

The Role of Emotional Intelligence and Self-awareness Coping Skills in Enhancing Psychological Well-being

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the use of emotional intelligence and self-awareness Coping Skills in enhancing the psychological well-being of learners in secondary schools in Rachuonyo North Sub-County, Kenya. The study employed a cross-sectional survey research design based on a convergent mixed-methods approach, whereby quantitative and qualitative data were gathered simultaneously and integrated during the interpretation of the findings. The target population for the study comprised 12,541 participants, including 12,370 students, 115 teacher counsellors, and 56 principals from 56 public secondary schools. The study had a sample size of 439, consisting of 387 students, 35 teacher counsellors, and 17 principals in seventeen sampled secondary schools. The study gathered quantitative data through questionnaires, which were analysed using descriptive statistics, namely frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, together with inferential statistics comprising Pearson correlation and regression analyses. Qualitative data were collected through interviews and focus group discussion guides and analysed thematically. The analysed data were presented in tables. All ethical practices were adhered to. The findings revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between self-awareness coping skills and learners' psychological well-being ($r=.845, p=.000$), indicating that higher levels of self-awareness were associated with better psychological well-being. The study concludes that strengthening emotional intelligence through self-awareness coping skills can significantly enhance learners' psychological well-being. It recommends that secondary school principals and teacher counsellors implement programs that promote learners' self-awareness Coping Skills, and this will be very useful for their psychological well-being.

Key terms: Coping Skills, emotional intelligence, learners, psychological well-being, self-awareness.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In Kenya, studies have highlighted a growing concern regarding the psychological well-being of secondary school learners. Research indicates that mental health issues like depression and anxiety are on the rise among secondary school learners due to factors such as examination pressure, family instability, and substance abuse (Ndeti et al., 2022). The emotional rejection of some learners by teachers during the teaching process, as a result of being emotionally charged, can contribute significantly to the emergence of suicidal behaviour among most adolescents, according to Okello and Aomo (2018).

According to Citizen Digital (2018), in a five-month period, Homa Bay County recorded more than 30 youth suicides. Within this time frame, Rachuonyo North Sub-County, in comparison to other sub-counties, registered the highest number of suicidal cases at about 16.7 per cent, having depression as a contributing factor among teenagers. The EI–academic achievement link is often explained by EI's role in managing stress and negative emotions, enhancing students' adaptability and social skills; hence the need for this study, where the findings would be very useful in enhancing psychological well-being of learners. Consequently, the extent to which emotional intelligence coping strategies enhance the psychological well-being of learners in Rachuonyo North Sub-County remains inadequately understood. Addressing this gap provides the rationale for the present study, which examines how self-awareness coping strategies contribute to the psychological well-being of secondary school learners in the Kenyan context.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional Intelligence (EI) entails individual's capacity and ability to effectively notice, comprehend, regulate and harness emotions in both one and others in a constructive and beneficial manner (Gkintoni et al., 2023). The ability of learners to recognize, understand, and regulate their emotions influences their mental health, interpersonal relationships, and overall academic performance (Mayer et al., 2004). In educational environments, emotional intelligence enhances the personal and professional development of both students and teachers by improving emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, classroom engagement, and the overall learning environment (Dolev & Leshem, 2017).

In Africa, EI has similarly been identified as a protective factor for psychological well-being. A study conducted among Ghanaian youth revealed that emotional intelligence buffered the negative effects of stress on mental health, reducing psychological distress and enhancing emotional regulation (Nyarko et al., 2020). The findings are particularly relevant to adolescent populations, as emotional competencies developed during adolescence play a crucial role in long-term mental health and social adjustment. Additionally, Oyoo et al. (2024) explain that psychological well-being encompasses personal perceptions, social interactions, and health-related behaviors that give life meaning and support individuals in reaching their full potential, as similarly described by Friedman (2017). They further indicate that it is commonly assessed using life satisfaction scales, as noted by Gao and McClellan (2018). This can be exploited for enhanced psychological well-being of learners in secondary schools in Kenya.

Despite this growing body of evidence, several gaps remain evident. Much of the existing literature establishes positive associations between emotional intelligence and educational outcomes but provides limited understanding of the specific emotional intelligence coping strategies through which these outcomes are achieved. Many studies examine emotional intelligence as a single, overarching construct, paying insufficient attention to its specific dimensions, such as self-awareness. Although the educational

benefits of emotional intelligence have been widely documented, relatively few studies have investigated its role in promoting learners' psychological well-being within the unique socio-cultural and educational contexts of sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Kenyan secondary schools.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design, which involved collecting data from the selected respondents at a single point in time. It helped the researcher to look at numerous characteristics of the respondents at the same time (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This design was adopted because it was suitable for investigating the relationship between emotional intelligence coping strategies and the psychological well-being of secondary school learners in Rachuonyo North Sub-County as they were at the time of data collection. Specifically, it enabled the researcher to collect information on self-awareness coping strategies and psychological well-being concurrently, thereby facilitating the determination of their associations.

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was adopted for the study, allowing quantitative and qualitative data to be collected at the same time, analysed independently, and merged during the interpretation of the results (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The quantitative data obtained from questionnaires provided measurable evidence on the relationships between the study variables, while the qualitative data gathered through interviews and focus group discussions offered deeper insights into learners' experiences and perceptions of emotional intelligence self-awareness coping strategies. The integration of both data strands enabled triangulation of findings, enhanced the credibility of the results, and provided a more comprehensive understanding of how emotional intelligence coping strategies influence the psychological well-being of secondary school learners.

The target population for the study comprised 12,370 Form Three and Form Four learners, 115 teacher counsellors, and 56 principals from public secondary schools in Rachuonyo North Sub-County, giving a total population of 12,541 respondents.

A multistage sampling procedure was employed where 17 public secondary schools were selected from the 56 schools in the sub-county using simple random sampling to ensure that each school had an equal chance of being included in the study. The principals of the selected schools were then included through census sampling, while 35 teacher counsellors were selected using simple random sampling in accordance with Mugenda and Mugenda (2019), who recommend sampling at least 30 per cent of a small, homogeneous population for descriptive and correlational studies. Finally, the sample size of Form Three and Form Four learners from the selected schools was determined using Taro Yamane's formula that has an assumed error value of .05. Thereafter, the required number of learners from each selected school was sampled using simple random sampling. Table 1 presents the target population and sample size for the study.

Table 1: The Target Population and Sample Size

Items	Population	Sample Size	Sampling Technique
Students	12,370	387	Taro Yamane's Formula
Teacher Counselors	115	35	Mugenda and Mugenda
Principals	56	17	Mugenda and Mugenda
TOTAL	12,541	439	—

Table 1 presents the target population and sample size, where there are 56 public secondary schools in Rachuonyo North Sub-County; out of 12370 students, 387 were sampled; out of 115 teacher counsellors, 35 were sampled; and 17 principals from 56.

According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2019), questionnaires were chosen due to their ability to collect a large amount of information in a reasonable span of time at minimal cost. Questionnaires were used to collect information from Teacher Counsellors (TCs). Questionnaires for TCs were issued by the researcher to assess how EI in Self-awareness coping skills enhances the psychological well-being of high school learners in Rachuonyo North Sub-County, Kenya.

Interviews were administered to principals and focus group discussion guides to learners. These enabled the researcher to support the information provided in the questionnaires, especially those related to uses of EI in self-awareness and coping skills in enhancing psychological well-being. The qualitative data collected through interviews and focus group discussions were analysed thematically using the six-step framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researcher first familiarised herself with the data through repeated reading of the interview and FGD transcripts. Initial codes were then generated and grouped into categories. Related categories were organised into themes aligned with the study objective. The identified themes were reviewed, refined, defined, and appropriately named before being interpreted and presented using narrative descriptions supported by selected verbatim quotations from participants. The qualitative findings were subsequently integrated with the quantitative results during the discussion to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how emotional intelligence self-awareness coping strategies influence the psychological well-being of secondary school learners.

The research instruments were subjected to content validation before data collection. The draft questionnaires, interview schedules, and focus group discussion guides were reviewed by the research supervisors and experts in Educational Psychology and Research Methodology at Rongo University to assess the relevance, clarity, and adequacy of the items in addressing the study objective. Their recommendations were used to revise and refine the instruments before administration. A pilot study was conducted in two public secondary schools that were not included in the main study to determine the clarity, appropriateness, and applicability of the instruments. Feedback obtained during the pilot informed further refinement of the instruments, thereby enhancing their validity for the main study.

Before commencing data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant Ethics Review Committee of Rongo University. A research permit was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Permission to conduct the study was also sought from the County Director of Education, the Sub-County Director of Education, and the principals of the selected secondary schools. Participation in the study was voluntary. The researcher explained the purpose of the

study, procedures involved, and the participants' rights. Written informed consent was obtained from teacher counsellors. Assent was also obtained from the learners. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, participants were not required to provide their names or any other identifying information on the research instruments. Unique codes were assigned to questionnaires, interview schedules, and focus group discussion guides. All information collected was treated as confidential and used solely for academic purposes. Participants were informed that they had the right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any stage without any penalty. The collected data were securely stored and were accessible only to the researcher and the research supervisors.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study examined how emotional intelligence (EI) can be used to enhance self-awareness and coping skills for the psychological well-being of learners in secondary schools in Rachuonyo North Sub-County, Kenya. The findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Emotional Intelligence and Self-Awareness Coping skills

N	Item Statement on Self-Awareness & Coping Skills	R	Level of Enhancement					M	SD
			N	B	M	H	E		
1	Emotional Intelligence skill is normally used for self-awareness to enhance psychological well-being of learners	F	0	0	9	21	5	3.89	.631
		%	0.0	0.0	25.7	60.0	14.3		
2	Emotional Intelligence training is integrated in the curriculum as a coping skill for psychological well-being of learners	F	0	0	1	12	22	4.60	.553
		%	0.0	0.0	2.9	34.3	62.9		
3	Level of self-awareness and psychological well-being	F	0	2	3	26	4	3.91	.658
		%	0.0	5.7	8.6	74.3	11.4		
		%	0.0	5.7	28.6	54.3	11.4		
4	Level of self-esteem and psychological well-being	F	0	0	6	20	9	4.09	.658
		%	0.0	0.0	17.1	57.1	25.7		
		%	0.0	2.9	11.4	71.4	14.3		
		%	2.9	0.0	25.7	54.3	17.1		
5	Positive affirmations and psychological well-being	F	1	1	5	15	13	4.09	.951

Table 2 shows that 60.0 per cent of the respondents were highly in agreement that emotional intelligence skills are normally used for self-awareness to enhance the psychological well-being of learners. Cumulatively, all the respondents endorsed this statement with a mean rating of 3.89 and a small standard deviation of .631. The small standard deviation shows that there was general agreement on this construct by the respondents. The finding concurs with that of Goleman (2023), who did a study in the USA and found that when students become more emotionally self-aware, they develop better interpersonal relationships and greater self-control, which are foundational to psychological well-being. The analysed findings of qualitative data revealed a similar theme that EI skills for self-awareness can indeed enhance

self-awareness, which is a pre-requisite to a stable psychological well-being of learners. An informative verbatim on this was that:

EI of a learner is very vital in understanding their self-awareness. With this, a learner will have a composed psychological well-being. Such a learner will make very rational decisions and cannot easily be confused by peers or other people he or she interacts with. (P004)

An excerpt from an FGD was that:

Our self-awareness can be boosted if we are made to understand ourselves. Good role models who are more mature than us can share their experiences, and this way can help us improve our EI, which is good for our psychological well-being. (FGD 6)

With these facts in mind, EI skill in self-awareness is a workable coping strategy for enhancing the psychological well-being of learners. Principals of various secondary schools should have programs that help enhance students' self-understanding, and this will be very useful for their psychological well-being.

As regards 'Emotional Intelligence training is integrated in the curriculum as a coping skill for psychological well-being of learners', there was unanimous endorsement from the respondents (100% cumulative percentage) with a mean rating of 4.60 and a small standard deviation of .553. The finding is consistent with Brackett et al. (2019), who reported that school-based social and emotional learning programmes, such as the RULER approach, enhance learners' emotional awareness, emotion regulation, interpersonal relationships, and coping abilities. The authors further noted that systematic EI instruction enables learners to accurately recognize, label, express, and regulate their emotions, thereby strengthening their capacity to manage academic and personal challenges while fostering positive psychological adjustment. These findings support the view that embedding EI training within the curriculum equips learners with practical coping skills that contribute to improved emotional balance and well-being. The analysed findings of qualitative data revealed a similar theme of EI-based training and students' coping skills, as supported by an informative verbatim from one of the principals that:

Training learners on problem-focused coping skills incorporate relaxation strategies to help manage emotional overload. The schools can use gender life skills education that is integrated into curriculum during the trainings. This is because encouraging learners in gender curriculum activities like sports, drama and music can enhance their coping skill thus leading to their psychological well-being. (P009)

Similarly, an excerpt from FGD was that:

Learners should be trained to develop relaxation strategies to manage their emotional overload. The strategies are inscribed in curriculum for example listening to music. Learners should also engage in co-curricular activities like sports. (FGD 1)

The construct is that EI training should be integrated into the curriculum as a coping skill for the psychological well-being of learners. Principals of various schools should develop school programs that inculcate resilience in learners through sports. Programs like sports can reduce feelings of failure by fostering resilience, emotional regulation, and self-esteem in a supportive environment. They provide a safe space to experience setbacks, encouraging students to try again and build coping skills.

The majority of the respondents (74.3%) highly supported the view that 'Level of self-awareness is commensurate to the psychological well-being of learners.' This was further supported by their overall

mean rating of 3.91 and a low standard deviation of .658 (Table 2). The quantitative findings support those of Mayer et al. (2004) in the USA, whose findings were that learners with high levels of EI are better equipped to identify their emotional states and apply appropriate coping strategies, contributing significantly to their psychological well-being. Self-awareness helps learners to carry out individual self-evaluation, thus facilitating informed decision-making. During the principals' interview, a theme of level of self-awareness and psychological well-being emerged as the following excerpt was noted:

Learners who possess self-awareness skills understand their emotions, why they are in school and the purpose for which they are learning. In case such learners are faced with challenges, they develop better ways of solving their problems soberly without unnecessary exposure to danger. (P016)

A verbatim quote from FGD was that:

Learners who have fully developed self-awareness skills always resist peer pressure due to their emotional clarity. This helps them to make better choices in life. They normally think before reacting to challenges they face in day-to-day life. (FGD 2)

With the confirmed construct, the level of self-awareness is commensurate with the psychological well-being of learners. Teacher counsellors should regularly organise self-awareness session talks with learners. This will help learners to identify their own emotions and those of their peers, thus get guided accordingly. Emotional awareness talks, including therapy, self-reflection, and open dialogue, enhance emotional stability by helping learners process feelings rather than suppressing them.

The majority of the respondents (57.1%) noted that the level of self-esteem is an indicator of emotional intelligence that can be used in enhancing self-awareness and coping skills for the psychological well-being of learners. Their mean rating for this was 4.09 (out of a possible maximum mean rating of 5). The quantitative findings are consistent with those reported by Singhal and Prakash (2021) and Enwere and Iloakasia (2024), who established a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and learners' psychological well-being. Students with high self-esteem showed greater emotional stability, stronger social ties, and higher academic engagement, whereas those with low self-esteem were more susceptible to stress, anxiety, and social withdrawal. From the analysed qualitative data, a theme of level of self-esteem and body image as an indicator of emotional intelligence emerged. This is what one of the principals had to say:

Self-esteem improves student psychological well-being by acting as a protective factor that boosts emotional stability, resilience, and learning, reducing risks of anxiety and depression. High self-esteem enables better stress management, fosters stronger social connections, and encourages learners' proactive, goal-oriented behaviour rather than avoidance. (P012)

A related excerpt from an FGD stated that:

Self-esteem develops when learners accept themselves the way they are regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds. They should understand their strengths and weaknesses in order to develop self-love and appreciation. Self-esteem can also develop when learners train on how to effectively operate within their environments. (FGD 25)

With the confirmed construct, learners can improve their levels of self-esteem by cultivating self-compassion, cognitive restructuring to challenge negative self-talk, and engaging in life skills training

because the qualitative findings are that level of self-esteem is an indicator of emotional intelligence that can be used in enhancing self-awareness and coping skills for the psychological well-being of learners. Teachers can employ strategies like teaching learners about decision-making, emotional regulation, and social skills to build competence, confidence, and resilience in a supportive learning environment.

The respondents' view from Table 2 is that positive affirmations are an emotional intelligence that can be used for enhancing self-awareness and coping skills for the psychological well-being of learners. The mean rating here was high at 4.09. The quantitative findings support those of Arquiza and Lynnelle (2020), who documented that positive affirmations are an emotional intelligence that can be used for enhancing self-awareness and coping skills for the psychological well-being of learners. Positive affirmations serve as a proactive EI skill by acting as a cognitive tool that fosters self-awareness and builds resilience in learners. During an interview with principals, a theme of positive affirmations on psychological well-being emerged. This was echoed by one of the principals, who said:

By consistently practising positive self-talk, learners can strengthen their adaptive thinking, increase self-acceptance, and better manage emotional regulation, ultimately enhancing their psychological well-being. (P003)

A related excerpt from FGD equally confirmed that:

Positive affirmations improve learners' self-awareness by encouraging reflection on strengths, aiding in coping by managing stress, and enhancing resilience, supporting both psychological and academic resilience. (FGD 17)

With these facts in mind, it was noted that positive affirmations are an aspect of emotional intelligence that can be used for enhancing self-awareness and coping skills for the psychological well-being of learners. Positive affirmations function as a practical tool for developing EI in learners by enhancing self-awareness, improving emotion regulation, and fostering adaptive coping mechanisms. Therefore, there is a need for education stakeholders like principals to champion campaigns towards challenging negative thoughts, building self-confidence, and fostering a positive mindset in learners.

Table 3: How Emotional Intelligence is Related to Self-Awareness and Coping Skills

Independent Variable	Inferential Statistical Test	Correlation with dependent variable (Level of reasoning ability predicts the psychological state of learners)
Emotional Intelligence enhancing self-awareness and coping skills variables	Pearson Correlation	.845
	Set Sig. (2-tailed) (α)	.05
	Observed P value	.000

Table 3 shows how EI can be used to enhance self-awareness and coping skills of learners for their psychological well-being. The analysed findings show that when all the aspects of EI are properly used to enhance self-awareness and coping skills, it will lead to a statistically strong positive ($R=.845$; $P=.000$) psychological well-being of learners in secondary schools at the .05 significance level. This will, however, require the employment of an adequate number of properly trained school counsellors in public secondary schools for its realisation.

Table 4: Model 1 Summary of EI in Self-Awareness and Coping Skills for Predicting Psychological Well-being

Model	R	R Squared	Adjusted Squared	R	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.845 ^a	.715	.578		.548

Table 4 shows how the use of EI in self-awareness and coping skills can be used to predict the level of psychological well-being of learners in secondary schools. The analysed findings show that the coefficient R, which was the predictor variable of EI in enhancing self-awareness and coping skills in this model, if properly used in enhancing self-awareness and coping skills, will positively and strongly ($r=.845$) predict the level of psychological well-being in learners. The R^2 of .715 means that 71.5 per cent of the variation in EI in self-awareness and coping skills level is explained by this model, indicating a strong fit. This construct, therefore, if properly implemented, will predict the level of psychological well-being of learners in secondary schools. This will, however, require properly trained counsellors to assist in appropriate implementation.

Table 5: Testing for Reliability of EI in Self-Awareness and Coping Skills for Psychological Well-being

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean of Squares	F	Sig.
1	Regression	17.273	11	1.570	5.235	.000 ^b
	Residual	6.899	23	.300		
	Total	24.171	34			

As shown in Table 5, the regression sum of squares of 17.273 indicates the amount of variance explained by the regression model in emotional intelligence (EI) in self-awareness and coping skills. It also shows a residual sum of squares of 6.899 of unexplained variance by this model. The F-Statistic from the table shows that the model is 5.235 times more effective at predicting the dependent variable (psychological well-being) than random error, and so it can be relied upon as a determinant factor of psychological well-being among learners in public secondary schools if carefully implemented. The F-statistic ($F = 5.235$) together with the small p-value ($p = .000$) indicates that emotional intelligence in enhancing self-awareness and coping skills is statistically significant, suggesting that the regression model provides a good fit to the data. In addition, the p-value of .000 (when $\alpha=.05$) indicates that the regression model significantly explains that EI in enhancing self-awareness and coping skills can determine the dependent variable. This means that the independent variables collectively predict the dependent variable better than random chance. It can therefore be relied upon to achieve the needed psychological well-being level of learners in the study area and in the Kenyan public secondary schools at large.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions: Research findings established that Emotional Intelligence in self-awareness and coping skills can enhance the psychological well-being of learners. Therefore, it was concluded that when all the aspects of EI are properly used to enhance self-awareness and coping skills, it will lead to a statistically strong positive correlation ($R=.845$; $P=.000$) with the psychological well-being of learners in secondary schools.

Recommendations: It was recommended that Principals and teacher counsellors of various secondary schools should have programs that help enhance learners' self-awareness and coping skills, and this will be very useful for their psychological well-being.

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