PERCEIVED IMPACT OF PEER RELATIONSHIP ON THE EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF PUPILS IN ONITSHA SOUTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT EDUCATION AUTHORITY

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Abstract

This study investigated the perceived impact of peer relationship on the emotional and social development of pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority of Anambra State. Three research questions guided the study. Descriptive survey research design was adopted to carry out the research. The population of the study constituted 482 teachers in the 39 public primary schools in the study area. Simple random sampling technique was used to select 100 teachers from the total population. The instrument for data collection was an 18-item structured questionnaire titled "Questionnaire on the Perceived Impact of Peer Relationship on the Emotional and Social Development of Pupils" (QPIPRESDP) developed by the researcher. The instrument was validated by three experts, two from the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, and one from Measurement and Evaluation Unit in the Department of Educational Foundations, all from the Faculty of Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The reliability was established using Cronbach Alpha and test yielded reliability coefficient of 0.80, 0.85 and 0.78 respectively. The overall reliability co-efficient of the instrument was 0.81. Mean was used for the analysis of data collected. The result of the findings revealed that peer relationships positively impact the emotional and social development of pupils in Onitsha South LGEA. Also, the findings identified the use of cooperative learning activities, introduction of socioemotional learning programs, among others as the strategies for improving peer relationships among pupils. Based on the findings, the researchers recommended among others that schools should integrate cooperative learning activities into classroom practices to encourage teamwork and strengthen positive peer interactions.

Key Words: Peer Relationship, Emotional Development, Social Development, Pupils.

Introduction

Education is widely recognized as vital tool and key driver of national development, helping countries grow economically and socially. It empowers and transforms individuals with the knowledge and skills needed to become productive members of the society, and this makes education an indispensable tool in many nations, including Nigeria. According to Fitria, Fidesrinur and Zahrawanny (2019) education aims to develop the potential of individuals to become human beings who have faith and are devoted to God Almighty, are noble, healthy, knowledgeable, capable, creative, independent, and become citizens who are democratic and responsible. In the same vein, Ugwude and Okika (2017) posits that education worldwide is a complex process of socialization that transforms individuals into social beings equipped with the necessary tools to participate fully in the dynamics of life. Education in Nigeria is structured into four main levels, with primary education serving as the foundational level of education.

Primary education is one of the most vital and fundamental levels of education among other levels. Primary education according to Nwachukwu and Umeh (2021) refers to the early phase of structured learning that provides children between the ages of 6 and 11 with fundamental knowledge, values, and skills essential for lifelong learning and social integration.

Middle childhood, spanning from 6 to 12 years old is a significant developmental stage where children typically begin primary education which lays the foundation for academics, social interactions and emotional growth through peer interactions. The Centers for Disease control and Prevention (2021) documents that middle childhood is a stage where children begin to take on expanding roles and engage in various environments, and they spend more time in school and other activities, leading to increased interactions with their peers. As primary school children navigate the challenges and opportunities of middle childhood, peer relationships emerges as an important aspect of their overall development influencing their sense of belonging, self-esteem and wellbeing.

Peer relationship is a term that describes the connections and interactions between children of similar age, status or background, often sharing similar interests, experiences or social context. Nie (2025) posits that peer relationships are referred to as interpersonal interactions formed and developed during conversations between peers at the same stage of psychological development. Peer relationships connotes that the individuals involved must share a similar age and developmental stage. According to Nwauzoije, Ugochukwu, Ogbonnaya and Onyekachi (2023) peer relationships involve how individuals of the same rank, value, quality, or ability communicate, feel, behave, and interact with each other. It is a connection between individuals of the same age, social position, abilities, or standing. In middle childhood, peer relationship typically involves friendships and social interactions with classmates, friends or acquaintance of similar ages. Peer relationships can have significant impact on children's social, emotional, and cognitive development which can influence their overall wellbeing. As children begin to interact and connect with peers, they begin to understand others better which can result to improved social and emotional development. According to Clauser et.el (2020) Lee, Terol, Yoon, and Meadan (2024); Millaku, (2023); Wei, (2023) peer relationships play a pivotal role in the socialization process, influencing various aspects of a child's life, including emotional well-being, academic performance, and overall quality of life. Wu et al., as cited in Uwakwe, Awoke and Ntaji (2022) also posits that peer theory and empirical research have demonstrated that peers play a crucial role in children's social development and have a significant impact on their self-concept and healthy personality formation. Furthermore, according to Pepler and Bierman (2018), peer relationships provide a unique context for children to learn vital social-emotional skills such as empathy, cooperation, and problemsolving strategies. Peer relationship is instrumental in several aspects of children's development which includes the emotional and social aspects of their development.

Emotional development is an integral aspect of childhood development that explains how children learn to recognize, understand and manage emotions, as well as develop empathy and relationships with others. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2018) defines emotional development as a complex task that begins in infancy and continues into adulthood. CASEL (2018) further stated that the first emotions that can be recognized in babies include joy, anger, sadness and fear. Littleton et.al (2018) tated that emotional development is the process in which the personality is continuously striving for greater sense of emotional health, both intra-physically and intra-personally. Emotional development is a term that describes children's ability to recognize, understand and manage emotions. Operationally, emotional development can be seen as a process by which primary school pupils learn to recognize, understand, and manage their emotions.

On the other hand, social development is an integral aspect of childhood development that plays significant role in the educational process of primary school pupils. Social development according to Aduku, Zakari and Ajibade (2022) is a process of systematic change that is purposely launched via the improvement of the average person's standard of living and equality of life. Social development according to Albuquerque (2015) is a process and a product of integrated and

sustainable actions related with quality of life, well-being, liberty, justice and citizenship. Social development connotes growth and increase in social skills. Haggerty and McCowan (2018) stated that this intricate process is orchestrated by a symphony of factors, including socialization, physical maturation, and cognitive growth.

The emotional and social development of primary school pupils are integral aspects of their childhood development that should be given attention to. As children's sense of self develops, more complex emotions like shyness, surprise, elation, embarrassment, shame, guilt, pride and empathy emerge, which influences their social interaction with peers and overall social development. Cherry (2019) stated that as children develop socially and emotionally, they experience temper tantrums, mood swings, and an expanding social world, they learn more about their emotions as well as those of other people. School aged children and young people are still learning to identify emotions, to understand why they happen, and how to manage them appropriately.

Several studies and researches have shown that peer relationships are a crucial variable that significantly influences children's emotional and social development, influencing their ability to form healthy attachments, regulate emotions and develop essential social skills. A study by Nwauzoije, et.al (2023) evealed that the influence of peer relationships at school can greatly contribute to the social adaptation and self-awareness of school-aged children. Also, a study by Xu, Jiang, Qin and Jiang (2022) found that healthy learning, cognition, emotion, and personality development in learners were facilitated by positive peer connections and relationships. These studies have revealed the significant role of peer relationships in enhancing learners' emotional intelligence, empathy, social skills and interactions which is instrumental in their overall development and wellbeing.

Many researchers have examined the influence of peer relationships on the emotional and social development of learners. Most of these studies failed to cover specific geographical context such as Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority. Hence, there exists a research gap that covered the perceived impact of peer relationships on the emotional and social development of pupils as two interconnected variables, covering Onitsha South. It is based on this research gap that the researchers sought to investigate the perceived impact of peer relationships on the emotional and social development of pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority of Anambra State.

Statement of the Problem

Peer relationships play an important role in the emotional and social development of primary school pupils. During the formative years of childhood, peers can influence how children perceive themselves, regulate emotions, build self-esteem, and interact socially. Positive peer interactions can improve empathy, cooperation, conflict resolution skills, and emotional stability, while negative peer experiences may lead to issues such as anxiety, withdrawal, or aggression. Children who are in school have very important relationships with their peers, which in turn impact their social and emotional development. However, there is a paucity of research on this area in Onitsha South. As a result, little is known about how peer relationships affect the emotional and social development of school-age children in this area.

Therefore, it is necessary to conduct research in Onitsha South to investigate this impact. Understanding how peer relationships affect the emotional and social development of pupils is crucial for many stakeholders. This study can serve as a springboard for parents, enabling them to foster their children's emotional and social development. It is based on this evident that the researcher sought to investigate the perceived impact of peer relationships on the emotional and social development of pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority of Anambra State

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived impact of peer relationships on the emotional and social development of pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority of Anambra State. Specifically, the study sought to;

1. Examine the perception of teachers on the impact of peer relationships on the emotional development of pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority.
2. Examine the perception of teachers on the impact of peer relationships on the social development of pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority
3. Find out strategies for promoting positive peer relationships among pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study;

1. What are the perception of teachers on the impact of peer relationships on the emotional development of pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority?
2. What are the perception of teachers on the impact of peer relationships on the social development of pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority
3. What are the strategies for promoting positive peer relationships among pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority?

Methods

This study investigated the perceived impact of peer relationship on the emotional and social development of pupils in Onitsha South curriculum Local Government Education Authority of Anambra State. Descriptive survey research design was adopted for this study. The population of the study comprised of all the 482 teachers in the 39 government primary schools in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority of Anambra State. Simple random sampling technique was used to select 100 primary school teachers from 10 schools out of the 39 primary schools in the study area. 10 teachers were selected from the 10 schools giving a total of 100 school teachers using sampling by balloting without replacement. The research instrument for the study was a questionnaire designed by the researchers from literature reviewed and previous study.

The instrument for data collection is a structured questionnaire titled "Questionnaire on the Perceived Impact of Peer Relationship on the Emotional and Social Development of Pupils" (QPIPRESDP) developed by the researchers based on information gotten from the review of related literature. The instrument consists of Section A, B, C, and D. Section A consisted of items on the bio-data of the respondents. Section B contained 6 question items on the perceived impact of peer relationship on the emotional development of pupils. Section C contained 6 question items on the perceived impact of peer relationship on the social development of pupils and Section D contained 6 question items on the strategies for improving peer relationships among pupils. The questionnaire contained the total of 18 items. The responses were structured on the four point Likert scale as follows: Strongly Agreed (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) with an assigned weight of 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively.

To ascertain the validity of the instrument, three copies of the questionnaire including the title, purpose of study and research questions were given to three experts. Two experts are in the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education and the other expert in the Department of Educational Foundations, all from the Faculty of Education, of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The Cronbach alpha method was used to establish the reliability of the instrument. The alpha

coefficients gotten were 0.80, 0.78, 0.79 and 0.78 for Cluster I-IV with an overall coefficient of 0.79. Data obtained was analyzed using mean and standard deviation. A mean of 2.50 was used as the cutoff point for making decisions. The decision rule was that any item that scored a mean of 2.50 and above would be seen as having attracted positive responses and was agreed, while items that scored less than 2.50 would be regarded as having attracted negative responses and was disagreed.

Results

Research Question One: What is the perceived impact of peer relationships on the emotional development of pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority?

Table 1: Mean Rating of Respondents on the Perceived Impact of Peer Relationships on the Emotional Development of Pupils

S/N	Perceived impacts of peer relationships on the emotional development of pupils;	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	Decision
1.	Peer relationships helps pupils to develop emotional intelligence	2.96	Agree
2.	It improves pupils' emotional awareness	3.10	Agree
3.	It develops pupils' empathy and compassion	2.92	Agree
4.	Peer relationships serve as emotional support system that help pupils cope during difficult times	3.02	Agree
5.	It improves pupils self-esteem	2.90	Agree
6.	Pupils develop emotional resilience through peer relationships	3.01	Agree
	Grand Mean	2.98	Agreed

Analysis in Table 1 showed that item 1-6 had mean scores of 2.50 and above with cluster mean of 2.98. This revealed that the respondents agreed that item 1-6 is the perceived impact of peer relationships on the emotional development of pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority.

Research Question Two: What is the perceived impact of peer relationships on the social development of pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority?

Table 2: Mean Rating of Respondents on the Perceived Impact of Peer Relationships on the Social Development of Pupils

S/N	Perceived impact of peer relationships on the social development of pupils;	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	Decision
7.	Peer relationships helps pupils to develop social skills	3.02	Agree
8.	Peer groups/relationships enhance pupils' social identity	2.89	Agree
9.	Pupils develop empathy, the ability to take turns	3.36	Agree
10.	It improves pupils in solving conflicts among peers	3.25	Agree
11.	Through peer relationships, pupils enhance their perspective-taking skills	3.34	Agree
12.	Peer relationships enhances teamwork skills leading to healthy social skills	3.21	Agree
	Grand Mean	3.17	Agreed

Data in Table 2 showed that item 7-12 had mean scores of 2.50 and above with grand mean of 3.17. This revealed that the respondents agreed that item 7-12 is the perceived impact of peer relationships on the social development of pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority.

Research Question Three: What are the strategies for improving peer relationships among pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority?

Table 3: Mean Rating of Respondents on the Strategies for Improving Peer Relationships among Pupils

S/N	Strategies for improving peer relationships among pupils;	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	Decision
13.	Use of cooperative learning activities such as role-play, dramatization	3.34	Agree
14.	Introduction of social and emotional learning (SEL) programs such as (Emotional ABCs premium, SPARK pre-teen mentoring, among others).	3.18	Agree
15.	Use of peer mediation/mentoring among peers	3.19	Agree
16.	Creating a positive school climate and environment that encourages peer relationships	3.09	Agree
17.	Use of inclusive group and seating arrangements	3.14	Agree
18.	Formulation of anti-bullying policies and interventions to ensure safe school environment	2.84	Agree
	Grand Mean	3.13	Agreed

The analysis in Table 3 showed that item 13-18 had mean scores of 2.50 and above with a grand mean of 3.13. This revealed that the respondents agreed that items 13-18 are the strategies for improving peer relationships among pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study revealed that peer relationships positively impact the emotional development of pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority. The findings of this study is in consonance with the findings of Sharon, et.al (2018) which revealed that found that the peer relationships among the adolescents predicted their current happiness level by 18%. Also, the results emphasized the importance of understanding the impact of peer relationships on the emotional well-being (happiness) of early adolescents. Also, the finding of this study is in harmony with Ladd et al. (2019), who stated that children who form close, supportive friendships are more likely to develop strong emotional regulation skills, helping them cope with frustration and manage conflicts constructively.

Also, the findings revealed that peer relationships positively impact the social development of pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority. The finding of this study is in consonance with the findings of Nwauzoije, et.al (2023) which revealed a moderate positive relationship was found between peer relationships and social adaptation. Also, the finding of this study is in line with Ladd et al. (2019) who found that children who had close friendships and were well-accepted by peers demonstrated better cooperation and leadership skills.

Furthermore, the findings identified the use of cooperative learning activities, introduction of socio-emotional learning programs, use of peer mentoring among peers, creating a positive school climate, use of inclusive group/seating arrangements and formulation of anti-bullying policies and interventions as the strategies for improving peer relationships among pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority. The finding of this study is in harmony with the findings of Karna and Stefaniuk (2023) which underscored the importance of inclusive settings, peer-mediated interventions, and active involvement of parents and teachers in fostering positive social interactions for children with ASD. Also, the finding of this study is in line with Ogunyemi and Fadare (2019) who reported that the integration of SEL into Nigerian primary school curricula led to improved peer interactions and reduced bullying

Conclusion

The study concludes that peer relationships significantly enhance the emotional and social development of pupils in Onitsha South Local Government Education Authority. It also establishes that strategies such as cooperative learning, socio-emotional programs, peer mentoring, inclusive arrangements, and anti-bullying measures are effective in improving these relationships.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher made the following recommendations.

1. Schools should integrate cooperative learning activities into classroom practices to encourage teamwork and strengthen positive peer interactions.
2. Teachers and administrators should implement socio-emotional learning programs to promote pupils' emotional growth and interpersonal skills.
3. Peer mentoring initiatives should be established to guide pupils in building supportive and healthy peer relationships.
4. Schools should adopt inclusive seating arrangements and enforce anti-bullying policies to create a safe and positive learning environment for all pupils.

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