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British Council  
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# Using mindfulness- based interventions to reduce stress and anxiety among students

Chinedu Vincent Okoro, Nigeria

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## School context

**Olumawu School** is a 32-year-old, award-winning, private, co-educational day and boarding school located in the heart of Abuja, Nigeria, in the City Center area, at 92 Ademola Adetokunbo Crescent, Wuse 2. The school offers a nursery (preschool), primary, secondary and university foundation and A level programmes and is staffed by highly trained educators who are experts in their fields of study. Our Nigerian curriculum, as well as the English national curriculum, prepares students for success in both national and international examinations.

## About the author



**Chinedu Vincent Okoro** is a Rotarian, educator, poet, dramatist and advocate for social change and mental health from Nigeria. He holds a Master of Education in Advanced Teaching from the University of the People in Pasadena,

California, USA. With over a decade in the teaching profession, Chinedu has found fulfilment in nurturing young minds and empowering students of all abilities to reach their potential. Currently, he is the Head of the Arts and Humanities Department and talent development coach at Olumawu School, Abuja, Nigeria.

Chinedu's literary works have appeared in national and international magazines, anthologies, and literary platforms, including *Makana m bu nwata nwanyi* (Best New African Poets 2019 Anthology), *Oh My Africa* (an anthology celebrating Africa's beauty) and *The Grand Patron* (2018 SYNW Chinua Achebe Essay/Poetry Anthology). He is also the author of the play *The Stinging Hut*.

## Key findings

- The workshops on Time management and Stress and anxiety reduction were observed as effective in reducing stress, improving organisation and enhancing time-management skills. An impressive 94.4 per cent of students reported feeling less stressed, more organised and better at prioritising tasks after the sessions. Additionally, 88.9 per cent found the workshop beneficial for handling academic stress.
- The school's support played a crucial role in the workshops' success, with all respondents acknowledging its contribution to creating a conducive learning environment.
- To maximise the workshops' long-term impact, sustained follow-up and continuous monitoring should be implemented.

## Exploratory Action Research questions

1. What do I perceive as the effects of stress on students' academic performance?
2. What do my students perceive as the main reasons for their stress?
3. In what ways do students display behaviours associated with stress and anxiety?

**'Mindfulness is a way of befriending ourselves and our experience.'**

Jon Kabat-Zinn

## Action Research rationale

This Action Research reflects both my professional insights and personal experiences. I believe it is crucial for driving improvement and innovation at Olumawu School, directly impacting students' academic success and well-being. As an educator who has personally benefited from mindfulness-based interventions, I recognise the urgent need to address rising student stress levels that negatively affect academic performance.

Research by Awadalla et al. (2020), as cited by Stevens Maree (n.d.), highlights that anxiety and depression significantly impair academic outcomes. Similarly, Brits (2021) highlights the high prevalence of mental-health disorders among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa. A 2024 World Health Organization (WHO) report further reveals that one in seven 10- to 19-year-olds worldwide experience a mental disorder, contributing to 15 per cent of the global disease burden in this age group.

Given these findings, I strongly believe mindfulness-based interventions offer a promising solution to students' mental-health challenges. This research is not merely about individual student outcomes but about fostering a culture of well-being and enhancing the overall academic environment at Olumawu School.

## Data collection tools

### Methodology

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative (teacher's reflective journal entry and focus group) and quantitative (questionnaires) methods. This approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the research questions, engaging both students and teachers for a multiperspective view.

The data collection tools included:

- **teacher's reflective journal entry:** This method gathered qualitative data through the teacher's personal reflections, offering insights into how stress affected students' academic performance based on classroom observations and interactions. These reflections helped in understanding the impact of stress on learning outcomes.
- **questionnaires:** A quantitative tool used to gather data from 20 students regarding the causes of stress. Google Forms facilitated the analysis of trends and patterns in student perceptions.
- **focus group:** Involving four to five teachers to explore in-depth qualitative observations on stress-related behaviours, this method fostered a collaborative environment for discussion.

All participants provided their informed consent, ensuring that ethical considerations were upheld throughout the research process.





## Data analysis for the exploration stage

### Key findings from the exploration

- Students' academic engagement and work quality are negatively impacted by stress and anxiety. Supportive teaching techniques and mindfulness-based interventions are proven to be effective strategies for raising students' resilience and focus, which in turn improves their academic performance.
- Academic pressure, school routines, time management and family expectations are key stressors for students. Importantly, 90 per cent of students reported that their regular school routines stress them out, and 100 per cent identified the pressure to perform well academically as a key source of such stress. While 85 per cent appreciated that they have poor time-management skills, 70 per cent blame daily routines, and 60 per cent believe expectations from the family are part of the reason for such stress. As many as 35 per cent of the students reported that interaction with others can raise their level of stress. In addition, 70 per cent of the students feel that teachers are aware of their stress, and 85 per cent feel it is very difficult to share stress with the teachers and counsellors. This shows a large gap in communication.
- All teacher respondents (100 per cent) observed behavioural changes, such as withdrawal and restlessness, in stressed students. To manage such kinds of stress, teachers use different approaches. Helping students manage stress emanating from workload, 50 per cent of the teachers use prioritising tasks or extension of time, while the other 50 per cent promote mindfulness and relaxation techniques to promote calmness and focus among students. Similarly, 50 per cent of the teachers emphasise coordination with teachers or counsellors for a holistic approach in students.

## Action Research

### Action plan

- The workshop must consist of two main modules: Time management and Stress and anxiety reduction. It must run in a face-to-face format and accommodate participants aged 11 to 17 years.
- Students should understand time as a resource. They should identify common time-wasters. They should learn techniques to prioritise tasks using SMART goals. Participants must learn how to create and maintain schedules. They should practise methods for balancing academic and personal responsibilities. Students must be introduced to planners, calendars and productivity apps. They should explore digital and physical tools for time management.
- The workshop should highlight symptoms, sources and the importance of open communication regarding stress and anxiety. Students must learn and practise mindfulness exercises. They should be guided through breathing techniques, progressive muscle relaxation, gratitude journaling, yoga and positive affirmations. The workshop must emphasise the role of sleep, nutrition and hydration in managing stress. It should introduce students to stress-reducing apps designed for teenagers.

## Action plan evaluation tools

In evaluating the effectiveness of my action plan, I considered multiple approaches that included both qualitative and quantitative methods of research to ensure a well-rounded assessment. The evaluation was, therefore, based on immediate outcomes, behavioural changes and the long-term effects of the strategies implemented.

- 1. Teacher reflective journal writing:** This helped gather qualitative data through the teacher's personal reflections, offering insights into the impact of the action plans on students' academic performance based on classroom observations and interactions.
- 2. Pre- and post-questionnaire:** The questionnaire took the form of pre- and post-assessments administered to a sample of 18 students to measure their expectations, knowledge and skills acquired before and after the workshop. These helped in isolating the exact areas of growth attributable to the intervention, thus providing a clear metric for evaluating its effectiveness. For example, the understanding of stress-management techniques or mindfulness practices was measured through structured questionnaires.
- 3. Focus group discussion:** This involved a focus group discussion technique comprising four to five teachers.

## Data analysis and conclusions

### Action plan implementation

The one-week action plan on time management and stress reduction was a huge success at my school. The entire programme was well structured, and the facilitators delivered their topics effectively. Each presenter offered unique insights, making the sessions interactive and highly informative. Students actively participated, engaging in discussions, activities and personal reflections. By the end of the workshop, many students testified to what they had learned and expressed confidence in applying time-management strategies to reduce stress.

What touched me most was the profound impact on students' mental and emotional well-being. As I observed them in counselling sessions with mental-health professionals, I felt deeply moved. Many had been carrying emotional burdens for too long, feeling overwhelmed and unsure of how to cope. This workshop provided a safe space for them to open up.

The experts were both informative and empathetic, offering a judgement-free environment. Many students shared that it was the first time someone truly listened to them. Beyond practical tools, they gained emotional support. Seeing students I have taught for years finally receive the care they deserved was incredibly moving. The workshop has left a lasting impact, and I feel privileged to have been part of it.

### Key findings

The findings highlight the workshop's effectiveness in reducing stress, improving organisation and enhancing time-management skills. An impressive 94.4 per cent of students reported feeling less stressed, more organised and better at prioritising tasks after the sessions. Additionally, 88.9 per cent found the workshop beneficial for handling academic stress and implementing better time-management strategies, while 55.6 per cent strongly agreed that they felt more confident in managing their time. The school's support played a crucial role in the workshop's success, with all respondents acknowledging its contribution to creating a conducive learning environment. Furthermore, 75 per cent of participants observed immediate positive behavioural changes in students.

Despite these successes, certain areas require further attention. Only 33.3 per cent of students strongly agreed that their ability to meet deadlines had significantly improved, indicating a need for additional support in this area. Moreover, 22.2 per cent felt that the workshop did not adequately help them balance school and personal life, suggesting the need for more tailored strategies. Additionally, 50 per cent of respondents emphasised the importance of individualised counselling in managing stress and anxiety, highlighting that while general interventions were helpful, personalised support remains crucial. To maximise the workshop's long-term impact, sustained follow-up and continuous monitoring should be implemented.

**'Develop daily leadership practices that focus on serving your learners and fostering open, effective communication. Embrace mindfulness and self-awareness as tools to manage stress and anxiety, build resilience, and enhance focus in the classroom.'**

Rotimi Jiboku, Principal, Olumawu School, Abuja

## Conclusions

The Action Research on time management and stress reduction has had a meaningful impact on students' lives. While the time frame was too brief to assess long-term effects, initial observations and feedback suggest that the workshop fostered essential skills for managing academic pressure. The student-centred approach encouraged engagement, interaction and self-reflection, resulting in increased confidence and improved organisational abilities. Notably, 94.4 per cent of students reported a reduction in stress levels and enhanced prioritisation skills. The counselling sessions offered invaluable emotional support, allowing students to share personal struggles in a non-judgemental environment.

Beyond my school, this study highlights the importance of integrating mental health and stress management into educational institutions globally. These interventions should be embedded within curricula to help students maintain well-being while achieving academic success. A balanced approach to education – one that prioritises both time management and emotional resilience – can be adapted across diverse cultural and institutional contexts.

To ensure the sustainability of these efforts, further initiatives were implemented.

- A compendium of workshop materials was published and distributed to students, teachers and counsellors at no cost.
- Mindfulness practice boards with QR codes linking to short mindfulness exercises and practices were installed in strategic locations within the school community.
- Training sessions for teachers to enhance their ability to support students' stress management were organised.
- A time-management and stress-reduction workshop for delegates comprising students, teachers and counsellors from 12 neighbouring schools in the FCT, Abuja, was hosted..

Additional workshops, surveys and counselling programmes will also be conducted at least once every academic session.

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And finally, I salute the assistance of AI in helping me correct some of my grammar and in creating graphical representations of some of my data analysis and key findings.