INFLUENCE OF SITUATIONAL STRESS ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MBOONI WEST SUB-COUNTY, MAKUENI COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Statement of the Problem: Students encounter various types of situational stress that have a detrimental impact on their academic performance. For instance, in public secondary schools located in Mbooni Sub- County, students consistently achieve poor academic performance in national examinations.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study was to assess the influence of situational stress on the academic performance of students in public secondary schools in Mbooni West Sub-County, Makueni County, Kenya.

Methodology: The study adopted a mixed methodology and descriptive research and phenomenological research designs. The target population consisted of 8109 respondents, including 45 principals, 137 teacher-counselors, and 7927 students. A total of 378 respondents were included in the sample, which was determined using Yamane's Formula. The study employed stratified and simple random sampling techniques to determine the sample size. The qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis according to the objectives and subsequently presented in narrative formats. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies and percentages. Additionally, inferential analysis was conducted using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Analysis with the assistance of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Version 23). The results were presented in tables.

Findings: The study found that academic performance of students in KCSE has been on a decreasing trend for the last five years (2018-2022) and is attributed to situational stress which students experience.

Conclusion: In conclusion, the study reveals a concerning trend of declining academic performance in public secondary schools. One of the key findings is the significant positive correlation between situational stress and lower academic performance. This suggests that as stress levels among students increase, their academic achievements tend to suffer.

Recommendations: Teacher-counsellors should advise students on how to mitigate challenges arising from impending academic activities and overcome them without net negative effect on their future academic endeavours. Students should learn how to manage situations which are likely to cause them high-level stress. Principals and teacher-counsellors should create a conducive school environment devoid of factors which may precipitate stressful situations to students. The study also recommends that educational institutions take a multi-faceted approach to address the issue of rising stress levels among students. Schools should also consider reducing academic pressure by reassessing homework load and exam scheduling. Furthermore, collaboration with parents and healthcare professionals is advised to offer a more comprehensive support network for students.

Keywords: *Situational stress, academic performance, public secondary schools*.

INTRODUCTION

Stress is a state of a body's reaction to any change that requires physical, mental and emotional adjustments or responses. The American Psychological Association (2012) defines stress as a state of mental, physical, or emotional tension that arises when an individual perceives a threat to their well-being. Ackerman, Brown, and Izard (2012) argue that stress is inevitable among students in educational settings due to the fast-paced nature of the modern world. Learners experience stress caused by different situations students are subjected to. Situational stress happens in the moment and often arises when students are triggered by a situation they can't control, typically conflict, loss of status or emergencies. Crozier and Perkins (2016) assert that, when students experience situational stress, they usually feel threatened by what's happening around them and, as a result their automatic fight or flight responses kick in. According to Crozier and Perkins (2016), this hinders their ability to concentrate on attaining optimal results presently.

A study conducted in Paris, France by Huesmann, Dubow, and Boker (2017) revealed that students encounter situational stress when they find themselves in a frightening situation where they have no agency or control. Such situations may include emergencies, the loss of a family member, or the inability to pay school fees. Huesmann *et al* (2017) observed that these circumstances have exerted a detrimental impact on students' academic performance. In keeping with these findings, Singh, Gupta and Grover (2017) carried out a study in India, which revealed that situational depression among students in secondary schools' stems from a struggle to come to terms with dramatic life changes from home environment to school settings or microsystems. These findings are indicative of the fact that there are heavy demands of education stakeholders on students to perform various roles, many of which are undefined, inconsistent and unachievable in the present socio-cultural, economic and bureaucratic context of society, causing heavy stress on high school students.

In high schools in Mexico, Ozer (2017) opines that cases of situational stress have become a household name caused by conflict, or a loss of status or acceptance in the eyes of one's peer group. To corroborate these assertions, Shaw and Emery (2015) carried out a study in Haiti which revealed that situations such as cramming for an examination, socio-economic status and family issues at home cause worry or concern, which are forms of stress. In many secondary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa, Bayram and Bilgel (2018) posit that instances of situational stress often appear suddenly where a student gets caught in a situation that he or she completely failed to anticipate.

According to Bayram and Bilgel (2018), such students find it difficult to learn to be more self-aware and thus cannot recognize the automatic physical and emotional signals that their bodies send out when they are under pressure. In support of this, Nwoye, Okonkwo and Opoto (2018) undertook a study in Nigerian high schools which established that students get stressed up whenever they find themselves in situations of heavy academic workload and change of daily routine. Nwoye *et al* (2018) noted that a change of school routine such as dedicated homework time and a consistent sleep schedule makes it difficult for students to manage which leads to more stress. This indicates that, while the general workload and stress are indeed linked, there is a substantial proportion of the cohort for whom these factors appear to be independent. In particular, the link between absolute stress and workload appears weaker, suggesting that the issue may not be the actual level of stress, but rather the students' perceptions of what constitutes a "normal" workload at secondary school level.

In Kenya, students find themselves in different situations at home or while at school, which act as predictors of stress to them. A study conducted among students in nine secondary schools in Kajiado North Sub- County by Preskilla (2020) revealed that socio-economic conditions at home and the context of the children affect their reaction to life situations contribute to children's stress levels which, in turn, affects their level of academic performance. In other words, students' demographic characteristics, psychological characteristics and prior academic performance, social and institutional factors as well as outcomes of the learning process contribute to students' stress levels by placing demands on them to perform better in their future academic undertakings.

In Mbooni West Sub- County, students' academic performance has been on a downward trend with many students registering low academic grades in KCSE. For example, a report by the Ministry of Education (2020) shows that Mbooni West Sub- County registered 34.67% in KCSE in 2016, 29.05% in 2017, 30.03% in 2018, 23.7% in 2019 and 22.1% in 2020 which

paints a picture of declining academic performance in public secondary schools. The report also shows that cases of stress and depression among students in secondary schools have been on the rise. A study carried out in Mbooni West Sub- County by Kyalo (2016) established that secondary school students face situations which make them experience increased stress levels. These range from academic stressors, isolation from peer groups, relationship problems, family challenges to socio-economic conditions at home. Kyalo (2016) found that such situations make students to develop to experience negative feelings, including worry, anger, frustration and sadness. However, much still needed to be done since Kyalo (2016) as did other reviewed empirical studies have not assessed how different forms of situational stressors influence students' academic performance in secondary schools, thus, the study.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Secondary school students experience different forms of situational stress in their daily academic activities which has had a negative impact on their academic performance. For instance, in public secondary schools located in Mbooni West Sub- County, students consistently achieve poor academic results in national examinations. The Ministry of Education's report from 2020 reveals that Mbooni West Sub- County achieved a KCSE pass rate of 34.67% in 2016, 29.05% in 2017, 30.03% in 2018, 23.7% in 2019, and 22.1% in 2020. This illustrates a situation where academic performance in public secondary schools is deteriorating. Efforts to mitigate these challenges such as recruitment of more trained teachers have not yielded much remarkable progress. However, there is a lack of empirical research investigating the impact of situational stress on the academic performance of students in public secondary schools. Therefore, this study aimed to address this gap.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study was guided by the following objectives:

i. To assess the status of academic performance in public secondary schools in Mbooni West Sub- County.

ii. To determine the influence of situational stress on academic performance in public secondary schools in Mbooni West Sub- County.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by the Psychological Stress Theory, which was postulated by Lazarus (1993). Two concepts which are central to this theory are appraising, that is, individuals' evaluation of the significance of what is happening to their well-being, and coping, that is, individuals' efforts in thought and action to manage specific demands. According to Lazarus

(1993), stress is regarded as a relational concept, that is, it is not defined as a specific kind of external stimulation nor a specific pattern of physiological, behavioral, or subjective reactions. Instead, stress is viewed as a relationship between individuals and their environment. That is, psychological stress is a relationship with the environment that the person appraises as significant for his or her well-being and in which the demands tax or exceed available coping resources. The concept of appraisal is based on the idea that emotional processes such as stress are dependent on actual expectancies that persons manifest with regard to the significance and outcome of a specific encounter. This theory assumes that the resulting state is generated, maintained, and eventually altered by a specific pattern of appraisals. In this study, stress is considered a threat which thwarts students' personal and academic goals. The effects of stress on students come as a result of a shift of feeling towards a more positive emotional state which, in turn, impacts on students' academic performance and learning outcomes. That is, environments with nature elements can have a stressful effect on students and the potential beneficial effects can be utilized in stressful classroom. Thus, the rationale of using this theory in this study was that it underscores the fact that different forms of stress have deleterious effects on academic performance of students.

The study was also guided by Walberg's academic achievement theory. This theory posits that learners' psychological traits coupled with their immediate learning environments influence educational outcomes. Walberg (2012) proposed nine main aspects which impact on learners' educational outcomes. These include; learners' ability or prior achievement, motivation, age or developmental level, quantity of instruction, quality of instruction, classroom climate, parental involvement, home environment, peer group, and exposure to mass media outside of school. In this study, to increase educational productivity and efficiency, educational process goals as well as achievement goals must be considered. Thus, the relevance of this theory is that educational process goals are interpreted to include learner perceptions of the social environment, creativity, self-concept, participation in extra-curricular activities, and interest in the subject matter. That is, ignoring these perceptions and experiences in favour of traditional goals measured by test scores decrease motivation and lower educational achievement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, specifically employing descriptive and phenomenological research designs. The target population consisted of 8109 respondents, including 45 principals, 137 teacher-counselors, and 7927 students from public secondary schools. A sample of 378 respondents was obtained using Yamane's Formula.

Nine strata were created using stratified sampling, based on the number of zones in Mbooni West Sub- County. Purposive sampling was used to select two principals and three teacher-counselors for each zone. Nevertheless, a total of 37 students were chosen from each zone through the method of simple random sampling. This procedure yielded a sample size consisting of 18 principals, 27 teacher-counselors, and 333 students. Data from students was collected using questionnaires, while principals and teacher-counselors were interviewed using interview guides. In addition, the researcher performed document analysis.

The qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis in accordance with the objectives and subsequently presented in narrative formats. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies and percentages. Additionally, inferential analysis was conducted using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Analysis with the assistance of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Version 23). The results were presented in the form of tables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the findings of the study based on the objective. It also outlines the methods of presentation of the study findings and discussions.

RESPONSE RATES

A total of 333 questionnaires were distributed to students, and 302 of them were completed and returned. Simultaneously, a total of 15 principals and 22 teacher-counsellors were interviewed. The resulting response rates are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Response Rates

Respondents	Sampled Respondents	Those Who Participated	Achieved Return Rate (%)
Principals	18	15	83.3
Teacher-counsellors	27	22	81.5
Students	333	302	90.7
Total	**378**	**339**	**89.7**

Table 1 shows that principals registered a response rate of 83.3%, teacher-counsellors registered 81.5% as the response rate whereas students registered a response rate of 90.7%. On average, this yielded a response rate of 89.7%, which affirmed the assertions of Creswell (2014) that a response rate above 75.0% is adequate and of suitable levels to allow for the generalization of the outcomes to the target population.

Status of Academic Performance in Public Secondary Schools

The study sought to assess the status of academic performance in public secondary schools in Mbooni West Sub- County. The assessment was conducted by specifically examining the academic performance in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) from 2018 to 2022. The results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: KCSE Performance in Public Secondary Schools in Mbooni West Sub- County (Mean scores) between 2018 and 2022

KCSE Results in Mean Score (Points)	Years of Examination				
	2018 %	2019 %	2020 %	2021 %	2022 %
1-2.9 points (Poor)	40.2	43.5	44.2	47.3	48.9
3-4.9 points (Below Average)	36.9	35.1	34.9	33.5	32.5
5-6.9 points (Fair)	15.4	15.1	14.8	13.7	13.4
7-8.9 points (Good)	5.3	4.4	4.3	3.8	3.6
9-11.9 points (Excellent)	2.2	1.9	1.8	1.7	1.6

Table 2 shows that, on average, academic performance of students in national examinations (KCSE) has been on a decreasing trend ranging between 1 to 5 mean grades for the last five years (2018-2022). These findings corroborate the findings of a report by MoE (2022) that the performance of students in Mbooni West Sub- County in KCSE has been on a downward trend. Academic performance constitutes a key component of quality education offered in secondary schools and outcome indicators can be defined based on the extent to which outcome measures are connected to learning content. In other words, classroom evaluation through academic performance plays an important role in shaping views of educational quality in secondary schools. This further implies that academic performance is the outcome of quality education and the extent to which a student or secondary school has achieved their educational goals.

According to Rubin et al (2010), students' academic performance represents one of the essential building blocks for transparent secondary education systems and qualifications. Smith et al (2011) also noted that academic performance forms an important part of quality assurance approaches to secondary education and the reconsideration of such vital questions as to what, who, how, where and when to teach and assess. This affirms the fact that academic performance is a crucial tool for clarifying the results of learning for the students and students. It is evident that academic performance has been progressively decreasing in public secondary schools.

Situational Stress and Academic Performance in Public Secondary Schools

The study aimed to ascertain the degree to which situational stress impacts academic performance in public secondary schools. The results are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: Students' Views on the Influence of Situational stress on Academic Performance in Public Secondary Schools

Test Items	Ratings				
	SA %	A %	U %	D %	SD %
Students usually feel stressed with their family's socio-economic status, which has often reflected in their academic performance	57.9	9.5	4.0	23.8	4.8
Whenever students lose acceptance and status among their peers, they usually feel stressed to an extent to lowering their academic grades	61.1	7.9	5.6	22.2	3.2
Challenges which bedevil students' families on a daily basis have not increased their stress levels and affected their academic performance	38.9	8.7	1.6	41.3	9.5
Loss of students' relatives rarely occasion high levels of stress which hamper their academic progress	37.3	5.6	4.0	45.2	7.9
Students often get stressed whenever they revise for their examination owing to heavy workload thus lowering their academic grades	69.4	3.8	4.4	15.9	6.5

Source: Field Data (2013)

Table 3 reveals that 57.9% of the students strongly agreed with the view that they usually feel stressed with their family's socio-economic status, which has often reflected in their academic performance as did 9.5% who agreed, 4.0% were undecided, 23.8% disagreed whereas 4.8% strongly disagreed. Majority of the students (61.1%) strongly agreed that, whenever they lose acceptance and status among their peers, they usually feel stressed to an extent to lowering their academic grades with 7.9% being in agreement, 22.2% disagreed whereas 3.2% strongly disagreed. Table 3 shows that 38.9% of the students strongly agreed that challenges which bedevil their families on a daily basis have not increased their stress levels and affected their performance while 8.7% agreed, 41.3% disagreed whereas 9.5% strongly disagreed.

These findings are consistent with the findings of a study undertaken in India in which Singh et al (2017) revealed that situational depression among students in secondary schools stems from a struggle to come to terms with dramatic life changes from home environment to school settings or microsystems. According to Singh *et al* (2017), today, students are faced with new challenges in education calling for greater effort from students. These findings are indicative of the fact that there are heavy demands of education stakeholders on students to perform various roles, many of which are undefined, inconsistent and unachievable in the present socio-

cultural, economic and bureaucratic context of society, causing heavy stress on high school students. These findings also support the findings of a study carried out in Haiti by Shaw and Emery (2015) which revealed that situations such as cramming for an examination, socio-economic status and family issues at home cause worry or concern, which are forms of stress. The findings further support the findings of a study conducted in Kajiado North Sub-county by Preskilla (2020) which revealed that socio-economic conditions at home and the context of the children affect their reaction to life situations contribute to children's stress levels which, in turn, affects their level of academic performance. These findings affirm the fact that economic situations which students find themselves in, psychological challenges, prior academic performance, social and institutional factors as well as outcomes of the learning process contribute to their stress levels by placing demands on them to perform better in their future academic undertakings. Slightly more than a third (37.3%) of the students strongly agreed that loss of relatives rarely occasion high levels of stress which hamper their academic progress while 5.6% agreed, 45.2% disagreed whereas 7.9% strongly disagreed.

These findings corroborate the findings of a study undertaken in Paris, France in which Huesmann et al (2017) found that students experience situational stress when they are in a scary situation that they have no control over it and this could be an emergency, death of a relative or lack of school fee. Huesmann *et al* (2017) further revealed that such situations have had a negative influence on the academic performance of students. These findings indicate that death of a loved one often causes high-level stress to students. This has always made them miss classes and slow down on their academic undertakings. Majority (69.4%) of the students strongly agreed with the view that they often get stressed whenever they revise for their examination owing to heavy workload thus lowering their academic grades while 3.8% agreed, 15.9% disagreed whereas 6.5% strongly disagreed. These findings are consistent with the findings of a study conducted in Nigeria in which Nwoye et al found (2018) established that students get stressed up whenever they find themselves in situations of heavy academic workload and change of daily routine. Nwoye *et al* (2018) noted that a change of school routine such as dedicated homework time and a consistent sleep schedule makes it difficult for students to manage which leads to more stress.

These findings point to the fact that, while the general workload and stress are indeed linked, there is a substantial proportion of the cohort for whom these factors appear to be independent. In summary, these findings are indicative of the fact that situations which students find themselves in have a tendency of causing them stress which negatively affects how they take

part in their academic activities. In other words, students face situations which make them experience high stress levels. These range from academic stressors, isolation from peer groups, relationship problems, family challenges to socio-economic conditions at home.

These situations make students to develop to experience negative feelings, including worry, anger, frustration and sadness. To ascertain the influence of situational stress on academic performance, data were collected from teacher-counsellors of the 15 sampled public secondary schools on how often (Very Often = 5, Often = 4, Sometimes = 3, Rarely = 2 and Never = 1) situational factors stress students and academic performance in KCSE for the last five years (2018-2022). Results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: How Often Situational Factors Stress Students and Academic Performance in Public Secondary Schools

How Often Situational Factors Stress Students	Students' Completion Rates (Meanscores)				
	2018	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**
3	4.723	4.724	4.643	4.173	4.521
2	3.108	3.159	3.118	2.771	2.293
1	3.140	4.320	3.710	4.010	4.020
2	4.660	4.750	6.090	5.286	6.030
1	2.135	2.007	2.098	2.354	2.333
2	2.225	1.973	2.375	2.425	2.235
1	3.767	4.235	4.925	4.239	4.824
1	3.767	3.539	4.743	3.772	3.872
2	4.100	4.058	4.342	3.452	3.589
1	3.341	3.644	3.934	3.327	3.180
2	5.658	5.733	6.159	4.822	5.532
3	4.280	5.698	5.843	4.117	4.369
1	2.851	2.855	3.963	2.906	2.816
5	4.216	4.681	5.584	4.827	5.560
5	6.448	6.889	6.705	6.285	6.630

Table 4 shows that, in public secondary schools, where there are there are many situational factors which frequently causes stress among students, academic performance has been on a downward trend. This further indicates that different situations at school make students undergo stress in their daily academic activities which has led to low academic performance.

Inferential Analysis

The data mentioned above underwent Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Test Analysis, and the results are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5: Relationship between Situational Stress Students and Academic Performance in Public Secondary Schools

		X1	B	C	D	E	F
X1	Pearson Correlation	1	.631*	.627*	.567*	.631*	.605*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.012	.012	.028	.012	.017
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15
B	Pearson Correlation	.631*	1	.937**	.913**	.909**	.888**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.012		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15
C	Pearson Correlation	.627*	.937**	1	.918**	.914**	.885**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.012	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15
D	Pearson Correlation	.567*	.913**	.918**	1	.924**	.929**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.028	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15
E	Pearson Correlation	.631*	.909**	.914**	.924**	1	.986**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.012	.000	.000	.000		.000
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15
F	Pearson Correlation	.605*	.888**	.885**	.929**	.986**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.017	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Key: **X1**- How Often Situational Factors Stress Students; **B, C, D, E** and **F**-Students' Performance in KCSE (mean scores) for the Years 2018 to 2022 respectively.

The results of the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Test Analysis, as shown in Table 5, indicate a statistically significant positive correlation between situational stress among students and academic performance in public secondary schools. The correlation coefficients were r1 = 0.631, r2 = 0.627, r3 = 0.567, r4 = 0.631, and r5 = 0.605. The corresponding p-values were 0.012, 0.012, 0.028, 0.012, and 0.017, all of which were less than 0.05. These findings provide additional evidence that the low academic performance of students in public secondary schools is caused by situational stress that they frequently encounter during their daily academic activities.

Thematic Analysis

During the interviews, the principals and teacher-counsellors also expressed similar views that students usually feel stressed with their family's socio-economic status, which has often reflected in their academic performance. Principal, P1, noted;

> *In my secondary school, many students come from humble socio-economic backgrounds and this has often made them acceptance and status among their peers.*

Similar views were expressed by the teacher-counsellors who also stated that socio-economic challenges and status have often made many students develop high stress levels. Teacher-counsellor, TC1, noted;

> *Socio-economic status and challenges which confront students have often made lose self-esteem among their peers. They feel as though they do not belong. This has caused a lot of stress whose end results has been reduced academic activities among students as well as low performance in examinations.*

These views further indicate that economic situations which students find themselves in, psychological challenges, prior academic performance, social and institutional factors as well as outcomes of the learning process contribute to their stress levels by placing demands on them to perform better in their future academic undertakings. The interviewees also stated that loss of students' relatives rarely occasion high levels of stress which hamper their academic progress. Teacher-counsellor, TC2, stated;

> *Loss of a dear one is often traumatic and usually leaves the affected students devastated to a point where they sometimes miss school for several days or even quit altogether.*

These views further underscore the extent to which death of loss of a loved one affect participation of students in academic activities. On the question of students' workload, the interviewees also noted that students often get stressed whenever they revise for their examination owing to heavy workload thus lowering their academic grades. These mixed findings point to the fact that situations which students find themselves in have a tendency of causing them stress which negatively affects how they take part in their academic activities.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The study findings indicate that the academic performance of students in national examinations (KCSE) in public secondary schools in Mbooni West Sub- County has been consistently declining over the past five years (2018-2022).   Furthermore, it is apparent that various circumstances arise within public secondary schools that significantly burden students, ultimately resulting in a detrimental impact on their academic achievements.   These factors encompass the socio-economic status of the family, the experience of losing loved ones, and the amount of work one has to handle.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study reveals a concerning trend of declining academic performance in public secondary schools. One of the key findings is the significant positive correlation between situational stress and lower academic performance. This suggests that as stress levels among students increase, their academic achievements tend to suffer. Given the high response

rates from the various groups surveyed, these findings are likely to be representative and therefore call for urgent action. Strategies aimed at reducing situational stress among students could be a pivotal step towards improving academic performance in public secondary schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that students should learn how to manage situations which are likely to cause them high-level stress. The Ministry of Education should formulate a policy which demands that funds are allocated to activities which are geared towards reducing the impact of stress on students' academic activities. The study also recommends that educational institutions take a multi-faceted approach to address the issue of rising stress levels among students. This could include implementing stress management programs that focus on teaching coping mechanisms like mindfulness and relaxation techniques. Schools should also consider reducing academic pressure by reassessing homework load and exam scheduling. Furthermore, collaboration with parents and healthcare professionals is advised to offer a more comprehensive support network for students. By adopting these measures, the study suggests that it is possible to create a more conducive learning environment, which in turn could improve both the well-being and academic performance of students.

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