



Peer Variables and Academic Identification of Senior Secondary School Students in Uyo Education Zone of Akwa Ibom State

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this correlational study was to investigate the relationship between peer variables (peer acceptance, peer support and peer loyalty) on young adolescents' academic identification. The sub variables; PA, PS and PL were examined using a researcher made instrument titled School Peer Variable Questionnaire ($\alpha=0.86$). Academic Identification was measured using the standardized Osborne (1997) Identification with Academic Scale which has ($r\ 0.92$). Sample selected was ($N = 544$). Responses were scored and hypotheses tested at .05 level of significance using the PPMC. Findings revealed the importance of peer relationship on both academic and emotional adjustment of adolescent learners. Peer acceptance, support and loyalty were found to improve learners' chances of achieving positive academic outcomes. The implication for educators and other stakeholders in adolescent care giving and teaching is for them to understand the importance of maintaining healthy peer relationships for young learners as teacher and peer acceptance, peer support and peer loyalty help them meet psychogenic needs and promote their academic motivation, self-concept, participation, classroom engagement, and feelings of belongingness in the school. Thus, findings have immense significance for educational research and practice, and also bodes well for teachers and counselors in Nigerian secondary schools. urban, ethnically

Keywords: academic identification, peer acceptance, peer support, peer loyalty, academic engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The high rate of attrition and the steady decline in academic engagement behaviours (punctuality, preparedness for class and effort expended on academic task) amongst young learners has been viewed as a serious educational and societal problem for many decades. This trend which is now a common occurrence even amongst adolescents of secondary school age range, if not promptly addressed will pose greater challenges in the future for the relevant stakeholders in the educational system. Getting students engaged with school in positive ways and increasing their identification with academics are important strategies of ensuring academic success with consequent implications for long term life goal attainment.

Researchers have over the years debated the notion that individuals do place more or less importance on various domains in their life (for example, academics, sports, social popularity, musical talent and others), and that the act of valuing a domain more or less (identification) will have motivational consequences for behaviour and achievement in that domain (academics). In the vocational education and training literature, researchers have studied how social structures and individual agencies help to form students' vocational identities and are related to their vocational choices (Brockmann, 2010; Lehmann, 2005). In academics, the few studies investigating the link between identification with academics and academic outcomes indicate that increasing identification with academics should increase the probability of positive outcomes in that domain. Stambler et al. (2013) found that identification with academics was related to important academic outcomes such as academic achievement and classroom participation in secondary school students. Specifically, identification with academics was found to be related to motivation, engagement, and a decreased likelihood of learners engaging in undesirable behaviours such as truancy, absenteeism, deviant behaviours and attrition (Griffin, 2002).

Students who are identified with academics would choose to engage in academic activities, put more effort to succeed in school, and persist longer in the face of frustration or failure than those who have misidentified because their self-esteem would be more strongly influenced by academic performance. Strongly identified students would also be more likely to have goals, beliefs, and self-schemas that would foster their success in academics (Brockmann, 2010; McCune, 2019). These would eventually lead to desirable engagement behaviours such as attending class, doing homework, studying, coming to class prepared, monitoring and self-regulating learning, as well as engaging in extracurricular activities (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

A learners' academic identity involves the said learner's emotional and psychosocial disposition towards the curricular aspects of school engagement. A learner who shows traits of self regulation, mastery goal-orientation, academic self-concept, achievement motivation and locus of control is often associated with academic identification (Bachman et al., 2011; McCune, 2019). Thus, academic identification, to a large extent, explains the fluctuations that exist in academic enthusiasm, engagement and zeal among learners.

A peer group is a group of people of the same age, fairly close friends, or engaging in the same activities. A peer group is both a social group and a primary group of people who have similar interests, age, background or social status. Peer group pose an important influence throughout one's life but they are more critical during the developmental years of childhood and adolescence (Onyejiaku & Onyejiaku, 2011). Contrary to the popular belief of the strong link

between peer groups and negative behaviours, Castrogiovanni (2002) asserted that there are some positive experiences offered by peer groups.

Peers form an important micro system for adolescents and play an important role in identity development (Wentzel, 2005), as well as the socialization process. Yet, not all adolescents are able to gain acceptance into a peer group. Studies suggest that students who feel accepted by their peers are better placed to surmount academic challenges. The ability to successfully negotiate peer group relationships is one indicator of an adolescents' social competency (Luna et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2017). Peer acceptance is the degree to which a child or adolescent is socially accepted by peers. It includes the level of peer popularity and the ease with which a child or adolescent can initiate and maintain satisfactory peer relationships (Encyclopedia of Children's Health, 2018). Peer acceptance and friendship provide a wide range of learning and development opportunities for children. These opportunities are made possible by companionship, recreation, building social skills, participating in group problem solving and managing competition and conflict.

Among secondary school-aged children, factors such as physical attractiveness, cultural traits and disabilities greatly affect the level of peer acceptance, with a child's degree of social competence being the best predictor of peer acceptance. Studies on peer acceptance demonstrate that social status in the classroom is related to feelings of belonging in school, academic engagement and achievement (Cillesen & Van den Berg, 2012; Ladd et al., 2009). Warm interaction with classroom peers creates a climate for comfort and help meet students' need for relatedness. According to Onyejaku and Onyejiaku (2011), each peer group has its code of conduct which does not always conform to adults' standard. The most important thing is that each child takes his membership very seriously and attempts to do anything to ensure he is accepted and recognized. Lack of acceptance by peers negatively affects the child especially at adolescence. Some children have been known to perform poorly in school not because they lack the cognitive ability to do well, but because they are disturbed by the fact that they are not accepted by their peer group. When children are accepted by their peers and feel included, this engenders motivation and learning in school (Juvonen et al., 2012).

Given that adolescents spend a large amount of time with their peers during the course of each school day, they readily look to peers for emotional, social and academic support. Teacher support and peer support have been found to have maximum impact on a student's perceived support level at school. It has also been documented that teacher and peer support are positively related to students' positive motivation, academic attitudes, self-efficacy and academic achievement (Demary & Malecki, 2002; Gherasim et al., 2013). The impact of peer support on students' performance and motivation peaks especially during the early adolescence years (Zitzmann, 2005). You (2011) found an influence of peers during adolescence through motivational elements such as locus of control and academic expectations, as perceived support provides a sense of motivation and guides students toward academic success.

When students work together to navigate through problems in the classroom, cooperate in group projects, examine and challenge their own beliefs, explain the relevance of classroom assignments to each other, engage in self-exploration and share their ideas, they co-create an autonomy-supportive context (Deci et al., 2006). Several studies associate peer support and

engagement in school. Kiefer et al. (2015) demonstrated that peers can be source of support in the context of cooperative interactions such as sharing valuable intellectual information and resources (for example notes and strategies) and modelling academically desirable behaviour and learning skills. You (2011), as well as Kiefer (2015) found a link between peer support and behavioural engagement; Perdue et al. (2009) also found a relation between peers' social support and students' engagement. Estell and Perdue (2013) studied the association between peer support (and also parents and teachers) in 5th grade children and behavioural (work habits) affective (school attachment) engagement in the 6th grade. Results indicated that peer support is significantly and positively related with affective engagement.

As adolescents continue to mature, their structures of relationship with peers change. They begin to forge stronger bonds of friendship which go beyond the walls of a classroom and consolidate on the reciprocity of the support offered to each other which virtually touches every aspect of life. They become more vulnerable and emotionally intimate. This increased vulnerability and intimacy requires greater trust among peers. Thus, there is a greater commitment and allegiance to their peer group. In times of need, adolescents tend to seek support from their peers first and may not even involve their parents. The cohesiveness of the peer group is an important factor of peer support. Yalom (2005) described cohesion as important to bound people at a time of extreme discomfort or conflict; members of a cohesive group can feel warmth, comfort and belongingness. A highly cohesive group is one that has members with a strong feeling of wellness and consists of members who are friendly, loyal and work together towards a goal; willing to endure pain or frustration for the group and willing to defend other members against external criticism and attack.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Academic identity is important in explaining the reason(s) behind learners' exhibition of goal-oriented behavior, in pursuit of their academic goals, as well as lack of motivation showed by various learners. Students who show a sense of identification with their scholarly activities have been found to excel in their academic tasks and show significant increase in their academic engagement. Literature, over the past years has shown significant linkage between teacher-related factors and academic identification of learners. However, the subtle, yet strong influence of peers on the academic identification and outcomes of students have probably been overlooked or yet to be understood and harnessed. Thus, the need to carry out this is to study to determine whether the selected peer variables relates with academic identification and therefore understand the relationship between peer variables and academic identification of public secondary school students in Uyo Education zone.

Hypotheses

Three null hypotheses have been formulated and was tested at .05 level of significance.

1. **Ho₁:** Peer acceptance has no significant relationship with secondary school students' academic identification.
2. **Ho₂:** Peer support has no significant relationship with secondary school students' academic identification.
3. **Ho₃:** Peer loyalty has no significant relationship with secondary school students' academic identification.

RESEARCH METHOD

The Correlational research design was adopted for this study. Correlational research design, according to Amajuoyi and Joseph (2016), is a type of research design adopted for studies that investigate the direction of relationship between a dependent variable and a group of one or more independent variables. This design is considered as a suitable choice for this study because it enabled the researcher to measure the magnitude of relationship between the identified peer variables and academic identification using reliable and valid questionnaires.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample size of 544 SS 2 using the multi-stage sampling technique was used in this study. The stratified and simple random sampling was used in selecting 5% of students in each LGA and 10% of SS 2 students in the schools selected. Numbers were assigned to each public secondary school in the LGAs and written on pieces of paper. These papers were mixed thoroughly in a container and numbers of schools reflecting 20% of the total number of public secondary schools in each LGA were picked.

From the population of SS 2 students in public secondary schools in the study area, 10% of the students were drawn from each LGA in Uyo Education Zone. In each school selected, SS 2 students were made to pick pieces of folded paper that have been labeled 'Yes' and 'No'. Students who picked 'Yes' were eventually selected for the study.

Instruments

Two instruments were used for data collection in this study. A researcher made instrument, titled, School Peer Variables Questionnaire (SPVQ) was used to elicit responses in line with the sub-variables discussed in this study. This instrument had two sections, A and B. Section A contains two items on the respondents personal information such as name of school and area of specialization, section B contains 15 items which are designed to elicit responses on peer acceptance, peer support and peer loyalty. Responses were assessed by a means of a four point rating scale as follows: Strongly Agreed (SA), Agreed (A) Disagreed (D) and Strongly Disagreed (SD). These responses were scored as 4, 3, 2, and 1, respectively.

To measure the academic identification of the students an adapted version of the Identification with Academic Scale (IAS) was used to measure the respondents' academic identification. This instrument was standardized by Osborne (1997) and consists of thirteen question items. Responses were assessed by a means of a four point rating scale as follows: Strongly Agreed (SA), Agreed (A) Disagreed (D) and Strongly Disagreed (SD). These responses were scored as 4, 3, 2, and 1, respectively. The School Peer Variables Questionnaire was issued out to an independent sample of 100 students and responses were collated and subject to Cronbach Alpha computation which yielded a reliability score of 0.86. The standardized Identification with Academic Scale used for the study had a reliability coefficient of 0.92.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data collected for this study from the questionnaires were analyzed using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC). Research hypotheses formulated for the study were tested using the PPMC at .05 level of significance.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1

Peer acceptance has no significant relationship with secondary school students' academic identification.

Table 1: Pearson Product Moment Correlation(r) analysis of the relationship between Peer acceptance and academic identification of public secondary school students

Variables	N	df	r-calculated	r-critical	Decision
Peer acceptance Academic Identification	544	543	0.78	0.0619	Significance

***Significant at 0.05 alpha level; N = 544; df = 543; Critical r-value =0.0619**

Table 1 presents the calculated r -value as 0.78. This value was tested for significance by comparing it with the critical value (0.0619) at 0.05 level of significance (two tailed test), with 543 degree of freedom. The calculated r -value (0.78) is greater than the critical r -value (0.0619). Hence, the result is significant. The null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that there is a significant relationship between peer acceptance and academic identification of public secondary school students in Uyo Education zone.

Research Hypothesis 2

Peer support has no significant relationship with secondary school students' academic identification.

Table 2: Pearson Product Moment Correlation(r) analysis of the relationship between Peer support and academic identification of public secondary school students

Variables	N	df	r-calculated	r-critical	Decision
Peer support Academic Identification	544	543	0.83	0.0619	Significance

***Significant at 0.05 alpha level; N = 544; df = 543; Critical r-value =0.0619**

As shown in Table 5, the calculated r -value is 0.83. This value is greater than the critical r -value of 0.0619 at 0.05 level of significance (two tailed test) with 543 degree of freedom. The result therefore implies that there is significant relationship between peer support and academic identification of public secondary school students in Uyo Education zone as the null hypothesis is rejected.

Research Hypothesis 3

Peer loyalty has no significant relationship with secondary school students' academic identification.

Table 6: Pearson Product Moment Correlation(r) analysis of the relationship between peer loyalty and academic identification of public secondary school students

Variables	N	df	r-calculated	r-critical	Decision
Peer loyalty Academic Identification	544	543	0.75	0.0619	Significance

***Significant at 0.05 alpha level; N = 544; df = 543; Critical r-value =0.0619**

As shown on Table 3, the calculated r -value of 0.75 is greater than the critical value of 0.0619 at 0.05 level of significance (two tailed test), with 543 degree of freedom. Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between peer loyalty and academic identification of public secondary school students in Uyo Education zone. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between peer loyalty and academic identification of public secondary school students. In testing the hypothesis, a significant influence of peer loyalty on academic identification of students was observed. The calculated r -value is greater than the critical r -value. This led to the rejection of the null hypothesis. The finding was supported by Sasmoko et al. (2017) who found that there is a positive correlation between peer group affiliations, classroom climate and students' academic achievement. Academic achievement is a hallmark of academic identification, thus, high achieving learners have a robust sense of academic identity. As posited by Sasmoko et al. (2017), students that enjoy warm affiliations with peers show positive academic outcomes. However, peer loyalty was not exactly associated with academic identity.

DISCUSSION

The result from Table 1 revealed that students who were socially accepted by peers identified strongly with academics since peer acceptance and friendship provide a wide range of learning and development opportunities and fosters academic achievement. The findings support that of Zhang et al. (2017) that reported that strong academic engagement and academic achievement could be linked to peer acceptance, feelings of warmth and belongingness amongst young learners. The result further agrees with that of Molloy et al. (2011). They found that academic oriented enthusiasm depended on social interaction and feeling of acceptance among peers. School adjustment entails a learner's tendency to adapt to both the social and emotional environment of the said learner. When a young individual is accepted by peers, they find the school environment warm and cordial. As a result, the learner finds the school an interesting place to be, this consequently improves attendance, engagement and academic participation.

Findings from Table 2 indicate that there exists a significant relationship between peer support and academic identification of secondary school students. As indicated in the Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis, students' academic identification was greatly increased by reported perceived level of support by peers. This confirmed the existence of strong relationship between peer support and academic identification of students. In concurring with this finding, Bursal (2017) rightly observed that peer support is positively related with adjustment and academic achievement. Learners that are struggling to meet set academic goals tend to thrive better when they are offered support by their friends and contemporaries. Also, psychosocial adjustment is made easier as a result of perceived support from classmates and friends. Results from this study are also in consonance with the finding of Kholidiyatus et al. (2016) that reported a strong positive relationship between perceived peer support and engagement behaviour. These engagement behaviours, they observed, foster academic identification. When learners work through scholarly difficulties with their peers they do not only make significant progress at improving performance, they also nurse healthy interpersonal relationships and camaraderie that helps them identify with their more brilliant contemporaries for future collaboration, as well as identifying with the academic activities they engage in together.

CONCLUSION/ RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that significant relationships exist between each of the peer variables of peer acceptance, peer support, peer loyalty and academic identification of public secondary school students in Uyo education zone. Therefore, the following recommendations are made:

1. Students' interpersonal relationship should be encouraged by creating a classroom environment that shows warmth, mutual respect and relatedness.
2. Highlighting ways in which strong academic performance can be instrumental in achieving students' short and long-term goals is a possible way to maintain and improve their identification with academics. This strategy can be accomplished by teachers within the context of their lesson plan.
3. The positive energy and influence of peers should be directed into the learning process by encouraging group work and peer mentoring in the school system.

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