pupils. Using Pearson's correlation coefficient formula, correlation coefficients for the tests from the two schools were 0.82 and 0.84, respectively. According to Heale and Twycross (2015), a reliability coefficient of 0.70 and above is considered high enough to obtain reliable and valid findings if the piloted study instruments are utilized in the main study. Consequently, the reliability coefficients from the pilot study were considered high enough to judge the instruments as reliable for use in the main study.

During the actual study, copies of questionnaires were delivered to pupils and teachers who found them to be brief enough for filling and returning on the same day. The study, with the help of research assistants, conducted interview schedules on parents, head teachers and education officer while questionnaires were being filled. In order to respond to the research questions, the researcher generated data from the research instruments with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 20.0 tool. Analysis of qualitative data included editing, coding and cleaning. Analysis of the quantitative data involved descriptive statistical analysis where frequency distributions and percentages were used to subsequently interpret the results. The Chi square test of independence was used to establish the level of association between psychological effect and academic performance.

The study population included school teachers, boarding primary pupils and parents of the pupils from all primary schools which provide boarding primary in Malava Sub-County. The target population comprised of all the 8 primary boarding schools in Malava whose total enrollment was 1139 pupils, 8 head teachers, 228 parents and 103 teachers (Malava Sub-County Education Office, 2017). This constituted 28% of the population of pupils in basic education within the Sub-County. The study used simple random sampling technique to select 301 pupils, Snowball sampling technique to select 23 parents, quota sampling technique to select 48 teachers and purposive sampling technique to interview all the 8 head teachers. According to the Sub County Education Office, there is no pure boarding primary school that offers pure residential learning at primary school level; the existing day schools provide boarding facilities for a few pupils. Therefore, the identified institutions provide both residential and day schooling options for the pupils. Although the schools have enrolled boarding pupils virtually in all classes, most schools had made boarding option mandatory for class seven and eight pupils only (Malava Sub-County Education Office, 2017).

## Results and Discussion

The demographic characteristics assessed were in terms of gender, age at enrollment to boarding school, work experience, marital status and level of education. *Table 1* below presents the distribution of respondents by gender.

*Table 1. Distribution of respondents by gender.*

Respondents	Male		Female		Total	
	F	P	F	P	F	P
Pupils	130	45.3	157	54.7	287	100
Parents	14	62.5	9	37.5	23	100
Teachers	32	66.7	16	33.3	48	100
Total	176	-	182	-	358	-

\*F = Frequency; P = Percentage

From the study results in table 1, the study indicated that from a total of 287 pupils, 130 (45.3%) were boys while 157 (54.7%) were girls. The high number of girls in boarding school may be due to recent focus on girl-child empowerment and vulnerability when travelling long distances to day schools. This is in concurrence that in the recent past empowerment of the girl-child in Kenya has momentarily disadvantaged the boy-child (Moraa, 2018). In terms of age at enrollment, the study also revealed that 80 (27.9%) of pupils were under the age of 12 when they were first enrolled to boarding primary school while 207 (72.1%) of the pupils were 12 years and above at boarding primary school enrollment.

In this study, 23 parents were interviewed where 14 (62.5%) were male and 9 (37.5%) were female. Female parents may have been held up by family responsibilities at their homes as male parents were free to move around the school for the researcher to get them conveniently. *Table 2* presents demographic characteristics of parent respondents (Kloosterman et al., 2011).

**Table 2.** Parents demographic characteristics.

Characteristics	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Age (years)	18 – 35	7	30.4
	36 – 50	12	52.2
	51 and above	4	17.4
Marital status	Married	17	73.9
	Single	4	17.4
	Divorced	2	8.7
Occupation	Farmers	8	34.8
	Teachers	13	56.5
	Business people	2	8.7

*Source: Research data*

From the Table 2, 7 parents (30.4%) were between 18-35 years of age, 12 parents (52.2%) were between 36-50 years and 4 parents (17.4%) were above 51 years of age. This shows that the researcher was able to collect information from all age brackets. On marital status, findings indicate that 17 parents (73.9%) interviewed were married, 4 parents (17.4%) were single while 2 parents (8.7%) were divorced. This shows that majority of parents with children in boarding schools are married. Out of all parents who were interviewed, 8 parents (34.8%) were farmers, 13 parents (56.5%) were teachers while 2 parents (8.7%) were self-employed. This shows that majority of parents with higher levels of education (teachers) were the ones sending pupils to boarding schools. Male teachers were 32 (66.7%) while female teachers were 16 (33.3%) showing that both genders were involved in the study. In terms of teaching experience of teachers, 31.3% of the teacher respondents had a working experience of 1-5years, 54.2% had an experience of 6-10years, 10.4% were with a working experience of 11-15years while the remaining 4.2% had an experience of more than 16 years. This shows that majority of teachers engaged in boarding schools had a teaching experience of 6 and 10 years. Akello (2015) agrees with this study by saying that teacher's effectiveness in terms of experience and education level is more significant to their pupils' academic performance.

The researcher asked the pupils on the psychological challenges they face at boarding primary school. The study revealed that 194 pupils (67.6%) experienced

nostalgia because they missed their parents, siblings and home environment, 8 pupils (2.8%) experienced teasing from teachers and senior pupils, 27 pupils (9.4%) were faced with lack of close friends, 40 pupils (13.9%) reported that they lost their personal belongings while 18 pupils (6.3%) reported that older pupils harassed them. These findings are found in *Table 3*.

**Table 3.** Pupils' psychological effects of early enrollment to boarding primary schools.

Psychological effects	Frequency	Percentage
Missed parents and home (nostalgia)	194	67.6
Losing personal effects	40	13.9
Lack of close friends	27	9.4
Harassment from senior pupils	18	6.3
Teasing from teachers and pupils	8	2.8
Total	287	100

*Source: Field data (2019)*

According to research findings shown in table 3, nostalgia may be caused by missing of favorite dishes cooked at home, empathy from parents and siblings, free time to play, non-critical judgement on simple mistakes. Compared to school environment, where meals are prepared in a standard way, lack of empathy due to large number of children against limited number of caregivers, limited play time as well as strict school rules. Nostalgia as a key challenge in boarding schools was confirmed by all the 8 head teachers in their interviews. Nostalgia therefore interferes with concentration levels in class thereby affecting their academic performance. The study unearthed challenges facing young boarders as a result of psychological effects which include low self-esteem, withdrawal from regular social life, suppressed emotions, life maladjustment and drastic survival modes.

Another psychological effect was losing of personal items as shown in table 3. Children reportedly lost their personal effects while in school especially during the first month in boarding primary schools. They included books, clothes, shoes and other personal effects. When a young boarder loses his/her belonging, they may develop fear, anxiety and nostalgia which affects them both psychologically and socially. However, during schools visiting days, 80% of pupils reported that the lost items were replaced unless they won't be stolen again. Another psychological effect was lack of close friends. This may be because of new environment and new people around them unlike at home where they are familiar with. This was reportedly prevalent during the first month at boarding schools when the school management realized of the problem, appropriate mitigation measures were instituted.

Harassment from other senior pupils and teachers was also evident as shown in Table 3. This may be due to poor reception after wetting the bed, crying for missing home, losing personal items, and inability to undertake manual work as well as inability to defend themselves. Although teasing is meant to positively assist victims to overcome some antisocial traits, it resulted to psychological torture to young boarders. The results mentioned in table 3 were agreed by teachers who gave the same information about the psychological effects which pupils face when taken to boarding primary schools before attaining 12 years of age as shown in *Table 4*.

**Table 4.** Psychological effects of early enrollment to boarding primary school according to teachers.

Effects	Agreed (%)	Disagreed (%)	Undecided (%)	Total (%)
Nostalgia	81.3	10.4	8.3	100
Losing personal effects	74	14.6	11.4	100
Lack of close friends	62.5	29.2	8.3	100
Harassments from seniors	62.5	33.3	4.2	100
Teasing	48	39.5	12.5	100

Source: Field data (2019)

The study findings illustrated in *Table 3* and *Table 4* are supported by Bowker (2007) who found out that there is untold psychological torture to boarders than the physical punishment of separation from families, some pupils lost their personal items, some lacked close friends, some were harassed by senior pupils while a small number were teased by teachers and fellow pupils when tried to cry because of the harsh school environment and home sickness. Kato (2015) findings also observed that taking young children to boarding schools was psychologically destroying them as they miss parental love leading them to be affectionless and lack of self-esteem. Findings of McVeigh, (2014) concurs with findings in *table 3* which observed that enrolling learners to boarding school before attaining 12 years is mentally damaging and detrimental to children's wellbeing which can lead to emotional deprivation and low academic performance.

The study sought to test the hypothesis which was:

**H<sub>0</sub>:** Psychological effects of early enrolment to boarding primary school do not affect pupils' academic performance. The study subjected the research data on psychological effects and pupils' academic performance to Pearson's moment correlation coefficient using SPSS software Version 20. Study findings were as shown in *Table 5*.

**Table 5.** Relationship between psychological effects and academic performance.

		Pupils academic performance	Psychological effects
Pupils academic performance	Pearson correlation	1	.127*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.027
	N	301	301
Psychological effects	Pearson correlation	.127*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.027	
	N	301	301

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Source: SPSS output (2019)

From the correlations analysis presented, it was evident that there is a statistically significant relationship between pupil's academic achievement and Psychological effect of early enrolment to boarding primary schools because the Significant value of 0.027 is less than  $P < 0.05$ . This is because when an individual is mentally disburbed, it may be difficult to concentrate and work hard so as to succeed in academic environment which is largely theoretical. The study results would be due to mitigating factors like age at enrolment as well as coping strategies employed by the school management, parents and pupil themselves. The results are supported by those of Bowker (2007), Kato (2015) and

McVeigh (2014) who concurs with the study findings observed that there is a relationship between psychological effects and academic performance leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis.

## Conclusion

From the study findings, it may be concluded that enrollment to boarding primary schools before attaining 12 years of age has psychological effects which leads to poor academic performance. These effects include, nostalgia, losing personal effects, lack of close friends, harassment from senior pupils and teasing from teachers and pupils. The psychological effects are manifested in behaviors such as low self-esteem, withdrawal and fear. The study recommends that education stakeholders consider regularizing 12 years as the minimum age for enrolment to boarding school environment when pupils are a bit mature, strong and independent and so they cannot be affected much by the psychological factors therefore their academic performance cannot be affected much.

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