

Coping With Administrative Working Conditions by Kenyan Principals and Head Teachers

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Abstract:- The tasks of public-school leaders are diverse, evolving and challenging. It is important to understand how the principals and head teachers cope with stressors in their day-to-day business of running schools. Since the phenomenon of coping strategies among school principals and head teachers has received little attention in Kenya, this study sought to qualitatively explore the coping strategies used by principals of secondary schools and head teachers of primary schools when facing administrative stressors in their working conditions. Eleven principals and head teachers were purposively sampled through maximal variation sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Each interview was audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and coded according to the constant comparative method of data analysis. Results showed that principals and head teachers used four problem-focused strategies and two emotion-focused strategies as the primary coping approaches to various problems they encountered in the course of duty. This study presents practical information as well as expands the theoretical understanding of administrative coping strategies among principals and head teachers. The study also implies that the administrative problems for which principals and head teachers sought coping strategies are amenable to policy changes that will support the school leaders to cope with stressors beyond their personal and institutional coping resources.

Keywords:- Coping Strategies, Working Conditions, Stress, Principals, Head Teachers.

I. INTRODUCTION

The tasks of public-school leaders are diverse, evolving and challenging. In Kenya, school leaders are responsible for school administration, financial management, supervision of instruction, curriculum implementation, evaluation of teachers, dealing with parents and working with external partners. School principals and head teachers across the world are reporting increasing pressure and raising concerns regarding their work due to the evolving nature of school leadership (Boylund, 2011). This is also the case in Kenya where the accelerating pace of ongoing changes in teacher management, accountability, introduction of a new curriculum, and new basic education legislations and policies are significantly affecting the working conditions of secondary school principals and primary school head teachers (Poirel, Lapointe, & Yvon, 2012).

One of the antecedents of stress affecting principals and head teachers is the working conditions which encompasses administrative tasks, workload, lack of resources, time constraints, professional development, relationship with colleagues, school community and parent support, and student discipline. It is important to understand how the principals cope with stress in their day-to-day business of running schools. Although the phenomenon of coping strategies among school principals and head teachers has been widely studied throughout the world, it has received little attention in Kenya. Though attempts have been made to quantitatively study the relationship between coping strategies and levels of stress among female principals (Juma & Simatwa, 2016), more studies are necessary to provide deeper understanding of the coping strategies of secondary school principals and primary school head teachers. The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore the coping strategies used by principals and head teachers when facing stressors in their working conditions.

➤ Coping Strategies

Folkman & Lazarus, (1980) conceived coping as the “cognitive and behavioural efforts made to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts among them” (p.223). They considered coping as a dynamic process which changes as the individual appraises the situation and responds appropriately. Conceptualizations of coping highlight the role stress plays in the coping process as individuals or organizations enact strategies to mitigate or completely alleviate a stressful event. Coping resources such as psychological, social and organizational means available to a person influence whether a particular coping strategy can or will be implemented. This study defines coping as the process in which school leaders engage to manage the stressors in their working conditions that they identify as exceeding their personal or organizational resources.

A closer look at the findings of different studies on the coping strategies used by principals reveals the multitude of ways principals handle stress. However, despite the diversity of strategies applied, two main categories emerge: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). *Problem-focused coping*, is aimed at problem solving or doing something to alter the source of the problem. *Emotion-focused coping*, is aimed at reducing or managing the emotional distress that is associated with a problem.

The coping strategies adopted for interpretation of the interview data in this study are based on the theoretical categorization of Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub (1989) which identifies the particular coping responses under *problem-focused coping* and *emotion-focused coping*. Typical responses in problem-focused coping are active coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, restraint coping and seeking of instrumental social support. Coping responses of *emotion-focused coping* are seeking of emotional social support, positive reinterpretation, acceptance, denial, turning to religion, focus on and venting of emotions, behavioural disengagement, mental disengagement.

II. METHOD

A. Research Design

A qualitative research methodology was employed to gain insight into the nature of coping strategies principals and head teachers employed to respond to the stressful events in their working conditions. The study was designed to focus on the general question, What strategies are used by principals and head teachers to cope with stressors in their working conditions? Collective case study method was used to provide vivid descriptions and explanations of coping strategies (Stake, 2005).

B. Participants

Data for this study were gathered from a population of 79 principals and head teachers in two sub-counties of Garissa county in North Eastern Kenya. Eleven (11) principals and head teachers were purposively sampled through maximal variation sampling based on the characteristics of school level, gender and school locale (Creswell, 2015). In addition, sample size was determined by Data Saturation Point.

C. Interviews

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews of 30 to 90 minutes length. The 11 single-participant interviews consisted of broad, open-ended questions designed to describe the day-to-day coping strategies of principals and head teachers. Prompts were used to elicit more detailed information. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim and coded according to the constant comparative method of data analysis.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The general research question addressed by this study was: What strategies are used by principals and head teachers to cope with stressors in their working conditions?

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that principals and head teachers used four problem-focused coping strategies and two emotion-focused strategies as the primary coping approaches to various problems they encountered in the course of duty. The problem-focused coping strategies were: *active coping*, *planning*, *suppression of competing activities* and *seeking*

professional support while the emotion-focused strategies were: *acceptance* and *behavioural disengagement*. Active coping was, however, the most commonly cited coping strategy as principals and head teachers sought to overcome the prevailing problems. The strategies employed by principals and head teachers to cope with administrative stressors are presented below under four themes that include time constraints, shortage of administrative and instructional resources, student discipline issues and lack of professional development.

A. Time constraints

Data show that principals and head teachers used problem-focused strategies in order to deal with problems of inadequate time they experienced from time to time. In particular, they used two strategies in succession – *suppression of competing activities* and *active coping* – to manage time constraints and competing work demands. On the one hand, the head teachers would put-off some activities so as to attend to more urgent ones (*suppression of competing activities*) and later create make-up time for the pending tasks (*active coping*). The interview excerpt below describes how a primary school head teacher used the two coping strategies successively.

Due to the problem of time you find that in everything we do there are inadequacies such as unbalanced books of accounts, untimely TPAD submission and other data compilation. So, we cope by attending to urgent matters at the time and postpone others to other times.

Principals and head teachers revealed that they try to find time for deferred activities both within school hours and outside working hours as explained by one secondary school principal in the following excerpt.

If an office matter, for example, meeting with ministry officials or BOM holds me from attending to a lesson, I organize for a makeup lesson. Non-teaching tasks like management of financial records and doing other record writing and data preparation are done outside our school time. So, school work is spilling over to our free time.

The principals and head teachers used personal time (after work) to compensate for the insufficient time to accomplish pending work. This finding points to a cycle of time constraint and coping mechanisms in which the principals and head teachers are trapped. Other research findings (Blasé, 1986) are consistent with this finding in revealing that head teachers use *suppression of competing activities* and *active coping* in order to manage time limitations and the competing work demands.

B. Shortage of Administrative and Instructional Resources

Interview data show that principals and head teachers used *active coping*, *acceptance* and *seeking instrumental social support* strategies to deal with resource shortages in the schools. In particular, the principals and head teachers reported that they engaged BOM teachers to palliate teacher shortage which was a major problem affecting most

schools. 'BOM teachers' was a term used to refer to temporary teachers who were enlisted by Boards of Management of schools in order to cope with staffing difficulties. The temporary teachers were of different categories that include unemployed qualified teachers, part-time teachers from neighbouring schools, university students and secondary school leavers. The interview extracts below shade light on school efforts of engaging temporary teachers.

The BOM has employed four teachers and we are charging children Ksh 100/- per child per term. We pay each teacher Ksh 10,000/- monthly. We don't pay them during holidays.

In rural schools we don't employ trained [qualified] teachers because we cannot afford to pay them and trained teachers usually don't go to rural schools for BOM employment when they see opportunities in town schools. Therefore, we look for form four leavers who may also be difficult to find in some areas.

As seen from the above extracts, shortage of teachers in schools was a critical problem that compelled principals and head teachers to adopt extraordinary measures that were sometimes inconsistent with existing regulations on teaching standards and policy stipulations. Since basic education is free in Kenya, schools, particularly primary and day secondary schools, are not allowed to charge students fees. However, according to the primary head teachers who took part in this study, the acute shortage of teachers in their schools necessitated the parents to agree to pay some fee in order to recruit and pay temporary teachers. This reflects an institutional coping strategy involving those with an immediate stake in the education of children at the lowest level in the educational bureaucracy. In addition, teacher engagement regulation requires only qualified teachers to teach in schools. Therefore, schools affected by teacher scarcity are allowed to engage only individuals who possess requisite training and teaching licence to serve as temporary teachers. However, hard-to-staff schools such as those in rural areas have had to engage untrained individuals such as form four leavers and university students to instruct their learners.

Engagement of temporary teachers was not the only strategy used to cope with teacher shortage. The principals and head teachers also used other active coping strategies that involved reorganization of teacher schedules and classrooms in order to efficiently utilize the available teaching staff. Principals and head teachers reported adopting teacher overloads and classroom reorganization strategies such as increasing class sizes, combining classes and adopting multi-grade strategy. On the one hand, combining classes and increasing class sizes which constitute horizontal reorganization of classrooms were coping measures for both primary and secondary schools. A secondary school principal who merged classes explained his coping strategy below.

We have also collapsed two classes into one e.g. in one class of form one we have 105 students against the recommended class size of 45. We do this to reduce the workload on teachers in terms of the number of lessons.

On the other hand, multi-grade teaching, a vertical reorganization of classrooms, which occurs when a teacher has to teach in the same class students from two or more grade levels, was reported to be practiced by primary schools that lacked adequate teachers.

We use multi-grade approach where we have children of grade 1 to 3 in one classroom. We also cope by accepting to be overloaded. I am the head of a rural school and I teach more than 40 lessons a week. I teach all the 8 lessons of the day. Sometimes you leave some classes unattended as you have no teachers.

The primary school head teachers also reported taking initiatives to actively cope with the shortage or total lack of teaching, learning and administrative resources. They sought printing and internet services, which were not available in their schools, from commercial printing shops. One head teacher stated that: "The head teachers have left the classrooms and are always in the cyber cafes filling forms and updating TPAD and NEMIS online".

In addition, primary school head teachers who did not have financial accountants in their schools and lacked accounting knowledge reported outsourcing accounting services. Seeking accounting services from external experts is a form of problem-based coping categorised as seeking social support for instrumental reasons. One head teacher remarked that: "On financial accounting, we look for experts to balance the accounts books for us. I was appointed head teacher and was never trained on accounting and financial management".

Primary school head teacher interviews also revealed that they coped with inadequate capitation, which was reported as a major problem, by active coping (problem-focused coping) and acceptance (emotion-focused coping). In the interviews the head teachers voiced their coping measures when funds in a given vote head were exhausted. The head teachers reported using personal finances (active coping strategy) when they could afford while in instances they could not afford they coped by accepting the situation as one beyond their means. One head teacher remarked that: "In order to make calls, and run school errands we sacrifice and dig into our pockets". Another head teacher, while alluding to acceptance of the situation, said: "We have just to use and operate with what we get. There is nothing else we can do about it".

C. Student Discipline Issues

In coping with student discipline issues, principals and head teachers depended primarily on active coping and acceptance strategies to reduce or eliminate the problems. Interview data showed that ministry of education policies on student discipline were not effective. Interviews also revealed lack of a single policy document accessible to

schools for managing student behaviour. The lack of sound discipline policy prompted individual schools to formulate their own internal mechanisms of dealing with student misbehaviour. For instance, to actively cope with indiscipline cases, schools established procedures to be followed from the perpetration of an offence to the expulsion of the offender from the school. One secondary principal elaborated the process as follows.

We ask the student to sign a commitment that he will not be involved in the indiscipline issue again. The student commits himself up to a maximum of three times. If the student persists despite the commitments we suspend him for two weeks after which we call the parent and warn the student before the parent. If that does not work and the student continues with truancy and absconds school we ask the parent to take him to another school where he can find chance because his child cannot cope here. Though this is not allowed by the policy we are forced to do it in order to maintain order in the school. If we don't do these things will go out of hand and it will be difficult to handle other students.

While schools largely took active disciplinary measures to maintain order in the school, a stern action such as expulsion from the school was considered in the event that students threatened or physically abused a teacher. This was done to particularly protect the teachers as expounded by a primary head teacher in the following excerpt.

The policy in this school is such that when a student threatens or physically abuses a teacher inside or outside the school he is sent away for good and we do this to protect the teachers who don't come from this region. This is not allowed by the government policy but we have to do it to maintain order and protect our teachers.

D. Lack of Professional Development

Coping responses with regard to lack of professional development involved *acceptance coping* as principals and head teachers accommodated to the lack of in-service training by accepting the situation. *Active coping* was also used to circumvent problems when principals and head teachers lacked the knowledge and skills of developing important professional documents. For instance, a primary school head teacher who lacked the knowledge of preparing a school strategic plan said: "Even though I am not trained in strategic planning, I continue planning for the school. We developed the vision and mission for the school without know-how".

A problem that was particularly unique to primary school head teachers was the lack of financial accounting knowledge. Unlike their secondary school counterparts who had bursars to manage school finances, the primary heads were the ones expected to manage the financial records of their schools. All the primary head teachers interviewed reported hiring external accountants to balance the books of accounts in addition to being taught basic accounting. This type of problem-focused coping called

seeking support for instrumental reasons is an important coping response to a professional challenge involving lack of expertise in an area of need. Below is a snippet from a primary school head explaining how she got assisted with recording financial transactions and learning accounting.

On financial accounting we seek the help of accountants. Some head teachers also learn accounting the hard way on their own by getting the help of accountants to train them one on one. I became a head teacher in 2009 and had to be assisted by a hired accountant before I learnt from him how to do it. We usually accumulate receipts of payment for a whole term and then hire an accountant to enter them in the cash book.

The results of this study reveal that principals and head teachers utilized both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies simultaneously as dictated by situations in their working conditions. For instance, principals and head teachers reported increasing class sizes, combining classes and adopting multi-grade strategy to address the problem of teacher shortage. The principals and head teachers also reported using active coping and acceptance coping alternately to address the same stressor. For example, they used personal finances (active coping strategy) to procure goods and services for the school when capitation funds were exhausted while in instances they could not afford to use personal funds they coped by accepting the situation as one beyond their means. This mixed approach towards coping strategies demonstrates that situational factors influence which coping strategies would be preferred by principals and head teachers (Vorell, 2012).

The findings of this study imply that, as the principals and head teachers accomplish their administrative responsibilities, they must balance between the constant competing tasks and choose the appropriate coping strategies. They also must consider the use of problem-focused strategies to practically create school norms although some norms may be at odds with national policies.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study examined coping strategies of secondary school principals and primary school head teachers in the school environment to gain a sense of their utilization in organizational settings. The findings indicate how principals and head teachers reacted to stressful working conditions such as time constraints, resource and teacher shortage, student discipline problems and lack of professional development. Whenever head teachers encountered stressors in their day-to-day activities they engaged in strategies that re-established a sense of normality despite the larger work environment. This study presents practical information as well as expands the theoretical understanding of administrative coping strategies among principals and head teachers.

The study findings imply that the administrative problems for which principals and head teachers sought coping strategies are amenable to policy changes that will support the school leaders to cope with stressors beyond their personal and institutional coping resources. For example, schools should be provided with adequate human resources such as teachers and accountants to reduce the workload on the institutional leaders. Providing professional development opportunities for principals and head teachers will help improve their skills and competencies for growth and school improvement. It is also necessary that the government provides clearly documented student discipline policies to schools for proper management of behaviour problems.

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