



Managing Anxiety During Transition to Boarding Secondary Schools: Coping Strategies among Adolescents in Rural Kenya

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Abstract: *The transition from primary to boarding secondary school is a critical developmental period for adolescents and is often accompanied by heightened anxiety due to academic, social, and environmental adjustments. In boarding schools, this transition is further complicated by separation from support systems, limited guidance and counselling services, and increased academic and social demands. Understanding how adolescents cope with transition-induced anxiety is essential for informing school-based psychosocial interventions. Guided by the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, the study used a convergent mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires administered to boarding secondary school students in Ainamoi Sub-County, Kericho County, Kenya, while qualitative data were obtained through structured interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using statistics, including means and standard deviations, whereas qualitative data were analysed thematically. Findings showed that although guidance and counselling departments existed in all sampled schools, they were understaffed and lacked professional capacity, and most schools had no structured transition programmes. Students reported moderate use of coping strategies ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.26$). Adaptive strategies, such as problem-focused planning, emotion-focused coping, social support, and spirituality, were predominant. However, maladaptive strategies, including denial, behavioural disengagement, self-blame, and substance use, were also evident, especially among students with limited psychosocial support. The study concludes that although adolescents show resilience through adaptive coping, inadequate institutional support heightens vulnerability to anxiety and maladaptive coping. Strengthening guidance and counselling services, implementing structured transition programmes, and promoting adaptive coping skills are essential for improving students' emotional well-being and adjustment during the transition.*

Keywords: *transition-induced anxiety, Coping strategies, Boarding secondary schools, Adolescents, Rural Kenya*

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1. Introduction

The transition from primary to secondary school represents a critical developmental period for adolescents, marked by increased emotional, social, and academic demands. This

transition often coincides with early adolescence, a stage characterised by rapid physical changes, heightened emotional sensitivity, evolving peer relationships, and increased vulnerability to anxiety and stress (Grills-Taquechel et al., 2010; Rice et al., 2011; Worsley et al., 2021). For learners entering boarding secondary schools,

the transition is particularly demanding due to simultaneous adjustments to separation from family, communal living, unfamiliar institutional routines, and increased academic expectations. These challenges necessitate effective coping strategies to facilitate successful adjustment and sustained academic engagement.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Boarding school environments present both opportunities and challenges for coping. While structured routines promote discipline, excessive rigidity may suppress autonomy and intrinsic motivation (Mugambi & Kigen, 2017). Examination-oriented teaching practices, particularly those focused on KCSE performance, have been associated with increased extrinsic motivation and heightened anxiety (Wambugu, 2015). Conversely, participation in co-curricular activities has been shown to enhance enthusiasm, social integration, and academic self-concept (Njoroge & Nyabuto, 2014).

Psychosocial support remains a critical gap in many Kenyan public boarding secondary schools. Over-enrolment following the 100 percent transition policy has resulted in overcrowding and strained institutional resources, limiting access to personalised guidance and counselling services (EMIS, 2019; Mutisya, 2020). Mwangi et al. (2020) reported that inadequate counselling services negatively affect learners' coping capacity and motivation, reinforcing the link between mental health and academic engagement. In such contexts, learners may increasingly rely on maladaptive coping strategies, including withdrawal, disengagement, and substance use (Ngema, 2021; Wanjiru, 2020).

1.2 The Objective of the Study

The objective of this study was to assess the coping strategies used by learners in boarding secondary schools to manage transition induced anxiety. Coping strategies refer to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural efforts individuals employ to manage internal or external demands perceived as stressful or overwhelming. During school transition, learners may adopt either adaptive or maladaptive coping strategies depending on personal resilience, social support, and institutional resources. Adaptive coping strategies—such as problem-solving, emotional regulation, seeking social support, and establishing routines—have been shown to buffer anxiety and promote resilience and positive adjustment (Stiehl et al., 2023). In contrast, maladaptive coping strategies, including avoidance, withdrawal, denial, and disengagement, may offer temporary emotional relief but

often exacerbate anxiety and hinder long-term academic engagement (Forsell & Åström, 2012; Chandra, 2021).

2. Literature Review

Global literature consistently highlights the importance of adaptive coping strategies in facilitating smooth school transition. Studies in Europe and North America indicate that learners with strong emotional regulation skills, self-confidence, effective communication abilities, and supportive peer relationships adjust more successfully to secondary school environments (Evangelou et al., 2008). Institutional support mechanisms—such as orientation programmes, peer mentoring, guidance and counselling services, and pastoral care—further reduce anxiety by increasing predictability and reducing uncertainty. However, many of these interventions are resource-intensive and may not be easily transferable to low-resource educational contexts, particularly in developing countries.

Problem-focused coping strategies, which involve actively addressing stressors through planning, help-seeking, and information gathering, are widely associated with positive adjustment outcomes. Studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that students who relied on problem-solving and social support experienced reduced academic stress and anxiety (Nagar, 2021). Similarly, access to guidance counsellors and academic advising has been shown to facilitate smoother transitions in well-resourced school systems (Brosnan et al., 2019; Ulenaers et al., 2021). However, these findings often assume the availability of institutional support structures that are not consistently present in under-resourced settings.

Emotion-focused coping strategies, aimed at regulating emotional responses rather than directly addressing stressors, are also common during school transition. Strategies such as humour, positive reframing, emotional expression, prayer, and mindfulness practices have been found to alleviate tension and enhance emotional awareness (Moynihan et al., 2021; Knabb et al., 2020). Nonetheless, scholars caution that not all emotion-focused strategies are adaptive. Excessive rumination, self-blame, and denial have been linked to increased anxiety and poor adjustment over time (Hickman et al., 2021). This distinction underscores the importance of guiding learners toward constructive emotional regulation strategies.

Social support consistently emerges as one of the most significant protective factors against transition-induced anxiety. Learners who receive emotional and instrumental support from peers, parents, teachers, and religious leaders report lower stress levels and better adjustment outcomes

(Mai et al., 2021; Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). Participation in co-curricular activities further enhances social integration and a sense of belonging. However, boarding school students may experience reduced access to family support during transition, increasing reliance on peer and institutional support systems.

African studies provide important contextual insights into how coping strategies are shaped by cultural norms, school climate, and institutional practices. In Nigeria, supportive teacher–student relationships have been found to foster adaptive coping and intrinsic motivation, while authoritarian teaching approaches undermine emotional adjustment (Akinola, 2014; Adeyemo, 2010). In Uganda, school belonging and peer acceptance strongly influenced learners’ coping strategies and emotional stability, particularly in boarding school contexts (Ssenyonga & Segawa, 2018). Similarly, studies in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe highlight the role of learner-centred pedagogies and assessment practices in shaping coping behaviours and motivation (Tadesse & Gillies, 2015; Mupa & Chinooneka, 2015).

Within the Kenyan context, empirical evidence indicates significant variability in coping strategies among secondary school learners. Maina (2016) found that learners employ avoidance, acceptance, and lifestyle adjustments to manage stress, with female learners more likely to seek social support. Wanga et al. (2017) reported that high-achieving learners tend to use problem-focused coping strategies, while low-achieving learners rely more on avoidance-based approaches. Teacher support and constructive feedback have been shown to enhance intrinsic motivation and adaptive coping (Chepchieng & Kiboss, 2016).

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) provide a useful framework for understanding how learners manage transition-induced anxiety. The model conceptualises stress as an interaction between the individual and their environment, involving primary appraisal of stressors and secondary appraisal of available coping resources. Based on these appraisals, learners adopt problem-focused or emotion-focused coping strategies. This framework is particularly relevant for examining how adolescents in boarding secondary schools evaluate transition-related stressors and select coping responses within resource-constrained environments.

Despite growing concern over adolescent mental health, empirical studies in Kenya have largely focused on academic performance and general school-related stress, with limited attention given to transition-induced anxiety

and coping strategies, particularly in rural boarding secondary schools. This gap limits the development of context-specific psychosocial interventions. The present study therefore seeks to examine the coping strategies used by adolescents to manage anxiety during the transition to boarding secondary school in Ainamoi Sub-County, Kericho County, Kenya, with the aim of informing responsive guidance and counselling practices and policy formulation.

3. Methodology

This study adopted convergent parallel mixed-methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and integrated to enhance understanding of adolescents’ coping strategies during transition to boarding secondary school (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative data examined the prevalence of transition-induced anxiety and patterns of coping, while qualitative data explored learners’ experiences and reasons for adopting specific coping strategies. Integration of findings enabled triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the results (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

The study was conducted in public boarding secondary schools in Ainamoi Sub-County, Kericho County, Kenya, purposively selected due to its rural-urban setting, high boarding enrolment, and limited guidance and counselling resources. The target population comprised Form Two students, who were in the early stages of boarding school adjustment. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed: eight schools were purposively selected, after which stratified, random sampling was used to select students by gender. For qualitative data, purposive sampling identified students with varied anxiety levels for interviews.

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire adapted from validated instruments assessing adolescent anxiety and coping strategies. The instrument was pilot-tested and achieved Cronbach’s alpha of 0.82, indicating good reliability. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework. Ethical approval was obtained from Kisii University, with additional permission from NACOSTI and the County Director of Education. Informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were strictly observed.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings on coping strategies used by boarding secondary school students to manage transition-induced anxiety. The discussion is organised thematically in line with the study's objective and integrates quantitative results, qualitative narratives, and relevant literature.

4.1 Coping strategies used to manage transition induced anxiety

The objective of the study was to ascertain the coping strategies employed by boarding secondary school students in Ainamoi Sub-County to manage transition-induced anxiety. Respondents were asked to indicate how often they engaged in a range of coping behaviors. The analysis of the average scores from the responses was carried out on a continuous scale. Scores below 1.5 were categorized as "rarely," scores between 1.5 and 2.4 were considered as "sometimes," scores between 2.5 and 3.4 were seen as "moderately," scores between 3.5 and 4.5 were interpreted as "most of the time," and scores above 4.5 were regarded as "always". Table 1 presents the study results.

Table 1 Coping strategies used to manage transition-induced anxiety (means and standard deviations)

Item No.	Item (short)	Mean	SD
1	Turn to work/activities to take mind off things	3.77	1.25
2	Concentrate efforts on doing something about the situation	3.75	1.18
3	Say to myself "this isn't real" (denial)	3.90	1.21
4	Getting emotional support from others	3.79	1.25
5	Give up trying to deal with it	3.70	1.31
6	Take action to try to make the situation better	3.71	1.27
7	Refuse to believe that it has happened (denial)	3.80	1.24
8	Let unpleasant feelings escape (venting)	3.66	1.27
9	Get help and advice from other people	3.59	1.42
10	Use alcohol or other drugs to get through it	3.84	1.28
11	Try to see it in a different, more positive light (reappraisal)	3.79	1.20
12	Criticize myself	3.78	1.17
13	Try to come up with a strategy about what to do (planning)	3.76	1.29
14	Get comfort and understanding from someone	3.53	1.33
15	Give up the attempt to cope (behavioural disengagement)	3.85	1.23
16	Look for something good in what is happening (positive search)	3.76	1.30
17	Make jokes about it (use humour)	3.93	1.11
18	Do something to think about it less (daydreaming/sleeping)	3.69	1.21
19	Accept the reality of the fact that it has happened (acceptance)	3.76	1.20
20	Express negative feelings (emotional expression)	3.90	1.30
21	Try to find comfort in religion/spiritual beliefs	3.58	1.39
22	Get advice/help from others about what to do (instrumental support)	3.93	1.15
23	Learn to live with it (adaptation)	3.79	1.33
24	Think hard about what steps to take (problem analysis)	3.58	1.26
25	Blame myself for things that happened (self-blame)	4.03	1.22
26	Pray or meditate	3.88	1.19
OVERALL MEAN AND SD		3.78	

Source: Research, 2025

The grand mean score of 3.78 indicates that, on average, learners reported using coping strategies to manage transition-induced anxiety "most of the time." This

suggests a relatively high level of active engagement in coping during the transition to boarding secondary school. The overall standard deviation of 1.26 reflects moderate

variability in responses, indicating individual differences in the frequency and type of coping strategies employed.

Collectively, these statistics demonstrate that coping is a salient and ongoing process for learners during the transition period, with most students regularly drawing on a range of strategies rather than relying on them occasionally. The moderate dispersion further implies that while coping is common across the sample, learners differ in the extent to which they depend on particular strategies, underscoring the need for differentiated psychosocial support within boarding school environments.

Table 1 shows that students report frequent use of a wide variety of coping strategies when managing transition-related stress. Mean scores cluster in the mid-3s to low-4s, indicating that most strategies were used “most of the time” to “always” by substantial subgroups of respondents. Patterns reveal a mix of adaptive (problem-focused, social support, cognitive reappraisal, acceptance, spirituality) and maladaptive/avoidant responses (denial, behavioural disengagement, self-blame, substance use). The coexistence of these strategies suggests that learners deploy multiple, sometimes contradictory, mechanisms as they negotiate the early boarding-school transition.

4.1.1 Problem-focused coping and planning

Problem-focused behaviours (planning, acting, concentrating efforts) are commonly reported (Items 2, 6, 13 with means ≈ 3.71 – 3.76). This profile implies active engagement with practical aspects of transition: reorganizing study habits, prioritizing tasks, and systematically addressing academic demands. High endorsement of planning and problem analysis indicates emerging self-regulation and agency among students—capacities that are theorized to reduce perceived uncontrollability and to foster adjustment. This is supported by a student:

“When I feel stressed about school, I try to plan what steps I will take to manage my studies and other responsibilities.”

A teacher-counsellor corroborated this emphasis on structuring responses:

“I often encourage students to break down their problems into smaller steps... set achievable goals.”

Collectively, these accounts align with literature linking problem-focused coping to improved adjustment and self-efficacy during school transitions. This pattern is strongly supported by empirical literature, which consistently demonstrates that problem-focused coping is among the most adaptive strategies during educational transitions. Evangelou et al. (2008) assert that students who actively engage in planning and problem-solving during transitions—such as moving from primary to secondary

school or adapting to boarding school environments—exhibit better academic adjustment, stronger self-efficacy, and lower levels of emotional distress. Similarly, Winga et al. (2017) found that learners who employed strategic coping approaches, including goal-setting and structured problem analysis, reported higher academic engagement and persistence despite transitional challenges.

Further empirical evidence from Brosnan et al. (2019) suggests that problem-focused coping enhances students’ sense of control over academic demands, thereby mitigating the negative psychological effects of uncertainty and novelty associated with transitions. Ulenaers et al. (2021) also reported that adolescents who actively sought solutions to academic challenges were more resilient and demonstrated more adaptive learning behaviors over time. In the Kenyan context, Ayiro et al. (2023) observed that students who were supported to develop structured study plans and problem-solving skills adjusted more effectively to boarding school environments.

Taken together, these studies corroborate the present findings by underscoring the protective role of problem-focused coping. Empirical literature suggests that such strategies not only address immediate stressors but also foster long-term academic competence and autonomy. Consequently, the findings support the integration of structured problem-solving and planning skills into school-based guidance and counselling programs to enhance students’ capacity to manage transition-induced stress effectively.

4.1.2 Emotion-focused strategies and affect regulation

Emotion-focused strategies, emotional expression, humour, positive reframing, and acceptance—also feature prominently. Items for emotional expression and reappraisal (Items 20 and 11; $M = 3.90$ and 3.79 respectively) indicate that learners actively regulate affect through both expressive and cognitive means. Humour (Item 17; $M = 3.93$) appears to be a salient short-term regulator that reduces tension and maintains social bonds.

“Sometimes I make jokes about difficult situations so that I don’t feel too overwhelmed.”

Empirical literature affirms that emotion-focused coping plays a critical role in regulating distress, particularly in situations where stressors are perceived as uncontrollable or unavoidable, such as major school transitions. Nicholls (2020) emphasizes that adolescents often experience heightened emotional reactivity during transitional periods, making emotion regulation strategies essential for psychological adjustment. Moynihan et al. (2021) further demonstrate that emotional expression and humour can reduce physiological stress responses and foster emotional

relief, especially in peer-dominated environments like schools.

Suhag et al. (2019) found that positive cognitive reappraisal framing stressful experiences in a more constructive light—was associated with reduced anxiety and improved academic motivation among secondary school students. Similarly, acceptance-based coping has been linked to emotional resilience, as it allows individuals to acknowledge stressors without excessive rumination or avoidance (Schmidt et al., 2020). Empirical studies also indicate that when emotion-focused strategies are combined with supportive social environments, their effectiveness increases substantially.

However, the literature cautions that emotion-focused coping alone may not resolve underlying academic or environmental stressors. Evangelou et al. (2008) argue that while emotional coping reduces immediate distress, it is most effective when complemented by problem-focused strategies. The present findings align with this perspective, suggesting that students use emotional coping as an initial regulatory mechanism rather than a sole solution. Overall, empirical evidence supports the adaptive value of emotion-focused coping during transitions, particularly as a short-term stress regulation strategy that preserves psychological well-being and enables continued engagement with academic demands.

4.1.3 Social support and instrumental help

Social support—emotional comfort, advice, and instrumental help—was widely used (Items 4, 9, 14, 22; means 3.53–3.93). Instrumental advice (Item 22) and emotional support (Item 4) in particular registered clearly as frequent strategies. Qualitative responses emphasise the centrality of peers, teachers and counsellors in providing reassurance, normalizing experience, and offering practical guidance. A student said:

“I feel better when I talk to my friends because they understand what I’m going through.”

This is affirmed by a counselor;

“Many students come to me when they feel lonely or stressed. Sometimes they just need someone to listen.”

These data underscore the buffering function of social networks in boarding contexts and indicate that school-based support is a primary resource for students navigating transition stress. This pattern is robustly supported by empirical literature, which consistently identifies social support as one of the most powerful protective factors during educational transitions. Mai, Wu, and Huang (2021) found that peer and teacher support significantly reduced anxiety and loneliness among students transitioning to new school environments. Similarly, Ngema (2021) reported that students who perceived their teachers as approachable

and supportive demonstrated better emotional adjustment and academic engagement in boarding schools.

Empirical studies further show that peer relationships play a central role in buffering stress during adolescence. Ayiro, Misigo, and Dingili (2023) emphasize that peer-based support systems foster a sense of belonging and normalize transitional challenges, thereby reducing feelings of isolation. Instrumental support—such as advice, reassurance, and practical assistance—has also been shown to enhance coping efficacy and adaptive functioning (Ulenaers et al., 2021).

Counsellor support is particularly critical for students experiencing heightened anxiety. Research indicates that access to professional counselling services during transitions facilitates emotional processing, adaptive coping, and early identification of maladaptive behaviors (Chandra, 2021). The present findings align with this literature, suggesting that students actively seek both emotional and instrumental support as part of their coping repertoire.

Overall, empirical evidence strongly validates the role of social support in mitigating transition-induced anxiety. The findings underscore the importance of strengthening peer mentoring programs, teacher responsiveness, and counselling services as integral components of school-based transition support frameworks.

4.1.4 Spirituality and meaning-focused coping

Spiritual practices and meaning-making (prayer/meditation, acceptance, looking for something good) were frequently endorsed (Items 26, 19, 16; means \approx 3.76–3.88). These strategies appear to provide emotional anchoring and cognitive reframing that helps students tolerate uncertainty and regain perspective.

“Praying helps me calm down and accept things I cannot change.”

In cultural contexts where religion is normative, spiritual coping is both accessible and potent as a resilience resource; it complements psychological supports by offering existential reassurance. Empirical literature, particularly within African and collectivist contexts, highlights the significance of spirituality as a culturally congruent and psychologically beneficial coping resource. Maina (2016) observed that spiritual practices provided adolescents with a sense of hope, emotional stability, and meaning during periods of uncertainty and change. Similarly, Knabb et al. (2020) found that faith-based coping enhanced resilience and emotional regulation among students facing academic and social stressors.

Schmidt et al. (2020) further argue that meaning-making processes help individuals reinterpret stressors as manageable challenges rather than overwhelming threats. In school contexts, spirituality often functions as both an individual and communal resource, offering comfort, moral guidance, and social connectedness. Empirical studies conducted in Kenyan and sub-Saharan African settings indicate that students frequently turn to prayer and spiritual reflection when confronted with stressors that exceed their perceived coping capacity (Ngema, 2021).

The present findings align with this body of literature by demonstrating that spiritual coping is not merely a passive response but an active meaning-regulation strategy. However, empirical evidence cautions that spiritual coping should complement, rather than replace, psychological and academic support systems. When integrated appropriately, spirituality enhances emotional endurance and supports adaptive adjustment. These findings suggest that school counselling programs should respectfully acknowledge and, where appropriate, integrate students' spiritual resources into holistic transition support strategies.

4.1.5 Avoidant and maladaptive responses

Several avoidant or maladaptive strategies were also reported at non-trivial rates: denial (Items 3 and 7; $M \approx 3.80-3.90$), behavioural disengagement/"giving up" (Items 5 and 15; $M \approx 3.70-3.85$), and distraction (Item 18; $M = 3.69$). Most concerning is the relatively high endorsement of substance use (Items 10: $M = 3.84$; Item 10 duplicate entries indicate notable prevalence). While some students may report experimental or occasional use, any resort to alcohol/drugs in response to transition stress warrants attention because of known risks for escalation and impairment.

"I keep myself busy so I don't have time to think about stressful things." (avoidance)

Avoidant strategies may confer immediate relief but typically impede emotional processing and long-term adaptation. Denial and disengagement were sometimes reported alongside problem-solving, suggesting that students oscillate between confronting and avoiding stress. Empirical literature consistently characterizes avoidance as a short-term stress management strategy that provides immediate emotional relief but poses significant long-term risks. Haighton et al. (2018) found that students who relied heavily on avoidance during transitions exhibited prolonged anxiety, reduced academic engagement, and delayed adjustment. Similarly, Barr and Copeland-Stewart (2022) reported that avoidance interferes with emotional processing and problem resolution, thereby exacerbating stress over time.

Dzicciolowska et al. (2021) argue that avoidance prevents individuals from developing effective coping skills,

leading to cyclical patterns of stress and disengagement. In school contexts, avoidance may manifest as excessive distraction, denial of challenges, or withdrawal from academic tasks. Empirical evidence suggests that while avoidance may temporarily reduce distress, it undermines long-term resilience and adaptive functioning.

The present findings align with this literature, indicating that although avoidance is commonly used, it represents a maladaptive coping trajectory if left unaddressed. Research emphasizes the importance of early psychoeducation to help students recognize the limitations of avoidance and transition toward more adaptive strategies. Consequently, the findings highlight the need for targeted counselling interventions that promote emotional awareness, problem-solving, and gradual exposure to stressors to counteract avoidant tendencies.

4.1.6 Substance-related coping

Noticeable endorsement of using alcohol/drugs to cope (use alcohol or other drugs to get through it) is worth attention as it has higher-than-expected mean of 3.84. These findings indicate concerning levels of substance-related coping among some students. Empirical literature unequivocally identifies substance use as a maladaptive coping strategy, particularly during adolescence. Haighton et al. (2018) and Barr and Copeland-Stewart (2022) report that substance use may initially numb distress but significantly increases the risk of dependency, academic decline, and mental health disorders. Adolescents who use substances to cope with stress are more likely to experience impaired judgment, reduced academic motivation, and social difficulties.

Empirical studies further demonstrate that transition periods heighten vulnerability to substance misuse due to increased stress and reduced supervision (Dzicciolowska et al., 2021). Chandra (2021) emphasizes that substance-related coping often co-occurs with other maladaptive strategies such as avoidance and self-blame, compounding psychological risk. In school settings, early substance use undermines both academic adjustment and psychosocial development.

The present findings align with this empirical evidence, underscoring the urgency of preventive interventions. Literature advocates for comprehensive school-based programs that integrate substance use education, coping skills training, and accessible counselling services. Early identification and referral are critical to mitigating long-term harm. These findings reinforce the need for proactive mental health and substance misuse prevention strategies within school transition support systems.

4.1.7 Self-blame and self-criticism

Self-blame (Item 25; $M = 4.03$) and self-criticism (Item 12; $M = 3.78$) are among the highest-scoring items, indicating a tendency for internal attribution of difficulties. Interviews and counsellor observations highlighted this pattern and its maladaptive consequences. A student reported:

“When things go wrong, I feel like it’s my fault.”

A counsellor confirmed:

“I notice that some learners blame themselves when things don’t go as expected... In counselling sessions, I help them understand that it’s normal to face difficulties.”

Excessive self-blame undermines self-efficacy, increases vulnerability to anxiety and depression, and reduces help-seeking. Its prominence points to an urgent need for cognitive reappraisal and attributional retraining within school counselling programmes. Empirical literature consistently associates self-blame with heightened anxiety, depressive symptoms, and reduced help-seeking behavior. Chandra (2021) found that adolescents who internalized responsibility for stressors beyond their control experienced prolonged psychological distress. Hickman et al. (2021) similarly reported that self-blame undermines self-esteem and interferes with adaptive coping during school transitions.

Attribution theory-based studies suggest that maladaptive internal attributions for stressors weaken motivation and resilience. Empirical evidence indicates that cognitive restructuring and attributional retraining significantly reduces self-blame and improve emotional adjustment (Nicholls, 2020). The present findings align with this literature, highlighting self-blame as a critical risk factor for poor adjustment.

Overall, the literature emphasizes the importance of counselling interventions that target maladaptive cognitions, promote self-compassion, and encourage realistic attribution of stressors. Addressing self-blame is essential for fostering healthy coping and preventing escalation of anxiety during school transitions.

The data indicates that students typically employ multiple strategies concurrently: active problem solving and planning, affect regulation through social and spiritual supports, use of humour and positive reframing, but also avoidance, substance use, and self-blame. This mixed repertoire is developmentally plausible—early adolescents experiment with coping and increasingly rely on social and institutional scaffolding. Importantly, the presence of adaptive strategies (planning, seeking help, reappraisal) alongside maladaptive ones suggests leverage points for intervention: strengthening adaptive skills may reduce reliance on avoidance and self-criticism.

The findings of the present study yield several important implications for educational practice, particularly for schools seeking to support students during the transition to secondary school. Given the demonstrated interplay between transition-induced anxiety, coping strategies, and intrinsic academic motivation, interventions should be proactive, developmentally sensitive, and embedded within routine school structures rather than offered solely as remedial responses.

First, there is a clear need to strengthen early orientation and skills training during the initial phase of school entry. The evidence that many students rely on planning and active problem-solving suggests that structured support in these areas can be strategically leveraged to enhance adjustment and reduce stress associated with unfamiliar academic demands. Schools should therefore embed systematic instruction in study skills, time management, goal setting, and problem-solving within the first term curriculum. Such early interventions can capitalise on students’ existing motivational resources while simultaneously mitigating uncertainty and cognitive overload, thereby promoting a smoother academic and psychological transition.

Second, the expansion of accessible counselling and group-based support is essential. Routine small-group counselling sessions and psychoeducational programs can provide safe spaces for students to process transition-related stress, normalize emotional responses, and develop adaptive cognitive and emotional coping strategies. In particular, targeted interventions should address maladaptive patterns such as self-blame by promoting realistic attribution styles and cognitive reappraisal. By helping students reinterpret challenges as manageable and developmentally normative, counselling services can prevent the escalation of anxiety and sustain intrinsic motivation.

Third, the findings underscore the importance of monitoring and preventing substance-related coping. Schools should implement early screening mechanisms and evidence-based harm-reduction programs to identify at-risk students. Preventive efforts should be complemented by the promotion of healthy alternatives for emotion regulation and distraction, including physical activity, creative arts, and supervised extracurricular engagement. Providing structured and meaningful outlets for stress reduces the likelihood that students will resort to maladaptive coping behaviors.

In addition, schools should deliberately leverage peer and spiritual resources. Formal peer-buddy or mentoring systems can enhance social belonging, reduce isolation, and provide practical guidance during adjustment. In culturally diverse contexts, collaboration with pastoral and spiritual care teams is equally important. Integrating

culturally congruent spiritual coping strategies with psychological support can enhance meaning-making and emotional resilience while respecting students' belief systems.

Finally, there is a need for targeted teacher training in supportive pedagogy. Teachers play a central role in shaping students' cognitive and emotional interpretations of academic challenges. Professional development should therefore emphasise classroom practices that normalize difficulty, reinforce mastery-oriented learning, and model adaptive coping strategies. Such practices can reduce students' tendency to internalise failure, foster self-efficacy, and sustain intrinsic academic motivation.

Collectively, these practice implications highlight the importance of a whole-school, preventive approach to transition support—one that integrates academic skills development, psychological support, social connectedness, and culturally responsive care to promote both wellbeing and sustained motivation.

The coping profile observed in Table 1 suggest a mixture of problem-focused actions (planning, taking action, problem analysis), emotion-focused responses (reappraisal, humour, emotional expression), social/instrumental support, meaning-making (spirituality, acceptance), alongside notable avoidant and self-directed strategies (denial, behavioural disengagement, self-blame, substance use) and emphasized by qualitative output is readily interpretable through the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. From this perspective, coping is the central mechanism that mediates the effect of appraisal on outcomes: primary appraisal determines whether the school transition is experienced as threat or challenge, while secondary appraisal gauges perceived resources and thereby shapes strategy selection (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused and instrumental support observed in the sample reflect appraisals of controllability and resource adequacy and are therefore theoretically expected to reduce perceived uncontrollability and protect intrinsic motivation. Conversely, denial, behavioral disengagement and substance-related coping are consistent with appraisals of low resource availability or overwhelming threat; such responses may provide short-term relief but, according to the transactional view, tend to sustain distress and erode the autonomy and competence beliefs that underpin intrinsic academic motivation.

Attentional Control Theory complements this appraisal account by clarifying the cognitive consequences of the different coping repertoires and how they impact motivation in practice (Eysenck et al., 2007). ACT predicts that anxiety biases attention toward stimulus-driven processes (worry, threat vigilance) and reduces processing efficiency; in this light, problem-focused behaviors,

routinization, and instrumental support operate to reduce extraneous threat cues and cognitive load, thereby preserving top-down, goal-directed control and enabling sustained intrinsic engagement. Emotion-regulation strategies (reappraisal, humor, social comfort) reduce immediate affective interference and can indirectly restore attentional control, but when relied on exclusively they do not eliminate task-relevant demands and may leave stimulus-driven distractibility unaddressed. Maladaptive responses (avoidance, substance use, self-blame) are especially problematic under ACT because they prolong intrusive cognitions or introduce further cognitive impairment, increasing the compensatory effort required to maintain performance; accordingly, even when intrinsic motivation remains high, these strategies exact a cognitive cost that risks eventual depletion of the resources necessary for sustained academic engagement.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined coping strategies used by boarding secondary school students to manage transition-induced anxiety, with particular attention to the role of institutional resources and individual coping mechanisms. The findings demonstrate that students actively employed a range of coping strategies during the transition to boarding school, with adaptive strategies such as problem-focused planning, emotion-focused regulation, social support, and meaning-making predominating. These strategies enabled learners to manage academic demands, regulate emotional distress, and adjust socially within the boarding school environment.

However, the study also revealed that limited institutional support—particularly understaffed guidance and counselling departments, inadequate professional expertise, and the absence of structured transition programmes—constrained the effectiveness of adaptive coping strategies. In such contexts, some students resorted to maladaptive coping mechanisms, including denial, behavioural disengagement, self-blame, and, in a few cases, substance use. These maladaptive responses were associated with heightened anxiety and poorer psychosocial adjustment, underscoring the interaction between individual coping capacities and the availability of supportive school resources.

Overall, the study highlights that successful adjustment to boarding school is not solely dependent on students' personal resilience but is significantly shaped by the institutional environment within which coping occurs. Strengthening school-based support systems—through structured orientation programmes, adequately staffed

counselling services, peer mentoring initiatives, and the promotion of adaptive coping skills—has the potential to enhance students’ emotional well-being, academic engagement, and long-term adjustment. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on adolescent school transitions and underscore the need for contextually responsive, resource-sensitive interventions to support learners during this critical developmental period.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends:

1. Strengthening guidance and counselling services in rural boarding schools by increasing staffing, enhancing professional training, and ensuring accessibility to all students. This would enable timely identification of students at risk and promote individualized psychosocial support
2. Implementing structured transition programs to guide students through the early stages of boarding school life. Such programs should include orientation sessions, study skills workshops, and social integration activities to reduce transition-induced anxiety
3. Promoting adaptive coping skills and peer mentoring, enabling students to learn effective problem-solving, emotion regulation, and social support strategies. Peer mentoring programs can serve as a sustainable support system, complementing formal counselling services,
4. Prioritizing psychosocial support in rural schools by integrating mental health awareness, stress management training, and culturally relevant strategies such as spirituality and meaning-making into the school curriculum. This approach would enhance resilience, emotional well-being, and academic outcomes
5. In conclusion, the study underscores the importance of comprehensive, context-sensitive support systems in rural Kenyan boarding schools. By addressing resource gaps and strengthening both formal and informal support mechanisms, schools can enhance students’ adaptive coping, reduce maladaptive behaviours, and foster holistic development during the critical transition from primary to secondary education.

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