



INFLUENCE OF TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF LEARNERS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN NAIROBI COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract:

This study aimed to examine the influence of teacher-student relationships on the academic performance of learners with learning disabilities in Nairobi County. Systems theory and Social Cognitive theories were adopted. A descriptive correlational research design was employed using a mixed research approach. The target population comprised 4 head teachers, 62 teachers, and 1,923 learners with learning disabilities from 4 regular primary schools in Nairobi City County. Stratified random sampling and simple random sampling were applied to select the four schools and respondents from each school respectively. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to choose the head teachers and teachers from each school. Questionnaires, focus group discussions, interview guides, and screening tools were used to gather data. Quantitative data collected was analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, whereas qualitative was transcribed and qualitatively analyzed in a thematic approach. A correlation test was done on the hypotheses to ascertain the relation between independent variables and dependent variables at a statistical significance of $p \leq 0.05$ ($p=5\%$) using Chi-square. Pearson product-moment correlation was computed to measure the strength of the association between predictors and children's academic performance variables. Qualitative data analysis involved transcription and analysis of open-ended questions from research tools using thematic analysis. Findings showed that all proxies for the teacher-student relationship except dependency level had a significant p-value ($p < 0.05$) at 95% Confidential Interval.

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Statistical statistics from chi-square the correlation between teacher-student relationships and learners' academic performance was statistically significant the null hypothesis was rejected. The study concluded that teacher-student relationships result in improvement in learners' academic performance. School policies have no significant relationship with learners' academic performance in primary school schools in Nairobi City County. The study recommended that teachers should deliberately express concerns both about students' academic and non-academic life, as this makes the learners with learning disabilities feel accepted and motivated to improve their academic work.

Keywords: academic performance, learning disability, teacher-student relationships, regular primary schools

1. Introduction

In the realm of inclusive education, the dynamics of teacher-student relationships significantly impact the academic performance of learners, particularly those with learning disabilities. Understanding these relationships and their influence on academic outcomes is crucial for fostering inclusive environments within regular primary schools. This paper aims to explore the association between teacher-student relationships and the academic performance of learners with learning disabilities in Nairobi County, Kenya. Academic performance is of significance to anyone involved in education, and as Tadese *et al.* (2022) state, it is the nucleus upon which the components of an education framework revolve. Furthermore, Tadese *et al.* (2022) exemplify its significance as learners who have excellent academic performance gain better employment, have more opportunities for career advancement, and earn higher salaries. These learners also gain from developing a positive self-concept and are unlikely to engage in vices such as substance abuse (Tentama & Abdillah, 2019). Other likely vices learners with poor academic performance exhibit include inappropriate comments in class, lateness, sleeping in class, and aggressive tendencies, among other vices.

A study in the United States by Sanders, *et al.* (2018) on school climate and its impact on academic attainment among at-risk students compared to their peers. Findings from the study indicated the association between school climate and academic attainment, was strongest among students with disabilities, which meant that school climate works differently for learners at different levels (Sanders *et al.*, 2018). Research conducted in various parts of the world provides valuable insights into the association between teacher-student relationships and academic performance. A study conducted in the United States by Hughes and Kwok (2019) found a significant positive correlation between supportive teacher-student relationships and improved academic outcomes among students with learning disabilities. Similarly, a study in the United Kingdom by Johnson *et al.* (2018) highlighted the importance of teacher-student relationships in fostering a conducive learning environment for students with diverse learning needs.

In Africa, where inclusive education is gaining momentum, research on teacher-student relationships and academic performance among learners with learning disabilities is emerging. A study conducted in South Africa by Smith and Mthembu (2021) underscored the critical role of positive teacher-student interactions in enhancing the academic engagement and achievement of learners with learning disabilities. Additionally, research by Adebayo and Adeyanju (2020) in Nigeria emphasized the need for supportive teacher-student relationships to address the educational needs of students with learning disabilities in mainstream schools.

The assurance for academic achievement among learners with disabilities in Kenya is enshrined in our Constitution under the Basic Education Act 14 of 2013. The statute dictates that children with disabilities have the right to free and mandatory education. Despite the legal reinforcement, children with disabilities continue to face challenges that can affect their performance. Aseka and Kanter (2014) state that the Basic Education Act 14 of 2013 has gaps since it does not align with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) to promote equal opportunities for learners with disabilities. Despite the growing awareness of inclusive education in Kenya, there is a dearth of empirical studies focusing on teacher-student relationships and academic performance among learners with learning disabilities. However, a recent study by Kimani and Mwangi (2023) conducted in Nairobi County shed light on the challenges faced by students with learning disabilities in building positive relationships with their teachers. The findings underscored the need for further investigation into the impact of teacher-student relationships on the academic outcomes of learners with learning disabilities in Kenyan primary schools.

The rationale for conducting this study lies in the gaps identified within the existing literature. While global studies highlight the importance of teacher-student relationships in supporting the academic success of students with learning disabilities, there is a lack of context-specific research within the Kenyan educational landscape. By examining the association between teacher-student relationships and academic performance in Nairobi County, this study aims to provide actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to enhance inclusive practices in regular primary schools. Furthermore, addressing this research gap is imperative for ensuring equitable access to quality education for all learners, regardless of their learning needs.

1.2 The Purpose of the Study

The study sought to examine the influence of school climate on the academic performance of learners with learning disabilities in Nairobi County.

1.3 Objective of the Study

- 1) Examine the influence of teacher-student relationships on the academic performance of learners with learning disabilities in Nairobi County.

1.4 Research Hypothesis

H01: There is no significant relationship between teacher-student relationships and the academic performance of learners with learning disabilities in Nairobi County.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is on Systems Theory. The theory, which traces its origin to Bertalanffy (1968) emphasizes that systems are open, interact with their environment, and acquire new features, which results in continuous evolution. The theory is applicable in this study since the school climate is a system consisting of inputs, processes, and output. In this case, one of the school sub-systems comprises the teaching staff, the learners, and the leadership. Accordingly, the theory is applicable since it will illustrate how the various dimensional aspects of the school climate (leadership, instructional materials, teacher-student relationships, and school regulations) interact to influence the academic performance of learners with learning disabilities. The theory is thus appropriate since it addresses how the learner with disabilities interacts with school climate dimensional aspects (leadership, instructional materials, teacher-student relationships, and school regulations) and how the dimensional aspects affect their academic performance.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

Independent variables

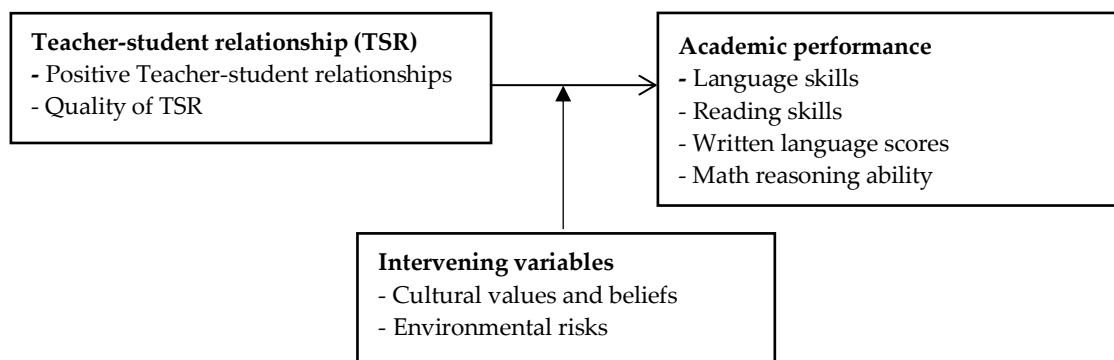


Figure 1: Researcher's Conceptualization of Interaction of Variables

2. Literature

2.1 Teacher-Student Relationships and Academic Performance

In Italy, Prino *et al.* (2014) revealed that the teacher-student relationships between teachers and learners with hyperactivity disorders were characterized by high conflict levels and dependency (Prino *et al.*, 2014). In South Africa Adewumi and Mosito (2019) sought to explore pockets of good practice found in the experiences of teachers in implementing inclusion of learners with special education needs (SEN). Results from the

study established that teachers accommodate learners with SEN despite their lack of qualifications and training in SEN. Furthermore, teachers experienced varied challenges in implementing the inclusion of learners with SEN. These challenges included a lack of parental participation, a heavy workload, inadequate training for teachers, multi-grade challenges, and a lack of resources (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019). Although challenges were encountered, this study concluded that there were various good practices in the teachers' experiences in implementing the inclusion of learners with SEN.

In Kenya, Kamau (2008) revealed that teachers embarrassed learners in front of other pupils, and also spent little time socializing with these learners (Kamau, 2008). Furthermore, the teachers would compare the learners with others who had excellent performance and would insult them by using terms such as lazy or naughty (Kamau, 2008). Additionally, not all teachers applied an individualized approach to the learners and would abandon the weak performers to catch up with the syllabus before the term ended (Kamau, 2008). Ideally, the study revealed many shortfalls in how teachers relate with learners who have a physical handicap, which ultimately affected the learners' performance negatively. However, the study looked at the teacher-student relationship and its effect on academic performance from the perspective of learners in a school of the physically handicapped. The current study sought to fill this gap by looking at teacher-student relationships and their influence on academic performance from the perspective of learners with LDs across all types of schools.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A descriptive correlational research design was employed and will utilize quantitative and qualitative methods in examining school climate and academic performance among learners with learning disabilities. Kothari and Garg (2019) indicate that descriptive studies bring out facts, and current circumstances in which people live, and assimilate enumeration and measurement parameters.

3.2 Target Population

The study targeted pupils with LDs, teachers, and head teachers from four selected primary schools in Nairobi City County. The target population comprised all 4 head teachers, 62 teachers, and 1,923 learners with LDs from 4 primary schools in Nairobi City County, who are 1,989 in total (Ministry of Education of Kenya, 2021).

3.3 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The study used the Yamane (1967) formula to establish the sample size. Stratified random sampling was applied in which the strata comprised the four selected schools from Nairobi County. The study applied a simple random sampling technique to select respondents from each stratum. A total of 331 learners with learning disabilities were selected using simple random sampling across all the 4 schools that participated since the

target population is known. A proportionate sampling procedure was used to select 82 learners from each school. Additional 3 learners were selected from three of the 4 schools to total up to 331 respondents.

3.4 Research Instruments

A semi-structured questionnaire, interview guides for key informants, FGDs, and screening tools for LD Learners were used to collect data.

3.5 Pilot Study

A pilot study was done with 10% of learners with LDs teachers and head teachers in Nairobi City County for a duration of 7 days. In this case 10 % of 331 (33) learners with LDs, 62 (6) teachers, and 4 (1) head teachers. All tools were subjected to tests for validity and reliability before undertaking the field survey.

3.6 Data Collection Procedure

Appointments at the school were made to engage with the head teachers, teachers, and learners. Interviews for head teachers and FGDs for teachers were carried out at designated rooms within the premises of the 4 selected secondary schools, whereas the learners answered the questionnaires in their classrooms. Regarding questionnaires, the lead researcher assisted learners having difficulties in understanding some items in the questionnaires, as well as explained instructions pertaining to how the questionnaires are to be filled. Interviews for the head teachers and FGDs for the teachers were carried out at the head teachers' offices and teachers' staff rooms within their schools respectively.

3.7 Data Analysis

Once data was collected from the questionnaires in the field survey, it was coded into SPSS for analysis. A correlation test was done on the hypotheses to ascertain the relation between independent variables and dependent variables at a statistical significance of $p \leq 0.05$ ($p=5\%$) using Chi-square. Pearson product-moment correlation was computed to measure the strength of the association between predictors and children's academic performance variables. Qualitative data were incorporated into a form, with the lead researcher and assistants reading and re-reading them to take note of emerging themes. Finally, the responses were reported in verbatim.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Any data provided by the participants was treated with confidentiality. No names of the institutions or individuals were provided in alignment with the right to confidentiality. Another ethical consideration entailed the right to informed consent. Specifically, their voluntary participation was sought, and participants had the option to decline.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Demographic and General Information of the Respondents

The summary of demographic data of the respondents has been presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Demographic Information of the Teachers

Demographic Variable		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Teachers' distribution by gender	Male	20	34.5%
	Female	38	65.5%
Total		58	100.0%
Teachers' distribution by age	18-29 years	18	31.0%
	30-39 years	25	43.1%
	40-49 years	9	15.5%
	50 years and above	6	10.3%
Total		58	100.0%
Teachers' distribution by level of education	Certificate	15	25.9%
	Diploma	31	53.4%
	Degree	8	13.8%
	Post-graduate	2	3.4%
	Masters	2	3.4%
Total		58	100.0%

From Table 1, it can be observed that the majority 38(65.5 %) of teachers respondents were generally female while 20(34.5%) comprised male teachers. This implies that most primary school teachers in Nairobi City County were female while their leadership is male-dominated. The results in Table 4.1 also show that most of the teachers were aged between 30 and 39 years (43.1%). These findings basically show that, while most of the teachers were in the middle age groups. Results in Table 1 further demonstrate that the majority (53.4%) of the teachers had diplomas, 25.9% had certificates while the least (3.4%) had attained master's and postgraduate (3.4%).

The summary of demographic data of the learners with LDs has been presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Demographic Information of the Learners with LDs

Demographic Variable		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Leaners' distribution by gender	Male	185	64.9%
	Female	100	35.1%
Leaners' distribution by age	6-9 years	126	44.2%
	10-13 years	153	53.7%
	>13 years	6	2.1%
Leaners' distribution by the level of class	Grade 1-2	38	13.3%
	Grade 3-4	113	39.6%
	Grade 5-6	124	43.5%
	Grade 7-8	10	3.5%

N=285

From Table 2, it can be observed that the majority 185(64.9% of learners who took part in the study were generally male while 100(35.1%) comprised of female learners. This is attributed to the fact that there is a high enrolment of male learners and most learning disabilities are manifested in male learners. The results in Table 2 also show that most of the learners were aged between 10 and 13 years (53.7%). Results in Table 4.1 further demonstrate that the highest proportion of learners (43.5%) were of grades 5 and 6 while the least (3.5%) were of grades 7-8.

4.2 Influence of Teacher-Student Relationships on Academic Performance of Learners with Learning Disabilities

The participants were asked to select a choice from a listed statement that best reflected teacher-student relationships and academic performance based on a 5-item Likert scale (SA=5, A=4, UD=3, D=2, and SD=1).

Table 3: Teacher-student Relationships in Academic Performance of Learners with Learning Disabilities

		Frequency	Percentage %
Relationships between teachers and learners with learning disabilities have high conflict levels, which affect academic performance in my school.	Strongly Disagree	7	12.1%
	Disagree	13	22.4%
	Undecided	16	27.6%
	Agree	10	17.2%
	Strongly Agree	12	20.7%
Relationships between teachers and learners with learning disabilities have a high dependency, and it affects academic performance in my school.	Strongly Disagree	13	22.4%
	Disagree	11	19.0%
	Undecided	12	20.7%
	Agree	14	24.1%
	Strongly Agree	8	13.8%
In my school, learners with learning disabilities are less autonomous and require more support and assistance from their teachers to improve on their academic performance.	Strongly Disagree	6	10.3%
	Disagree	3	5.2%
	Undecided	10	17.2%
	Agree	27	46.6%
	Strongly Agree	12	20.7%
In my school, teachers who handle learners with learning disabilities still need training in special education needs to improve on academic performance.	Strongly Disagree	17	29.3%
	Disagree	16	27.6%
	Undecided	11	19.0%
	Agree	6	10.3%
	Strongly Agree	8	13.8%
In my school, teachers give remedial work to learners with learning disabilities to improve on academic performance.	Strongly Disagree	9	15.5%
	Disagree	13	22.4%
	Undecided	13	22.4%
	Agree	19	32.8%
	Strongly Agree	4	6.9%
In my school, teachers embarrass learners with learning disabilities because of mistakes, wrongs done, and low marks, which affects their academic performance.	Strongly Disagree	7	12.1%
	Disagree	13	22.4%
	Undecided	14	24.1%
	Agree	9	15.5%
	Strongly Agree	15	25.9%

Results on the teacher-student relationship on academic performance in Table 3 showed that 25.9% of the teachers strongly agreed that teachers embarrassed learners with learning disabilities because of mistakes, wrongs done, and low marks thus affecting their academic performance. This finding is supported by that of Kamau (2008) who revealed that teachers embarrassed learners in front of other pupils, and also spent little time socializing with these learners. Further findings showed that 46.6% agreed that learners with learning disabilities were less autonomous and required more support and assistance from their teachers to improve their academic performance. This is supported by Prino *et al.* (2014) that learners with learning disorders were less autonomous and required more support and assistance hence high dependency. Nonetheless, 32.8% of the teachers agreed that teachers gave remedial work to learners with learning disabilities to improve on academic performance while 22.4% disagreed with the statement. Adewui and Masito (2019) support this finding by arguing that giving remedial work to learners with LDs is one of the good practices in implementing the inclusion of learners with special education needs.

A proportion of 17.2% of teachers strongly agreed that relationships between teachers and learners with learning disabilities have high dependency and effects on academic performance in their school. This finding is supported by those of Prino *et al.* (2014) that the teacher-student relationships between teachers and learners with hyperactivity disorders were characterized by high conflict levels and dependency. Findings further indicated that 27.6% of the teachers were undecided whether the relationships between teachers and learners with learning disabilities had high conflict levels, which affected academic performance in my school.

These results were further subjected to analysis using Pearson's Correlation Coefficient to assess the existence of the relationship between the instructional materials and the learners' performance (scores in numeracy and literacy) at the level of 0.5% significance level (95% confidential). Table 4 presents the Correlation Matrix measuring the relationship between instructional materials and academic performance of learners with LDs.

According to Table 4, there is a positive relationship between learners' academic performance and conflict levels between teacher and learners ($r=0.142^*$), Support and assistance from teachers ($r=0.113^*$), dependency levels ($r=0.126$) and motivation and reinforcement by teachers ($r=0.191^*$). The positive relationship indicates that there is a correlation between the factors related to teacher-student relationships and the academic performance of learners with learning disabilities. All proxies for the teacher-student relationship except dependency level had a significant p-value ($p<0.05$) at a 95% confidential interval. The results imply that all the factors scored low correlation values, (r-value of $<.5$) demonstrating a weak correlation.

Table 4: Influence of Teacher-Student Relationships on Academic Performance of Learners with Learning Disabilities

Dependent variables		Independent variables			
		Conflict levels between teacher and learners	Support and assistance from teachers	Dependency levels	Motivation and reinforcement by teachers
Learners academic performance (r)	Pearson correlation	.142*	.113*	.126	.191*
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.007	.014	.24	.045
^a Language skills ^b Reading skills ^c Written language ^d Math reasoning ability ^d	N	58	58	58	58

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

4.3 Hypothesis Testing

The first formulated hypothesis stated:

H01: There is no significant relationship between teacher-student relationships and the academic performance of learners with learning disabilities in Nairobi County.

To test the hypothesis and to determine whether there was enough statistical evidence in favour of the relationship between teacher-student relationships and the academic performance of learners with learning disabilities, a Chi-square analysis was computed at a 0.01 significance level by checking the combined statistics of teacher-student relationships against learners' academic performance. The results of the Chi-square statistics test for the hypothesis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Relationship between Teacher-student Relationships and Learners' Academic Performance

	Value	Df	Asymp.Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	24.671	6	.003
Likelihood Ratio	4.364	2	.359
Linear by-Linear Association	.475	1	.491
N of valid cases	144		

Table 5 shows that the chi-square value is 24.671, DF=6 with an associated p of 0.003. Since p is less than 0.05 ($p= 0.003 < 0.05$), the null hypothesis is rejected and therefore teacher-student relationships have a significant relationship with learners' academic performance in selected primary schools in Nairobi City County. The results imply that teacher-student relationships result in improvement in learners' academic performance. The result coincides with those of Mensah and Koomson (2020) who revealed in their study that connectedness, dependent, and conflicting teacher-student relationships

negatively impacted academic performance. Positive relationships develop environments that augment academic achievement.

In an interview with the head teacher from school A explained that:

“Instructional materials including multimedia are critical in cultivating concentration and improving active classroom participation among learners with LDs. However, this is only possible if the instructional materials are sufficient and relevant to the subject.”

The above findings imply that instructional materials would only have an impact on academic performance among learners with LDs if they are properly used. These findings are also supported by those of Deveci *et al.* (2023) which indicated that relevant teaching materials had a significantly positive impact on the learning process. Kipkirui *et al.* (2019) revealed that appropriate instructional materials influenced retention of pupils with disabilities.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions of the Study

The study concludes that building and maintaining positive teacher relationships is crucial for success among learners with learning disabilities in the classroom. The classroom behaviour can be enhanced by improving the relationship between learners and teachers. Learners need to feel a sense of belonging in order to be engaged, motivated, and successful as they spend more of their waking hours in a classroom. A positive teacher-student relationship creates an enabling environment for academic engagement and achievement as students need some sense of belonging to improve their academic work.

5.2 Recommendations

- 1) Positive relationships develop environments that augment academic achievement. Teachers should deliberately express concerns both about students' academic and non-academic life, as this makes the learners with learning disabilities feel accepted and motivated to improve their academic work.
- 2) Based on the high requirements of the schools, the Ministry of Education should boost the budgetary contribution to programmes related to special needs education.
- 3) The government should budget sufficient funds for improving the availability of instructional materials in all secondary schools.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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