Original Research Article

Psychosocial Challenges and Their Effects on Senior High School Students in the Nanumba Municipality of Ghana

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Abstract

The study explored the psychosocial challenges and their effect on the academic pursuit of 196 Senior High School students in the Nanumba North Municipality of Ghana using the concurrent mixed method design. Structured questionnaire and an interview guide were employed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. Stratified random sampling technique was used to enrol 196 respondents for the study. Quantitative data was analysed using independent samples t-test and simple linear regression while the interview data was analysed thematically with verbatim quotes to buttress issues as they emerged. Findings revealed that stress, depression, anxiety, aggression, bullying and hyperactive behaviours, poor self-concept, poor self-esteem and lack of confidence were psychosocial challenges confronting Senior High School students in the said district. No significant gender difference, in terms of psychosocial challenges among students, was found. However, psychosocial challenges significantly affected the academic pursuit of these students. It was recommended that management of Senior High Schools, in collaboration with counsellors in the Municipality, should be proactive in identifying students who are faced with psychosocial challenges and offer them the necessary counselling they need in order to facilitate their maximum adjustment in school.
Keywords: Psychosocial challenge, Adjustment, Internalizing, Externalizing behaviours.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a sustained concern in society regarding the psychosocial distress that comes along with detachment from home to pursue academic ambitions for both male and female students in the Senior High Schools (Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005). Fabian (2000) asserts that the transition from a familiar situation into a new or unfamiliar situation, for example, from home to childcare/preschool, to primary school, or secondary school is characterized by change, tensions and uncertainties. These students may feel physically and psychologically overwhelmed, have doubts about their own ability and hence, developed an avoidant attitude towards their studies (Wong, Bheung, Chan, Ma & Tang, 2006). Accordingly, the ability of the individual student to prevent psychological distress is closely related to his or her personal resources, and specifically the effective use of coping strategies (Salami, 2008).

Recent epidemiological reviews indicate that there is a high prevalence of emotional and behavioural problems across developed countries such as Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Australia, and developing countries like India, Uganda as well as Ghana and Nigeria (Waddell, Offord, Shepherd, Hua & McEwan, 2002) in the form of depression, anxiety, withdrawal, suicidal thoughts, and relationship challenges between peers, teachers and parents (Uboh, 2014).

Several researchers seem to agree that these psychosocial challenges if not addressed promptly could severely militate against students' everyday functioning and worsen their mental health (Duinhof, Stevens, van Dorsselaer, Monshouwer & Vollebergh, 2015; Suyen, 2017). Relatedly, Famakinwa, & Akinnawonu, (2016) confirm that the pressure and adjustments that come with Senior High School life can often be overwhelming for students as most of them have already attained the adolescence status or approaching the developmental stage of adolescence, which has its peculiar disruption. For example, Mumthas & Muhsina (2014) conducted a descriptive study to unravel the psychosocial problems of adolescents at higher secondary level and the findings testified that the students face more problems relating to educational and emotional aspects. Relatedly, Rajkumar

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et al. (2015) carried out a comparative study on psychosocial problems among students of Central University of Karnataka. The study reported that due to tight schedules, new atmosphere, examinations, inter personal relations with teachers, fellow students coupled with adolescent age, most of the students are facing some psychosocial problems such as stress, depression, anxiety and lack of interest.

In Ghana, a study was conducted based on Global School-Based Health Survey, (GSHS) and the findings revealed that Senior High School students had various psychosocial issues: 15% reported that they felt lonely, 13% felt so worried and 38% felt so sad or hopeless (Owusu, 2008). This has become very evident with the increasing number of students entering into Senior High Schools in recent times. Adatsi (2013) study of Senior High Schools in Tema Metropolitan District reported that one fifth of young individuals under 18 years were diagnosed with some form of developmental, emotional or behavioural problems and that coping was paramount to effective management of all these problems. In the Nanumba North Municipality, report indicate that Senior High School students for the past three years exhibit behavioural problems in the form of aggressiveness, bullying, drug use, and vandalism such that the school authorities are overwhelmed and find it difficult to deal with such unruly behaviours. (Nanumba North District Directorate Annual Report 2020) To mitigate these school related challenges of students, the school has institutionalized and strengthened its Guidance and Counselling units to help students overcome these challenges. Furthermore, the school from time to time has been organizing annual orientation programmes for newly admitted students to enable them acquaint themselves with their new environment in order to facilitate maximum adaptation and be able to cope with stressful situations.

In spite of all these interventions, students are still facing enormous school related challenges such as aggressiveness, unruly behaviour, hyperactivity, disrespect for authority and all forms of uncooperative behaviours (Mumthas & Muhsina, 2014) the result of which seriously affect the academic performance of the students. The researcher deem this as a thorny issue that need to be addressed holistically based on empirical evidence.

Further, it appears most of the studies conducted, focused on identifying the psychosocial challenges confronting these students and did not consider how these challenges affect students in an educational set-up despite the numerous attention given to research on psychosocial challenges of students on the global front. And this is the gap this study intends to bridge. In addition, looking at the issue of student indiscipline and its consequent consequence on performance and the general atmosphere of Senior High Schools in the District there is a critical need to conduct

such a study to provide empirical data that can inform policy and also yield intervention strategies that will create positive psychosocial wellbeing of the student for academic success. For this reason, the study aimed at examining the psychosocial challenges of Senior High students and how these challenges affect their academics pursuit in the Nanumba North Municipality.

Empirical data was gathered on gender, stress, depression, anxiety, aggressive behaviour, hyperactive behaviour, bullying, poor-self-concept, poor self-esteem, lack of confidence and academic pursuit of students. Data was analysed using thematic analysis, t-test and linear multiple regression.

It is envisaged that the findings obtained in this study will contribute enormously to the existing body of knowledge on psychosocial challenges of students pursuing education. The findings would also provide an opportunity for the study participants to re-examine their own challenges and make appropriate adjustments.

Furthermore, the findings would provide evident based information to education policy makers on curriculum development to address some of the psychological and social related challenges facing Senior High School students in the country. Additionally, the findings would add to the repertoire of knowledge of counsellors, social workers and other professionals in the field of psychology and enable them to design interventions to effectively deal with psychosocial challenges affecting students for effective adjustment and academic work in our secondary education system.

Research Questions
The study sought answers to the following questions:
1. What are the psychosocial challenges of Senior High School students in the Nanumba North Municipality?
2. How do psychosocial challenges of Senior High School students effect their academic pursuit of in the Municipality?

Hypotheses
The following hypotheses were tested in the study at 0.05 significant level:
1. H_{01}: There will be no statistically significant gender differences in psychosocial challenges experienced by Senior High School students in the Nanumba North Municipality.
2. H_{02}: Psychosocial challenges experienced by the students will not significantly affect academic pursuit of Senior High School students in the Nanumba North Municipality.

Delimitation of the Study
The study was limited to two (2) Senior High Schools in the Nanumba North Municipality. Psychosocial challenges considered in this study were

related to internal, external and social problems. Elements of academic pursuit considered in this study were persistence, concentration, class participation, motivation and positive attitude towards studies.

Theoretical underpinning

This study is underpinned by Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory which proposed that development proceeds throughout the life span in a series of eight "crisis", each of which is a critical period during which the individual is maximally vulnerable to two opposing forces; one that pulls the individual to healthy age-specific ego-functioning, and another that pulls him/her to unhealthy functioning. Depending on how the crisis is resolved, "strength" i.e. the individual's ego will acquire a new strength unique to that stage. When the forces of a particular crisis pull the individual toward unhealthy resolution of that issue, the stage is set for the development of subsequent problems. Crisis have a cumulative effect; if one stage is unfavorably resolved, it becomes more likely that succeeding stages will also be unfavorably resolved. Failure to resolve the early psychosocial issues has particular serious consequences for later development that will affect the individual's coping behaviours as well.

Erikson's theory is linked to this present study such that if students are not able to fully resolve their conflicts at the adolescent (SHS) stage of development, it is likely to influence the way they behave and react to issues, which result into a psychosocial challenge or a crises. In this situation if the student is unable to resolve these challenges he/she gets confused and frustrated and that affects his/her ability to adjust appropriately to academic work.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the concurrent nested mixed method design which involves the collection of data at the same time or in parallel within the same study with one method nested within the other.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A total sample size of one hundred and ninety six (196) participants were selected from, a population of four hundred (400) students for the quantitative study using the proportionate random sampling technique. This technique was deemed appropriate because it reduced sampling error and ensured that variability between strata is maximum, thus balancing the bias of deliberate selection (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). In addition, it made it possible to included male and female, thus ensuring representation of samples across the entire population. Further, eight (8) participants, (four from each school) were selected by convenience technique and interviewed.

Table-1: List of Schools and Gender Distribution of Respondents

Schools	Males	Females
Bimbilla SHS	82	51
Holy Spirit SHS	40	23
Total	**122**	**74**

Instrumentation

Two (2) structured questionnaire instruments (Psychosocial Challenges Scale and Academic Pursuit Scale) were used to gather data for the quantitative aspect of the study, while self-developed interview guide gathered the qualitative data. Psychosocial Challenges Scale (PCS).

Psychosocial Challenges Scale (PCS) is a 45-item measure adapted from Orpines and Frankowski (2001) and Orpinas, Horne & Stanisrewski (2003) for adolescent students. It has been used to measure emotional, behavioural and social problems of adolescent students. The original scale had 72-items and its Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficient was 0.880. The scale had a 4-point Likert scale ranged from disagree (1), strongly disagree (2), agree (3) and strongly agree (4). All the items in the questionnaire were positively worded. The Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficient for the 45 statements in the questionnaire was found to be .782 using a similar Ghana students' population. George and Mallery (2003) provide the following rules of thumb while interpreting reliability coefficients: "≥ 0.9 – Excellent, ≥ 0.8 – Good, ≥ 0.7 – Acceptable, ≥ 0.6 – questionnaire, ≥ 0.5 – Poor and ≤ 0.5 – Unacceptable". Hence, the reliability for the scale was found to be acceptable. Academic Pursuit Scale (APS).

This is a 7-item measure developed by the researchers in relation to existing literature and the research hypotheses. It was used to measure persistence, efforts, concentration, class participation, motivation, attitude towards learning and the interest students had in learning. The scale had a 4-point Likert scale ranged from disagree (1), strongly disagree (2), agree (3) and strongly agree (4). All the items in the questionnaire were worded positively. The Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficient for the 7 items in the questionnaire was found to be 0.830 after pre-testing it on a similar in characteristics, a Ghanaian student population at Wulensi Senior High School in the Nanumba South District. The researchers validated the instruments in terms of content and face validity. The research questions were analyzed qualitatively in themes. Verbatim quotations of respondents were also used to buttress issues as they emerged in the study. To test the hypotheses inferential statistics of Independent Sample t-test and Simple Linear Regression were employed. Ethical issues, regarding research such as confidentiality, anonymity, and participant right, were considered in this study.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: *What are the psychosocial challenges experienced by Senior High School students in the Nanumba North Municipality?* Several themes relating to internalizing, externalizing and social issues that confronted students emerged from the interview data.

Internalizing Challenges of Students (Stress, Depression and Anxiety)

A major challenge that emerged from the interview data was related to participants experiencing stress, depression and anxiety. The participants claimed that due to multiple strenuous duties, they hardly find time to relax, hence, dozed off during classes and are not able to participate effectively in class. One of the participants advanced the following:

When I wake up, *I sweep the dormitory and school compound, fetch water for teachers and prefects before I attend morning assembly. All these duties are supposed to be performed daily before classes begin. It is not easy to combine all these duties with academic work. After going through these numerous activities, I find it extremely difficult to concentrate in class (SSIP-7).*

Another participant added that

At times, I personally find it extremely difficult to meet deadlines and as I endeavour to accomplish whatever tasks I'm assigned to, I sometimes feel restless and become annoyed with anything that prevents me from getting on with whatever I'm doing (SSIP-5).

Depression and Anxiety

Furthermore, it was re revealed that most of the participants felt sad about things that used to be fun for them. They reported that suddenly, they had lost appetite and also at night, they are not able to sleep. A participants shared the following:

I feel sad and worried about issues and things that used to be fun for me are no longer appealing to me. I get tired with the least thing I do and especially at night, I wake up so many times and find it difficult to sleep again. I have lost appetite and can't eat as I used to (SSIP-1).

Another participant articulated that:

I'm particularly troubled when there is going to be test or exams. In class, when I'm asked a question, it becomes very difficult for me to remember what I've been taught. When I want to speak in public, I shiver and panic making me to commit mistakes that under normal circumstances, I shouldn't commit (SSIP-4).

It could be inferred from the above statements that participants found it extremely burdensome to manage issues that confront them daily while in school giving the impression that they are experiencing stress, depression and anxiety which are some of the psychosocial challenges of the students.

Externalizing Challenges of Students (Aggressive Behaviours and Bullying)

Externalizing psychosocial challenges of students that emerged from the study shows that participants exhibit aggressive and hyperactive behaviours which interfere with their normal daily activities and are a source of concern to them as the following statement suggests:

I get angry with colleagues who offend me and I try to revenge to show my displeasure. I find it difficult to control myself especially when I'm angry unless I act it out, else, I don't feel at ease. I personally like teasing and at times I say things about my colleagues to make others laugh. At times, I kick others and call them nick names (SSIP-3).

Furthermore, another participant articulated that:

When I sit at one place for a long time, I feel bored and drowsy. The longest time I can sit to learn is 30 minutes and beyond that I can't concentrate unless I get up and socialize. I always feel like expressing myself. Frankly speaking, when I'm quiet, it disturbs me and makes me helpless (SSIP-6).

It could be concluded that participants found it challenging to regulate their behaviours in their interactions with others. These distractive behaviours did not allow these students to stay focused in class and pay particular attention to their studies.

Social Challenges of Students (Low Self-Concept, Low Self-Esteem and Lack of Confidence)

Social challenges that emerged from the interview data relate to poor self-concept, poor self-esteem and lack of confidence. These perceptions negatively influence the way these students interact with other people, act and respond to daily issues as evidenced in the following statement a participant shared:

Hmm, I can't express myself freely in the presence of my colleagues and I'm also dissatisfied with my current academic performance in the class. I personally don't feel happy when people find mistakes with whatever I do. None of my friends consult me for anything [sic]. I'm always late in doing and submitting homework and assignments because I don't have good understanding of the things that are taught in the class and I don't think I can also do well or better as others do in class (SSIP-4).

Lack of Confidence

Another remarkable issue that emerged was the issue of lack of confidence. Participants seem not to have the confidence needed to solve issues that they experience nor have the self-assurance and trust in themselves. They claimed that this has affected their learning outcome. In support of this, a participant advanced the following:

I don't believe that I can efficiently lead a group of my colleagues to compete in a quiz or debate. I can't get

good grades in calculation subjects like mathematics and Science. I'll not be able to explain concepts in Mathematics and Science to my colleagues for them to understand even if I consult my notes (SSIP-3).

These statements seem to suggest that participants look down upon themselves and did not exhibit confidence during class activities. These withdrawn attitudes had created some doubts as to whether these students could actually accomplish their educational ambitions in life.

Research Question 2: *What are the effects of psychosocial challenges on the academic pursuit of Senior High School students in the Nanumba North Municipality?*

This research question sought to discover the effects of psychosocial challenges on the academic pursuit of Senior High School students in the Municipality. It emerged from the interview data that inadequate persistence and motivation to learn, lack of concentration and poor attitude towards learning were among some of the effects experienced by these students.

A participant expressed her concerns as follows:
Each day, I dedicate 30 minutes to my studies. When I sit down to learn I'm not able to stay for long and with the least distraction, I'm not able to concentrate. I only sit down to do intensive studies when it's time for class tests or examinations. After I've finished writing a test or exams, truly speaking I don't put in much effort in my studies and I can really see that my performance

hasn't been the best as it was when I got admitted into this school (SSIP-3).

Inferring from the above statement, it can be concluded that participants were not determined to learn and/or lack the needed motivation and concentration for learning. These are all indications that psychosocial challenges have much effect on the academic pursuit of these students.

Poor Attitude towards Learning
Additionally, the interview data further suggested that participants did not develop the right attitude towards their studies. The following was recounted by one of the participants:
Personally, I don't have a personal study time table but my friend has one and that is what we are both using. I study the subjects I'm good at because if I even decide that I'll follow the timetable, I find it difficult to stick to it. Also when I sit down to learn and remembers that I've not finished paying my fees and may be prevented from writing the end of term examinations, I suddenly loose interest in learning. (SSIP-4).

Hypothesis 1
1. **H_{01}**: *There is no statistically significant gender differences in psychosocial challenges of Senior High School students in the Nanumba North Municipality.*

To test for this hypothesis, an independent sample t-test was conducted to find out and compare the means of the two sexes (males and females) in relation to their psychosocial challenges. The results are presented in Tables 2-3 below.

Table-2: Descriptive Statistics Results of Gender and Psychosocial Challenges for Hypothesis 1

	Sex	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total Psychosocial Challenges	Male	122	2.4756	.35257	.03219
	Female	74	2.5625	.25692	.02947

Table-3: Independent Samples t-Test Results for Hypothesis 1

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means	t-test for Equality of Means	
		F	Sig.	T	Df	sig. (2-tailed)
Psychosocial Challenges	Equal variances assumed	4.70	. 031	-1.805	194	.073
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.937	190.521	.054

In table 2, the female group (N = 74) was associated with a much larger psychosocial challenge M = 2.5625 (SD = .25692) than the male group (N = 122), M = 2.4756 (SD = .35257). As can be seen in Table 2, the male and female distributions were sufficiently normal for the purpose of conducting a *t*-test. The findings in Table 3 show that the sig. value (p = 0.54) is above .05 which shows that there is no significant differences between the male and female group. This analysis suggest that there is no statistically significant gender differences in the level of psychosocial

challenges experience by male and female students in the Nanumba North Municipality. The null hypothesis is therefore supported.

Hypothesis 2 *Psychosocial challenges will not significantly affect academic pursuit of Senior High School students in the Nanumba North Municipality.*

This hypothesis was tested by means of a simple linear regression and the results presented in Tables 5 and 6 below.

Table-5: Model Summary Results of Simple Linear Regression for Hypothesis 2

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.518ᵃ	.268	.265	.61983	.268	71.185	1	194	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Psychosocial challenges
b. Dependent Variable: Academic pursuit

Table-6: Results of Coefficient of Simple Linear Regression for Hypothesis 2

Model	Unstandardized	Coefficient	Unstandardized	Coefficient	t	sig.
1(Constant)	B	Std. Error	Beta			
Psychosocial	.063	.350			.181	
Challenges	1.167	.138	.518		8.437	

In table 5, psychosocial challenges as an independent variable was tested to see its effect on the outcome variable or dependent variable, academic pursuit of Senior High School students. As presented in Table 5, the model of independent variable, psychosocial challenges successfully influenced the outcome or dependent variable (academic pursuit). The findings therefore suggest that the present model is a good predictor and significant model since the sig. value (p = 0.00) is less than alpha (0.05) reported as F (1,194) =71.18, p = 0.00. Also, as shown in Table 5, the Adjusted R^2 (0.265) implies that 26.5% of the variables in academic pursuit can be explained by one's psychosocial challenges.

As presented in Table 6, if the equation for the line that uses psychosocial challenges to determine its effects on the academic pursuit was considered, then y = β_o+ β_1x, where 0.63 is the beta (β) or the slope for psychosocial challenges and 1.167 is the constant of the line i.e. the y-intercept. This means that if the equation of the line was used to determine the level of significance of psychosocial challenges, then the equation for the line was formulated as y = 0.63x +1.167. To determine whether or not the slope of psychosocial challenges was significant, then we consider the t–test (t =8.437) comparing that slope to a slope of 0 to the sig. value of (p = .000).

The above analysis suggests that there is statistically significant effect of psychosocial challenges on the academic pursuit of Senior High School students in the Nanumba North Municipality. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study found that Senior High School students in the Nanumba North Municipality experienced psychosocial challenges such as stress, depression and anxiety. These challenges are in the form of emotional or internal challenges that are not overtly acted out but worries students inwardly and interfere with their learning and relationships with others. This finding agrees with Saravanan & Wilks (2014) who indicated similar findings in their study on psychosocial problems facing medical students and pointed out that the most prevalent among these problems were emotional challenges such as depression, anxiety and stress.

Though, existing literature has found the developmental trend that internalizing problems increase with age (Frigerio *et al.,* 2004; Petot *et al.*, 2008). It is worth noting that the qualitative and quantitative findings of the present study did not find any gender disparities in terms of internalizing challenges of students. This current finding partly corroborates the finding of Costello & Kroner-Herwig, (2014), who assert that depression and anxiety disorders are among the most prevalent psychiatric problems and the prevalence rates of these disorders increase during adolescence, especially among females. The plausible explanation of the differences in internalizing challenges of Senior High School students could be due to cultural variations.

Further, it became evident that, aggression, bullying and hyperactive behaviours were some of the externalizing or behavioural challenges of Senior High School students. These problems of students are behavioural manifestations which are displayed or acted out which directly affect the students or indirectly interferes with the activities of other students. The present findings lends support to the findings of Phares (2003), who found that externalizing problems of Senior High School students include violence, rebelliousness, disobedience and drug use. Bhosale, & Khismatrao (2015), argue that externalizing or behavioural problems include conduct disorders, educational difficulties, substance abuse, and hyperactivity.

The findings of the study also suggest that students held poor self-concept, poor self-esteem and lack of confidence in themselves. These were reported as social challenges students face. Consistent with this finding, Solomon (2006) identified self-esteem as a universal construct, which was of general psychological importance and had both direct and latent effects on several aspect of human behaviour. In a related view, Quarcoo (2013) noted that low self-esteem, for instance was significantly related to depression, suicide ideation,

delinquency, aggression and antisocial behaviour. It also substantiates the findings of Soomro & Clarbour (2012), who reported that self-esteem, has been found to be an important precursor of school achievement and related adjustment.

In the quantitative findings no statistically significant gender differences in the mean psychosocial challenges scores was found between male and female students which supported the null hypothesis. This is suggestive of the fact that male and female students experience the same level of psychosocial challenges. However the findings of the linear regression showed that there was statistically significant effect of psychosocial challenges on the academic pursuit of Senior High School students in the Nanumba North Municipality. This is consistent with Ndhlowu (2010), who found that emotional and behavioural disorders frequently led to poor school performance and eventual school dropout.

Similarly, psychosocial problems of students interrupts with their ability to perform satisfactorily in school and both externalizing, internalizing, and inattentive behavioural problems have been linked to academic difficulties (Masten *et al.*, 2005; Breslau *et al.,* 2009).

In conclusion, we can say that psychosocial challenges are prevalent among Senior High School students in the Nanumba North Municipality and that these challenges affected students' academic pursuit and its impact was significant. The psychosocial challenges coupled with the unique developmental stage of Senior High School students could plausibly lead to high degree of psychosocial role confusion. It appears that multiple roles can increase students' stress levels and negatively influence academic functioning of these students (Biasi, Bonainto, & Levin, 2015; Menozzi *et al.*, 2016). In addition, the fact that no statistically significant gender difference was found in psychosocial challenges of Senior High School students in the study setting calls for supportive programmes in schools to meet the diverse developmental needs of these students.

RECOMMENDATIONS
Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are made for the consideration of stakeholders in education:
1. The study found that psychosocial challenges are among the pertinent issues Senior High School students face in the Nanumba North Municipality and it is therefore recommended that management of Senior High Schools in the Municipality in collaboration with counsellors should be proactive in identifying students who are faced with psychosocial challenges and offer them the necessary counselling they need.

2. Guidance programmes offered for students should be regular in all Senior High Schools in the Municipality to help students adapt maximally to their changing environment and develop the right attitude towards their studies.
3. In order to minimize the effect of psychosocial challenges on students, school authorities should sensitise students on the need to seek counselling when they are confronted with psychosocial issues in the school so that they would be able to deal effectively with these challenges and focus positively on their academic ambitions.

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