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EDUCATION

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GRIEF AND CONDUCT DISORDER AMONG STUDENTS IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NJORO SUB-COUNTY, NAKURU COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of Study: To examine the relationship between grief and conduct disorder among students in public secondary schools in Njoro Sub-County, Nakuru County, Kenya.

Problem Statement: Grief following the loss of a parent, guardian, or sibling profoundly affects students' emotional well-being and behavior in public secondary schools. Conduct disorder among students in Kenya's public secondary schools has become a serious concern, manifesting in behaviors such as high absenteeism, defiance towards teachers, bullying, and drug abuse.

Methodology: The study employed correlational research design and targeted 24,858 comprising student population 24,515, class teachers 196, school principals 49, and 49 heads of counseling departments from 49 public secondary schools in Njoro Sub-County. The sample size comprised 467 respondents from 13 public secondary schools, 393 students, 35 class teachers, 13 Principals and 13 Heads of Counseling departments. The study employed standardized questionnaires to collect quantitative data from student population, while qualitative data was obtained through Key Informant interviews with school administrators, class teachers and teacher counselors. The collected data was analyzed with the aid of SPSS software version 29.0 using descriptive and inferential statistics.

Results: Simple linear regression analysis revealed a positive and statistically significant relationship between loss and grief and conduct disorder, with grief explaining 47.3% of the variation in conduct disorder among students, $R^2 = 0.473$, $F = 341.106$, $p = 0.000$. The fitted model was expressed as Conduct Disorder = 0.694 + 0.512(Loss and Grief), meaning that a one-unit increase in loss and grief was expected to cause a 0.512-unit increase in conduct disorder.

Recommendation: Public secondary schools should strengthen grief counseling, early identification of bereaved students, teacher sensitization, peer support systems, parental involvement, and referral mechanisms to reduce grief-related conduct difficulties among learners.

Keywords: *Grief, Bereavement, Conduct Disorder, Students, Public Secondary Schools, Kübler-Ross Grief Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, Njoro Sub-County*

INTRODUCTION

Conduct disorder is a serious concern in schools, as it affects students' ability to adhere to rules, respect authority, regulate their behavior, and make responsible decisions (Habibulloh, Ridho, & El-Yunusi, 2024). Welsh (2024) emphasizes that behavioral issues linked to conduct disorder pose challenges in maintaining good behaviors, which is essential for fostering values such as integrity, responsibility, and respect. Students with conduct disorder often struggle with aggression, defiance, and rule-breaking tendencies, which can disrupt their academic progress and social interactions (Kisisiwe, Bago, & Makundi, 2024). The presence of conduct disorder in schools contributes to increased classroom disruptions, making it difficult for teachers to manage learning environments effectively. Persistent behavioral issues may lead to conflicts with peers and educators, absenteeism, and, in severe cases, school dropouts (Sullen, 2024). Addressing conduct disorder through early intervention, behavioral support programs, and counseling services is crucial in promoting a positive learning atmosphere.

Research by Vis and Boynton (2024) and Surbakti and Harahap (2024) have shown that grief to a greater extent contributes to conduct disorder among students who experience the loss of loved ones and especially on their identity, self-acceptance and self-confidence. Study by Ahmad, Iqbal, Ali, Jabeen and Imran (2024) has linked emotional distress from loss and grief to increased behavioral challenges, academic struggles, and difficulties in adhering to school rules. When students experience grief, their ability to concentrate in class, follow school rules, and interact positively with peers and teachers is greatly disrupted (Üzmez & Kavakli Ulutaş, 2024). According to Isaac (2024), in some instances students tend to become withdrawn and disengaged, struggling to complete assignments or participate in classroom activities, while others may express their pain through aggression, defiance, or sudden mood swings, leading to disciplinary issues. The emotional turmoil of loss and grief also has the potential to erode a student's good behavior, making it harder for them to manage their time, control impulsive behavior, or adhere to school regulations (Shanshan & Loang, 2024).

In Kenya's public secondary schools, adolescents grapple with the loss of loved ones often exhibit withdrawal, diminished self-esteem, and strained peer relationships, leading to disciplinary challenges and declining academic performance (Mwangi, 2024). Grief is a profound emotional response to loss, and among students, has the potential to influence their general conduct, emotional well-being, and overall conduct in school (Muli, 2024). A study conducted by Nyaga (2020) in Langata Sub-County, Nairobi, revealed that bereaved students frequently experience social withdrawal and deteriorating academic results.

Many studies such as Uroko (2025) and Riera-Negre, Hidalgo-Andrade, Rosselló and Verger (2024) have focused on the effects of grief on academic performance of students who have been bereaved, other studies shows how students undergoing grief may be supported emotionally at school while yet other studies have indicated how grief can be linked to suicidal ideations in youths who are going through loss and grief. As viewed from the literature above, many recent studies concerning grief and its effects on students more so academically have been carried out abroad. Therefore, this study focused on the effects of grief as a result of the death of parents, guardians or siblings on student’s behavior which may in turn affect a student’s behavior negatively at school.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Grief following the loss of a parent, guardian, or sibling profoundly affects students' emotional well-being and behavior in public secondary schools (Campbell, 2024). Conduct disorder among students in Kenya's public secondary schools has become a serious concern, manifesting in behaviors such as high absenteeism, defiance towards teachers, bullying, and

drug abuse (Ministry of Education, 2020). A study by Okumu (2022) in Nairobi County identified absenteeism, defiance towards teachers, and bullying as prevalent behavioral issues associated with conduct disorder. The loss of a loved one can lead to intense pain, sadness, helplessness, and insecurity, particularly if the deceased was the sole provider, leaving students vulnerable to financial hardship and emotional distress.

Research indicates that grief can lead to behavioral issues commonly associated with conduct disorder, such as aggression, defiance, withdrawal, bullying, and increased irritability, which may result in disciplinary actions like suspensions and expulsions (Limo & Kibowen, 2017). If not addressed, unresolved grief can contribute to more severe emotional and behavioral disorders, including conduct disorder, which further exacerbates rule-breaking tendencies, classroom disruptions, and poor academic outcomes (Ngesa et al., 2020). Early intervention, counseling, and emotional support are essential in helping bereaved students manage their grief and reduce the likelihood of developing persistent behavioral challenges.

Thus, the problem is that unresolved grief among bereaved students leads to emotional distress and conduct-related behavioral issues that hinder academic performance. Grief among students has primarily been the focus of most studies mainly focusing on psychological well-being and academic performance rather than its impact on their behavior, creating a research gap that this study seeks to address. For instance, Limo and Kibowen (2017) assessed the psychological effects of grief on students in Kenyan secondary schools and found that bereaved students experienced emotional distress, social withdrawal, and reduced academic performance. This study sought to assess the relationship between grief due to bereavement and conduct disorder among students in public secondary schools in Njoro Sub-County, Nakuru County.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To examine the relationship between grief and conduct disorder among students in public secondary schools in Njoro Sub-County, Nakuru County, Kenya.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Kübler-Ross Grief Theory

The Kübler-Ross Grief Theory was developed by Kübler-Ross (1969). The theory states that individuals experiencing grief go through five distinct stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969). These stages are not necessarily linear, and individuals may move back and forth between them in their grief process (Corr et al., 2021). Kübler-Ross originally designed the model to describe the experiences of terminally ill patients, but it has since been applied to various forms of loss, including bereavement, job loss, and other significant life changes (Kastenbaum, 2020). The theory suggests that grief is a psychological journey where emotions evolve over time, ultimately leading to acceptance and adaptation (Worden, 2018).

Despite its wide application, the Kübler-Ross Grief Theory has been subject to criticism, particularly regarding its rigid stage-based approach to grieving. Critics argue that grief is highly individualized, and not all individuals experience all five stages in the prescribed order (Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001). In many African societies, grief is less about personal emotional progression and more about communal rituals, ancestral connections, and extended kinship involvement, where mourning practices are embedded in collective identity and spirituality (Mbiti, 1991; Nwoye, 2005). Nevertheless, despite these criticisms, the model remains influential in bereavement studies and provides a foundational understanding of how grief manifests in different contexts (Attig, 2011).

Kübler-Ross Grief Theory is relevant to this study in understanding how grief impacts Conduct Disorder. Adolescents experiencing grief due to the loss of a loved one, whether a parent, guardian, sibling, or close friend, may struggle with emotional regulation and behavioral control (Balk, 2011). The anger stage, for example, can manifest in disruptive behavior, aggression, or defiance towards teachers and peers, impacting classroom conduct (Silverman & Worden, 2013). Similarly, students in the depression stage may withdraw socially, disengage from school activities, or exhibit poor academic performance, leading to disciplinary concerns (Kaplow et al., 2014). Research indicates that unresolved grief in adolescents can lead to long-term behavioral problems, including truancy, substance abuse, and violence (Haine et al., 2008). Understanding that grief is a dynamic process rather than a fixed sequence of emotions allows school authorities to provide flexible, student-centered approaches to conduct that address the root causes of misconduct rather than merely imposing punitive measures (Stroebe et al., 2008).

Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was developed by Bronfenbrenner in 1979. The theory states that human development is influenced by multiple environmental systems that interact at different levels, namely the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem includes immediate relationships such as family, school, and peer interactions that directly affect a child's development (Tudge et al., 2009). The mesosystem involves the interactions between different microsystems, such as the relationship between a student's school and their home environment (Christensen, 2016). The exosystem consists of external settings that indirectly influence the child, such as parental workplaces or community institutions (Neal & Neal, 2013). The macrosystem encompasses broader societal influences, including cultural values, socioeconomic conditions, and educational policies (Guy-Evans, 2020). Lastly, the chronosystem captures changes over time, including life transitions such as the loss of a loved one (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

Bronfenbrenner's theory provides a framework for analyzing the effects of grief on students' behavior and conduct in public secondary schools. When students experience the death of a close relative, their microsystem is immediately affected, disrupting their interactions with parents, teachers, and peers (McLeroy et al., 1988). A grieving student may exhibit withdrawal, aggression, or defiance in school due to emotional distress (Ungar, 2011). The mesosystem can further compound these effects, as conflicts between home and school responses to grief may create inconsistencies in conduct enforcement (Christensen, 2016). Additionally, the exosystem plays a role, as factors such as financial strain caused by a parent's death can lead to stress at home, affecting a student's concentration and behavior in school (Kelly & Symonds, 2017). The macrosystem also influences grief responses, as cultural attitudes towards bereavement shape how students process and express their emotions (Betancourt & Khan, 2008). The chronosystem indicates how grief affects conduct over time, as unresolved grief can lead to long-term behavioral issues such as truancy and delinquency (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016).

Neal and Neal (2013) critique ecological systems theory for it is overly complex and difficult to apply in specific contexts. Critics also point out that the model does not account for internal psychological factors, such as resilience and coping mechanisms, which play a crucial role in how children handle grief (Ungar, 2011). Despite these criticisms, the theory remains an important tool for understanding the multi-layered influences on students' behavior and conduct in school settings (Guy-Evans, 2020). Used together with Kübler-Ross's Grief Theory, they show that grief does not occur in isolation but unfolds within systems that can either buffer or intensify behavioral problems. Kübler-Ross focuses on individual emotional stages but does

not explain why some students develop conduct disorder while others do not; Ecological Systems Theory fills this gap by showing how environmental risk factors (e.g., harsh discipline, peer pressure, family conflict) interact with grief to shape behavioral outcomes.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

While bereavement is associated with various mental and physical health problems, such as concentration difficulties, fatigue and an increased vulnerability to subsequent stressors, most children adapt to it over time (Kennedy et al., 2018; Lytje & Dyregrov, 2019). A minority, however, develops mental health problems (Kentor & Kaplow, 2020; Keyes et al., 2014), e.g., depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), conduct disorder, or prolonged grief disorder (PGD). Bereavement may trigger grief reactions resembling symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including panic attacks, inexplicable breathing difficulties or hyperventilation, particularly when exposed to reminders of the death. Sleep disturbances are also common.

Wango and Gwiyo (2023) examined how schools and counselors can support grieving pupils and students, emphasizing the inevitability and universality of death. The study indicated that bereavement, whether due to accidents, illnesses like HIV/AIDS and cancer, or natural disasters, significantly affects children's and adolescents' physical and mental health, relationships, and social functioning. The findings emphasized the role of schools in creating post-traumatic growth among bereaved students, advocating for structured support systems to help them cope with loss.

Omucheni, Mwenje and Kamunyu (2024) investigated antisocial behaviors prevalent among children experiencing complicated grief (CG) in selected public primary schools in Nairobi County, Kenya. The study acknowledged that children’s inability to fully comprehend and process death due to factors such as chronological age, attachment to the deceased, nature of death, and family support often leads to delayed or prolonged grief, manifesting in social and cognitive dysfunction, including antisocial behaviors. Guided by Attachment Theory, the study employed a convergent mixed-method design, utilizing multistage and purposive sampling to select 259 pupils aged 10–13 years who had lost a loved one within the last year, along with 22 class teachers of bereaved pupils. The findings revealed that social aggression, with an aggregated mean of 3.01, was the most prevalent antisocial behavior among children who had lost a loved one, though antisocial behaviors were also observed among those without CG. However, the study did not explore the long-term psychological effects of CG on children’s academic performance, presenting a gap in understanding the broader impact of grief on learning outcomes. While studies have explored grief and conduct disorder separately, few have examined the intersection of these factors within the adolescent student population, particularly in the Kenyan context.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between grief and conduct disorder among students in public secondary schools. Grief, arising from the loss of a parent, guardian, or sibling, may manifest in emotional turmoil, withdrawal, anger, or defiance, which in turn can influence behavioral outcomes. The framework suggests that unresolved grief is likely to contribute to maladaptive behaviors commonly associated with conduct disorder, including aggression, rule-breaking, and oppositional tendencies. Grief was considered the independent variable, while conduct disorder was the dependent variable. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework.

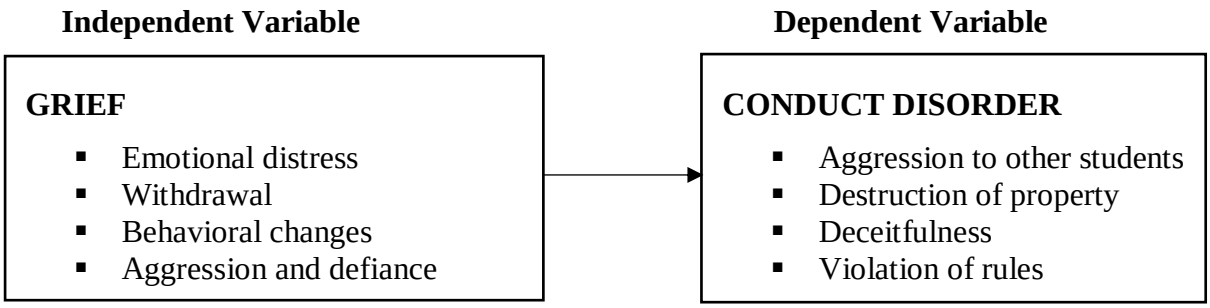


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

The study employed correlational research design. A correlational research design is used when the objective is to examine the strength and direction of relationships between variables (Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2014; Priya, 2021). This design was appropriate for the study as it facilitated the measurement of the correlation between grief and conduct disorder, providing empirical analysis on the extent and nature of their association within the real-life context of public secondary schools in the region. The study was conducted in Njoro Sub-County, which is one of the eleven sub-counties in Nakuru County, Kenya. Njoro is predominantly an agricultural region with both rural and peri-urban settlements, and it hosts a significant number of public secondary schools. It lies within the central part of the Rift Valley and is known for its diverse population and educational institutions.

The study population comprised all 49 public secondary schools in Njoro Sub-County, Nakuru County, Kenya. The study targeted 24,515 students, 196 class teachers, 49 principals and 49 heads of counseling departments. The 49 public secondary schools were categorized into three strata: mixed-day schools, mixed boarding schools and single-gender schools, and 27% of the 49 schools were sampled, resulting in approximately 13 schools. The sample size determination was guided by Yamane (1967) formula, $n = N/1+N(e)^2$, which gave 393 students who were randomly selected from the sampled schools. The 196 class teachers were sampled using stratified random sampling, and applying 18% of the total population, approximately 35 teachers were selected (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). The study employed purposive sampling to select 13 principals and 13 heads of counseling departments, corresponding to the 13 sampled schools. The total sample size was therefore 467 respondents.

The study employed standardized questionnaires to collect quantitative data from student population. The Standardized Conduct Disorder Questionnaire, comprising 32 questions was used to assess emotional distress, rule-breaking behaviors, and social challenges based on students' experiences over the past year. In addition, the Standardized Grief Disorder Questionnaire (PG-13-Revised) was used to examine emotional and cognitive responses to grief, identifying distress patterns and coping mechanisms. Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted with principals, class teachers and heads of counseling departments to capture in-depth qualitative details on school policies, conduct disorder challenges, and available grief support mechanisms. The study used ten percent of the sample size for pilot study, which was done at Nakuru Day Secondary School, Nakuru municipality (Creswell, 2021).

Content validity was established through a descriptive evaluation process, where the questionnaire and interview guide were reviewed by the researcher in consultation with the supervisor and peers to determine whether the instruments adequately represent the study's domain. Construct validity was tested using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) by examining Bartlett's Test of Sphericity and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values. Shrestha (2021) suggest that a KMO value greater than 0.5 and a significant Bartlett's Test ($p < 0.05$) indicate that the

construct is suitable for analysis. Grief recorded a KMO value of 0.612, while conduct disorder recorded 0.729, and Bartlett's test of Sphericity was significant for both variables (p = 0.000). The study used Cronbach's alpha to test the reliability of the questionnaire items and considered a coefficient of 0.7 or above (Taber, 2018). The grief scale recorded a reliability coefficient of 0.741, while the conduct disorder scale recorded 0.835, demonstrating a high level of internal consistency among the items in each scale.

Quantitative data was keyed into excel before subjecting it to meaningful analysis through SPSS version 29.0 (Awang, 2012). To quantify the strength of the relationship between grief and conduct disorder, the researcher used regression analysis. Goodness of the model was undertaken using Analysis of Variance, while test of significance was done at 5% level of significance. A simple linear regression model was used to test the effects of grief on conduct disorder among students as follows:

$Y = \beta_0 + \beta X + e$

Where

Y is the Conduct Disorder

X is Grief,

B_0 is the constant (co-efficient of intercept),

β is the slope of the regression equation and e is the error term.

Qualitative data collected using KII was analyzed thematically using content analysis. The study obtained clearance from St. Paul's University Ethics Review Committee (SPUERC), along with a research permit from NACOSTI, and informed consent was obtained from participants, who were assured that participation was voluntary and that their personal details remained anonymous and confidential.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher targeted 393 students, 35 class teachers, 13 principals, and 13 heads of counseling departments from the sampled public secondary schools in Njoro Sub-County, Nakuru County. Out of the 393 students sampled, 382 participated in the study, giving a response rate of 97.2%. Among class teachers, 32 out of the 35 sampled teachers participated, representing a response rate of 91.4%. The study further achieved a 100% response rate among principals and heads of counseling departments, as all the 13 sampled principals and all the 13 sampled heads of counseling departments participated. Overall, 440 out of the 454 sampled respondents participated in the study, giving an overall response rate of 96.9%. The response rate achieved here is consistent with the recommendation by Wu, Zhao and Fils-Aime (2022) that a response rate of 70% and above is good for statistical analysis.

The gender distribution of the respondents showed that male students formed majority at 214 respondents, representing 56.0% of the sample, while female students were 168, representing 44.0%. The inclusion of both genders was important because experiences of loss, grief, emotional adjustment and conduct-related behavior may be expressed differently among boys and girls in school settings. The age distribution showed that most of the respondents were below 18 years, with 266 students representing 69.6% of the sample, while students aged 18 years and above were 116, representing 30.4%.

Most of these students were found to be Form 3 students who formed the largest proportion of the students at 189 students, representing 49.5%. Grade 10 students were 119, representing 31.2%, while Form 4 students were 74, representing 19.4%. These differences are important

because emotional distress linked to grief may interact with school pressure and contribute to conduct-related difficulties such as defiance, aggression, truancy, or rule-breaking behavior.

Relationship between Grief and Conduct Disorder

The objective of the study was to examine the relationship between loss and grief and conduct disorder among students in public secondary schools in Njoro Sub-County, Nakuru County, Kenya. The study conducted simple linear regression analysis to examine this relationship. In this analysis, loss and grief was treated as the independent variable, while conduct disorder was the dependent variable. The regression analysis was used to determine whether students' experiences of loss and grief significantly predicted conduct disorder-related behaviors and emotional difficulties. Table 1 presents the model summary results for the simple linear regression analysis.

Table 1: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.688	0.473	0.472	0.322

a. Predictors: (Constant), Loss and Grief
b. Dependent Variable: Conduct Disorder

The results in Table 1 show a correlation (R) value of 0.688, indicating a strong positive association between loss and grief and conduct disorder among students in public secondary schools in Njoro Sub-County, Nakuru County. The coefficient of determination, R Square, is 0.473, implying that loss and grief account for 47.3% of the variation in conduct disorder among the students. The remaining 52.7% of the variation in conduct disorder may be explained by other factors not included in the model, such as family background, peer influence, school environment, academic pressure, and other psychosocial experiences. This finding suggests that grief is a key predictor of conduct-related difficulties among students. Table 2 shows the ANOVA results.

Table 2: ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	35.475	1	35.475	341.106	0.000[b]
	Residual	39.525	380	0.104		
	Total	75.000	381			

a. Dependent Variable: Conduct Disorder
b. Predictors: (Constant), Loss and Grief

The findings in Table 2 show that the regression model is statistically significant in explaining the relationship between loss and grief and conduct disorder, with an F-value of 341.106 and a p-value of 0.000 < 0.05 level of significance. This indicates that loss and grief significantly predict conduct disorder among students in public secondary schools in Njoro Sub-County. The implication is that students who experience higher levels of grief are more likely to report conduct-related difficulties, including emotional distress, school avoidance, irritability, social withdrawal, concentration problems, rule-breaking tendencies, and aggressive feelings. This confirms that grief among students was not only an emotional issue but also a behavioral and school adjustment concern. Table 3 shows beta coefficient results.

Table 3: Regression Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	0.694	0.052		13.346	0.000
	Loss and Grief	0.512	0.028	0.688	18.469	0.000

a. Dependent Variable: Conduct Disorder

The fitted regression model is therefore expressed as follows:

Conduct Disorder = 0.694 + 0.512(Loss and Grief)

The regression coefficient results show that loss and grief have a positive and statistically significant relationship with conduct disorder among students in public secondary schools in Njoro Sub-County, Nakuru County (B = 0.512, p = 0.000 < 0.05). This is supported by a t-value of 18.469, which is greater than the critical value of 1.96. The finding implies that a one-unit increase in loss and grief is expected to result in 0.512-unit increase in conduct disorder among the students. Therefore, students who experience stronger grief-related symptoms are more likely to report higher levels of conduct-related difficulties.

The findings are consistent with those of Khamala, Amunga and Ashioya (2025) who established that guidance and counseling positively influenced conduct disorder management in public secondary schools by supporting behavioral modification among learners. Similarly, Kusumawardana (2018) showed that student conduct varied across school contexts, implying that school environment and disciplinary structures shape learners' behavior. Elrod, Rice and Meyers (2022) also observed that positive behavioral support systems and a supportive school climate reduce conduct-related problems among students. Therefore, the current finding that loss and grief significantly predicted conduct disorder supports the view that student behavior is shaped by psychosocial experiences and school-based support systems. This is in line with Balk (2011), who argues that adolescents experiencing grief due to the loss of a loved one, whether a parent, guardian, sibling, or close friend, may struggle with emotional regulation and behavioral control. This implies that grief counseling, positive behavioral interventions, and supportive school environments are important in reducing conduct-related difficulties among bereaved students.

The study further conducted key informant interviews with principals, teachers and heads of counseling to obtain deeper explanations on grief and conduct-related behavior among students in public secondary schools in Njoro Sub-County. The interview results showed that students dealing with grief experienced several disciplinary challenges. Interviewees reported cases of lateness, absenteeism, incomplete assignments, poor class participation, defiance, and conflict with peers. One class teacher stated that:

> *"Some grieving students start coming late to school, missing lessons, or failing to complete classwork. At first it appears like indiscipline, but when you talk to them, you realize there is a deeper problem."*

Principals indicated that grief sometimes made students less responsive to school rules and authority. One principal explained that bereaved learners may resist correction because they are emotionally overwhelmed. The principal noted that:

> *"A student who is grieving may react harshly even to simple correction. They may feel that nobody understands what they are going through."*

The head of counseling also reported that grief-related disciplinary issues were often linked to emotional pain rather than deliberate misconduct. According to the counselor, some students became restless, easily provoked, or uninterested in school expectations. The respondent stated that:

> *"Many of these students are not necessarily bad. They are hurting, and the pain comes out through behavior such as anger, silence, or refusal to follow instructions."*

Indeed, recent studies have clearly established that the loss of a loved one is one of the most stressful life events that a child can have to cope with and that it is a risk factor for numerous disorders (Revet et al., 2020). The implication is that disciplinary issues among grieving students should not be handled only through punishment. Schools need to combine discipline with counseling so that teachers can distinguish between ordinary misconduct and behavior linked to grief, loss, and emotional distress.

The interviews revealed that grief affected student behavior in the classroom by reducing concentration, participation, motivation, and emotional control. Teachers reported that some students appeared physically present but mentally distracted. The head of counseling indicated that grief also affected students' ability to interact with teachers and classmates. Some students withdrew from classroom discussions, while others became irritable when asked questions. The counselor stated that:

> *"Grief affects how students respond to others. Some become quiet and isolated, while others become impatient and easily annoyed."*

Teachers further reported that classroom conduct problems could include sleeping during lessons, refusing to participate, leaving class without permission, or arguing with classmates. One teacher said:

> *"Some students start behaving as though school no longer matters. They may fail to do assignments, avoid questions, or become disruptive."*

The interview findings showed that the death of a parent or primary caregiver had the strongest impact on student behavior. Principals explained that parental loss often affected students emotionally, socially, and economically. One principal stated that:

> *"Losing a parent affects a student deeply because it is not only emotional. It can also affect fees, food, guidance at home, and the student's sense of security."*

The interviewees identified withdrawal as one of the most common behavioral problems linked to grief. Irritability and anger were also frequently mentioned. Principals observed that some students became easily provoked and reacted strongly to minor disagreements. One principal stated that:

> *"Some students become very short-tempered after a loss. A small issue with another student can quickly become a serious conflict."*

Absenteeism and school avoidance also emerged as common grief-related behaviors. The head of counseling noted that some students missed school because they felt emotionally unable to cope or because the loss had created new responsibilities at home. These findings imply that grief-related behavioral problems are both emotional and school-based. The findings are in line with Obadire and Sinthumule (2021) whose findings revealed that the causes of student disciplinary problems varied across schools, with factors such as parental influence, peer pressure, and school environment playing significant roles. The findings also echo Kentor and

Kaplow (2020) and Keyes et al. (2014) who argued that a minority of students develop mental health problems post bereavement, e.g., depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), conduct disorder, or prolonged grief disorder (PGD). Schools should therefore respond through counseling, academic follow-up, peer support, and family engagement rather than relying only on disciplinary measures.

CONCLUSION

The study sought to examine the relationship between grief and conduct disorder among students in public secondary schools in Njoro Sub-County, Nakuru County, Kenya. The study concludes that loss and grief had a positive and statistically significant relationship with conduct disorder among students. The regression results showed that loss and grief explained 47.3% of the variation in conduct disorder, while the regression coefficient indicated that an increase in grief was associated with an increase in conduct disorder-related difficulties. This confirmed that students with stronger grief symptoms were more likely to report emotional distress, school avoidance, social withdrawal, irritability, concentration problems, rule-breaking tendencies, and aggressive feelings. Therefore, grief is an important predictor of conduct-related challenges among students in public secondary schools in Njoro Sub-County.

The study further concludes that grief among students was not only an emotional issue but also a behavioral and school adjustment concern. This finding was supported by qualitative results, where principals, class teachers, and heads of counseling reported that grief affected students' attendance, classroom participation, concentration, peer relationships, emotional control, and discipline. This means that student misconduct should not always be interpreted as deliberate defiance, since some behaviors may be signs of emotional distress, grief, rejection, or poor school adjustment.

The study concludes that although grief was a major predictor of conduct-related difficulties, more than half of the variation in conduct disorder was explained by other factors outside the model, such as family background, peer influence, school environment, academic pressure, and other psychosocial experiences. Managing grief-related conduct concerns therefore requires a whole-school approach involving principals, teachers, heads of counseling departments, parents, peers, and external support services. Strengthening school-based grief counseling and psychosocial support would improve student welfare, behavior, discipline, and academic engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that public secondary schools in Njoro Sub-County should establish structured grief identification and support systems. Schools should maintain confidential records of students who have experienced bereavement and monitor them over time. Class teachers, heads of counseling, and school administrators should work together to identify bereaved learners early and provide timely emotional support before grief affects school attendance, concentration, peer relationships, and behavior.

Schools should improve guidance and counseling departments to respond more effectively to grief-related emotional and behavioral difficulties. Counseling services should not only focus on discipline cases but should also address grief, emotional distress, social isolation, self-worth, academic fear, and peer relationship challenges. Schools should also provide private counseling spaces and allocate adequate time for heads of counseling to attend to students without being overwhelmed by normal teaching duties.

The study further recommends that teachers should be sensitized and trained on how grief can affect student behavior. Since the findings showed that grief was linked to school avoidance, poor concentration, withdrawal, irritability, rule-breaking tendencies, and aggressive feelings,

teachers should avoid interpreting all misconduct as deliberate defiance. Instead, they should be trained to observe warning signs, hold supportive conversations, and refer affected students to the counseling department. This would help schools shift from a purely punitive approach to a balanced approach that combines discipline, emotional support, restorative correction, and student welfare.

The study recommends stronger collaboration between schools, parents, guardians, education officers, and mental health professionals in managing grief-related conduct problems. Schools should involve parents and guardians when grief affects attendance, behavior, or performance, while serious cases should be referred to qualified professionals. The Ministry of Education and relevant county education stakeholders should also support schools by deploying trained counselors, developing grief management guidelines, and strengthening psychosocial support programs for students in public secondary schools.

Although this study found that loss and grief explained 47.3% of the variation in conduct disorder, the remaining 52.7% was attributed to other factors not included in the model. Future studies should therefore examine factors that may account for the unexplained percentage. Further research should also be conducted in other sub-counties or counties to compare the relationship between loss and grief and conduct disorder across different school contexts, including urban, rural, private, boarding, and day school settings.

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