

Influence of Social Support on Meaning in Life among Boarding Public Secondary School Students in Mbeere South Sub-County, Kenya.

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ABSTRACT

There is increase of poor mental health among students, which has led to increase of deviant behaviors and meaninglessness. Several studies have shown that, social support is essential for human growth and flourishing and, it positively contributes to meaning in life among different groups of people. The main aim of this study was to investigate the influence of social support on meaning in life among secondary school students in Mbeere South Sub- County. The study used quantitative paradigm of data collection and analysis. It assumed causal-comparative design. Proportionate Stratified Random Sampling Technique and simple random sampling was used to select 255 participants. The study was guided by Logotherapy by Viktor Frankl and self-determination theory by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan. The data was collected using standardized Multidimensional Perceived Social Support and Meaning in Life questionnaires and was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings of the study show that, the students have high total Social Support and Meaning in Life ($M= 5.47, SD= 1.02; M= 5.81, SD= 0.96$) respectively. Additionally, the finding of the study revealed that Total Social Support has a significant influence on Meaning in Life ($\beta = 0.344, p = 0.00$). However, there was no influence of social support on search for meaning in life. Suggesting that there are other factors that influence search for meaning in life among secondary school students. Hence, this study recommends that, need for qualitative study that would allow interrogation of respondents on some of the meanings and causes of behaviors, secondary schools to embrace training of peer mentors/mediators/counsellors and school counsellors to use logotherapy.

Key Terms: Social support, meaning in life, significant others.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Globally, mental health conditions affect 16% of youth and adolescents while depression is one of the leading causes of illness among the youth (World Health Organization, 2019). According to the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights 40% of the in-patients and 25% of outpatient in our health facilities suffer from mental health-related conditions (KNCHR, 2011).

In Africa factors affecting mental health which includes, anxiety, depression and substance use is on increase. For example, In South Africa 1 out of 6 people suffer from mental health condition (Lancet Commission on global mental health and sustainable development, 2018). According to Shamsuddin, et al (2013), depression which is one of the mental disease is manifested through defiant behaviors such as unrest, substance use and abuse and school dropout among the students.

The Kenya Mental Health Policy (KMHP 2015-2030) aims at promoting mental health in line with goals of Universal Health Care (UHC) which is geared towards promotion of health and preventing disease, (Ministry Of Health, 2015). To promote mental health there is a need of multi-disciplinary approach, which will entail creating awareness, and prevention of mental illness among all sectors of the government as a way of realizing the aim of UHC, which is promotion of health and prevention of disease (MOH, 2015) These findings are worrying since the youth make up 30% of the entire population in Kenya. The majority are in secondary schools (National Council for population and Development, 2017).

Globally, the family, friends, and significant others are noted as source of social support; and families are renowned to be ways for getting pieces of advice, for offering emotional and material support, and increasing happiness (Moeini, Farhadian, & Ara, 2018). Social support is perceived as a basic human mental need. For instance, among students in the UK, it is known for increasing the quality of life, and for the reduction

of anxiety and depression among students (Alsubaie, Stain, Webster, & Wadman 2019). In none school environments, it is also found out that visits from family members are observed to be of importance for emotionally aiding the sick to make a healthy choice of behavior, to cope with stress and meaning in life (Debrikova, Pcolkova, Khalil, & West, 2015). Thus, the psychological importance of social support is not limited to school or students alone.

Support offered by members of family, friends and other important people in one's life plays an important role on one's growth and general wellbeing (Noels, Adrian-Taylor, Saumure & Katz, 2019). Support from family members and friends, plays a key part in helping students attain academic resilience and meaning in life (Donielsen, 2010). Thus, if a student perceives that he has positive support from parents, classmates, schoolmates and teachers in form of advice, encouragement and other forms of social and emotional support make him to find studies more interesting, finding right satisfaction and meaning in their studies. For instance, in USA students with perceived social support at school are able to enjoy their studies, and are less likely to suffer from anxiety and depression hence are able to overcome challenges which are related to learning environment (Wentzel, 2017). On the other hand, where there is no supportive school environment, the students are not able to understand the changes and overcome the challenges which they come across at school and outside school, this leads to psychological problems such as depression and behavioral problems such as substance abuse which leads to low self-image, anxiety, depression and poor academic performance.

A study carried out in China among 262 university students on the intervening role of social support on academic achievement and emotion exhaustion using a sample of 262 students, showed that, there is positive relationship between social support, educational attainment and emotional exhaustion (Li, Chan, Chung, & Chui (2010). In other word, these finding indicate that having parental, peer and teachers support enhance success in the field of academic and at the same time help to ease stress related to emotion exhaustion due to academic pressure. This means that care from family, friends and significant others helps the students find meaning in their studies.

In other non-academic setting social support was found to increase job performance and meaning in life. A study carried out among 188 highly educated black American women showed that, support from family and friends plays an important role in upholding general well-being (Linnabery, Stuhmacher, & Tower 2014). This means family, church and friends support play a key role in promoting psychological well-being.

According to Hayhurst, Riordan, Boyes, Ruffman, and Hunter, (2017) social support $\beta = + .08$ and belonging to group $\rho < .0005$ $n^2 = .44$ help in promoting resilience among the adolescents. Resilience is important for young people today, especially in helping to overcome challenges which come about in the process of growth.

The surrounding social context has influence on academic performance of adolescents (Rosa & Trudge 2013). This indicates that the environment in which the adolescent operated should have positive influence on his academic performance and success. For example, the home environment of a student should be supportive otherwise, it will have negative impact on academic outcome of that student. The above study is supported by findings of a quantitative study carried out in Belgium among 930 students, the findings show that in a school the mixing of students from different background, teachers and support staff help in boosting mental well-being and purpose in life and as a result student are able to perform better in their studies (Sherman, Simonton, Latif, & Bracy, 2010). This ability to interact effectively with all parties involved, determines the academic performance of the students. However, lack of competence in the interpersonal relationship could significantly influence problematic behavior which in turn affect the outcome of the organization.

Social support helps in promoting hope and self- esteem. For example, a quantitative study carried out in Spain among 2042 participants aged between the ages of 18- 95 years showed that, social support helps reduce depression and promote meaning in life in post-partum periods $m = 149$, $SD = 38$, $P = .01$ (Negron, Martin, Almog, Balbierz & Howell 2013). This shows that social support is not only important to young people but across all ages.

According to investigations carried out among Chinese adolescents aged between 12-19 years low esteem was correlated to depressive symptoms and lack of social support (Li, Chan, Chung, and Chui 2010). Social support also helps in promoting meaning in life and reduction of suicide tendencies since depression and suicide is found to increase more in socially isolated (Bauman, Toomey, & Walker, 2013). This means lack of perceived supportive relationship can leads to increase of depression among students in China.

Poor social support leads to meaninglessness which is manifested through substance and drug abuse among youths (Mehrabi, et al 2016; Alsubaie et al, 2019; Ren, Qin & Zhang, 2018). From the finding 87% of those young people from divorced family abused drugs at ≤ 20 years. This is due to lack of a person who can give advice or direction to these young people which makes them prone to peer influence.

Lack of meaning in life leads to existential emptiness, this existential emptiness leads to depression, anxiety and addictions (Frankl 1969). Providing supportive environment will enable the student to have a sense of belonging and will be able to live positively. Meaninglessness among the youth is manifested in poor

academic achievements, engagement in risky behavior and later in life is associated with high divorce rates, lower level of income and suicide.

There is relationship between psychological health and meaning in life. This means that if adolescents are helped to find meaning in life by provision of appropriate support, they will be free from many risky behaviors Brassai, Piko & stager (2011). According to study carried out among 1446 Latino youth aged 8-16 social support help in development of mechanism to overcome challenges of life, Pierreira et al (2019).

In Africa, family, relative and friends play an important role in providing material, emotional and informational support (Moloney, 2015). Communal living and social belongingness were paramount values which were passed from one generation to another by the community elders as a way of promoting cohesion and growth in the society.

School is one of the avenues through which social support is offered and meaning in life is promoted. However, according to study carried out in Kenya, boarding system of school does not promote social support from parents and relatives Kerubo (2016). Instead, it promotes competition among students this leading to stress, anxiety and depression as a result of trying to achieve best performance (Ramakrishan, Baccari, Ramachandran, Ahmed, & Koenig, 2018).

In Kenya student unrest and substance abuse are on increase, causing great concern among all the stake holders in education sector. It is characterized by burning of school facilities, violence and substance abuse (Nyambegera, 2018), this has resulted in school dropout and poor academic achievements. Studies have associated increase of indiscipline to weak social support (Aute, 2019; Nadeke, Chumba & Kiprop 2017). On the other hand, ability to make sense in the world, having a direction/ purpose in life and having social connections are indicators that one has meaning in life (Shuv-Ami & Bareket-Bojmel, 2020). Meaning in life is manifested in having cohesion, having something one is living for and significance. All these are positive indicators of good mental health (Glaw et al 2017). On the other hand, substance use, student unrest and other forms of deviant behavior are indicators of meaninglessness and poor mental health among students. This means that, family relations and support from significant others plays an important role in promoting one's growth and attainment of meaning in life.

In Kenya, indiscipline among students has become a major concern among different stakeholders in education sector (Mwaniki 2018). Cases of students burning schools or sneaking from school and abusing drugs are on increase. According to a study carried out in Kenya, some of indiscipline cases which include not following school's rules, sneaking out of school and negative peer influence are due to lack of parental support, peer influence and lack of guidance and counselling in schools (Withaka 2017, Mwanza 2018).

These findings are supported by a survey carried out among public secondary school in Kenya. 86.2% of the respondents confirmed that strikes and other forms of indiscipline among students contribute greatly to poor performance (Karanja & Bowen 2012). Cooperation between all participants in the education sector, teachers, parents, government and peers contribute greatly in fostering discipline among young people. Thus, social support helps students feel they can make it and are not alone, hence they are able to find meaning in their studies. They develop a positive attitude and commitment which contribute to good performance and completion of studies since indiscipline contribute to school dropout.

According to Alger and Fair (2019) behaviors that contribute to onset of drug and substance use and abuse begin at adolescence and the outcome has negative impact on both social and mental health. Adolescents undergo different challenges due to physical, Emotional and psychological changes that occur in their bodies, these changes have effect on their self –esteem and identity that they are neither children nor adults. However, this is a crucial stage which determines the rest of young people's lives. Helping these young people need precaution since there is conflict of interest where by that which the teenagers' value is less accepted by those that are adults (Moloney 2015; Worthman, Dockray & Morceau 2019). This makes the teenagers confine and trust in their fellow young people which becomes source of peer pressure which includes deviant behaviors such as substance use and abuse.

This is supported by a survey carried out among 24 public schools in Mbeere South Sub-County which is the population for the current study. The study shows that some parents are very strict to their adolescents and they give strict rules which must be followed (Njagi, Manyasi & Mwanja 2018). This strains relationship contribute to young people falling victim of peer pressure which result in deviant behavior and drug abuse.

Poor social support has negative impact on the young people, hence there is a need for establishment of stable social support for the young people as a way of promoting their mental health and curbing negative social behaviors such as irresponsible sexual and deviant behaviors, which affect student participation and success in their studies.

The above studies have shown that support from parents (family), peers and significant others such as teachers contributes to mental health. Some of students of public secondary schools in Mbeere South Sub-County are involved in deviant behavior such as substance use (khat) and omitting school to go and work in the farms (Ndegwa, 2019). However, little is reported on how social support contributes to meaning in life among

secondary school students yet, according to (Kagwe, 2019) family, peers/ friends and significant others contribute to meaning in life. Hence the current study will help to establish how social support from parents, peer and significant others influences meaning in life among secondary school students in Mbeere South Sub-County.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted quantitative paradigm of data collection and analysis. It assumed causal-comparative survey. The data was collected at a single point of time to examine effect of support from family, friends and significant others on meaning in life among public sub-county secondary school students in Mbeere South Sub- County. The study used standardized multidimensional perceived social support and meaning in life questionnaires to collect data and analyzed using SPSS statistics version 22. The Cronbach's alpha analysis was used to find out the degree of instrumental reliability. The test was used to assert the reliability on a Linkert scale with 12 items which revealed an alpha of $\alpha = 0.81$, which is considered good implying that the scale for multidimensional perceived social support (MSPSS) by Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet and Farley (1988) applied well to the respondents in the current study. Likewise, Cronbach's test was applied to the scale for meaning in life by Steger, Frazier, Oishi and Kaler (2006). The internal consistency of reliability of meaning in life questionnaire on the Linkert scale that had 10 items was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.78$).

III. RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics of the Study

The demographics of the participants are presented descriptively using the scheme of age, gender, class, the people that one lives with, those that influence their decision to study, and if one is happy or not to be in school. The results in Table 1 show that the responses were from participants with varied demographics.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

		Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Female	95	37.3
	Male	160	62.7
Age Range	12-13	5	2.0
	14-15	39	15.3
	16-17	127	49.8
	18-19	84	39.2
Class/ Form	One	91	35.7
	Two	82	32.2
	Three	82	32.2
Stay with	Family	238	93.3
	Friends	2	.8
	Relatives	14	5.5
	Sig. Others	1	0.4
Decision Influencer	Family	87	34.1
	Friends	4	1.6
	Relatives	13	5.1
	Self-Motivation	151	59.2

From Table 1 it is indicated that majority of respondents were males ($n = 160, 62.7\%$) while females constituted 37.3% . The description of classes showed more respondents were in form one ($n = 91, 35.7\%$) compared to other classes, form two ($n = 82, 32.2\%$) and form three ($n = 82, 32.2\%$).

Most of the participants were aged between 16-17 years making up 49.8% ($n = 127$), followed by those aged 14-15 years at 15% ($n = 39$) and lastly those between 12-13 years at 2.0% ($n = 5$) being the least. The table also

indicates that majority (n = 238, 93.3%) of participants stayed with family members while a few stayed with relatives (n = 14, 5.5%). Only two respondents stayed with friends and only one stayed with significant others.

Influence of Social Support on Meaning in Life among Students

After investigating the prevalence of both social support and meaning in life variables among the secondary school students of Mbeere South Sub-County, the study sought to establish the influence of social support on meaning in life among the respondents. Regression analysis was used to establish the extent to which the three Social Support (IV) variables of Family, Friends and Significant Others influence the different dimensions (Presence of and Search for) meaning in life (DV).

Table 2
Regression Analysis for Social Support and the Presence of Meaning in Life

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficient	Significance	
	β	SE		t	P
(Constant)	2.807	.460		6.10	0.00
Degree SS Family	0.112	0.08	0.093	1.39	0.165
Degree SS Friends	0.189	0.063	0.201	2.981	0.003
Degree SS Sig.Others	0.210	0.072	0.207	2.93	0.004

The linear regression standardized coefficients from table 2 above indicate that Significant Others SS ($\beta = 0.207$, $\rho = 0.004$) contributed most to the social support influence on presence of meaning in life, followed by Friends ($\beta = 0.201$, $\rho = 0.003$) and lastly Family SS ($\beta = 0.093$, $\rho = 0.165$). Since the ρ values for Significant Others SS and Friends SS are less than alpha (0.05), we reject the null hypothesis H_{03} and accept alternative H_{a3} that significant others SS and Friends SS have significant influence on Presence of Meaning in Life of Secondary School Students in Mbeere South Sub-County. However, since the ρ value for Family SS is greater than alpha, we fail to reject the hypothesis H_{03} and affirm that Family SS has no influence on the Presence of Meaning in Life of secondary school students of Mbeere South Sub-County.

Table 3
Regression Analysis for Social Support and the Search of Meaning in Life

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficient	Significance	
	β	SE		t	ρ
(Constant)	4.96	.469		10.57	0.00
Degree SS Family	0.051	0.082	0.045	0.623	0.534
Degree SS Friends	0.01	0.065	0.015	0.206	0.837
Degree SS Sig.Others	0.11	0.073	0.115	1.506	0.133

The linear regression standardized coefficients from table 3 above indicate that Significant Others SS ($\beta = 0.115$, $\rho = 0.133$) influenced most on search of meaning in life, followed by Family SS ($\beta = 0.045$, $\rho = 0.534$) and lastly Friends SS ($\beta = 0.015$, $\rho = 0.837$). Since all the ρ values for the three social support variables are greater than alpha (0.05), we fail to reject the hypothesis H_{03} and maintain that Other SS, Friends SS, and Family SS have no influence on Search for Meaning in Life of Secondary School Students in Mbeere South Sub-County.

Table 4
The Influence of Total Social Support (SS) on Total Meaning in Life

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficient	Significance	
	β	SE		t	P
(Constant)	3.837	.337		11.387	0.00
Total Social Support	0.351	0.060	0.344	5.823	0.00

The regression analysis in table 4 shows that Total Social Support has a positive beta standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.344$) implying a weak direct relationship and a ρ value ($\rho = 0.00$) less than alpha (0.05), hence we reject the hypothesis H_{03} , and adopt the alternative hypothesis H_{a1} stating that social support has a significant influence on meaning in life of secondary school students in Mbeere South Sub-County

IV. DISCUSSION

The study found that for three variables of social support (Family, Friends, and Significant Others) both male and female respondents reported moderate or higher degrees. However, the male respondents reported higher means than their female counterparts (Female $M = 5.39$, $SD = 1.07$; Male $M = 5.56$, $SD = 0.98$).

The chi-square results indicated that gender did not specifically have any influence for both presence of MIL ($X^2 = 5.72$, $\rho = 0.057$) and search for MIL ($X^2 = 5.55$, $\rho = 0.062$) but rather on Total MIL ($X^2 = 6.13$, $\rho = 0.047$) of the secondary school students in Mbeere South Sub-County. The findings can be related to the study among university students in Poland that highlights the correlation of motivation and meaning in life (Siwek, Oleszkowicz, & Słowińska, 2017). The study found for the descriptive means and variances “women and men did not differ in respect to both the general level of meaning in life.” Instead, the aspects of motivation created distinctive differences; women scored higher on the mean sum of intrinsic values” than men “(women: $M = 13.63$, men: $M = 12.44$, $t = 3.62$, $p < 0.001$)” (p. 558). In women both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation promote meaning in life whereas for men intrinsic motivation promote meaning in life. Accordingly, Deci & Ryan (2005) argue for the self-determination theory that intrinsic motivation contributes most to growth and wellbeing. This implies male participants in this study should have reported higher values on meaning in life than female which is not the case. The findings indicate the need for further study focused on the two categories of meaning in life, Presence and Search, since most of studies have not separated the two.

For the demographic features: form, live-with, decision-influencer, and age, the researcher was led to maintain that these features had no influence on meaning in life of secondary school students of Mbeere South Sub-county. The researcher accorded precedence to other studies that present other features that affect the meaning in life such as spirituality and psychological wellbeing (Abeyta & Routledge, 2018). This could explain the influence on presence of meaning in life reported in the perception of being happy to be at school ($X^2 = 6.78$, $\rho = 0.034$). This means if all the factors that promote meaning in life among the adolescents are fostered there will be reduced deviant behaviors thus promote happiness and psychological wellbeing. The findings correspond with the logotherapy theory, in which, if one does not possess meaning in life they tend to fill the void/ vacuum with negative tendencies and behaviors Frankl (1992).

The findings also show that social support from friends and significant others significantly influence of presence of meaning in life among the secondary school students in the current study (Significant Others $SS (\chi^2 = 0.207, \rho = 0.004)$; Friends ($\chi^2 = 0.201, \rho = 0.003$). It is argued in a study among African American adolescents that those who had high friendship quality do not fall in to deviant behavior but instead enjoy studying (Linnabery, Stuhlmacher & Tower, 2014). This implies friends and significant others are important aid to MIL among secondary school students in Mbeere South Sub-County. It is notable that frequencies ranged high for live with family (93.3%) while decision influencer was mostly self-motivation (59.2%). This also strongly suggests that the common tendency to negate peer support and adolescent relationship in school settings must be given a better understanding. It could greatly contribute to the level of social support and thereby improve the measure of meaning in life.

Interestingly, the current study findings show that the three categories of social support: Family SS , Friends SS and Significant Others SS have no significance influence on search for meaning in life. According to Martela, Ryan, & Steger, (2018), social support can promote or hinder motivation which promotes meaning in Life, where by poor SS can hinder growth whereas strong SS can promote growth. Nevertheless, those studies take the totality of meaning in life without consideration of the two components of Presence and Search for meaning. This study consistently suggests the need to identify the factors that contribute to the distinctive components, more especially the Search for Meaning in Life.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The investigation on the level of social support (IV) and meaning in life (DV), showed that the students have high level of social support and meaning in life. Nevertheless, concerning the third objective, there was no influence of social support on search for meaning in life but on the presence of meaning in life and total meaning in life. Hence, the conclusion that there are other factors that influence search for meaning among the secondary school students in Mbeere South Sub- County.

Similarly, the level of social support through all demographic characteristics of gender, age group, form, live with, decision influencer and perception of happiness as student, revealed that two variables of Family SS and Significant Others SS recorded high mean values, while Friends SS recorded moderate values. Therefore, the conclusion that a qualitative study could have helped explore more on the perception of friendship among boarding secondary school students in Mbeere South Sub-County.

Lastly, the vagueness of to whom participants referred to as their friends, family, or significant others was noted. This could have been explored and explained by a qualitative study. Hence the conclusion that the method used was limited for it did not explore on the three categories of independent variable.

VI. RECOMMENDATION

The findings of the study shows that social support (Family, Friends and Significant others) has influence on total meaning in life but no influence on search for meaning. Therefore, the study recommends that the Ministry of education policy makers to address the need of guidance and counselling department in all secondary school with the seriousness it requires, to help address issues arising from lack of social support and meaninglessness among secondary school students, which results in suicides (at extreme), and different forms of deviant behaviors. The school counselors to use logotherapy, self-determination theory together with other theories to address the issues of meaninglessness and promote mental health and wellness among secondary school students. They will intervene on collective role of teachers, friends and parents in promoting meaning in life among the students.

Family SS and Significant Others SS recorded high mean values while Friends SS recorded moderate values. Yet from finding of other studies show that, friends plays a key role in promoting meaning in life across all age groups. Therefore, there is a need to develop programs in the school setting that will help students develop desire for search for meaning in life among the students, such as promotion of peer mediation and mentorship for healthy friendship, these programs, should include teachers and parents who should also be enlightened on importance of friendship among young people and their role in promoting health friendship. Such programs includes peer mediation programs and peer counsellors training, use of motivation speakers in challenging students be self-motivated.

The students in boarding secondary school in Mbeere South Sub- County should be encouraged to come up with initiatives that will create awareness on importance of meaning in life among themselves and induce aim to search for MIL and achievement of the meaning in life. Such programs can include "student helping students" kitty where students contribute whatever they have to sustain their fellow students who lack some basic things in school. Additionally, doing things for others evoke intrinsic motivation to work hard in their studies and promote healthy friendship as a result avoid deviant behaviors.

The future researchers in the field of psychology to involve qualitative approach to explore and understand categories of social support and how they influence both presence and search for meaning in life. Also, across section and longitudinal studies are recommended in order to understand changing patterns in social support and meaning in life.

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