Greener Journal of Educational Research

ISSN: 2276-7789 Impact Factor 2012 (UJRI): 0.7230 ICV 2012: 6.05

Stress and Adolescent Development

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT

This study sort to investigate views of teachers and students on sources of adolescent stress, effects of stress and how stress can be managed. The descriptive survey design was used. Data collection was through questionnaires and interviews. A total of 300 people participated in the study. Research findings revealed that due to rapid growth of their bodies, adolescents experience incompatibility of their mental development with their physical changes or with the social environment and as a result they suffer from problems arising from inadequate adaptation. Stress can lead to depression, anxiety and other social emotional problems. The study suggested that with so much pressure in their lives teaching stress management helps prepare adolescents with tools needed to recognise and manage stress in an effective and positive manner.

Keywords: Stress, Adolescence, Development, Stressor, Coping, Adolescents

1. INTRODUCTION

Stress is experienced by both young people and adults as part of their everyday life. Stress is not bad at all it energises and maintains goal directed behaviour, however excessive stress can lead to a wide range of mental and physical health (Mapfumo, 2012:155). Stress can have a significant effect on an adolescent's long term physical and mental well being. Adolescent stress is a pivotal health issue because of its abilities to disrupt an adolescent's capacity to handle demands of daily life (Chandra & Batada, 2006). Stress is a state of physical or mental tension that causes emotional distress or even feelings of pain to an individual (Lai, Chao, Chanf & Chang 1996). It is a feeling of mental, physical and emotional strain or tension. The existence of stress depends on a stressor. Volpe (2000) defines a stressor as anything that challenges an individual's adaptability or stimulates an individual's body or mentality.

Adolescence is a transition period from childhood to adulthood. During this period individuals go through a time of rapid growth, make academic and professional decisions, identity develops, orientations towards the future begins, and expectations from families and school increase (Durualp, 2013:658). From the perspective of the psycho-social development of adolescents, it is seen that they are required to adjust to the emotional problems they encounter. Adolescence is a period that involves important transitions (for example, pubertal growth and hormonal changes, heightened sexuality), increasing responsibilities for example, changes from dependence to independence and changes in the roles the individual plays in society.

The view by Hall (1904) that adolescence is a period of "storm and stress" is reconsidered in the light of this contemporary study, although some researchers believe adolescence is not a very tumultuous period. According to Chandra and Batada (2006), Hall was not the first to remark on the emotional distinctiveness of adolescence. He was the first to consider storm and stress issue explicitly and formally. Aristotle stated that youth "are heated by nature as drunken men by wine". Rousseau relied on a stormy metaphor in describing adolescence. "As the roaring of waves precedes the tempest, so the murmur of rising passions announces the tumultuous change. Keep your hand upon helm, he advised parents, or all is lost" (Rousseau 1962:172-173).

The core of the storm and stress is a period of life that is more difficult in some ways than other periods of life and difficult for adolescence as well as for people around them. Hampet, Meier and Kummel (2008) assert that during adolescence (11-19 years), the levels of stress increase significantly.

Stress is one of the serious issues that affect a student's life, its effects could be reflected in student social, academic and mental health (<http://www.rand.org>). During the teen years, a lot of changes take place and in order to stabilise these changes, the adolescent students are always confronted with problems and conflicts. All the changes require adaptations and all this brings with them a certain amount of stress.

The idea that adolescence is difficult includes the following key elements which are sources of stress: the school, family factor, peer pressure and physical appearance (Eckotlu & Chafia 2006, Kempf 2011). School teachers and parents use academic achievement as a sole criterion for evaluating a student's performance at school. The educationist Dewey once said "Education is a pursuit of a perfect life". According to Erkutlu and Chafia (2006) the pressure to perform well, high expectations of teachers, parents and self makes academic environment very stressful. Too much homework, competitions with their students, and lack of interest in

particular subjects are sources of stress (<http://jmsnonolympictimes.org>). Kempf (2011) also notes that bullying is on the increase in schools.

According to Kempf (2011) some of the leading causes of stress among adolescents include: the failing economy- parents losing their jobs, receiving pay cuts, or losing benefits, arguments between parents, illness or death of family member. The break between them and boy/girlfriend attribute to adolescent stress. In the same vein Krienke-Seiff, Aunola and Numi (2009) say adolescents are confronted with stress stemming from romantic partners or dissatisfaction with body image. Peer pressure can lead to poor decision making and hurt feelings (Chandra & Batada, 2006). Teen stress is often difficult to recognise and parents and educators need to know the impact of stress on the adolescent in order to provide the necessary support and help them deal with the multiple issues.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Adolescent stress as a health issue is often overlooked. Stressed adolescents are not given much support to help them develop mentally, emotionally and physically.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the various stressors adolescents face?
- Are teachers aware of the impact of stressors among adolescent learners?
- What are some strategies that can be put in place to manage stress?

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section discusses the research design, sampling techniques, and data collection methods employed in the study.

4.1 Research Design

Gays, Mills and Airasian (2006:82) define a research design as a “general strategy or a plan for conducting a research study”. A research design determines techniques to be used in sampling and data collection. This study employed the descriptive survey design. Descriptive survey is a method of research that describes what we see over and beyond (Babbie 1997:62). Gall and Borg (1996) posit that descriptive survey enables investigators to understand attitudes, perceptions and opinions prevalent in a large population. Thus, the researcher chose this method as it allowed participants to express exactly what they felt about stress.

4.2 Population

Population is defined as a group to which the researcher would like to generalise the results of the study (Gay et al, 2006). The population of this study were secondary school students and their teachers.

4.2 Sampling

From the population, a sample with properties which make it representative of the whole is drawn to allow for an accurate generalisation of the study (Choga & Njaya 2011). In this study, the researcher used simple random sampling to select the participants. Random sampling occurs when all elements of the population have same chances of being drawn in the sample. From each of the three schools, 80 students were selected giving a total of 240 students. On the other hand, a total of 60 teachers were also selected giving a total sample of 300 participants

4.3 Data gathering tools.

The tools used to gather data depends on the type of data to be collected and the resources available. In this study the questionnaire and interview were the tools used. The questionnaire was considered plausible enough as it enables respondents to respond to questionnaire freely and in the comfort of their privacy (Flick, 2009). The questionnaire had both closed and open ended questions. 234 students and 54 teachers completed the questionnaires.

The interview was used because of the following advantages noted by Chiromo (2006) and Gwimbi and Dirwai (2003):

- It is a flexible and adaptable way of data collection.
- One can easily follow up and probe interesting items coming during the interviews.
- Non-verbal responses can be observed which are in their own right, important in bringing out possible changes in the meaning of some aspects under probe. A total of 6 teachers and 6 students were interviewed using interview schedules. The interviews were tape recorded and the researcher also wrote down the answers as a back up to the recordings. Before administering the tools, the researcher sought informed consent from the participants. In addition, the participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents analyses and discusses research findings of this study according to emerging themes. The findings were drawn from questionnaires and interviews, the study sort to find out views of teachers and school children on stress as experienced by adolescents in school settings.

5.1 Presentation and analysis

Table 1: Distribution of study participants. N=300

Category	Male	Female	Total	%
Teachers	20	40	60	20
Students	120	120	240	80
Total	140	160	300	100

In urban schools under which this study was carried, there are more female teachers than male teachers as shown in the table. Out of the 60 teachers who participated 20 were males and 40 were females. As can be shown by the table 60 (20%) of the participants were teachers, while 240 (80%) were secondary school children.

Defining stress

All the participants were asked to give their understanding of 'Stress'. They provided some of the following definitions: Stress is

- mental strain
- failing to cope with a situation
- excessive pressure
- unstable mind
- emotional strain

From these responses, it can be seen that all participants have an idea of what stress is. All the responses are pointing out stress being worry from life's problems.

Asked to what extent they agreed to the assertion that stress is one of the most difficult stages in the lifespan of a person, the responses are given in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Adolescence is one of the most difficult periods in one's life. N=300

Category	Teachers			Students			Grand total	
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total		%
SA	7	12	19	39	42	81	100	33.33
A	9	18	27	45	53	98	125	41.67
SD	2	4	6	17	14	31	37	12.33
D	2	6	8	19	11	30	38	12.67
Total	20	40	60	120	120	240	300	100

The responses clearly show that adolescence is a problematic stage in one's life.

Out of the total participants, 225 (75%) of them were in agreement that in a person's lifespan, adolescence poses many difficulties. Of the total participants 75(25%) did not agree with this view.

Major stressors in adolescence

In response to stressors encountered by adolescents, both teachers and students listed, some of the following factors as causing stress:

- puberty
- poor academic performance
- too much homework
- family related problems like domestic violence, death and poverty
- love affairs
- peers.
-

In addition, students listed the following as stressors:

- labelling by teachers
- abusive teachers
- sexual abuse
- corporal punishment
- personal appearance
- bullying.

Impact of Stress

Participants were asked to state whether stress affects the general development of an adolescent. Table 3 details the responses.

Table 3: Stress impacts the development of an adult.N-300

Category	Teachers			Students			Grand total	
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total		%
Yes	16	34	50	97	108	205	255	85
No	4	6	10	23	12	35	45	15
Total	20	40	60	120	120	240	300	100

The table shows that of the total 300 participants 255 (85%) agreed that stress impacted the development of an adolescent while 45(15%) viewed stress as not affecting the life of an adolescent.

Those who viewed stress as negative gave the following consequences of stress:

- lack of concentration in class
- aggressive behaviour
- lack of appetite
- socially withdrawn
- suicidal attempts.

From the responses, it emerged that all schools had Guidance and Counselling sessions. When asked how often stressed children are helped through these sessions, the results are shown in the table below:

Table 4: Frequency guidance and counselling sessions are held in schools.N-300

Category	Teachers			Students			Grand total	
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total		%
Often	3	5	8	25	15	40	48	16
Sometimes	5	14	19	47	48	95	114	38
Rarely	8	13	21	34	45	79	100	33.33
Never	4	8	12	14	12	26	38	12.67
Total	20	40	60	120	120	240	300	100

Guidance and Counselling is not given the attention it deserves. Only 48 (16%) out of the 300 participants said it was given often. Though participants agreed that there are Guidance and Counselling sessions 214 (71.33%) total participants as reflected in the table are of the view that it is not done frequently.

Managing stress

When asked how stress can be managed, the participants gave some of the following responses:

Table 5: Strategies of coping with stress at school. N-300

Category	Teachers	Students	Total	%
Have lots of entertainment	4	12	16	5.33
Provide Guidance and Counselling	30	94	124	41.33
Invite psychologists	6	35	41	13.67
Give less homework	5	39	44	14.67
Discuss with parents	15	60	75	25
Total	60	240	300	100

The table shows that most participants 124 (41.33%) viewed Guidance and Counselling as the most effective strategy for handling stressed adolescents, followed by communicating with parents 75 (25%), Having lots of entertainment was the least strategy, cited by only 16 (5.33%) participants.

Some of the following strategies were listed by teachers:

- teaching children assertiveness to have high self esteem
- encouraging students to talk with adult role models.

5.2 Discussion

Stress is experienced by everyone in life; however stress becomes problematic when there is too much or too little, it is how one identifies and manages it that makes a difference in a person's physical and mental development. The study sort to investigate views of teachers and students on adolescence stress, its sources, impact and management.

In the study, participants gave definitions of stress with ease, proving that they are quite aware of it. They described it as mental strain, failing to cope with a challenging pressure and unstable mind. It was defined in terms of emotional and physical outcomes. The definitions of the participants are in line within the definition given by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) who define stress as a mental or physical phenomenon formed through one's cognitive appraisal of the interaction with the environment. Thus, both the study and the above authors agree that stress is people's perceptions and interpretations of how they respond to the demands placed upon them by the environment.

Adolescence which according to Erikson (1966) is a transition period between childhood and adulthood involves a lot of mental and emotional changes happening, as well as changes in responsibility that may cause stress. It is a confusing and dangerous period when young people experience self-organisation and role confusion as found by the study. Some participants as also noted by Hall (1904) stressed that it is a period of heightened 'storm and stress.'

The study revealed that stress experienced by adolescence stems from many sources. School stress was clearly articulated as a major source of stress. Students mainly pointed out that too much homework, tests and examination stress them. This is parallel to research done by Alison 1992 cited in Krenke-Seiffge, Aunola, and Nurmi (2009) who found out that among factors that contributed to stress among adolescents was their achievement in academic subjects.

Bullying was another stressful issue many adolescents face at school as noted by the research findings. Participants especially form one students pointed out that at school there are some bullies who cause them a lot of stress. These bullies for example, cause other students in a weaker position to do humiliating acts, and give them money. Bullying Statistics (2007) appears to support this finding by asserting that in their study, 23% of elementary students reported being bullied ranging from one to three times a month. There have been numerous occasions when students have taken their lives because of bullying. In addition, some stressors at school listed by participants mainly students included labelling by teachers, corporal punishment, and disrespect from teachers.

Peer relations take on much more importance during adolescence. In the present study, it was found that most teens go through stress because of peer pressure. The words “popularity” and “cliques” are frequently associated with this time in life. Being accepted into desired social circles and keeping up with the ‘popular kids’ is of high priority for many adolescents with many going to great lengths to be accepted. Chandra and Batada (2006) carried out a study and found similar results to those of this study that adolescents go through stress as a result of peer pressure. They also found that more than half, the boys and girls cited boy-girl relations as a frequent cause of stress. It can be inferred that peer pressure is one of the important factors causing stress.

Wang and Ko (1999) point out that many adolescents are dissatisfied with their physical appearances. Girls especially feel upset more easily than boys because of their concerns about appearance. Referring to the same issue, the current study also noted that adolescents feel pressure to change their outward appearance. One interviewee pointed out that some adolescents perceive themselves as ugly if they are too short, too tall and dislike their skin colour.

According to the results of the study, family was found to be a source of stress among adolescents. Participants noted that issues such as parental status including domestic violence, poverty, and death cause stress. Anda, Baroni, Baskin, Buckwalld, Morgan, Gold and Weiss (2000) carried out a study on adolescent stressors and found out that financial problems, marital status of parents and high expectations from parents cause stress.

Thus, stressors among adolescents can be summarised as follows

Stress helps to deal with life's challenges. However, when too much stress builds up a person may encounter many physical and emotional health problems. According to BBC (2013) stress that is too intense or prolonged causes body to release stress hormones over a long period. This increases the risk of a range of physical health problems including headaches, stomach upsets and high blood pressure. It can increase the risk of having a stroke or heart attack. More often stress leads to psychological problems. It makes people feel distrust, anger, anxiety and fear which in turn can destroy relationships. Stress also plays a key role in the development of anxiety disorders and depression. Long term stress can play havoc with immune system and this can raise the development of viral infections. Participants agreed that if stress is on-going, it can lead to problems like lack of concentration in class, depression, drug abuse, headaches, suicide attempts, truancy and social withdrawal. Interesting to note are similar views by Neeham, Crosnce and Muller (2004) and Chandra and Batada (2008) who say effects of stress on a student's life can have serious impacts on their ability to perform or succeed in school. Earning failing grades that do not meet expectations of students themselves, caregivers, parents or teachers creates stress among students. Academic failure leads to increased levels of pregnancy, truancy and school dropout. McLaughlin (2009) says cognitively adolescents may have difficulties in making decisions. Borg (1998) carried out a study to investigate some emotional reactions to bullying that occurs in schools. The findings indicated that victims of bullying experience feelings of vengeance anger and self-pits.

High levels of stress have been related to high levels of drug abuse, suicide, engaging in sexual behaviours. The following excerpt shows effects of stress on a teenager:

I feel stressed

As stress builds up I begin to cry.
I hide.
Not my body, but my mind.
I can no longer feel what I used to feel.
Things seem unreal.
Life.
Stress.
I feel stress.

Except from 'I feel stress' by Kellie Briscoe
October 2, 2002

Source: *Centre for Adolescent Health* (2006)

It was observed that stress can affect an adolescent's life negatively and hence there was need for coping strategies to be put in place so that the adolescent would not be hindered from reaching their full potential. The study found the following to be protective against stress:

- Teaching assertiveness so as for the adolescent to have high self-esteem.
- Integrating stress management lessons in guidance and counselling sessions.
- Communicating with parents of concerned adolescents on how they could intervene.

The study reveals that though schools have Guidance and Counselling sessions, these were not used as they were supposed to. Kempf (2011) appears to support this finding by arguing that one option is to provide service through student support groups and counselling services where adolescents are provided with resources and programs that teach coping strategies for a healthy lifestyle such as exercising and talking to someone. Hampel et al (2008) carried research on comparing students who went through training in a prevention programme, compared to those who did not receive. The results showed that students who participated in the programme experienced healthy development in coping, self-efficiency and recovery. As noted by Frydenburg (2004) preparing adolescents how to respond to stress from multiple factors may help them to have less stress in future, is consistent with findings of this study.

6 CONCLUSION

The study has shown that adolescence is one of the most difficult stages in the lifespan of an individual. Adolescents undergo many changes mentally, emotionally as well as changes in responsibility and role during this stage. Stressors were found to emanate from peer pressure, school work, family and personal factors. The results of the study indicate that stress has a psychological, emotional, behavioural and physical impact on the adolescent. To help cope with the stress, it was suggested that programmes which help students manage their stress be implemented especially in Guidance and Counselling sessions.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings in the study make it possible to recommend that:

- Schools should identify adolescents' stress as soon as possible. Efforts to help teachers understand the sources and effects of adolescent stress are beneficial in helping reduce stress.
- Schools to consider preventative steps to build coping skills, problem solving skills before adolescents reach a more critical level of stress. Lessons regarding management of stress are a great addition to a health curriculum.
- Communicating with the family if adolescent is experiencing high levels of stress. Parents and teachers should acknowledge stress and provide more support and care to help students cope with various stresses.
- Teachers, school counsellors and parents to work together to be positive role models that promote a healthy life style.
- Further research on gender related issues to shed light on how males and females cope with stress and what options work best of either gender.

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