



From Crisis Management to Academic Achievement of At-Risk Students in Secondary Schools in the Buea Municipality, South West Region – Cameroon

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Abstract

Crisis management in this context is the ability for students to solve problems and take care of them, especially situations that affect their academic achievement. These are actions that are taken to deal with difficult situations in an organized way. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between crisis management and academic achievement of at-risk students. Using the survey design, a triangulation method of data collection was used. The study had a sample size of 196 participants distributed as: 113 students filled the questionnaire, 53 students interviewed and 30 teachers for the focus group discussion. Looking at the findings, it was realized that managing crisis fostered the academic achievement of at-risk students. Hence the Binary logistic regression model explained by the components of crisis management was significant as $P=0.002$. This implies that the effect of managing crisis impact more on the academic achievement of at-risk students. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between crisis management and academic achievement of at-risk students. As a result, at-risk students were highly flexible and their flexibility/social competence was positively related to their performance and academic achievements. Thus parents, stakeholders and the government should seek to create warmth, security, peace and supportive school environment for students to associate with their peers. This will enhance social competence, problem solving skills, sense of purpose and create prospects for all students to strive and achieve especially in our African society.

Keywords: Crisis management; Academic achievement; Students; Security; Peace; Supportive

Abbreviations: IDPs: Internally Displaced; SA: Strongly Agree; A: Agree

Introduction

This study investigates crisis management and academic achievement of at-risk students in secondary schools. The

study examines the role crisis management (flexibility) play in fostering the academic achievement of at-risk students in secondary schools in Buea municipality. It examines how some at-risk students are able to overcome social unrest, hardship and succeed in school while others fail. These students faced challenging situations that put them at-risk. These challenges are kidnapping of school

children, burning down of schools, insecurity, and poverty, lack of school fees, divorce, illness and death of parents which put a student at-risk for school failure, behavioral problems and school drop-out. This study therefore, focused on the positive aspects of managing crisis that can enhance the academic achievement of at-risk students in secondary schools. In this regard, a specific component of flexibility/ crisis management abilities (such as social competence) was examined in relation to the role it plays in fostering the academic achievement of at-risk students [1-4].

Research [5-7], has shown that students from disadvantaged environment or families, live and study in different contexts and therefore have specific and different educational problems compared to their more socially advantaged peers. Fon [8], stipulates that some of the reasons for school failure are insecurity on the way to school, lack of school needs, poor performance, dismissal, smoking, scamming, financial difficulties, emotional instability and family problems. These factors (risk factors) are disabling conditions that deny opportunities and resources for children and place them in jeopardy of failing to become meaningful members of their home, school and community. Treatment to crisis is an individual's ability to cope or "recover" from significant adverse life situations [9]. As such academic achievement is one manifestations of crisis management [10].

Background to the problem

Managing crisis is the process that individuals, families and communities use to resolve difficulties, to cope, adapt and take advantage of resources when facing significant acute or chronic stress or the compounding effect of both [11,12]. Some students come from threatening school environment such as burning down of schools, insecurity on the way to school, lack of school needs, parents are divorced and lack academic support from parents. Moreover, there are students whose parents are dead, some have parents with low socio-economic status and as such they face difficulties of not having their school needs and even food to eat. Some of them live with a parent and other younger siblings, managing to make ends meet. The social environment places them well below the threshold of insecurity and poverty, such that they stop going to school, they are driven for school fees, fail to do assignments because of lack of text books and sometimes fail their exams. Nevertheless, some of the students are self-sponsored, care for their younger siblings, support the family and do odd jobs. These conditions place them at-risk of school failure. Many of them who go through these difficulties, absent or abandoned school, become truants, scammers and drop out from school but there are few who are able to manage such emerging situations

(self-control, flexibility, goal directedness, sense of purpose, etc) and succeed in school. This distinguished behavior, makes them function where others failed. They are not free from problems, rather their flexibility during crisis moments is manifested in the ways they face and resolve problems stemming from their environments or country. The degree of effectiveness coming from their behaviour (i.e. Personality characteristics), can be estimated in terms of the degree to which the individual is able to establish success and a more harmonious relationship with the environment [13,14].

Subsequently, two groups of students facing crisis were observed. The first group turns to take a more positive side of the problem (eg hiding and going to school, working hard on the farms so as to generate income to support oneself and the family, pushing trucks in the market, doing holiday jobs, working with peers, etc) while the second group takes a negative approach (eg absenteeism, dropping out from school, dismissal from school etc). Looking at the scenario, what makes this first group survive while the second group fails? What is it that enables the first group to carry on and be flexible to the end? It was found in a study carried out in Washington, DC, by Bernard [15] on "Fostering the ability to manage crisis in children" that the students with positive attitude during difficulties, are those who had developed perseverance. As a result, the ability to navigate from crisis management to academic achievement does not develop in isolation but in the presence of risk factors. Based on the situation in Buea sub-division - Cameroon, young people at tender ages of 11-22 years go through lots of stressful situations such as fighting for security, hiding in the bush, forcing to go to school, doing baby-sitting, working in people's farms, hustling "carrying bambe" in the motor parks in order to fend for themselves and their junior ones. Faced with all of these traumatic situations, they suffer from isolation, fear of the future, poor self-image, peer pressure, failure at school, absenteeism, and antisocial behavior. With all this, some still struggle to succeed in school. How do such students manage these crises and still succeed in their academic pursuits, this is what calls for concern [16].

Experience shows that adolescents have problems. Some children come from poor family background, crisis stricken environment and some are victims of internally displaced parents, who have given up in life and even stop school but there are some who will struggle to manage with life. To this end, what makes the difference that some students are able to manage these difficulties and achieve but others face the same situation and fail and lack the zeal to continue? Crisis management ability may be one of the skills that make the difference. This disciplined

behaviour may be motivated by their personality characteristics such as; social competence, a sense of purpose, and problem solving skills [17].

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner ecological theory enabled us to understand student's development and how they are shaped by their interaction with the environment and cultural contexts. It helps to illuminate practical issues on crisis management and academic achievement of at-risk students in secondary schools. It contextualizes human development and shows a variety of influences on the development of at-risk children in different ethno cultural settings. The theory is of significance to this study because it shows how the child is exposed to crisis emanating from the environment. As such, students at-risk must be supported by others or the environment (parents, care givers, peers, neighborhood, community and the government), for positive advancement.

At the microsystem where the at-risk students interrelates with parent(s), relatives, peer groups, school activities and neighborhood, they engage in different activities which help them to manage and overcome the difficulties they will face in life. It is at the level of the microsystem that children going through difficulties have and develop most protective factors such as flexibility and social competence. These protective factors are all found in the socio-ecological model of Bronfenbrenner, where abilities to manage crisis or organized situations, are developed as children interact with their environment such as with their relatives, peer groups, school activities, neighborhood and their community. In this light, children who come from unsecured environment, divorced homes, those whose parent(s) are internally displaced (IDPs), those who lack school needs and are self-sponsored can manage their problems and difficulties by socializing with the different people and activities found in the environment [18].

Problem Statement

Students in different parts of Cameroon face adversities, of which some of them are less likely to manage with such adverse conditions. Youths at the ages between 11-22 years are at a critical stage of human development. It is critical because if these young people are not assisted in an unsecured school environment because parents have ran into the bushes and some internally displaced for security purposes, they might fail, stop going to school or develop anti-social behaviors with resultant effects on the society. Consequently, because of the crisis, some schools are closed down; parents are less involved in the

education of their children, especially at secondary school level. Social insecurity in some towns and villages stops students from going to school as such illiteracy, prostitution, drug abuse and cyber criminality grows to its peak. Some students in this municipality are also faced with opposing conditions such as: death of parent(s), divorce of parents, poverty, low socio-economic status, lack of school needs, family conflict, lack of protection and support from the community.

It is obvious that these students have problems (crisis). Despite the managing strategies they deploy to survive in school and life, many still find it difficult to manage this crisis. Without strategic plans to manage these harsh conditions, it would be difficult for them to navigate through life successfully. Therefore their ability to navigate with such adversities comes from their inner curiosity, perseverance, self-control, determination, ability to organize, interaction with friends and members of the community. Although personal attributes and environmental characteristics have positive and negative impact on students' cognitive development and academic success, based on some research works, the ability to solve these problems and take care of them is termed "crisis management". This is manifested through; flexibility, determination, social competence. Therefore this will help them to cope normally with their difficulties. On this account, this study seeks to investigate how crisis management affects the academic achievements of at-risk students? [19].

Research Method

The descriptive survey design, using the triangulated methods of data collection was used.

Sampling technique

The purposeful sampling technique was used to select respondents for this study. They were students in form four, lower sixth and upper sixth of G.T.H.S Molyko, G. B.H.S. Buea and Summerset secondary schools in Buea Sub-Division. As a result, 113 students were given questionnaire to fill, 53 students were interviewed and 30 teachers for the focus group discussion, from the three schools respectively. This made a total sample size of 196 respondents. The actual sample of the respondents who filled the questionnaire stands as follows: G.T.H.S (14, 23 & 7) students, G.B.H.S. (13, 11 & 15) and Summerset (15, 6 & 9) students respectively, making a total of 113 students. While the sample of the respondents who were interviewed stands as follows: G.T.H.S (6, 6 & 6) students, G.B.H.S. (6, 5 & 6) and Summerset (6, 6 & 6) students

making a total of 53 students and 30 teachers for the FGDs respectively.

Procedures

The data of this study were collected with the aid of a four point scale questionnaire, interview guide and Focus Group Discussion Guide. The questionnaire was administered to 113 students purposively chosen for this study. It was made up of 22 items structured and closed ended statements. For each of these statements, students were required to state whether they strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree and strongly disagree (SD). The focus

group discussion was conducted with teachers; as such there were three discussion groups, made up of an average of 10 participants each who were selected purposively from each school. The focus groups lasted between 1hr: 30 minutes to 2hrs respectively. The group discussion consisted of 10 teachers per school respectively, making a total of 30 participants.

Interviews were also conducted with 53 students who were purposively selected from those who filled the questionnaire (see table 1).

No	School	Class	Sample size of respondents (Questionnaire)	Distribution of sample per class (Questionnaire)	Sample size of students (interviews)	Distribution of Sample Per class (interviews)
1	GTHS Molyko	Form 4	44	14	18	6
		Lower sixth		23		6
		Upper 6 th		7		6
2	G.B.H.S. Buea	Form 4	39	13	17	6
		Lower 6 th		11		5
		Upper 6 th		15		6
3	Summerset Buea	Form 4	30	15	18	6
		Lower 6 th		6		6
		Upper 6 th		9		6
Total			113	113	53	53

Table 1: Distribution of sample for Questionnaire and Interviews.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire was analyzed using frequency, proportions and Multiple Response Analysis (MRA). Interview guide and focus group discussion were analyzed using the combined process of thematic and content analysis, with the support of Atlas Ti 5.2 (Atlas Ti GMBH 2006). The gender of learners with difficulties differed across the three schools such that out of 113 students, 63(55.8%) were male while 50(44.2%) were female. Cumulatively, (94)83.2% of the students were aged 20 years and below while (19)16.8% of the students were aged 21yrs and above. In terms of adversities, lack of school needs was the most pronounced adversity faced by students with a weight of 81.4% (92), followed by the death of parents 69.9% (79) and the least expressed was divorce 21.2% (24). This trend did not differ between the male and the female.

In the first term, the majority of at-risk students performed average and above 54.9% (62) and the percentage rose to 69.0% (78) at the second term. These students live mostly with the relatives 30.9% (17), alone 27.3% (15) and with mother 27.3% (15). Students, who complained of death of parents, live mostly with relatives 39.2% (31), mother 35.4% (28), or alone 15.2% (12). At-risk students who complained of divorced parents lived mostly with their mother 29.2 (7%), followed by relatives with equal weight and alone 20.8% (5). These students from divorce home performed lesser with a proportion 54.2% (13) as compared to 73.0% (65) for those in non-divorced home. It was observed that at-risk students were generally endowed with social competence ability/flexibility with proportion of agreed ranging from 81.4% (92) to 99.1% (112), demonstrating their high level of determination/socialization with their teachers, community members, neighbors and friends though faced with adversities.

Findings and Discussions

Quantitative analysis of at-risk student depicting their social competence ability

Social Competence	Score	df	Sig.
I love working together with other students of my age.	.078	1	0.780
I understand and feel for my friends and share my ideas with them.	.017	1	0.898
I shear/lend my belongings with my friends when they need help.	.453	1	0.501
I cooperate, tolerate and get along well with my friends.	1.458	1	0.227
I care about my friends.	.345	1	0.557
I am not tempted to follow my friends who are not going to school and are hiding in the bush.	8.262	1	0.004
I help My friends to succeed in school	.453	1	0.501

Table 2: Effect of individual indicators of social competence/flexibility on academic achievement.

From the Binary Logistic Regression Model, the effect of individual model indicator was equally computed as presented above. From this table, we can realize that one indicator demarcated itself as significant predictors of

social competence ($P < 0.05$) namely 'I am not tempted to follow my friends who are not going to school and are hiding in the bush.

Item	Scale	%	Academic achievement		Total
			Below average	Average and above	
I am not tempted to follow my friends who are not going to school and are hiding in the bush.	Disagree	n	23	69	92
		%	25.0%	75.0%	100%
	Agree	n	12	9	21
		%	57.1%	42.9%	100%
Total	n	35	78	113	
	%	31.0%	69.0%	100%	

Table 3: Not following friends who are not going to school Vs. academic achievement.

The findings revealed that the academic achievement of these children who manifested social competence on the item "I am not tempted to follow my friends who are not going to school and are hiding in the bush" was measured as per their averages: those who disagreed 92 (100%) where 23(25.0%) were below average and 69(75.0%)

were above average. Meanwhile those who agreed 21 (100%) where 12(57.1%) were below average as compared to 9(42.8.9%) above average. As such, this data accepted that there is a significant relationship between social competence and at risk students' academic achievement.

Social Competence	Agree	Disagree	N
I love working together with other students of my age.	90.3%(102)	9.7%(11)	113
I understand and feel for my friends and share my ideas with them.	94.7%(107)	5.3%(6)	113
I shear/lend my belongings with my friends when they need help.	99.1%(112)	0.9%(1)	113
I cooperate, tolerate and get along well with my friends.	92.9%(105)	7.1%(8)	113
I care about my friends and I'm flexible with them.	98.2%(111)	1.8%(2)	113
I am not tempted to follow my friends who are not going to school and are doing lucrative jobs.	81.4%(92)	18.6%(21)	113
I help My friends to succeed in school	99.1%(112)	0.9%(1)	113
MRS	93.7%(741)	6.3%(50)	791

Table 4: Distribution of how students perceived social competence/flexibility.

Binary Logistic Regression Model was used to appraise the effect of social competence/ flexibility on academic achievement of students going through crisis. The

variability explained by the model was significant. The Likelihood Ratio Tests: Chi-Square=10.524; df=7; $P = 0.161$; $N = 113$). The explanatory power of the model

was 8.9% (Cox & Snell R Square =0.089). This hypothesis (Ho) is rejected. Signifying that, a higher percentage of respondents for this study support the fact that they fully possess the qualities that strengthens determination and social competence which is an indicator of crisis management among at-risk children. That is MRS = 93.7 % (741) for respondents who agreed as compared to 6.3 % (50) who disagreed. This indicates that at-risk students were generally endowed with social competence ability with proportion of agreed ranging from 81.4% (92) to 99.1% (112), demonstrating their high level of socialization with their teachers, peers, environment, family and neighbors though faced with difficulties. Therefore social competence is a booster to academic achievement.

Qualitative analysis of at-risk student depicting their social competence ability

The above mentioned view was supported by qualitative data (interviews and focus group discussions) from a series of questions asked with regards to the above variables. Students and teachers revealed that the relationship of students with others in their different schools and youth forums was caring, friendly, kind and supportive. Examples of their interactions with one another were seen during communal activities, study groups, inter-class football competitions, clubs, singing and dancing groups.

With regards to the responses to the question on the extent to which their engagement with the friends, teachers and counselors has helped those to overcome and cope with the difficulties they face, students and teachers indicated that their interaction with these people has:

- Improved on their academic attainment as it helped them focus better on their studies when doing group assignments.
- Improved self-confidence and understanding towards their friends.
- Helped them improve on how to manage crisis and avoid distractions
- Helped improve their sense of purpose when they interact with other peers.
- Helped them love working together and share ideas with one another.
- Helped them know how to conduct themselves, cooperate, tolerate and get along with friends in school.
- Made us to love working as a team and to walk with peers with different personality traits.

From the findings, these responses strengthen crisis managing abilities of these students. Looking at the objective of this study which was to investigate how social competence/flexibility affects the academic achievements of at-risk students. After testing seven indicators of the components, it was realized that when students cooperate, tolerate and get along well with friends, it enhances success. As such, there is a significant relationship between social competence/flexibility and academic achievement of at-risk students.

The above findings revealed that, at-risk students in Buea Sub-Division of the South West Region of Cameroon, do well as they actively manage their crisis, engage and interact in different activities with their friends, such activities include: farming and selling in the market, doing holiday jobs, have educative debates, group presentations and workshops organized by the school. Consequently, all the aforementioned activities were enriching and lucrative. As a result, when students are determined, hard-working, collaborative, feeling and sharing ideas, tolerating and participating in their activities, they possess attributes which are very important socializing tools that strengthen the manifestations of crisis managing abilities (social competence) among at-risk students. Moreover, such characteristics will enable them to overcome depression, fear, and discouragement and avoid being tempted to follow friends who are not going to school.

The findings are consistent with the findings of Asangha [20], who found that through the active engagement of adolescents in different activities with their peers such as; studying, discussing, doing group assignments, farming, hunting, craft work, animal rearing, blacksmithing, fetching firewood, caring for younger siblings and doing petty trading, are all human development strategies that permit students going through difficulties in Buea Sub-Division, the south West Region of Cameroon, to develop competences that upholds a sense of purpose, belongingness and resistant abilities for positive academic progress among at-risk students.

Reis, Colbert, and Hebert [21] in their study in Georgia found out that, at-risk students in Rocky Jones rural Virginia high school, were sensitive during crisis period, determined to work with fellow students and had appreciation for cultural diversity. These attributes was common with high achieving students in the school. Other activities that helped the high achieving students were their participation in house chores, following relatives to their job sites, cooperate in income generating activities in the family and participating in summer enrichment programs organized by the government. The results of

this study found that the at-risk students had many characteristics identified in crisis management research such as flexibility, perseverance, strong will, tolerance, patience, feelings for other people, caring for others and willingness to cooperate with those who portray different ideas from theirs, believing that they could be of help to other peers going through adversities [22]. Bradley & Crowyn [3], also agreed that being involved in school activities, having feelings of belongingness with classmates, having good relationships with their teachers and obedience to the school rules and regulation, leads to high achievement in school even though coming from socially disadvantaged background [23-25].

Fomba [8] further found out that, through the socialization of real life activities, children accept risks, share, discuss, employ creativity and learn how to manage immediate and extended real life conflicts/challenges. As a way of communal work life, the practice of peer work (njangi) has the potential of catalyzing social intelligence and collaborative attitude in the youths. With community actions, students are curious and excited to socialize and participate in communal work activity, while generating learning in different context for the development of work skills necessary in exploiting available community resources which enhances their cognitive development [26].

In addition, the above findings are also consistent with the findings of Nsamenang [27] who found out that, most African children are compelled by their impoverished circumstances to struggle to survive and make progress through their own efforts. The evidence for such agency is better sought within African traditional societies and peer cultures. The group interaction is a trigger and central support of agency in African children. In Cameroon, most of children's work is undertaking with friends in child to child social networks and exchanges with older siblings and peer mentors as child protectors rather than with parents or teachers. The children's group offers opportunities for children to strive, play, share their worries, 'work' and learn together, free from parental supervision and adult control. This freedom with their friends promotes creativity and challenges children to cultivate pro-social characteristics and altruism on their own terms, to defer with more competent peers, to address and resolve conflicts and to notice needs of younger ones and serve those [27].

Milteer [28], found that peer play and engagement in trading and selling activities provides forum for cognitive engagements, academic, social, and behavioral learning in the classroom and at home. In addition to communication based social skills, peer play and other social engagement

can also aid in the development of another set of social skills that will improve the likelihood for school success. Apprey [29], in a study in Virginia found out that, these skills include conflict resolution, problem solving and stress management skills. Once students engage in these more complex interactions, violence may arise and conflict can occur at home. Through dealing with this conflict, students at-risk can develop pro-social behaviours, problem solving and conflict resolution skills. If children can develop these skills at a young age, it can create firm foundations for processing stress, depression, rejection, discouragement, self-pity, dealing with conflict and communication that can help them regulate their emotions, engage in peer relationships, cope with difficult situations, and succeed academically [30].

In conclusion, based on the findings of this study, at-risk students in Buea municipality, South West region of Cameroon, interact in different activities with their friends in other to survive, overcome and cope normally with the crisis in the country. Through personal efforts and collaboration with friends in the different activities that students with difficulties conduct in Buea Sub-Division, they are able to share ideas, develop skills and competencies that help them when facing any difficulty.

Conclusion

From the above findings, it is obvious that, crisis management in this study, operationalized as social competence/flexibility significantly foster the academic achievement of at-risk students. This research proved that crisis management among students in Buea, was not only as a result of support system from the social welfare (government) but as a result of inner curiosity for a positive change, coupled with the ability to socialize with peers, teachers, relatives and others in the community. Moreover, the study revealed that social competent skills are of the most powerful internal and protective factors linked to managing crisis. As such, supportive adults (relatives, teachers, counselors and community leaders) are key elements in helping at-risk students to succeed academically.

Therefore parents, relatives, teachers, stakeholders and the government should seek to create warmth, ensure peace and security, create supportive school climates and create opportunities and activities for at-risk students to associate with their peers. This will enhance social competent abilities in children and nurtures the development of crisis management abilities needed for academic achievement. They should also provide sponsors for the at-risk children and create opportunities

for all students to succeed, especially in our African society.

Recommendations

Since education is the back born of any nation and the future of every nation depends on the educational success and survival of our young people, factors such as security, care, support, meaningful participation, social competence, can be given freely by adults in any environment in which children operate such as schools, communities, homes, and among their peers. Such factors have been shown, as in this study, to promote crisis management in at-risk students which can positively impact their educational progress. Therefore supportive governance, care givers, family members, members of the community and stakeholders should be very observant in monitoring the different activities that the children engage in within peer groups, so as to be able to identify, encourage and support those activities that are lucrative and enriching for the psychosocial wellbeing of their children.

Teachers, educators, school counselors and school psychologists through studies and co-curricular activities within schools, could also use the classmates as an important resource in building socially responsible behaviour among students with difficulties in schools. Students could also be encouraged to scaffold each other in times of difficulties and teachers could also be observant and scaffold students when they face difficulties as they participate in different activities and tasks.

The government and other welfare services could provide security, create lucrative jobs and enriching programs/activities that students can engage in and make use of them, in order to sponsor themselves and effectively build up crisis managing skills among them.

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