

The buffering effect of emotional
intelligence on the adjustment of secondary
school students in transition

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Abstract

Introduction: The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence and adjustment of students transitioning from primary school to secondary school.

Method: The study is a descriptive survey research in which emotional intelligence stands as the independent variable and adjustment as the dependent variable. Two validated instrument measuring emotional intelligence and adjustment respectively were used to collect data from the participants.

Results: Results show that there was a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and adjustment. It was also found that the strengths of emotional intelligence, defined in terms of high, moderate and low, significantly impacted the adjustment of students in transition.

Discussion: The outcome of this study has strengthened the need to mount an emotional-intelligence based counselling intervention programme to mitigate the transition trauma of pupils moving from primary to secondary school. Such intervention should be targeted at problematic areas of transition such as academic and social adjustment, organisational issues, pupil perception, school phobia and other transition traumas.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Adjustment, Secondary School Students, Transition

Introduction

Students transiting from primary school to secondary school are faced with a lot of challenges as entering secondary school is an adjustment and growth process that takes a lot of efforts and above all requires hard work. These challenges are academic as well as interpersonal. Academically, as young adolescents make the transition into high school many experience a decline in grades and attendance (Carvel, 2000; Collins and Harison, 1998, Galton, Gray and Ruddrick, 1999, Mizielle, 1995). It has been established in research literature that no matter at what age transition is made into secondary school, drop in academic achievement still results (Suffolk Education Department, 1997).

The work of Mcgee, Ward, Gibbons and Harlow (2003) on school transition vis-à-vis academic attainment indicate that: following transition to secondary school students tend to suffer decreases in academic achievement, regardless of the age at which transition is made, it will still lead to a fall in achievements; academic achievement in the first year at secondary school seems to be related to students decreased interest in academic activities and an increase in non-academic activities, and disillusionment at the lack of academic challenge.

Buttressing this opinion, Richardson (2002) pointed out that transition trauma which manifest itself in form of undiminished concerns during the year, role strains, lower than their normally expected grade point average, and negative social behaviour ratings by their teachers are negative outcomes experienced by middle school students (junior secondary school students). On the basis of the overwhelming evidence gathered from the literature, it is unassailable fact that academic frustration characterized transition into high school.

Transition to a new school apart from including academic adjustment also embraces social adjustment as well. The features of transition from primary to secondary school including moving from the known to the unknown; a smaller primary school to a larger secondary school and having one teacher for several subjects with some room

changes to other subjects, to a different teacher for each subject, usually in a different room (Bates, 1998; Measor and Woods, 1984). The adjustment period may last until pupils are able to show they can cope by making appropriate responses to the demand of a new environment. The period of transition to high school also coincides with the onset of puberty which in itself is stressful. This invariably implies that two transitional events would have to be navigated simultaneously. Thus the transition into high school is compounded by the onset of puberty and the problem associated with it. The stress associated with transition has been a subject of investigation by the researchers, although there are discrepancies as to how long and severe is that stress (Ward, 2001). As Richardson (2002) opined, the ability of adolescents to cope, to develop their emotional autonomy and to behave in social appropriate and responsible way enables them to more easily accept the socially challenges of transition. He therefore suggested the application of emotional intelligence to address the problems associated with transition.

The transition into secondary school marks the end of childhood and the beginning of adolescence. This transition as Goleman (1995) indicated is a difficult challenge in the realm of emotion. The adolescent entering junior secondary school is faced with an atmosphere where proper social interaction is a sine qua non for success. As the young adolescent proceeds and progresses on this journey, being emotionally intelligent is not only crucial, but a necessary condition for a successful studentship. Having emotional competencies will enable students to deal better with pressure of peer politics, academic challenges and the temptation of alcohol, drugs and sex.

It should be realized that one aspect of adolescents is their emotion, and within schools and the society as a whole, this aspect has more often than not been overlooked. Students are assessed in terms of performance and grade. They are assessed on how well they can play, act and so forth. However, the more intrinsic aspect of adolescents as well as all of us is usually ignored. It is this aspect that is described as emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence has of recent been suggested as a critical factor in adjustment to life in general and to work and work performance in particular (Goleman,

1995, 1998). Emotional intelligence refers to the emotional information as it relates to the perception, assimilation, expression, regulation and management (Mayer and Cobb, 2000; Mayer, Salovey and Caruso, 2000). It is believed to encompass social and cognitive functions related to the expression of emotion (Schutte, Marlowe, Hall, Cooper, Golden, Dorheim, 1998). Emotionally intelligent person have been described as well adjusted, warm, genuine, persistent and optimistic (Mayer, Dipaolo & Salovey, 1990; Salovey and Mayer, 1990). Salovey and Mayer (1990) in their attempt to clarify and define emotional intelligence, categorized emotional intelligence into five domains.

1. Self-awareness – observing oneself and recognizing a feeling as it happens.
2. Managing emotions – handling feelings so that they are appropriate; realizing what is behind a feeling; finding ways to handle fears and anxieties, anger and sadness.
3. Motivating oneself – channeling emotion in the service of a goal, emotional self-control, delaying gratification and stifling impulses.
4. Empathy: sensitivity to other's feeling and concerns and taking their perspectives, appreciating the differences in how people feel about things.
5. Handling relationship – managing emotion in others, social competence and social skills.

Looking at the five domains mentioned above, it would be seen that they have a wide range of useful implications for secondary school students. When faced with transition traumas, all the five aspects of emotional intelligence can make useful contributions towards working out the problems.

While it might be correct that there have been a lot of theorizing in the usefulness of emotional intelligence in ameliorating transition trauma (Richardson, 2002, Goleman, 1995), there is paucity of empirical data in this regard. The purpose of the present study essentially therefore was to determine the extent of relationship between emotional intelligence and adjustment of secondary school students in transition.

Based on the objective of this study, the following hypotheses were tested:

1. There will be no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and school adjustment of students in transition.
2. There will be no significant relationships between the strengths of emotional intelligence (high, moderate and low) and school adjustment of students in transition.

Method

The study is a descriptive survey research in which emotional intelligence stands as the independent variable and adjustment as the dependent variable.

Subjects

Participants in this study were two hundred fresh secondary school students randomly selected from five secondary schools in Ibadan city, Nigeria. Their age ranged from nine to fourteen years. Their mean age was 11.4 years. The participants were grouped into high, moderate and low emotional intelligence categories based on their scores in the emotional intelligence questionnaire. Their scores were arranged in order of magnitude and subsequently divided into three groups with the first one-third classified as high, the next one-third as moderate and the last one-third as low.

The Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire designed by Schutte et al (1998) was used to assess the emotional intelligence of the subjects. It is a thirty-three items instrument with response format ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Examples of items of the scale are (1) I have control over my emotion (2) I easily recognize my emotion as I experience them. High score on the scale indicate a higher emotional intelligence. A Cronbach's Alpha of .87 was found for internal consistency of the scale. It also has a test-retest reliability of .78. The scale also shows evidence of validity as scores on the scales were shown to be related to eight of the nine measures predicted to be related to emotional intelligence. As indicated in Lazzari's study, (Lazzari, 2000), the scale has a Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = .81$.

To assess the adjustment of the participants, section J of Adolescent Personal Data Inventory (APDI) by Akinboye (1977) was used. It is a twenty items scale with a response format ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Typical items on the scale include (1) I often experience a feeling of personal satisfaction (2) Life is generally beautiful (3) There is sufficient reasons for me to be happy in school. The instrument has a theoretical value ranging between 20 and 100. The subscale has an internal consistency reliability indicated by a coefficient Alpha of 0.805. It also has a test-retest reliability indicated by $r = 0.87$ after three weeks and $r = 0.80$ after two months.

The instruments were administered on the participants in their respective schools. The researcher was assisted by the school counsellors, and this facilitated easier administration of the instruments. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study. After the researcher had explained the instruction, participants completed the research instruments in their classes. The administration lasted for about fifty minutes. The researcher debriefed all the subjects at the end of the testing. Of the two hundred and ten questionnaire distributed only two hundred were found useful for the study.

Statistical analysis

The Pearson Product Moment Correlation and analysis of variance (anova) were employed to analyze the data.

Results

Table 1. Relationship between emotional intelligence and adjustment of secondary school students in transition

	N	X	SD	df	r	P
Emotional Intelligence	200	100.97	34.6	198	.177	<0.05
Adjustment	200	72.28	16.3			

Table 2. Analysis of Variance showing the effect of strengths of emotional intelligence (High, Moderate and Low) on the adjustment of the students.

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Between groups	4039.200	2	2019.600		
Within group	47499.599	197	241	8.38	<0.05
Total		199			

The result indicate that the levels of emotional intelligence is significantly related to adjustment of the participants $F_{(2,197)} = 8.38, P < 0.05$.

The mean scores of the subjects on adjustment measure in order of merit are indicated as follows: High emotional intelligence = 77.83; Moderate emotional intelligence = 70.45; and Low emotional intelligence = 67.19. The results thus confirmed that the strengths of emotional intelligence have profound influence on the adjustment of the subjects.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the relationship between emotional intelligence and adjustment of student in transition. This was approached from two perspectives. The first perspective examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and adjustment. The second perspective was to see if the strengths of emotional intelligence (High, Moderate and Low) would influence the adjustment of the subjects.

The findings indicate that significant relationship exists between emotional intelligence and adjustment. This finding corroborates Sjoberg (2001) whose finding demonstrated significant relationship between emotional intelligence and life adjustment. The finding is also supported by the work of Greenberg, Kusche, Cook and Quamma (1995). It was established in this work that emotional intelligence contributes to social

and academic adjustment of school children. Further support for the current study could be found in the work of Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie and Reisser (2000). The explanation for this result is not far fetched. Emotional intelligence competencies are likely to contribute to warm, smooth and spontaneous social interaction, preempts conflict and tension and enhance effective functioning as well as flexible focus of attention . This line of thinking is in consonance with the research that has found relationship between sociability and positive emotionality (e.g. Argyle & Lu, 1990; Furr & Funder, 1998).

The second finding of this study shows that there is significant relationship between levels of emotional intelligence and adjustment. It is also noted that high emotional intelligence translates to high mean score in adjustment. The result is in consonance with that of Sjoberg (2001) who found that high emotional intelligence was associated with better handling of failure and frustration; more creativity, less psychophobia and higher self-esteem.

It is plausible, given the present finding that a student who possesses emotional intelligence may score high in adjustment as a result of their being emotionally intelligent. According to Mayer and Cobb (2000) the current definition of emotional intelligence as defined by Mayer and Salovey and Caruso (2000) is the capacity to process emotional information accurately and efficiently, including the capacity to perceive, assimilate understand, and manage emotion (P. 165). A student high in emotional intelligence based on the above definition should have some of the elements required for also being high in adjustment such as self-acceptance, positive relation with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth.

While various explanations may be given as to why students who scored high in emotional intelligence also scored high in adjustment, it is more probable that students who are high in emotional intelligence are very adept in understanding both their emotion and those of others. This therefore puts them in a position whereby they will attract many positive peer relationships, as people know this is a person they can talk to and trust. As a result of positive socialization, students feel good about themselves and are well adjusted.

Further explanation could be that students who are more tune with their views and emotion as well as others view and emotion will be more equipped in setting up boundaries in their lives. They will know when to say yes to things that they can handle and when to say no to things they recognize will overburden them. These factors may contribute to a lower level of stress which in turn would put them in a position where they are properly adjusted. It is important to note that student who score high in emotional intelligence has a variety of positive attributes and tools on hand for positive socialization and being adept in understanding both themselves and others. These are definitely valuable assets which can easily predispose students to positive ramifications with better adjustment as its outcome.

The current results have important implications for the development of emotional intelligence-based counselling intervention targeting students moving from elementary school to secondary school. This kind of intervention should be built into orientation programmes for fresh students. The focus of such intervention should be on problematic areas of transition such as academic and social adjustment, organizational issues, pupil perception, school phobia and other transition traumas.

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