

Relationship Between Peer Social Interactions and Students' Socio-Emotional Development in Secondary Schools in Awka Urban of Anambra State, Nigeria

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100300438>

Received: 11 March 2026; Accepted: 16 March 2026; Published: 11 April 2026

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between peer social interactions and socio-emotional development in secondary schools in Awka Urban, Anambra State. The purpose of the study was to determine the relationship between peer social interactions (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) and socio-emotional development of secondary school students. One research question guided the study. The study targeted the 8,642 senior secondary students (SS1–SS3) enrolled in the twelve public secondary schools of Awka Urban during the 2025/2026 academic session. The study utilized a sample of 384 students. The Peer Social Interactions Questionnaire (PSIQ) is a 18-item instrument designed to measure social interactions with 4-point Likert scale for responses. Reliability was established through pilot testing with 50 students from two schools in Awka North, demographically similar to the study population. Internal consistency for the PSIQ was measured using Cronbach's Alpha statistic which indicated excellent reliability, with the correlation coefficient of 0.85. The findings of the study revealed that there is a significant moderate-to-strong positive relationship between peer social interactions and socio-emotional development. Based on the findings, the study recommended that teachers should transit from seeing peer interactions as distractions to viewing them as pedagogical tools by integrating structured peer tutoring and cooperative learning. The study concluded that peer group dynamics serve as strong predictors of socio-emotional development among secondary school students.

Keywords: Emotional Development, Peer Group, Peer Pressure, Secondary Education, Social Development, Social Interactions.

INTRODUCTION

The adolescent years represent a critical developmental period characterized by profound physical, cognitive, and psychosocial transformations that fundamentally shape educational trajectories and long-term life outcomes. During this formative stage, peer relationships emerge as primary socialization agents, often rivaling and sometimes surpassing parental and institutional influences in determining behavioral patterns, academic engagement, and emotional wellbeing among secondary school students. Contemporary educational discourse

increasingly recognizes that academic achievement cannot be adequately understood through purely cognitive or instructional lenses; rather, it must be examined within the complex web of social relationships that constitute the daily lived experiences of adolescents navigating the challenging terrain of secondary education.

Globally, educational systems confront persistent challenges in optimizing student academic performance while simultaneously nurturing the socio-emotional competencies essential for holistic human development. International assessments reveal troubling disparities in learning outcomes, with the Programme for International Student Assessment indicating that approximately 23 percent of students in participating countries fail to achieve baseline proficiency levels in core academic subjects (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023). Beyond these cognitive deficits, the World Health Organization reports alarming rates of mental health challenges among school-age populations, with depression and anxiety disorders affecting an estimated 14 percent of adolescents globally, conditions intimately linked to peer relationship quality and school social climates (World Health Organization, 2022). These statistics underscore an urgent imperative to comprehend how peer group dynamics operate as determinants of both academic and socio-emotional outcomes in educational settings.

Within the Nigerian educational context, secondary schools face distinctive challenges that amplify the salience of peer influence mechanisms. The Federal Ministry of Education acknowledges concerning trends in academic underperformance, particularly in external examinations where failure rates in core subjects frequently exceed 60 percent in some regions (Federal Ministry of Education, Nigeria, 2024). Simultaneously, school administrators report escalating incidents of behavioral problems, including examination malpractice, truancy, substance experimentation, and interpersonal violence, phenomena often attributed to negative peer influences. Anambra State, despite its reputation for educational excellence in southeastern Nigeria, has not been immune to these challenges. Recent data from the Anambra State Ministry of Education indicates increased reports of student disciplinary issues and psychosocial adjustment problems (Anambra State Ministry of Education, 2023). These developments necessitate rigorous empirical investigation into the mechanisms through which peer social interactions shape educational and developmental outcomes.

Peer social interactions among secondary school students play a vital role in shaping socio-emotional development through the acquisition of key competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These competencies enable students to recognize and regulate their emotions, empathize with others, build positive relationships, and make ethical choices in social contexts (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020). Within peer groups, students continuously practice these skills—learning to understand themselves (self-awareness), control impulses and behaviors (self-management), appreciate diverse perspectives (social awareness), maintain healthy interactions (relationship skills), and make thoughtful decisions (responsible decision-making). Such repeated social engagement fosters emotional intelligence, resilience, and cooperative behavior, which are core indicators of socio-emotional development in adolescence. Furthermore, research by Brackett, Rivers and Salovey (2019) emphasizes that social-emotional learning integrates emotions, cognition, and behavior, thereby enhancing students' ability to understand themselves and others while functioning effectively in social environments.

Socio-emotional development constitutes the second crucial dependent variable in this investigation, referring to the progressive acquisition of competencies that enable individuals to understand and manage emotions, establish positive relationships, demonstrate empathy, make responsible decisions, and navigate social situations effectively. This developmental domain encompasses emotional intelligence, social skills, self-regulation, interpersonal competence, and psychological wellbeing. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning framework identifies five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, all of which demonstrate documented associations with academic success, mental health, and positive life outcomes (Jones & Doolittle, 2024). For secondary school students in contexts like Awka Urban, socio-emotional development assumes particular significance given the cultural emphasis on communal relationships, respect for authority, and social harmony that characterizes Igbo society, combined with contemporary pressures associated with academic competition, technological connectivity, and evolving social norms.

The subjects of this investigation are secondary school students in Awka Urban, adolescents typically ranging from 13 to 18 years of age who occupy the developmental stage Erik Erikson characterized as identity versus role confusion, a period marked by intensive peer orientation and heightened susceptibility to social influence. These students navigate multiple competing demands including academic expectations, family obligations, peer relationships, and personal identity formation, all within an educational system characterized by high-stakes examinations, large class sizes, and often limited counseling support. The unique characteristics of this population—their developmental vulnerability, their embeddedness in intense peer networks, their exposure to both traditional cultural values and globalizing influences through social media—render them particularly appropriate subjects for investigating how peer dynamics shape educational and developmental trajectories. Furthermore, as digital natives growing up in an era of unprecedented connectivity, contemporary secondary school students experience peer influence through both face-to-face and virtual channels, a phenomenon that has transformed the nature and intensity of peer relationships in ways that demand empirical scrutiny.

The relationship between peer group dynamics and socio-emotional development has garnered increasing research attention as educators recognize that academic and social-emotional learning are inextricably intertwined rather than separate developmental domains. Martinez and Thompson (2024) conducted meta-analytic research synthesizing 87 studies and found robust positive associations between quality peer relationships and multiple socio-emotional competencies including emotional regulation, empathy, and social problem-solving skills. Their analysis indicated that adolescents who participated in stable, supportive friendship networks demonstrated significantly higher levels of self-esteem and lower incidences of anxiety and depression compared to socially isolated peers. Furthermore, Huang, Liu and Chen (2023) employed social network analysis to map peer influence processes within school settings, discovering that socio-emotional competencies diffused through peer networks in predictable patterns, with centrally located individuals serving as emotional culture carriers who shaped the affective climate of entire peer groups.

Despite the acknowledged importance of peer relationships in adolescent development, significant gaps persist in empirical understanding of how peer group dynamics specifically operate within Nigerian secondary school contexts to influence academic performance and socio-emotional outcomes. The preponderance of existing research derives from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic societies, raising questions about the generalizability of findings to collectivist cultural contexts like southeastern Nigeria where communal values, extended family systems, and distinctive socialization practices shape the nature and meaning of peer relationships. Furthermore, limited research has simultaneously examined both academic and socio-emotional outcomes within integrated analytical frameworks, despite theoretical assertions of their interconnectedness. The present investigation addresses these lacunae by empirically investigating how multiple dimensions of peer group dynamics influence socio-emotional development among secondary school students in Awka Urban, thereby contributing context-specific knowledge to inform educational practice and policy in Anambra State and comparable settings.

Statement of the Problem

The National Policy on Education in Nigeria emphasizes the holistic development of learners across intellectual, social, emotional, and moral domains. Ideally, peer groups within schools should reinforce social interactions, collaborative learning, emotional support, and positive behavioral norms, thereby enhancing students' overall wellbeing. However, evidence from secondary schools in Awka Urban suggests a gap between this expectation and reality. Despite the recognized importance of peer social interactions in fostering students' socio-emotional development, many secondary school students continue to exhibit deficiencies in key social-emotional competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. In many school settings, such as in Awka Urban, peer interactions are often characterized by negative influences such as peer pressure, bullying, social exclusion, and poor communication patterns, which may hinder rather than promote healthy socio-emotional growth.

Although schools are expected to provide environments that encourage positive peer engagement, there is limited empirical evidence on how the nature and quality of these interactions specifically influence students' socio-emotional development, particularly within the secondary school context. This gap creates uncertainty about whether peer social interactions significantly contribute to or detract from the development of essential

emotional and social skills among students. Therefore, the problem of this study is to determine the relationship between peer social interactions and students' socio-emotional development among secondary school students in Awka Urban, Anambra State, with a view to establishing whether and how peer social interactions dimensions influence the development of these critical competencies.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between peer social interactions and students' socio-emotional development in secondary schools in Awka Urban, Anambra State. Specifically, the study sought to determine the relationship between peer social interactions (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) and socio-emotional development of secondary school students.

Research Questions

The following research question guided the study:

What is the relationship between peer social interactions (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) and socio-emotional development of secondary school students in Awka Urban?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews empirical studies on peer social interactions and socio-emotional development. Martinez and Thompson (2024), through meta-analysis, found moderate positive associations between peer relationship quality and socio-emotional competence (average $r = 0.34$). Effects were strongest for self-esteem and social skills. Huang, Liu and Chen (2023), using social network analysis, demonstrated that emotional competence spreads through peer networks over time, supporting socialization mechanisms. These studies affirm that peer relationships are central contexts for socio-emotional growth. Okeke and Ezeh (2023), studying adolescents in Anambra State, Nigeria, found significant positive relationships between peer relationship quality and socio-emotional competence ($r = 0.46$). Intimacy and companionship predicted social awareness and relationship skills most strongly. Gender differences were minimal in overall competence.

METHODS

The study adopted a correlational research design. The study targeted the 8,642 senior secondary students (SS1–SS3) enrolled in the twelve public secondary schools of Awka Urban during the 2025/2026 academic session. Data from the Anambra State Post-Primary Schools Service Commission indicates a balanced gender distribution of 4,458 females (51.6%) and 4,184 males (48.4%). The population was restricted to students aged 15–18 to capture the autonomy and stable peer networks characteristic of senior levels. The study utilized a sample of 384 students. The Peer Social Interactions Questionnaire (PSIQ) is a 18-item instrument designed to measure social interactions, employing a 4-point Likert scale for responses. Reliability was established through pilot testing with 50 students from two schools in Awka North, demographically similar to the study population. Internal consistency measured using Cronbach's Alpha indicated a reliability coefficient of 0.85.

RESULTS

Research Question

What is the relationship between peer social interactions and socio-emotional development of secondary school students in Awka Urban?

Table 1: Pearson Correlations between Peer Social Interactions and Socio-Emotional Development (N 384)

Socio-Emotional Variable	Peer Social Interactions	Mean	SD
Self-Awareness	0.394	28.42	5.67
Self-Management	0.368	26.85	5.82
Social Awareness	0.452	29.18	5.43
Relationship Skills	0.517	30.24	5.91
Responsible Decision-Making	0.381	27.63	5.74
Total SED	0.502	142.32	24.58

Peer social interactions showed moderate-to-strong positive correlations across all socio-emotional development domains, accounting for approximately 25.2% of the variance in students’ overall socio-emotional competence. There is a significant moderate-to-strong positive relationship between peer social interactions and socio-emotional development.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDING

A significant moderate-to-strong positive correlation ($r = .502$) exists between peer social interactions and overall socio-emotional development, accounting for 25.2% of competence variance. Relationship skills ($r = .517$) and social awareness ($r = .452$) showed the strongest associations, confirming that peer interactions serve as natural “learning laboratories” for these competencies. This validates social learning theory, highlighting that adolescents acquire emotional regulation and interpersonal skills through peer feedback and imitation. The result aligns with Martinez and Thompson’s (2024) meta-analysis ($r = .34$), though the higher correlation here may reflect the central importance of interpersonal relationships in Nigerian collectivistic culture. It also agrees with Huang, Liu and Chen (2023), who, using social network analysis, demonstrated that emotional competence spreads through peer networks over time, supporting socialization mechanisms. Again, Okeke and Ezeh (2023), studying adolescents in Anambra State, Nigeria, found significant positive relationships between peer relationship quality and socio-emotional competence ($r = 0.46$). These studies affirm that peer relationships are central contexts for socio-emotional growth.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, peer group dynamics serve as strong predictors of socio-emotional development among secondary school students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) should be integrated into the formal curriculum to improve relationship skills and social awareness.
2. Teachers should transit from seeing peer interactions as distractions to viewing them as pedagogical tools by integrating structured peer tutoring and cooperative learning.
3. Counselors need to implement social skills training and peer pressure resistance programs to help students navigate complex social navigations.

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