

**TEACHER-COUNSELLORS' SELF-APPRAISAL OF THEIR GRIEF
COUNSELLING COMPETENCE IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN
KISII COUNTY, KENYA.**

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ABSTRACT

The study was carried out to explore teacher-counsellors' self-appraisal of their grief counselling competence in public secondary schools in Kisii County, Kenya. It was anchored on Bowlby's theory of attachment and loss and utilized a convergent parallel mixed methods design that combined both a cross-sectional survey and phenomenological research designs. A sample of 181 teacher-counsellors obtained through simple random sampling was involved. Data was collected through a questionnaire and interview guide. A pilot study was done to determine the reliability and validity of the research instruments. Data analysis was done using univariate and thematic analysis backed up by narratives. When the respondents who had much and enough competence were combined, this study established that they had high competence in listening (92.9%), establishing a rapport (86.8%), sharing personal experience with grief (78.4), recognizing denial (57.4%), identifying an internally suffering (56.9%) and recommending helpful articles and books (52.5%). The respondents appraised their competence as below average in assessing healing (47.5%), facilitating individual, group and family grief counselling (46.4%), identifying cultural differences that affect treatment of grief (46.4%), counselling students on death, grief, and loss (44.7%), providing debriefing services (41.4%) providing grief psycho-education (37.8%). Based on these findings, the recommend that teacher-counsellors undergo grief counselling training through seminars, workshops or training institutions or online in order to enhance competence.

Keywords: Appraisal, Grief, Counselling, Competence

1. INTRODUCTION

Grief is a universal human experience that everyone expects to encounter at one point in life. Students are the most hurt because most of them may not have developed adequate coping skills

or the expressive or cognitive capacity to comprehend and processes the challenges that come with loss (Imholf, 2015). In some cases, students may recognize and acknowledge the reality of the loss and incorporate it into their lives as they move forward. Some may have a hard time accommodating the actuality of the loss and their signs may be stretched and deepened rather than lessened over time. This makes it hard for them to keep on living in an adaptive and functional way (Ashley, 2013). Teacher-counsellors should anticipate to provide grief counselling at different points of their life to students who may require it. Breen (2010) observed that grief counselling competence is important because if counsellors do not have the necessary competence, they may injure the client instead of supporting them psychologically. To the therapists, grief counselling competence is significant because it buffers them from the discomfort resulting from handling a grieving client (ACA, 2014). The American Counselling Association (ACA, 2014) and Cicchetti (2014) observed that although grief counselling competence is core when supporting grieving clients, there is inadequate research that focuses on the competence of counsellors to provide suitable and effective grief counselling. There is therefore need for more studies that focus on counsellors' grief counselling competence in diverse environments and fields (Cicchetti, 2014). This formed the background against which this study was undertaken. Competence is defined as the capability of a counsellor to offer effective counselling services to numerous types of clients in a principled and specialized way in order to attain desirable outcomes (Sank, 2010). In this study, it means the ability of teacher-counsellors to offer effective grief counselling services to students who need it in an ethical and expert way to enable them attain psychological wellbeing. The current study focused on school environment where cases of orphans who psychologically suffer in silence are rising and therefore drop out of school or performance wise (Nyongesa & Kiplagat, 2017).

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Death is unavoidable human happening that continue to take away the social, physical and psychological wellbeing of students in various public secondary schools in Kisii County. In most cases, the financial, material and spiritual needs of such students are taken care of but their psychological wellbeing receives little attention. Some students who are overwhelmed by grief have dropped out of school or academically because of their inability to manage grief while some resort to drug and substance abuse, careless premature sex or suicidal tendencies. Teacher-counsellors have been identified as suitable avenues through which the psychological needs of such students can be addressed (Andanje, 2013). However, the topic of grief is emotive and therefore requires counsellors with a high degree of competence because it is mentally draining (Blount & Mullen, 2015). Counselor education is also quite varied in terms of curriculum, the nature of institutions that offer training, and the duration of training programs. This variation in counselor education is exemplified by the range of programs offered by various institutions,

including non-graduate diplomas, undergraduate and postgraduate degrees (Oketch, Atieno, Kimemia and Muthoni, 2011). This makes it challenging to establish the grief counselling competence of all counsellors, teacher-counsellors included. This study filled this gap by examining the perceived teacher-counsellors' grief counselling competence in public secondary schools in Kisii County.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cicchetti, McArthur, Szirony and Blum (2016) carried out a study on 93 master's-level students to establish their perceived grief counselling competence and its implication on education. The result showed that the respondents did not feel competent to handle grief counselling. Another study by Muellenbach (2015) focused on how training facilitated the competence of 11 psychology trainees to acquire their competence. The result indicated that training increased counsellors' competence by increasing their self-perception and self-confidence.

Rahman, Zubaidah, Samsiah and Nor (2014) researched on the general counselling competence of 39 counsellors in secondary schools in the Perak State of Malaysia. Data was obtained through a structured questionnaire and analyzed through descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that the counsellors considered themselves moderately competent in executing their duties. In their study, Andres and Murillo (2016) focused on the grief counselling competence undergraduate and graduate students in the school of social work at California State University. A questionnaire was used to obtain data which was analyzed through descriptive statistics. It was established that the respondents in both undergraduate and graduate programs did not feel competent in providing grief and loss services. Eremie (2014) also found that professional competency among school and non-school counsellors in Rivers State, Nigeria was low. Gamino and Ritter (2015) carried out a selected review of literature tracing the underpinnings of death competence from its evolution. The results of the review showed that death competence is a necessary prerequisite for ethical practice of counsellors but most counsellors were not competent.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in Kisii County among teacher-counsellors in various public secondary schools. It adopted a convergent parallel mixed methods design that combined both a cross-sectional survey and phenomenological research designs. The design was used to facilitate confirmation, cross-validation and corroboration of data in order to facilitate offsetting of weaknesses inherent within one method with the strengths of the other method (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2014). Bowlby's theory of attachment and loss was utilized. A sample of 181 teacher-counsellors obtained through simple random sampling was involved. Data was collected through a questionnaire and interview guide. A pilot study was done to determine the reliability

and validity of the research instruments. Data analysis was done using univariate and thematic analysis backed up by narratives.

5. FINDINGS

The respondents were required to appraise their competence in executing 12 grief counselling activities. Each item on the survey was rated on a scale of 1 to 5. In this scale, a rating of 1 pointed out that the respondent did not have competence in executing that particular activity. A 5 designated that the respondent had adequate competence in performing that given action. Table 1 shows the analysis of the self-appraisal of teacher-counsellors on their grief counselling competence per activity.

Table 8: Teacher-counsellors’ self-appraisal of their grief counselling competence

		Frequency	Percent
I can establish a rapport with grieving students	Much competence	85	47.0
	Enough competence	72	39.8
	Little competence	9	5.0
	Some competence	10	5.5
	No competence	5	2.8
	Total	181	100.0
I can listen to a grieving student	Much competence	102	56.4
	Enough competence	66	36.5
	Little competence	4	2.2
	Some competence	5	2.8
	No competence	4	2.2
I can identify an internally suffering grieving student	Much competence	35	19.3
	Enough competence	68	37.6
	Little competence	46	25.4
	Some competence	12	6.6
	No competence	20	11.0
I can provide grief psycho-education to students	Much competence	18	9.9
	Enough competence	49	27.1
	Little competence	58	32.0
	Some competence	24	13.3
	No competence	32	17.7
	Total	181	100.0

Competence in Facilitating individual, group and Family Grief Counselling	Much competence	25	13.8
	Enough competence	59	32.6
	Little competence	42	23.2
	Some competence	25	13.8
	No competence	30	16.6
	Total	181	100.0
I can counsel students on death, grief, and loss	Much competence	29	16.0
	Enough competence	52	28.7
	Little competence	41	22.7
	Some competence	31	17.1
	No competence	28	15.5
	Total	181	100.0
I can identify cultural differences that affect treatment of grief among grieving students	Much competence	39	21.5
	Enough competence	45	24.9
	Little competence	39	21.5
	Some competence	27	14.9
	No competence	31	17.1
	Total	181	100.0
I can provide appropriate grief debriefing services to grieving students	Much competence	19	10.5
	Enough competence	56	30.9
	Little competence	37	20.4
	Some competence	32	17.7
	No competence	37	20.4
	Total	181	100.0
I can assess healing in a grieving student	Much competence	19	10.5
	Enough competence	67	37.0
	Little competence	41	22.7
	Some competence	25	13.8
	No competence	29	16.0
	Total	181	100.0
I can share my experience with grief with a grieving student	Much competence	73	40.3
	Enough competence	69	38.1
	Little competence	17	9.4
	No competence	11	6.1
	Total	110	61.9

	Total	181	100.0
	Much competence	37	20.4
	Enough competence	67	37.0
I can recognize a grieving student who is in denial or disbelief about death	Little competence	33	18.2
	Some competence	22	12.2
	No competence	22	12.2
	Total	181	100.0
	Much competence	36	19.9
	Enough competence	59	32.6
I can recommend helpful articles and books for grieving students	Little competence	29	16.0
	Some competence	22	12.2
	No competence	35	19.3
	Total	181	100.0

From the finding on Table 1, 2.8% appraised themselves as having no competence in establishing a rapport with grieving students. 5.0% had little competence, 38.8% had enough competence and 47.0% had much competence. Respondent TC2 remarked through personal communication that;

Handling grief is not a simple process. As I try to establish a relationship with the grieving students, initially, I am struck with emotions because of the awareness that what I went through during my personal loss is what the students are going through. However, I realize that I have the situation at hand and therefore I have to overcome my emotions and establish the bond between me and the student because I have to support him or her to normalize the grief. I have had no problem establishing a rapport with grieving students.

According to the finding on Table 1, 56.4% of the respondents had much competence in paying attention and listening to grieving students, 36.5% enough competence, 2.2% little competence, 2.8% some competence and 2.2% no competence. Respondent TC7 had this to comment;

I wholly immerse myself to the narrations of the grieving as I make props at appropriate intervals. I listen to them before making any comment because it is them pouring out their bottled up emotions and in such a scenario what they need is a listening ear that is not quick to impose personal views and feelings to them. During this session, patience and confirmation of information is key. Focused attention using eye contacts is significant. I have no challenge in giving grieving students attention and listening to them.

Table 1 indicates that 37.6% had enough competence, 25.4% little competence, 19.3% much competence 11.0% no competence and 6.6% some competence in identifying internally suffering grieving students.

Based on interviews, respondent TC5 said that;

Loss of a loved one is heartbreaking because in an instant, a student's life is devastated and the student may depict behavior such as withdrawing or detachment from other students they were close to may not be active on other social activities they were active in hitherto bereavement and may appear to be having trouble in maintaining their daily routine. Even if such students don't come to seek counselling, I am able to tell that volumes of negative issues are being processed within his or her mind. There is always a certain behavior a given student has during good days. If this behaviour or behaviours change during grief but the student does not seek counselling services, then there are high chances that such a student could be suffering internally.

Data displayed on Table 1 indicates that 32.0% had little competence, 27.1% some competence, 17.7% no competence, 13.3% enough competence and 9.9% much competence to provide psycho-education. According to respondent TC9;

Grief psycho-education is uncomfortable topic to teach grieving students because I feel it will open the wound that was opened by the passing on of my loved one. Naturally, I am human and when I imagine of my own grief, the topic becomes uncomfortable to teach. Even empathy can make me to avoid providing psych-education to grieving students. Feeling of a student's pain can cause discomfort and distress to me and therefore find it is a challenge to teach students on this topic. It's hard to know what to say, especially when emotions run high, and sometimes I make missteps when trying to find the right words in a difficult situation. It's not always easy to know how to talk about dying.

Table 1 shows that, 32.6% had enough competence, 23.2% had little competence, 13.8% much competence, 13.8% some competence and 16.6% no competence in facilitating individual, group and family grief counselling. Respondent TC2 remarked that;

I found that engaging in group and family counselling was very useful and effective because everyone speaks their story and I can help them to open up and express themselves. Through this, they stop feeling like they are the only unlucky people in the world. That it does happen to other people as well. You're not the only ones, which is consoling to know that there are other people.

The analysis on Table 1 shows that 28.7% had enough competence, 22.7% little competence, 17.1% some competence, 16.0% much competence and 15.5% had no competence in counselling students on death, grief and loss. According to respondent TC7;

In most cases, I don't even notice that some students are grieving. Even when I notice this, I rarely take action'. When students approach me, it is challenging to counsel them on this issue because I feel it is reminding them about the loss.

Table 1 shows that 24.9% had enough competence, 21.5% much competence, 21.5% little competence 17.1% no competence and 14.9% some competence in identifying cultural differences that affect treatment of grief among students. According to respondent, TC12;

There are diverse beliefs and teachings to young people about death in various cultures. I do not have the competence of identifying cultural differences that affect treatment of grief among students. I come from a different cultural background from the grieving students and I have not stayed among many communities in Kenya and therefore be able to have the competence in the same.

Data analyzed on table 1 shows that 30.9% had enough competence, 20.4% little competence, 20.4% no competence, 17.7% some competence and 10.5% much competence to provide appropriate grief debriefing services to students. From the interview, respondent TC10 remarked that;

The debriefing exercise is challenging because it evoked my emotions resulting from my own experience with grief. As much as people assume counsellors have the competence of handling issues related to trauma, they are also human beings with feelings and emotions. I am not free to probe the grieving students in the course of interviewing them because I imagine of my previous situation and put myself in their shoes.

Table 1 shows that responses that were given were of varied fractions, with 37.0% replying that they had enough competence, 22.7% little competence, 16.0% no competence, 13.8% some competence and 10.5% much competence in assessing healing in grieving student. Two participants, TC6 and TC11, who replied to interviews remarked on the importance of safety assessment of grieving students.

The result on Table 1 displays that 40.3% had much competence, 38.1% enough competence, 9.4% little competence, 6.1% some competence and 6.1% no competence to share their personal experience with grieving student. Respondent, TC9, had this comment;

When sharing my own experience, the grieving students normally feel touched by my experience. The grieving students are able to feel with me. Having been in a similar misfortune, when I empathize and share my experience, I can easily be understood and believed during the counselling sessions. The students will feel that because I have been there and came out, then I have a point when I share my own experience with them.

In the analysis shown on table 1, 37.0% had enough competence, 20.4% much competence, 18.2% little competence, 12.2% some competence and 12.2% no competence to recognize a grieving student who is in denial or disbelief about death. Respondent TC7 remarked that;

It is a small number of students that was in a state of disbelief but the majority had accepted that their loved ones had gone. It is a daunting task for to recognize that some of these students are in disbelief that the loved ones have permanently gone. There are some who hide their feelings and sometimes it becomes a challenge to to identify them.

The result on Table 8 shows that 32.6% had enough competence, 19.9% much competence, 19.3% no competence, 16.0% little competence and 12.2% some competence to recommend helpful articles and books for grieving students.

6. DISCUSSIONS

From the finding on Table 1, 2.8% appraised themselves as having no competence in establishing a rapport with grieving students. 5.0% had little competence, 38.8% had enough competence and 47.0% had much competence. Responses from interviews revealed that teacher-counsellors had no problem establishing a rapport with grieving students. This therefore shows that most of the respondents had the competence of establishing a rapport with grieving students. The high competence in establishing a rapport with grieving students could have been occasioned by the experience most teacher-counsellors had in providing grief counselling services and teaching in their respective schools. According to Ober, Granello and Wheaton (2012), grief counselling competence of a counsellor is acquired through experience and training.

According to the finding on Table 1, 56.4% of the respondents had much competence in paying attention and listening to grieving students, 36.5% enough competence, 2.2% little competence, 2.8% some competence and 2.2% no competence. Respondent TC7 had this to comment "I listen to them before making any comment because it is them pouring out their bottled up emotions and in such a scenario what they need is a listening ear that is not quick to impose personal views and feelings to them". This therefore means that most teacher-counsellors had the competence of listening to a grieving student. This could have been shaped by experience in

executing grief counselling; an observation made by Ober, Granello and Wheaton (2012) that age and experience shapes a counsellor's counselling skills.

Table 1 indicates that 37.6% had enough competence, 25.4% little competence, 19.3% much competence 11.0% no competence and 6.6% some competence in identifying internally suffering grieving students. Based on interviews, respondent TC5 said that "Loss of a loved one is heartbreaking because in an instant, a student's life is devastated and the student may depict behavior such as withdrawing or detachment from other students they were close to may not be active on other social activities they were active in hitherto bereavement and may appear to be having trouble in maintaining their daily routine". This study established that the competence of teacher-counsellors to identify internally suffering grieving students was low. This could suggest that there some grieving students whose psychological needs had not been addressed in public secondary schools in Kisii County because of teacher-counsellors not being able to identify internally suffering grieving students. This finding is consistent to that of Imhoff (2015) who observed that although loss was universal, individuals expressed grief uniquely and in an individual manner, with some concealing it such that it was not possible to overtly see it.

Data displayed on Table 1 indicates that 32.0% had little competence, 27.1% some competence, 17.7% no competence, 13.3% enough competence and 9.9% much competence to provide psycho-education. According to respondent TC9, "grief psycho-education is uncomfortable topic to teach grieving students because I feel it will open the wound that was opened by the passing on of my loved one". This study found that the majority of teacher-counsellors in public secondary schools in Kisii County did not have the competence to provide grief psycho-education to grieving students. The lack of competence in providing grief psycho-education to grieving students could be attributed to the fact that most of them have not trained in grief counselling and the fact that they do not want to reawaken their memories of personal experience with loss and that of grieving students. This finding is consistent with that of Tran (2016) who noted that the topic of grief was uncomfortable and therefore most counsellors ignored it.

Table 1 shows that, 32.6% had enough competence, 23.2% had little competence, 13.8% much competence, 13.8% some competence and 16.6% no competence in facilitating individual, group and family grief counselling. Responses from qualitative and quantitative data were mixed. However, the findings indicated that most of them preferred individual grief counselling. Although group counselling may make grieving students share their pain and acknowledge that it happens to others, the principle of confidentiality is violated and some may not express themselves in a group because of fear of their information leaking. Each grieving student's circumstances are unique and need to be handled exclusively. Tran (2016) noted that grief is individual and therefore has to be treated within that context.

The analysis on Table 1 shows that 28.7% had enough competence, 22.7% little competence, 17.1% some competence, 16.0% much competence and 15.5% had no competence in counselling students on death, grief and loss. Responses from qualitative data echoed the findings of quantitative data and therefore this study established that most teacher-counsellors did not have the competence of counselling students on death, grief and loss. The lack of competence in counselling students on death, grief, and loss may be attributed to the topic being emotive, the teacher-counsellor not wanting to renew personal memories and those of grieving students and the cultural constraints that argue against talking about death because it is a taboo. This agrees with the finding of Tran (2016) that the topic of grief is uncomfortable and therefore most counsellors avoided it.

Table 1 shows that 24.9% had enough competence, 21.5% much competence, 21.5% little competence 17.1% no competence and 14.9% some competence in identifying cultural differences that affect treatment of grief among students. According to respondent, TC12; “there are diverse beliefs and teachings to young people about death in various cultures. Kuehn (2013) found out that there are various cultural ways different people treat grief and this has a bearing on how grieving students respond to loss. This study found that most of the respondents did not have the competence of identifying cultural differences that affect treatment of grief among students. This is possible because teacher-counsellors and students who need counseling services in public secondary schools in Kisii County come from diverse cultural backgrounds. This was further confirmed by a finding by Tran (2016) that the way in which grief is communicated, felt and processed differs from tradition to tradition.

Data analyzed on table 1 shows that 30.9% had enough competence, 20.4% little competence, 20.4% no competence, 17.7% some competence and 10.5% much competence to provide appropriate grief debriefing services to students. From the interview, respondent TC10 remarked that “the debriefing exercise is challenging because it evoked my emotions resulting from my own experience with grief”. From these responses, this study found that most teacher-counsellors in public secondary schools in Kisii County had no competence in providing appropriate grief debriefing services to students. The researcher attributed this situation to be because of lack of training in grief counselling on the part of the teacher-counsellors. Training may give them the advantage of being grounded in practice on theories like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy which is paramount to supporting clients in pain. Wood (2016) established that counselling encourages optimistic results for grieving clients by assisting the bereaved process grief through debriefing.

More than a half (57.4%, summed percentage) had the competence of recognizing a grieving student who is in denial or disbelief about death. Grieving people express denial or disbelief about the demise of their loved ones. Therefore, the study sought to find out if the respondents

had the competence of recognizing a student who was in denial or disbelief about the death of their loved one. According to Bowlby (1980), when an individual experiences a loss, the disbelief that it has occurred leads to denial. This is with the hope that what has happened can reverse.

The result on Table 1 displays that 40.3% had much competence, 38.1% enough competence, 9.4% little competence, 6.1% some competence and 6.1% no competence to share their personal experience with grieving student. Respondent, TC9, had this comment “the students will feel that because I have been there and came out, then I have a point when I share my own experience with them”. From these responses, most students had the competence to share their personal experience with loss. Kaufman (2016) observed that counsellors who self-disclosed were rated as more fostering, dependable, and concerned than are non-disclosers. Therefore, those who were involved in this study had these features because 78.4% of the respondents indicated that they had competence that ranged between much and enough competence.

The result on Table 8 shows that 32.6% had enough competence, 19.9% much competence, 19.3% no competence, 16.0% little competence and 12.2% some competence to recommend helpful articles and books for grieving students. This study found that more than a half (52.5%) of the respondents had competence that ranged between enough and much competence. Much of the material recommended to these students was the Bible. Ashley (2013) noted that although most schools did not have enough reference materials, teachers referred their grieving students to the internet.

7. CONCLUSION

Grief is a reality in human life. Teacher-counsellors are bound to offer grief counselling services at some point (s) in their career. Their competence varies from one counsellor to another. In this study, it was established that teacher-counsellors had much competence in establishing a rapport, listening to grieving students; helping them express their grief and sharing their personal experience with grief. However, the study concluded that the grief counselling competence of teacher-counsellors in public secondary schools is still low.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommended that all teacher-counsellors be encouraged to undergo a comprehensive training in grief counselling as a way of developing their competence in grief counselling. Training equips them with necessary practical knowledge and skills. At the same time, they can be encouraged to partner with counsellors in public hospitals who execute grief counselling in order to develop their experience in matters related to grief.

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