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How Does Gender Relate to Interpersonal Skills? Exploring Differences in Interpersonal Skills among Primary School Pupils

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The current study examined gender differences in interpersonal skills among standard four primary education pupils. Interpersonal skill is a crucial ability that contributes to positive development among primary school pupils. This quantitative research was conducted in the public primary schools of Babati Township Council, Manyara region. The study randomly involved 340 standard four primary school pupils from 17 purposely selected schools (ten boys and ten girls from each school) and their class teachers who were also purposely selected. The assessment tool for pupils was adopted from the MESSY-II (Matson Evaluation of Social Skills with Youngsters –II) to assess interpersonal skills among the selected pupils. T-test was used to test the differences between girls and boys concerning the possession of interpersonal skills. The findings show no significant statistical difference between boys and girls possessing interpersonal skills. This is reflected in both the 'means' and 'p-values'. This study concludes that interpersonal skills are vital for them to prosper academically. Having no significant difference between boys and girls, the study deviates from a body of literature that signifies the difference between the two.

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INTRODUCTION

The educational system today aims at preparing children for life in the 21st century. Foreseeing the knowledge necessary for the youngsters at the age they will live is important. Therefore, it is essential to enable children to master interpersonal skills in a successful way and develop certain abilities. To meet social development as a social being, an individual must be familiar with the norms, rules and values of the society where s/he lives, as well as master the skills necessary for him/her to achieve effective interaction within that society. A man who succeeds in this is socially adapted and competent, and so are children who have succeeded (Selimovic, 2009).

Enhancing harmonious social relationships with other people is a skill that has to be prepared from the early years of a person's life (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2010). However, this skill is not just a theoretical concept that can be conveyed through teaching and guidance, but rather a practical skill that a person has to learn through interactions with others and forming relationships with others. Interpersonal skills have become an important aspect in realizing children's activities and social values.

According to Dubrin (2014), an interpersonal skill can be defined as any competence that facilitates interaction and communication with others where social regulations and relations are made, communicated, and changed in verbal and nonverbal ways. The process of learning these skills is known as socialization. For socialization to occur, interpersonal skills are central to relate to each other. These skills in an educational environment include effective communication, social, professional ethics, problem-solving, decision-making, and organizational skills that are required in the adventure of education to facilitate children's learning. Therefore, interpersonal skills are the abilities and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behavior (Dubrin, 2014). They involve various social, communication and adaptive skills.

Children naturally learn many interpersonal skills through interactions with peers (Dinh, 2019). Being skilled in social situations provides several benefits. For example, children with strong interpersonal skills are likely to make friends easily, positively affecting mental health. On the other side, children who struggle with interpersonal skills can have few or no friends, which can have a negative effect on their well-being into adulthood. In any case, interpersonal skills become increasingly essential as children grow older. In addition, strong interpersonal skills during childhood may predict success in adulthood (Gresham & Elliot, 1990). Children's future earning ability is increasingly likely to be determined by whether or not they possess these soft skills, rather than just their exam performance. Full potential in schools must encompass academics and soft skills that are foundational to many life benefits (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2010).

One of the most important aims of primary education is to assist children in adapting to social life healthily. The foundations of the socialization process, starting at birth and lasting as long as the person survives, are laid down during the primary education ages (Kotluk & Kocakaya, 2018). Primary school pupils acquire many interpersonal skills from their parents, peers, close environment and teachers. Interpersonal skills are an important part of the socialization process among pupils. It affects their manner of interacting, communicating, and behaving toward others. These skills are critical for the future survival of pupils, who will continue developing to overcome different conflicts that occur in the community and learn from actual situations. The possession of the knowledge, understanding, and skills to engage in social relationships is necessary for everyone (Dinh, 2019; Kotluk & Kocakaya, 2018). In addition to improving pupils' social relationships, interpersonal skills are important for their academic and non-academic endeavors. So, any pupils with problems related to a lack of social intelligence need to be

guided through a process to improve their interpersonal skills.

Furthermore, primary school pupils go through the process of socialization as a feature of the development period, where they start to uncover the rules of companionship and act according to those rules. At this period, pupils share the same environment with their classmates and get involved in everyday activities with their peers. Thus, interpersonal skills become the essential cornerstones of their social relationships in future (Kotluk & Kocakaya, 2018). Pupils with interpersonal skills are able to communicate, solve problems, make decisions, and express themselves effectively. However, pupils with limited interpersonal skills can have behavioral disorders such as lack of confidence, failure at school, shyness, and violent conduct. Thus, the objective of this study is to find out any gender differences in the possession of interpersonal skills.

CURRENT STUDY

The present study is based on teacher ratings of interpersonal skills among the selected pupils. Although studies have indicated that interpersonal skills development is similar for both boys and girls, evidence of gender differences in the level of interpersonal skills is noticeable; regardless of an informant, boys seem to get significantly lower mean ratings than girls (Sorlie et al., 2020).

According to Merrell and Gimpel (2014), boys are likelier to display poor interpersonal skills than girls. Many educational research studies have investigated the mechanisms underlying such differences (Voyer & Voyer, 2014), but research has not fully addressed the relationship between interpersonal skills and gender differences. Gender intensification theory contends that understanding the importance of interpersonal skills may correlate with gender. It suggests that children develop various mindsets in relation to their abilities because of their exposure to societal norms (Priess-Groben & Lindberg, 2016). For example, observing

interactions among family and peers may teach girls that their ability to establish relationships and maintain a positive reputation among peers is more essential than boys.

In a study of elementary school children in the United States, Diprete and Jennings (2012) found that girls have higher interpersonal skills. In Uganda, Chioda et al. (2021) show that graduates from interpersonal-skill intensive training secondary schools were more likely to graduate and female graduates were also more likely to be enrolled in or to have completed tertiary education.

However, researchers in non-western countries have not examined this topic significantly. Tanzania is one of the nations where research on assessing children's social behavior, particularly, is limited. Examining interpersonal skills across cultures may help provide a universally agreed-upon definition of the construct in the professional community. Thus, it is essential to study the interpersonal skills of Tanzanian girls and boys in a school environment because it is where they spend much of their daytime and display several behaviors.

METHODS

The study investigated gender differences in the possession of interpersonal skills among public primary school pupils. The aim was to provide an informed information based on the possession of interpersonal skills, which form a good foundation for acquiring other skills, including academic skills. This section outlines the methodological processes that were employed in this study.

Variables: the study variable were;

- Independent Variable: Gender
- Dependent Variable: interpersonal skills

Research Approach and Design

The study utilized quantitative research. The researcher opted for this approach alongside descriptive design because quantitative researches

produce objective data that can be clearly communicated through statistics and numbers. To understand and derive meanings from the participants, the study found the need to gather responses in a manner that preserves authenticity and meaning.

Study Area

This study was conducted in Babati Township Council, Manyara region. The Council comprises eight wards: Bagara, Babati, Bonga, Nangara, Singe, Sigino, Maisaka and Mutuka. There were 30 primary schools, 12 Secondary schools and The Open University of Tanzania as educational institutions in the Council. The area was randomly selected because interpersonal skills are universal and thus, they could be studied everywhere.

Study Population

The population was to be defined appropriately to avoid ambiguity about whether a given unit belongs to the population. This study's population comprised all standard four pupils in Manyara region. However, due to the survey requirements, the Babati Township Council public primary schools' students, representing the remaining district councils, were selected to participate in the study.

Selection of Participants

Six wards of Babati Township were randomly selected from the two divisions. Six schools were sampled from Bagara Ward, three from Maisaka Ward, and two from each of the wards to form research units. Thus, a sample of 17 schools was selected. A stratified random sampling technique guided the selection of pupils. To get a representation by gender, the pupils were first sat in groups composed of boys and girls. A simple random sampling procedure without replacement was, thereafter, employed to recruit pupils from each sampled school to avoid inconsistencies attached to the random sampling technique with placement. Three hundred forty pupils were recruited to participate in this study; twenty from

each selected school (ten boys and ten girls). Class teachers were purposely selected to play the parents/guardians role.

Data collection

Data were collected from the selected pupils using the interpersonal skills assessment tool for pupils that was adopted from the Matson Evaluation of Social Skills with Youngsters– (II MESSY-II). MESSY-II is among the most widely used self-report scale to measure social skills developed by Matson, Rotatori and Helsel (1983). The MESSY-II is an interpersonal skills measure for a broad range of children, ages 2–16, based on observations of both appropriate and inappropriate social behaviors. The scale has one parent/caregiver report form, where class teachers were requested to fill in this study. The MESSY-II has 64 items, each rated on a Likert-type rating scale from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("very much").

However, only six items (behaviors) relevant to school development were selected for this study. The interest was to determine how participants differed in these behaviors: communication, cooperation, self-control, self-management, engagement and assertion. A reliability analysis was carried out on these items. Cronbach's alpha showed that the tool had reached an acceptable reliability (internal consistency) of 0.81; thus, the items appeared worthy of retention.

Data Analysis

Data analysis started in the field and continued throughout the research. Data were collected using paper-based tools (questionnaires) and entered into SPSS immediately after fieldwork. Data were then transferred from SPSS to STATA for cleaning and analysis. Apart from descriptive analysis for demographic variables and some visualization, the T-Test was used to test the differences between girls and boys concerning the possession of interpersonal skills. Mathematically, the t-test takes a sample from each of the two sets and establishes the problem statement by assuming the null hypothesis

that the two means/ratios are equal or there is no difference between the two groups.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Many standard four pupils (131) in the studied 17 schools were ten years of age. This follows the Tanzanian Education and Training Policy (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2014), which requires pupils to start primary education at the maximum age of seven years. According to the ETP (URT, 2014), seven years is ideal for a child to start standard one.

The findings on gender differences in the possession of interpersonal skills are based on the results of T-Test testing for equality of the mean between boys and girls. In Table 1, column (1) describes the variable used in each row. Columns (2) to (4) provide the observations, mean and standard deviation for boys. Columns (5) to (7) give the observation, mean and standard deviation for girls, respectively. Column (8) provides the p-value associated with the equality test of the two means for boys and girls.

Table 1: Differences in interpersonal skills between boys and girls

Variables	Boys			Girls			p-value
	N	Mean	Std Dev	N	Mean	Std Dev	
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Communicating	163	4.0736	0.5617	177	4.0791	0.6695	0.9352
Cooperation	163	4.2147	0.6549	177	4.1977	0.6912	0.8166
engagement	163	4.0368	0.7018	177	3.9661	0.7680	0.3774
Self-management	163	3.9264	0.9133	177	3.9266	0.9109	0.9986
Assertion	163	3.9448	0.9891	177	3.8531	1.0174	0.4008
Self-control	163	3.8282	0.8210	177	3.9096	0.7559	0.3419

The findings show no statistical difference between boys and girls in the possession of interpersonal skills. This is reflected in both the 'means' and 'p-values'. The p-values in all the six variables tested against boys and girls were more outstanding than 0.05. This suggests the acceptance of a null hypothesis that there was no difference in the possession of interpersonal skills between boys and girls.

Interpersonal skill, as one of the areas of human social behavior, is one of the most extensively studied construct. Recently, more and more importance has been placed on educational research on the study of the development of interpersonal skills. Social capability is increasingly recognized as essential to school readiness (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). It is found that socially competent pupils are more successful in schools than their less skilled peers in developing positive attitudes towards school and adjusting to school. The findings of the current study are consistent with limited scholarly

works. Ahhirao (2023) surveyed gender differences in socio-emotional skills and found no significant gender disparity in interpersonal adequacy, communication skills, or adequacy.

These findings, however, differ from a convenient number of studies. For instance, Gresham and Elliott (1990) conducted a study to examine differences in the interpersonal skills, problem behaviors and academic performance of Iranian kindergarten children. The study assessed children using the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) Teacher and Parent Questionnaire. They revealed gender to be the most important characteristic of the child linked with differences in interpersonal skills. They came up with separate norms for boys and girls in the SSRS standardization study. Girls were rated higher on the interpersonal skills subscales, whereas boys were rated higher on the problem behaviors factor. The findings further showed that female Iranian kindergarteners were rated as having

higher cooperation, assertion, responsibility, self-control, and total social skills (Abdi, 2010).

More evidence suggests that girls are rated higher on interpersonal skills measures. DiPrete and Jennings (2012) studied a teacher-rated social and behavioral skills latent factor (as measured by approaches to learning, self-control, and interpersonal skills) in kindergarten, first, third, and fifth grade. They used data from the Early Child Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS–K:1999). The findings showed that girls are rated as having moderately higher interpersonal and behavioral skills ratings in kindergarten (Caemmerer & Keith, 2015; Welsh et al., 2001; Wentzel, 1991).

Several factors can be attributed to the existing gender differences in interpersonal skills. Disparities in the way genders are socialized by adults and caregivers, as well as in self-regulatory behaviors, have been proposed to account for individual disparities in interpersonal skills at the aggregate level. Either mechanisms may explain gender differences in the interaction- and convention-driven aspects of interpersonal skills and the control- and organization-driven aspects of learning-related interpersonal skills.

From a social angle, gender disparities in interpersonal skills may be explained by the gender socialization process elaborated within social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). Once children exist within a gender group, reinforcement from adults and peers is differentially applied when child behaviors conform to gender-based expectations. At the adult level, teachers may hold gender-typed expectations wherein girls and boys get different feedback about appropriate behavior in the classroom (Koch, 2003).

Differences in self-regulatory behaviors, which are also socially attributed and contextually shaped, may also serve to explain gender-related differences in interpersonal skills. The ability to monitor, inhibit, and direct one's attention and behavior

(Gathercole & Pickering, 2000) substantially overlaps with the self-regulatory skills conceptualized as executive function. They may also act as an essential explanation for girls' higher ratings of interpersonal skills. Matthews et al. (2009) studied self-regulatory behaviors using both indirect (teacher rating scale; Child Behavior Rating Scale) and direct observational measures (Head-Toes-Knees-Shoulders (HTKS) task) in a sample of 268 kindergarteners. Girls outsmarted boys on both self-regulation measures, with more evident differences found with the more objective HTKS measure. Furthermore, more considerable variation was found for boys on the HTKS measure, primarily due to a higher frequency of scores in the low range. The participants' young age and consistency of results across indirect and direct measures provide additional support for gender disparities in the self-regulatory components of interpersonal skills.

The finding that females are rated higher in interpersonal skills than males is also evident in other research (Caemmerer & Keith, 2015; DiPrete & Jennings, 2012; Welsh et al., 2001). Given that girls, on average, demonstrate fewer academic and behavioral problems than boys, particularly during the early years of schooling (Hamre & Pianta, 2001), the higher ratings for girls may reflect a teacher bias in interpersonal skills ratings. For instance, given that teachers have been shown to interact more positively with academically capable students (Brophy & Good, 1970), teachers may rate those students perceived to be more behaviorally compliant and academically competent to be higher in interpersonal skills. Further, positive interactions between teachers and students may improve student engagement naturally and, thus, elicit more prosocial student behaviors. However, it is a fact that more competent interpersonal skills enhance classroom performance. In support, DiPrete and Jennings (2012) showed in the ECLSK: 1999 sample that the higher interpersonal skills ratings recorded for girls were an explanation, not a result, of better teacher-rated academic skills for girls. This

is because they showed more academic engagement and work completion behaviors.

Methodological differences and sample characteristics between the current study and past research may also explain some of the different findings despite some overlap. While the current study sample may provide insight into interpersonal skills development within a rural-based situation, this may have affected some gender-specific findings.

CONCLUSION

Growth models of social skills in school-age children support evidence of gender differences in interpersonal competence across development. This study concludes that interpersonal skills are essential for youngsters to prosper academically. However, this study did not find any significant difference in interpersonal skills between boys and girls, deviating from a body of literature that signifies the difference between the two.

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