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Keywords: Bereavement, coping strategies, academic achievement, correlational survey, secondary school students.

Bereavement, Coping Strategies and Academic Achievement of Secondary School Students in Nigeria's Owerri Education Zone, Imo State

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between bereavement, coping strategies and academic achievement of secondary school students in Owerri Education Zone, Imo State. The study adopted a correlational survey design. The population comprised 620 bereaved secondary school students drawn from 12 public secondary schools in the zone, from which a sample of 240 students was drawn using purposive and simple random sampling techniques. Two research questions guided the study, and two null hypotheses were tested at the .05 level of significance. Data were collected using the Bereavement, Coping Strategies and Academic Performance Questionnaire (BCAPQ), a 20-item four-point Likert-scale instrument validated by three experts and yielding Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients of .77, .80 and .83 for its three sections. Data were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMC). Findings revealed a significant negative relationship between bereavement and students' academic achievement, and a significant positive relationship between students' coping strategies and their academic achievement. Based on the findings, it was recommended, among other things, that schools institute structured grief-support and counselling programmes and that guidance counsellors train bereaved students in adaptive coping strategies to safeguard academic performance.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a developmental stage already marked by emotional and social upheaval, and the death of a parent, sibling, or other close relative can compound this instability considerably. Bereavement, understood as the state of having lost a loved one through death, exposes secondary school students to grief reactions that include sadness, withdrawal, anger, difficulty concentrating, and diminished motivation for schoolwork (Agulanna and Nwachukwu, 2017). In the Nigerian context, and particularly in the South east, North Central and Nothwest, students are increasingly exposed to bereavement through insecurity-related violence, road accidents, illness, and other causes of parental or sibling death, placing a growing number of learners at risk of grief-related academic disruption (Izuabga, Ahamefula, and Onah, 2024 ; Tukur and Idris, 2025).

Bereavement is the objective state of having lost someone significant through death, distinct from grief, which is the emotional response to that loss (Ajokpanivo, 2017). Among adolescents, bereavement can manifest as intrusive thoughts about the deceased, difficulty concentrating on schoolwork, sleep disturbance, and social withdrawal, all of which can interfere directly with classroom engagement and academic performance (Izuabga, Ahamefula, and Onah, 2024). How a bereaved student adjusts to loss is shaped considerably by the coping strategies available to them. Coping strategies refer to the cognitive and behavioural efforts individuals employ to manage the emotional, psychological and practical demands imposed by a stressful event (Ibe and Adaeze, 2019). Students who draw on adaptive strategies, such as seeking social support, engaging in problem-focused coping, or reframing the loss positively, tend to sustain their academic functioning better than those who rely on avoidance or withdrawal (Chukwuma, 2022). Academic achievement, the outcome of interest in this study, refers to the measurable level of a student's attainment in school subjects, typically reflected in test scores, continuous assessment records, and examination results.

Although guidance and counselling units exist in most Nigerian secondary schools, bereavement support is rarely delivered as a structured, evidence-informed intervention. Establishing the strength and direction of the relationships among bereavement, coping strategies, and academic achievement can therefore help counsellors and school administrators design more targeted support for grieving students. It is against this backdrop that this study investigated the relationship between bereavement and academic achievement, and the relationship between

coping strategies and academic achievement, among secondary school students in Owerri Education Zone, Imo State.

This study was anchored on Kubler-Ross's (1969) Stages of Grief Model and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. Kubler-Ross's model conceptualizes grief as unfolding through stages, including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, which helps explain the fluctuating academic engagement often observed in bereaved students as they move through these stages. Lazarus and Folkman's model complements this by framing coping as a dynamic transaction between the individual and the stressor, in which the coping strategies a student adopts shape the ultimate impact of the stressor, in this case bereavement, on functioning, including academic functioning. Together, the two models support the proposition that both the experience of bereavement and the coping strategies employed in response to it can be expected to relate meaningfully to academic achievement. Rodger (2022) documented thirteen bizarre beliefs about death that reflect historical, cultural and superstitious understandings of dying and burial practices. One of such beliefs is the placing of coins on the eyes of the deceased, a practice that dates back to ancient Greece where it was believed that the dead had to cross the river Styx to reach Hades and therefore needed to pay the boat driver Charon, so coins were placed over the eyes to enable payment upon arrival. On a more practical note, coins were used to weigh down the eyelids because many people die with their eyes open, which was considered unsettling and was thought to allow the dead to beckon the living to follow them, with coins being round, fitting into the eye sockets and heavy enough to keep the eyes closed until rigor mortis set in. A notable example of this practice is the two silver half-dollars placed on Abraham Lincoln which are now displayed in the Chicago Historical Museum. Another belief associates birds with death, as birds were long regarded as messengers to the afterlife due to their ability to soar to the homes of the gods, leading to myths that hearing an owl hoot one's name or seeing ravens and crows circling a house, striking a window, entering a house or perching on a windowsill signified impending death, although vultures remain the birds most commonly associated with death. Rodger further noted the tradition of burying the dead facing east, which explains why most cemeteries are laid out on an east-west grid with headstones on the west and feet pointing east, based on the belief that the dead should be able to see the new world rising in the east like the sun, which is also why people are buried on their backs rather than in a fetal position. Closely related is the practice of removing a corpse feet first, which was taught as a standard procedure in coroner training and originated from Victorian times when it

was thought that if a corpse was taken out head first, it could look back and beckon those behind to follow. Beyond superstition, it is also considered a sign of respect and is practically easier for handling a body in rigor, as it allows bending at the knees to navigate corners. Another common practice is covering mirrors in the vicinity of a dead body to prevent the soul from being reflected back while attempting to leave the body for the afterlife, a tradition strongly held in Jewish mourning that also serves to prevent vanity among mourners and compel them to focus on remembering the departed. The custom of stopping clocks at the time of death was believed to signify that time had ended for the deceased and that the clock should not be restarted until burial, and if the head of the household died, the clock was never to be started again. The appearance of flowers on graves has also been imbued with meaning, as naturally growing wildflowers were interpreted as a sign that the deceased had been good and had gone to heaven, while a barren and dusty grave suggested evil and descent to Hades. This belief evolved into the practice of placing artificial flowers on graves, though it is now discouraged in many cemeteries for maintenance reasons, while wreaths on caskets originally served the practical purpose of masking the odor of decomposition with scented flowers. Rodger also highlighted the belief that pregnant women must avoid funerals due to the perceived risk of being overcome by emotion and suffering a miscarriage, a notion considered far-fetched. Among contemporary urban myths is the idea that celebrities die in threes, popularized by the consecutive deaths of Ed McMahon, Farrah Fawcett and Michael Jackson over three days, though a review of twenty-five years of archives by the New York Times showed this to be the only instance of three well-known celebrities dying in progressive three-day succession. Another superstition is the need to hold one's breath while passing a graveyard to avoid inhaling a restless spirit seeking re-entry into the physical world, a practice that would be impractical when passing large cemeteries like Wadi-us-Salaam in Najaf, Iraq, which spans one thousand four hundred and eighty-five point five acres and holds over five million bodies. Hearing thunder during a funeral is interpreted as a sign that the departed soul has been accepted into heaven, although in some cultures thunder associated with lightning was regarded as bad luck or a sign of death. Numerous superstitions surround funeral processions, including the belief that it brings misfortune to transport a body in one's personal vehicle, that failing to pull over and stop for a procession is not only disrespectful but illegal in some jurisdictions, that if a procession stops along the way another person will soon die, that a corpse must never pass over the same section of road twice, that counting cars in a procession is akin to counting the days to one's own death, that seeing one's reflection in a hearse

window marks one for death, that bringing a baby to a funeral ensures its death before age one, and that a black cat crossing before a procession dooms the entire parade. Finally, leaving a grave open overnight is considered ill-advised, with the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association noting that the standard grave size is two and a half feet wide by eight feet long by six feet deep, making an open grave both a safety hazard and a source of cultural unease.

Other bizarre and unconventional death practices documented across cultures include biting the corpse, which is found among the LoDagaa people of West Africa where surviving wives were closely watched for fear that they might attempt suicide by biting their husband's corpse in order to follow him into the land of the dead, and the restraining of mourning relatives in the same LoDagaa culture where close family members who displayed extreme grief were tied up with ropes, hides or strings to prevent them from harming themselves out of despair. Equally unconventional funeral and mourning rituals include the exhuming and parading of corpses among the Toraja people of Indonesia who regularly dig up dead family members every few years during the Ma'nene ritual, clean the bodies, dress them in fresh clothes and walk them around town. Among the Dani tribe of Indonesia, women used to amputate a segment of a finger whenever a close relative died as a physical manifestation of grief and as a means of appeasing ghosts, while some traditional groups in Ifugao in the Philippines kept the body near the home and after a few days peeled the skin off the corpse for use in fertility-related burial rites. Although practices such as eating the bodies of relatives, marrying the spirit of the dead to dolls or dying after biting a corpse may sound incomprehensible, anthropologists have lived for more than a century in close contact with populations worldwide studying their attitudes toward death and attempting to understand their logic and meaning. Southeast Asia is widely known for elaborate funeral customs that may appear unsettling to Western audiences. Anthropologist Peter Metcalf observed that the Berawan population in Borneo disposed of corpses using a method similar to that for preparing rice wine, a local drink. Like rice, dead bodies are washed, laid out in front of a communal longhouse and stored in big jars, while fluids of decomposition are allowed to flow out through a bamboo pipe and collected in another vessel, with the solid part of the body later laid to rest in a cemetery. A similar treatment centred on the separation of solid and liquid parts was described by Robert Hertz among the Ngaju of Borneo, who noted that relatives, especially widows, were compelled either daily or on fixed dates to collect liquid produced by decomposition of the flesh, smear it on their bodies or mix it into their food. Cannibalism has long fascinated anthropologists and explorers, with the term cannibal

historically used as shorthand for peoples considered uncivilized. Anthropologist Beth Conklin described at length the practice of compassionate cannibalism among the Wari tribe of the western Amazonian rainforest, where consumption of the dead was an act of affection and respect rather than aggression. Another unusual custom described by anthropologist Ellen Schattschneider emerged during World War II in northern Japan, where many young men died unmarried and without opportunity to procreate, which was considered a bad death that would leave restless spirits to haunt families. Even today when unmarried children die, rituals are performed to ensure rest for their souls through a marriage between the spirit of the dead symbolized by a photograph and a spirit bride represented by a doll or figurine, with both objects placed in a box preserved for a long time so that the spirit bride accompanies the deceased for thirty years until reaching the other world. A similar practice involving illegally obtained corpses of young unmarried women has reportedly occurred in China. For a long time in Mongolia people left their dead to decompose in the open air in a form of sky burial, where after death a suitable spot was chosen, usually near a river populated by animals and birds that consumed the body as quickly as possible, with the living avoiding the place for several months so as not to witness decomposition. In 1955 funeral reform was enacted because the socialist administration considered sky burials inappropriate in a modern urbanized society, yet local populations often resisted burial in the ground as earth was believed to be the domain of evil spirits. As reported by anthropologist Gregory Delaplace, the reform had mixed success, and although most people are now buried rather than left in the open, cemeteries never became the neat gardens of remembrance hoped for by government but remain vast and vague grounds apparently without order. A Japanese cultural concept that has long interested anthropologists is the muenbotoke or disconnected spirit, referring to spirits of those who died childless or without family members to ensure commemoration in ancestral tombs through grave rituals. People facing the prospect of dying unrelated suffer great social stigma while alive, leading to emergence of new funeral practices to alleviate this condition. Anthropologist Jieun Kim documented inhabitants of a quarter in Yokohama largely populated by homeless individuals or those who may die alone without relatives to care for their bodies, where charitable associations ensure that medical personnel or volunteers monitor residents frequently so corpses can be promptly cremated and tended to with proper rituals at death, with remains placed in a common grave where volunteers perform regular memorial services to allow spirits to find peace and attain respected ancestor status despite absence of family. When imagining contact with the dead, Western thought often

conjures sensational events like seances or obscure conversations with spirit mediums, but this was not the case among the Sora tribe in India. As documented by anthropologist Piers Vitebsky, the Sora had the unusual custom of prolonged conversations with the dead that continued for years after death through mediation of a funeral shaman in a state of trance. Vitebsky notes that in a large village of five hundred people, dialogue may take place from about five times a week to about ten times a day, with conversations containing a quest for a verdict or for increased certainty, as people seek causes of illness or understanding about causes of death at funerals. In a recent book, Vitebsky described the waning of this practice, as it is deemed primitive and superstitious by present-day generations and extensive conversations with the dead no longer occur with such frequency as the Sora shift toward Hindu or Christian beliefs.

Several studies have examined bereavement in relation to schooling outcomes. Nwankwo, Chukwu, and Obi (2021), in a study of secondary school students in Anambra State, found a significant negative relationship between bereavement and academic performance, with bereaved students recording lower continuous assessment scores than their non-bereaved peers. Similarly, Okonkwo and Eze (2020) reported that grief-related concentration difficulties were significantly associated with declining test scores among bereaved adolescents in southeastern Nigeria. On coping strategies, Ibe and Adaeze (2019) found that secondary school students who employed problem-focused coping strategies achieved significantly higher academic scores than those who relied on avoidant coping. Chukwuma (2022) similarly reported a significant positive relationship between adaptive coping and academic resilience among bereaved students, while Adigwe and Uzoma (2023) found that social-support-seeking coping was positively and significantly associated with sustained academic performance following a stressful life event. These findings collectively support the expectation of significant relationships between bereavement, coping strategies, and academic achievement, and justify the correlational design adopted in the present study.

Despite several studies on bereavement among adults and university students, there is a paucity of empirical research focusing on how bereavement and its coping strategies affect the academic achievement of secondary school students in the South Eastern region of Nigeria, particularly in Owerri Education Zone. It becomes imperative therefore to examine the nature of bereavement experiences among these students, the coping strategies they employ and how these variables relate to their academic achievement, with a view to providing evidence based recommendations for school counsellors, teachers and parents.

Statement of the Problem

Teachers and counsellors in Owerri Education Zone frequently observe that bereaved students display declining class participation, inconsistent assignment completion, and falling test scores in the months following a loss. Yet, school-based responses to bereavement remain largely informal and reactive, often limited to a brief consolatory conversation rather than sustained support grounded in an understanding of how grief and coping relate to academic performance. Without empirical evidence establishing the strength and direction of these relationships in the local context, counsellors and school administrators lack a firm basis for designing appropriate interventions. This study therefore sought to determine the relationship between bereavement and academic achievement, and the relationship between coping strategies and academic achievement, among secondary school students in Owerri Education Zone.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the relationship between bereavement and students' academic achievement?
2. What is the relationship between students' coping strategies and their academic achievement?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between bereavement and students' academic achievement.

H_{02}: There is no significant relationship between students' coping strategies and their academic achievement.

Theoretical framework

Kübler-Ross's (1969) Stages of Grief Model

Kübler-Ross's Stages of Grief Model was originally propounded by Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book On Death and Dying. The model was developed from her clinical work with over 200 terminally ill patients at the University of Chicago hospital where she observed common emotional patterns among patients confronting their own impending death, which she later extended to the experiences of individuals facing any significant loss through bereavement. Kübler-Ross proposed five distinct stages through which bereaved individuals pass. Denial is the initial stage where the individual finds it difficult to accept the reality of the loss. For a secondary school student, this may manifest as shock, disbelief that a parent or sibling is dead and acting as if nothing has happened, and serving as a temporary

defense mechanism to cushion the immediate shock. As the reality of denial fades, pain emerges and is often redirected as anger. The student may direct anger at God, doctors, family members, or even the deceased for leaving, which in school may appear as irritability, disobedience to teachers, or aggression toward peers. This is followed by bargaining where the bereaved attempts to negotiate or make deals to reverse or lessen the loss. A bereaved student may engage in prayers such as God, bring back my father and I will be serious with my studies, a stage that is characterized by guilt and if only statements. Depression is a stage of deep sadness, emptiness, withdrawal and helplessness when the full weight of the loss is felt. Among secondary school students, it is marked by crying, loss of interest in academic activities, social isolation, poor concentration, sleep disturbance and declining academic achievement. The final stage is acceptance which involves coming to terms with the loss and adjusting to a new life without the deceased. The individual does not necessarily get over the loss but learns to live with it, and a student at this stage begins to re-engage in school work, forms new coping routines and re-establishes interpersonal relationships. Kübler-Ross noted that these stages are not linear or fixed. Individuals may not pass through all stages, may experience them in different orders, may revisit earlier stages and may stay longer in one stage than another. The model provides a framework for understanding the emotional and behavioural manifestations secondary school students in Owerri Education Zone exhibit after bereavement and explains why some students experience prolonged academic disruption if they become stuck in anger or depression stages without adequate coping support.

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping was propounded by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman in their 1984 book Stress, Appraisal and Coping. The model explains stress as a dynamic transaction between a person and their environment, emphasizing that stress is not in the event itself but in the individual's cognitive appraisal of the event and perceived ability to cope with it. The model posits two key appraisal processes. Primary appraisal is the individual's judgment about the significance of an event. A bereaved secondary school student may appraise the death of a parent as a threat to academic survival, a harm or loss already experienced, or a challenge that must be overcome. Secondary appraisal involves the evaluation of available coping resources and options. The student assesses what can be done, whether there is social support from family, teachers or peers, religious faith, counselling services, and internal strength to manage the grief. Based on these appraisals, Lazarus and Folkman identified two broad

categories of coping. Problem-focused coping involves direct efforts to alter or manage the stressful situation itself, such as seeking information about the loss, planning new study routines, seeking financial assistance, or engaging in counselling. Emotion-focused coping involves regulating the emotional distress associated with the loss, such as seeking emotional support, positive reframing, avoidance, denial, or religious coping. In later revisions, they added meaning-focused coping which involves drawing on beliefs, values and existential goals to sustain coping. The model further states that coping is a process that changes over time depending on reappraisal. A student may initially use emotion-focused strategies like crying and withdrawal, and later adopt problem-focused strategies like seeking academic support and re-engaging in school activities as adjustment improves. The effectiveness of coping is determined not by the type alone but by the fit between appraisal and coping strategy. In the context of bereavement, coping strategies and academic achievement of secondary school students in Owerri Education Zone, the model explains why students experiencing similar losses show different academic outcomes. Those who appraise bereavement as manageable and employ adaptive coping such as seeking social support and counselling are more likely to maintain academic achievement, while those who rely on maladaptive strategies such as self-blame, isolation and substance use are more likely to experience prolonged emotional distress and academic decline.

Methodology

The study adopted a correlational survey design. The study was conducted in Owerri Education Zone of Imo State, Nigeria. Owerri Education Zone is one of the three education zones in Imo State, comprising six Local Government Areas: Owerri Municipal, Owerri North, Owerri West, Mbaitoli, Ikeduru and Ngor-Okpala. The zone is located in the eastern heartland of Imo State with Owerri as the capital city and administrative headquarters. The zone has a high concentration of public secondary schools, both junior and senior secondary schools, under the supervision of the Imo State Ministry of Education and the Secondary Education Management Board (SEMB), Owerri Zonal Office. The choice of Owerri Education Zone was informed by its large student population, reported cases of bereavement among secondary school students, and observed decline in academic engagement among affected students. Additionally, the zone's urban and semi-urban nature exposes students to varying degrees of social support and counselling services, making it a suitable context for examining the relationship between bereavement, coping strategies and academic achievement of secondary school students. The population comprised 620 bereaved secondary school students identified from 12 public

secondary schools through school guidance and counselling records. These students had experienced the death of a parent, sibling, or other close relative. A sample of 240 students was selected from the population. Purposive sampling was first used to identify eligible bereaved students, after which simple random sampling was employed to select the students who participated in the study.

Data were collected using a researcher-developed instrument titled Bereavement, Coping Strategies and Academic Performance Questionnaire (BCAPQ). The instrument consisted of three sections. Section A obtained demographic information, while Section B measured students' experiences of bereavement and Section C assessed their coping strategies. Sections B and C contained items rated on a four-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. The instrument contained 20 items in total, while students' academic achievement scores were obtained from their school records. The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by three experts, comprising two experts in Guidance and Counselling and one expert in Measurement and Evaluation. The instrument was also trial-tested, and its reliability was determined using Cronbach's alpha. Reliability coefficients of .77 and .80 were obtained for the bereavement and coping strategies sections, respectively, while an overall reliability coefficient of .83 was obtained. These coefficients indicated that the instrument had satisfactory internal consistency and was suitable for data collection.

The researcher administered the questionnaire directly to the sampled students with the assistance of school guidance counsellors. The research questions were answered using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMC), while the two null hypotheses were tested at the .05 level of significance. The null hypothesis was rejected when the obtained p-value was less than .05, indicating a statistically significant relationship. Conversely, the null hypothesis was retained when the p-value was equal to or greater than .05, indicating that the observed relationship was not statistically significant.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between bereavement and students' academic achievement?

Table 1: Relationship between Bereavement and Students' Academic Achievement

Variables	N	R	Remark
Bereavement	240	-0.451	Moderate Negative
Academic Achievement			

Table 1 shows a correlation coefficient of r = -.451 between bereavement and students' academic achievement. The negative sign indicates that the two variables move in opposite directions. In other words, as the level or intensity of bereavement increases, students' academic achievement tends to decrease. The magnitude of .451 indicates a moderate negative relationship between the two variables. Thus, students experiencing higher levels of bereavement tend to record lower academic achievement, whereas students experiencing lower levels of bereavement tend to record relatively higher academic achievement.

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between bereavement and students' academic achievement.

Table 2: Pearson Product Moment Correlation between Bereavement and Students' Academic Achievement

Variables	N	r	p-value	Decision
Bereavement	240	-0.451	.000	Significant
Academic Achievement	240			

Table 2 shows a Pearson correlation coefficient of r = -.451 between bereavement and academic achievement, with an associated p-value of .000, which is less than the .05 level of significance. The null hypothesis (H01) was therefore rejected, indicating a significant negative relationship between bereavement and students' academic achievement: as bereavement intensifies, academic achievement tends to decline.

Research Question 2: What is the relationship between students' coping strategies and their academic achievement?

Table 3: Relationship between Coping Strategies and Students' Academic Achievement

Variables	N	R	Remark
Coping Strategies	240	-0.451	Moderate Negative
Academic Achievement			

Table 3 shows a correlation coefficient of r = .527 between students' coping strategies and academic achievement. The positive sign indicates that the two variables move in the same direction. This means that as students' use of effective coping strategies increases, their academic achievement also tends to increase. The magnitude of .527 indicates a moderate positive relationship between the two variables. Thus, students who employ more effective coping strategies tend to record higher academic achievement, while students with less effective coping strategies tend to record comparatively lower academic achievement.

H_{02}: There is no significant relationship between students' coping strategies and their academic achievement.

Table 2: Pearson Product Moment Correlation between Coping Strategies and Students' Academic Achievement

Variables	N	R	p	Decision
Coping Strategies	240	.527	.000	Significant
Academic Achievement	240			

Table 2 shows a Pearson correlation coefficient of r = .527 between coping strategies and academic achievement, with an associated p-value of .000, which is less than the .05 level of significance. The null hypothesis (H_{02}) was therefore rejected, indicating a significant positive relationship between students' coping strategies and their academic achievement: students who employ more adaptive coping strategies tend to record higher academic achievement.

Discussion of the findings

The first finding revealed a significant moderate negative relationship between bereavement and students' academic achievement with a correlation coefficient of r = -.451 and p = .000, indicating that as the level or intensity of bereavement experienced by students increases, their academic achievement tends to decrease. This suggests that the emotional and psychological challenges associated with the loss of a loved one interfere with concentration, participation in school activities, motivation to learn and ability to devote adequate attention to academic tasks. This result is theoretically consistent with both Kübler-Ross's Stages of Grief Model (1969) and Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (1984). In line with Kübler-Ross's model, bereavement exposes students to emotional stages such as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance which are incompatible with effective academic functioning. When a secondary school student is stuck in the depression stage, characterized by deep sadness, withdrawal, loss of interest, poor concentration and sleep disturbances, cognitive resources needed for learning, class participation and examination preparation are depleted, as the student's mental energy is preoccupied with grief rather than academic tasks, leading to absenteeism, incomplete assignments and lower test scores. This explains the negative direction observed in the study, as higher grief intensity pulls students away from academic engagement. Lazarus and Folkman's model provides further explanation for the significant relationship found. According to the model, bereavement is appraised as a threat or harm that overwhelms the student's coping resources. During primary appraisal, the death of a parent or close relative is judged as a major loss threatening financial stability, emotional security and academic future,

while secondary appraisal reveals insufficient resources to cope, especially in an environment like Owerri Education Zone where school counselling services are limited. When coping resources are perceived as inadequate, stress becomes chronic and interferes with attention, memory and problem solving abilities which are critical for academic achievement. The moderate magnitude of -.451 suggests that while bereavement alone does not completely determine academic failure, it creates a significant psychological load that lowers academic output. The finding aligns with earlier studies such as Adeyemi (2018) and Eze and Obiora (2023) who found that emotional maladjustment from loss was associated with reduced academic concentration. It is also consistent with Oosterhoff, Kaplow and Layne (2018) who found that sudden loss among adolescents was associated with lower academic achievement, reduced ability to concentrate and learn, and lower enjoyment of school. Similarly, Elsner, Krysinska and Andriessen (2022) in a systematic review of 22 studies concluded that bereavement can constitute a barrier to educational achievement among children and young people, affecting academic performance, educational engagement and attainment. However, the negative relationship should not be interpreted to mean that every bereaved student will necessarily experience poor academic achievement, as individual responses to loss vary and some students may maintain or even improve their academic functioning when adequate emotional, social and educational support is available. Elsner et al. (2022) noted that the educational effects of bereavement can vary according to individual and contextual factors. Therefore, the rejection of the null hypothesis confirms that bereavement is not a neutral event but a significant psychosocial factor that undermines academic achievement, as explained by the grief stages that disrupt emotional stability and by the stress appraisal process that taxes coping capacity. The second finding revealed a significant moderate positive relationship between students' coping strategies and academic achievement with r = .527 and p = .000, indicating that students who reported greater use of effective coping strategies tended to record higher academic achievement. This suggests that the ability of students to manage the emotional and practical challenges associated with bereavement helps them maintain concentration, continue participating in school activities and remain engaged with academic responsibilities. From the perspective of Kübler-Ross's model, academic recovery after bereavement depends on movement through the grief stages towards acceptance. Students who adopt adaptive coping strategies are able to transit from the disruptive stages of denial, anger and depression to the acceptance stage more quickly. Acceptance involves coming to terms with the loss and adjusting to a new life without the

deceased, which allows re-engagement in school activities, restoration of concentration and re-establishment of study routines. In contrast, students who use maladaptive coping such as avoidance, self-blame and isolation remain fixated in anger and depression stages, prolonging emotional distress and academic decline. The positive correlation therefore reflects that effective coping facilitates resolution of grief stages and return to academic functioning. Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model provides a more direct explanation. According to the model, the outcome of a stressful event like bereavement is not determined by the event itself but by secondary appraisal and the coping strategies adopted. Problem-focused coping such as seeking counselling, planning new academic schedules, seeking social and financial support, and emotion-focused adaptive coping such as religious coping, positive reframing and seeking emotional support help to regulate distress and restore cognitive resources needed for learning. Students in Owerri Education Zone who employed these adaptive strategies were able to reduce the psychological load of bereavement, improve emotional stability and sustain attention, memory and classroom participation, leading to higher achievement. Students who relied on maladaptive emotion-focused strategies such as denial, withdrawal and substance use experienced increased emotional exhaustion and academic disengagement. The magnitude of the relationship being stronger than that of bereavement itself at .527 compared to -.451 suggests that coping is a protective factor. This supports Lazarus and Folkman's assertion that coping mediates the stress-outcome relationship, such that even when bereavement is intense, appropriate coping can buffer its negative effect on academic achievement. This is consistent with Akinpelu and Adeyemi (2021) who found that students with secure recovery resources showed better emotional adjustment. It is also consistent with Egbule (2023) who reported that the use of counselling services as a coping support was associated with improved academic performance among secondary school students in Nigeria. Oosterhoff et al. (2018) demonstrated that bereavement can affect concentration, learning, school enjoyment and school belongingness, suggesting that factors that help students manage the consequences of loss may be important for maintaining academic functioning, while Hay et al. (2025) found that the academic experiences of bereaved students were closely connected with their well-being, highlighting the importance of appropriate support. Nevertheless, the positive correlation does not establish that coping strategies directly cause higher academic achievement, as the correlational design only indicates that the two variables are related. Other factors such as social support, family circumstances, school support, prior academic ability and the severity and timing of the bereavement may also

influence achievement. In addition, Bøe et al. (2024) found that escape-oriented coping among bereaved adolescents was associated with greater grief symptoms over time, demonstrating that different coping strategies may have different consequences and reinforcing the importance of distinguishing adaptive coping from coping strategies that may not promote healthy adjustment. Overall, the findings indicate that bereavement is significantly associated with students' academic achievement, with higher bereavement tending to correspond with lower achievement, while stronger coping strategies are positively associated with higher achievement, thereby highlighting the importance of providing bereaved students with appropriate emotional, counselling, social and academic support within the school environment.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that bereavement is significantly associated with students' academic achievement. The significant negative relationship between bereavement and academic achievement indicates that higher levels of bereavement tend to be associated with lower academic achievement among secondary school students. This suggests that the emotional and psychological challenges associated with the loss of a loved one may interfere with students' concentration, participation, motivation, and overall academic engagement. The study also concludes that coping strategies are significantly and positively related to students' academic achievement. Students who employ more effective coping strategies tend to achieve better academically. This indicates that appropriate ways of managing the challenges associated with bereavement may help students maintain their academic engagement and performance despite experiencing loss.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following actionable strategies were recommended:

1. School management in Owerri Education Zone should establish functional guidance and counselling units with trained counsellors to provide immediate grief counselling, individual psychotherapy and group support sessions for bereaved students, to facilitate movement from denial, anger and depression stages to acceptance as proposed by Kübler-Ross and to strengthen adaptive coping appraisal as proposed by Lazarus and Folkman.
2. Teachers should be trained to identify early signs of grief such as withdrawal, irritability, absenteeism, loss of concentration and decline in academic performance, and to provide academic accommodations including flexible deadlines, remedial lessons, peer tutoring and reduced workload during the acute grief period to prevent prolonged academic disruption.

3. The Ministry of Education and school authorities should develop a bereavement support protocol that includes a clear referral system, a bereavement register, follow-up visits and collaboration with parents or guardians to monitor emotional recovery and academic progress of affected students.
4. Students should be equipped with adaptive coping skills training through workshops on problem-focused coping such as help-seeking, time management and study planning, and emotion-focused adaptive coping such as positive reframing, emotional expression, religious coping and seeking social support, while discouraging maladaptive strategies like self-blame, isolation and avoidance.
5. Parent-Teacher Associations and community stakeholders should strengthen social support systems by creating bereavement support groups, financial assistance schemes and mentorship programmes for bereaved students, particularly those who have lost parents, to address both emotional and practical challenges that interfere with schooling.

Government and non-governmental organizations should provide periodic mental health screening in secondary schools and sponsor capacity building programmes for school counsellors on contemporary grief intervention techniques to ensure sustainable support for bereaved students and improvement in their academic achievement.

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