

Original Article

Transitional Stress to Grade One Students in Academic Writing

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Abstract

This study explores the stress experienced by Grade One students in private schools in Lalitpur as they transition from preschool to more structured writing activities. While early writing skills are essential for academic success, there is limited research on how writing interventions affect young learners in low-resource settings. Using Bridges' Transition Model (2011) and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the study explores key questions: How do first graders experience the shift to structured writing? Are teachers aware of this stress, and are they trained to support systematic writing? How do teachers address this stress in the classroom? The research used critical hermeneutics, combining classroom observations, teacher interviews, and collection of student work. The researcher also drew on personal experience working with Grade One students during their writing transition to understand the stress they face. The findings offer useful insights into reducing student stress, supporting academic success, and helping teachers and school staff improve the classroom environment. The study also provides recommendations for curriculum developers and policymakers to design effective, evidence-based educational interventions.

Keywords: *transitional stress, academic writing, school counselor, transactional model of stress and coping, critical Hermeneutics*

Background of study

Recently, adding my graduation degree in School Counseling and practicing as a school counselor and preparing reports, often I came upon a gap in research writing. When I reflected on my journey to education, I came to realize that we have been introduced to writing paragraphs and answering questions since grade one but still stress lingers throughout

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our learning journey. I came upon a gap in research in structured writing patterns that students in primary/ basic schools are following now. Writing skills in earlier years and their impact on academic success later on in life are yet to be explored. A researcher's mind full of queries related to academic stress, teachers' awareness and their coping strategies are unpacked to some extent in this study. To my understanding, the root of pressure starts from the transition from preschool to formal education in grade one. This study delved into this transitional stress in academic writing. This study also focused on the strategies that can help reduce this stress.

Stress is a common phenomenon, albeit of different intensity and reasons. Addressing academic stress among the school starters, i.e., grade one is essential to ensure academic success later in school life. This not only affects an individual but the whole academic standards of a grade, school and a community. Most researchers are limited to transitional stress for higher education and higher levels, whereas for preschoolers moving to grade one is found rare. As Harmer (2006) mentions, over the years writing has been seen as only a support system for learning grammar and vocabulary, rather than as a skill in its own right. Teachers in our context are observed to follow former understanding. He further adds that training students to write demands the care and attention of language teachers due to the level of correctness and issues of well-formedness is concerned. Stress in students and teachers' awareness is yet to be explored for grade one. Depiction of stress ignores the phenomenological experience of grade one students in their academic or systematic writing skills. Preliminary studies in similar contexts suggested that writing intervention improves metacognitive skills and motivation. To this background, the study explored stress and issues of grade one in academic writing and provide insight into how these issues can be addressed. The study further explored awareness and preparedness of teachers for such situations. Overall, it looked for the answers to the following research questions: (1) What are the common stress issues in writing activities in grade one due to transition from preschool? (2) How do teachers perceive stress? And (3) How have teachers helped to manage stress issues?

Academic Transition and Transitional Stress

An academic transition is a significant change in students' life as they move from one level of education to another. It involves adjusting to new learning environments, attitudes and skills. Cleng et al. (2023) state academic transition as the internal process in mind which takes place when students undergo change and pass from the familiar to the unknown, responding to culture, social and cognitive challenges. Myers (2005) defines stress as a process by which one perceives and copes with environmental threats and challenges. Personal and environmental events that cause stress are known as stressors (Lazarus, 1990). Thus, emotional disturbances or changes caused by stressors are stress in simple terms. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggest that daily hassles which often appear unimportant in relation to major life events, often taken for granted, in itself can be stressful and cause feelings of anxiety, depression, change in behavior and psychology, as well as acute and chronic illness. Though we are told that changes are good, it does not always feel that way. Academic transitional stress could be any changes in the class or school environment that alters children's emotional and mental wellbeing. In the language of Wilks (2008), academic stress

is the product of a combination of academic demands exceeding adaptive availability of resources to an individual

Components of Transitional Stress

A study conducted by undergraduates recognized a few factors associated with academic stress. Academic workload, attending lectures, examinations, school curriculum, inadequate learning materials, academic performance, crowded classrooms, subject-wise projects, worrying about future, self-expectations, peer pressure, parental pressure, finance and admission procedure (Agolla & Ongori, 2009). However, pertaining to stress for grade one students, my experience reveals that kids in our context enjoy a small school with child centered and play methods. Different classroom settings, subject wise teachers and a new environment trigger their stress. Hence, academic writing is sometimes a big challenge for the small ones.

Academic or Systematic Writing

According to Bhandari (2024), writing is a skill that students are expected to acquire for academic purposes. However, Paudel and Joshi (2017) mention that teachers find it difficult to teach writing skills in English as students view it as a ‘frightening activity’ even though it is mandatory in the basic education system of Nepal. Academic writing skills can be transferred to learners using a range of instructional strategies. “This requires proper training and awareness in teachers, lack of which may be a major cause of stress among students. Adopting diverse writing styles inspire students to think imaginatively” (Bhandari, 2024, p.51). Teachers face obstacles when it comes to writing skills, the inability to inspire students, address diverse talents, time constraints, and inappropriate teaching materials are some common challenges. Teachers lack effective instructional strategies to assist students in developing their writing skills.

Bridges Transition Model Theory

Transition Model Theory developed by William Bridges, in 1991 is a framework of understanding and managing change emphasizing the psychological process individuals undergo during the change. It differentiates between external ‘change’ and internal ‘transition’. The model has three stages- “ending”, “neutral zone”, and “new beginning”.

Bridges’ first stage, “ending”, is associated with a decline in engagement and morale and is related to the loss of an old way of doing or being. This relates to graduation from pre-schools for new grade one students. The “neutral zone” is the second stage, during which morale is low and changes are being made or initiated from the old to new methods. The different way of teaching learning activities reminds me of the second stage. The last stage of this concept is called “new beginning”, during which people begin to develop new identities, values, behaviors, and ways of doing and being, where their engagement and morale are reinvigorated. This is when children are normalized to writing patterns.

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping Theory

Stress can be understood as a reaction, a stimulus or a transaction and are assessed in three different levels. Janse (2021) explains these levels as: a. primary appraisal, the first level where a situation can be assessed as positive, irrelevant or potentially dangerous. The

secondary appraisal is the second level's assessment determining whether a specific situation can be managed with available resources but with insufficient resources, a stress reaction is triggered by the human brain. The way of dealing with stress and threats which arise from it is called coping. The third level is reassessment which is to measure the success of coping strategies adopted in order to guarantee adaptation to new situations. The new situation is a challenge and becomes a threat if not addressed properly.

Stress can be dealt with in various ways like a problem oriented, emotion oriented or an assessment-oriented approach. In the words of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), events have causal effects on behavior which can be expanded to encompass emotional and cognitive processes result in better outcomes and behaviors in order to explain success or failure. The way a person appraised a situation directly influences the coping process and their emotional reactions, showing that cognitive appraisal is important in mediating thoughts, feelings and actions central in identifying different coping styles. I link this theory as an assessment tool to identify the type of reaction to stress and the coping strategy adopted by the students to overcome their writing stress.

Research Design

This study employs a phenomenological research design, using critical hermeneutics to range over the transitional stresses faced by grade one in academic writing. This research is guided by interpretative phenomenological paradigm where a researcher is allowed to articulate pre-existing theoretical constructs, explain the phenomenon and produce a new one (Radnitzky, 1973). Gardiner (1999) mentions that critical hermeneutics focuses on creative interpretation of words and text as active role players with statement or action engagement and the wider context within which these phenomena occur.

The study involved four teachers dealing with grade one from two different schools in Lalitpur, Nepal. The participants were selected purposively to ensure that they had relevant information, experiences and insights into research questions. Information was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, classroom observation, and artifacts analysis. The participants were allowed to share their experiences and perceptions, which were later transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify prejudgments, find texts that contradict or complicate, and derive alternative meanings and new narratives.

Findings of the Study

The research questions of this study ascertain the pressure problems in grade one students caused during the writing activities. The apprehension and preparedness among teachers were other areas of exploration. Their coping strategies were also figured. To gather information, an in-depth interview was conducted. Their responses were then transcribed and analyzed a number of times. Similar codes were grouped into different categories. The categories then were formed into phrasal themes and then interpreted based on narrative paradigm. The discussion and interpretation follow emerging themes drawn from the interviews with four teachers of grade one of two different schools. The researcher, being involved as an observer, has given the understanding and interpretation of self. The major themes interpreted are:

"Stress to be Stressed", "The Cycle of Overwhelm", "Slow Adaptation to Meet High Expectations", and "Establishing a Praxis is Essential".

All pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality. First participant, (Fuli) is a middle-aged woman with a decade of experience in teaching toddlers. Fair complexion, soft voice with a large nose pin on her cheerful face, makes her identity in school as a loving teacher. Second participant (Hasu) is a college graduate introduced to teaching a year ago. She is found enthusiastic and keen to learn. Third participant (Alexa) looks updated and smart. She is also taking some ICT training to enhance her teaching effectiveness. My fourth participant (Bichitra) is quite different. She was most of the times found occupied with her works. She talked very little and had to take several sessions to make her open up. All my participants were female by coincidence.

I realized that interview's findings revealed a gap between problem and strategic coping mechanism. Though teachers are aware of stress, they find themselves helpless at times. Transition has created confusions among teachers and students. Slow adaptation characters of children are not able to meet the high expectations of teachers and parents. The stressors are seen but not addressed properly causing the children into more difficult situations. Techniques and strategies are few and not always effective as thought of by teachers. Involvement of parents to solve these stress issues and adequate training and resources appear crucial.

Stress to the Stressed

Hasu and Alexa observed the problem in holding pencils by children who often complained about pain in their hands and fingers. Alexa said: *I have to catch and hold the children to make them complete their writing task. It's very difficult for them to be focused for a long period of time. I mean even a few minutes is long for them.* Hasu said, *above all, this writing work is the pressure of handwriting style by parents and in-charges/coordinators. We are hardly able to make them write all these five-six subjects and end up saying, you did not check the handwriting.* Bichitra, on the other hand said- *they make a lot of excuses to avoid the writing tasks. They go to washrooms, visit all the classes in school, say they forget their books and exercise books and sometimes they start to cry for no reason.*

Fuli was serious while giving the answer as she took a long breath and said-

They are becoming smaller and smaller every year. (She refers to the age of children in comparison to earlier years). They hardly understand what we instruct them and comprehend all the knowledge in their writings really becomes challenging. I try my best to make short and easy sentences but still I wonder whether they really understand or just pretend to understand what they write. Some of them are very clever though.

Analyzing these, it relates to Wilks (2008), stating that academic stress arises when the demand surpasses an individual's availability to coping stress. Likewise, as Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggested, stress can be understood as a reaction, a stimulus or a transaction, here students exhibit pressure of writing in both physical stress-like headaches and pains, upset stomach, lack of concentration or energy, frequent or uncontrolled urination and sleep disturbances. Common psychological issues were avoidance, dissociation, impairment in

functioning, restlessness and forgetfulness, spending time out of class during writing activities. Increased arousal and anger issues were seen little later if the former problems were not addressed. Furthermore, this reminds Lazarus and Folkman (1984)'s statement that these minor daily stressors that seem insignificant and overlooked now can actually lead to major behavioral problems, psychological changes and academic challenges. As a researcher, there is an insight in the urgency of addressing these issues to reduce the impact later on.

Cycle of Overwhelm

The little children get confused in their subjects and works, said Hasu. Similarly, Fuli stated- Sometimes expectations from us keep me in a dilemma, whether to help children first or start the course and curriculum, plan some activities for them or just make them rote and learn. Alexa smiled and said, these days, whenever I get some confusion, I immediately ask chatGpt and do something possible but the truth is I'm confused what to do and what not. Bichitra also shared her state of confusion as she said, whenever my plan fails or I find my students not following me, I flow with them, make them play, love them and letting them do what they like to. At times I feel helpless.

All their experiences were somehow similar to a researcher's perspective and as stated by Bhandari (2024), that teachers lack effective instructional strategies to assist students in developing their writing skills. So, they were seemingly confused and not in accordance with what purpose they were. Their facilitation to writing strategies was not clear to themselves. Experiential methods were more prevalent than systematic and guided methods for teachers. The impact of personal experiences on skills formation of students was not always as anticipated. The teachers were mindful of the stress. They have been making possible efforts to help their students.

Slow Adaptation to Meet High Expectations

When teachers were asked about how they have been dealing with the issues of writing stress of children, they shared variation in their experiences. Fuli explained:

I change my technique sometimes. I try dramatization and play-way method. Sometimes, I praise the child, and, when necessary, take help from parents. Hasu gives space and time to children; as she said, I pretend to extend their time of work and take them out of class or elsewhere like library, ground, etc., and make them complete their writing tasks. Alexa said, I try talking to children about their problems and sometimes it's about explaining things differently. Bichitra shares her experiences as- I let them make noise or play by themselves. I complete my correction works that time and afterwards I call them back and make them write. Sometimes I will write for them on the board and they will copy.

Not surprised to hear them as only Hasu had taken some training on writing skills. When asked about training, they all shared a common answer that they had taken some handwriting training but had no idea about the systematic or guided structured writing process. Hasu said, *When I was doing a Google search for answers and meanings, I came across the word structured writing but I am not clear about it.*

The expectations of parents and teachers from grade one is that they are able to read their textbooks and comprehend answers and solve exercises given in books. Physical growth as

well as cognitive development matters. The fine motor skills of some children are not found to be refined enough to hold a pencil and complete a page of writing using their eye, hand and brain coordination. Agreeing with Poudel and Joshi (2017), structural writing is considered a frightening activity. As a researcher, while observing them, I found Fuli's worry very true regarding the age of children. The so-called 6 years old is unable to pull their pants, wear shoes or arrange books in bags. These children were asked to develop their answers and write them with accuracy of spelling and grammar. Not to forget, in a good handwriting. However, on the second visit after two weeks, I found them more settled and composed than before. Adaptation takes time.

Establishing a Praxis Seen Essential

Teachers and parents are found aware of stress. However, they take it as normal. When Fuli easily accepted saying, *it's always like that*, my inner self objected to me, *then let's find some solution*. This reflected to me the potentially dangerous stress to the children in days to come. The academics as well as mental health is being affected due to this ignorance. Hasu said, *Different subjects and routines are confusing for children to work with. I wish we had fewer books and less work to give to children*. Harmer (2006) mentioned that writing has historically been viewed merely as a tool for acquiring grammar and vocabulary. Teachers were unaware of the guided writing structures and had very few or no training in these areas. They even shared that training could be helpful to them if they really existed. Alexa was surprised when asked about specific training of systematic and guided writing structures, *do such training happen? They would be really helpful*. Hasu added, *parental encouragement and skill building efforts from teachers would be helpful*. Here, I would state Bhandari (2024), who mentioned that academic writing skills can be imparted to learners through various teaching methods but insufficient training and awareness among educators may significantly contribute to stress in students.

Thus, overcoming major challenges in structural writing could be started through awareness and personal orientation. Teacher student's ratio, if made mandatory for the basic level, can let teachers spend more time helping students. Inadequate teaching resources are observed during visits to schools. Whatever is trained to teachers is not being applied in the classroom setting effectively and the loopholes are even connected to the policy level in formation of curriculum, relatable courses and guided writing workloads for children. Monitoring of private schools is another challenge for effective implementation of teaching and learning pedagogies.

Discussions

There were four participants: Fuli, Hasu, Alexa and Bichatra. They all are teachers of grade one. Fuli and Hasu are grade teachers while Alexa and Bichitra work as subject teachers assisting the class teachers. When exploring the findings from the lens of Bridges Transition Model theory, the psychological process in individuals during the change, the change in the classroom settings, class teachers and other teachers all are considered as external factors or "change", whereas the internal phenomenon of children realizing the structural differences in their study pattern and adaptation to the classroom environment is internal and known as "transition". The first stage of this model, 'ending' is when the children are upgraded to grade one and are supposed to be taken to bigger schools. (Most of the grade one students come from a separate preschool, which has a completely different school environment than of grade

one). At this stage, students are associated with a decline in engagement and morale and are away from their usual ways of doing things or being. It aligns with transition theory to the experiences of grade one as they shifted to implementing new writing style and it further justifies the sense of loss felt by them as they were stressed to writing. The second stage 'neutral zone' followed in our context, can be referred to as the first few weeks in grade one where they are introduced to writing long sentences and are encouraged to follow new rules and new ways to write. Developing new identities, values, behaviors, beliefs and methods of writing where student engagement and morale are revitalized is compared to the third stage of transition model theory known as 'new beginning'. After this stage, children begin to normalize and adapt to new writing styles.

Supported by Janse (2021), the second theme was based on the findings that despite the knowledge and awareness of stress in children, teachers were not able to tackle stress properly. Change is stressful, and this stress is a stimulus that requires either adjustment or a response. Contradicting Lazarus (2087), who claimed stress to be a product of interactions between a person and their environment and coping is the way of dealing with stress and threats, the third theme establishes the findings that may not always lead to coping but rather leads to further complications. The reassessment to measure the success of coping strategies adapted to new situations may not be adaptive and effective for all. However, the last theme gives hope for change. This contains suggestions for practical ways to address the problem of writing stress in the first graders. Proper guidance and special training for structured and guided writing to teachers are essential.

Conclusions

The study explored the often overlooked stress that grade one students in private schools experience as they transition from preschool to structured academic writing. Rooted to Bridge's Transition Model and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, the research revealed that while both teachers and students acknowledge the strain of the transition, lack of training for structured writing strategies and adequate classroom support leave many students and teachers overwhelmed. The finding emphasize that writing stress is not merely a behavioral concern but a psychosocial challenge that affects students' emotional wellbeing, cognitive, and physical health. Teachers, despite their efforts and insight, face confusions and limitations in effectively addressing these challenges due to insufficient training and resources. The study highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions, including professional support in systematic writing instructions, curriculum reforms that align with children's developmental needs and parental involvement. By establishing a praxis grounded in structures writing support, emotional understanding, and policy level changes, the foundational years of education can be transformed into less stressful and more empowering experiences for young learners. In a nutshell, especially in private schools in Nepal, the transition from preschool to grade one is often misaligned with children's emotional and cognitive development. This study suggests systemic reforms, improved teachers' capacity, parental education, and support structures like school counseling. The implication of the findings of this research help reframe education at the foundation of basic level as developmentally appropriate, empathetic and effective rather than a stressful academic leap. The research findings may have several implications for school and teacher-trainers to make

plans for in-service training for teachers' professional development regarding writing skills. School administrators and teachers may implement writing strategies in classroom for grade one. Similarly, early childhood educators may benefit from developing an early childhood transition framework. Also, parental orientation and engagement plans can be developed by the schools.

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Author's Bio

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