

Learning Environment and Acquisition of Social Skills Among Primary School Learners in Calabar Education Zone, Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigated learning environment and acquisition of social skills among primary school learners in Calabar Education Zone of Cross River State, Nigeria. Survey research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study comprised all 7,260 primary six pupils in all public primary schools in the study area. A total of 711 primary school learners were used for the study. The selection was done through the stratified, simple random and accidental sampling techniques. A questionnaire titled "Learning Environment and Acquisition of Social Skills Questionnaire" (LEASSQ) was used for data collection. The instrument was validated by one expert in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching, and two experts in the field of tests and measurement in the Faculty of Educational Foundation Studies, University of Calabar. The reliability estimate of the instrument was established through the Cronbach Alpha reliability method. The reliability coefficient obtained, ranged from 0.75 to 0.89. Regression analysis was the statistical technique employed to test the study's hypothesis at .05 level of significance. The result of the analysis revealed that peer-to-peer learning significantly relates with acquisition of social skills among primary school learners. The study concluded that peer-to-peer learning plays a significant role in the acquisition of social skills among primary school learners. Based on the findings, the researcher recommended, among others that peer-to-peer learning should be encouraged since it is a mutual learning and training strategy that involves participants of the same level who would relate and engage better in collaborative learning.

Keywords: Learning environment, peer-to-peer learning, social skills acquisition.

Introduction

Education is an indispensable tool in nation building. It is a systematic process of training and instructions designed primarily to transmit knowledge and skills, potentials and abilities to individuals, equipping them to be useful to themselves and to contribute efficiently to the growth and development of the society at large (Zou, 2020). The Universal Basic Education (UBE) Scheme, in line with this, was introduced to provide free, compulsory, quality education for all children aged 5-15 years; the primary and junior secondary education. This basic education forms the foundation upon which other tiers of education rest. With its focus on literacy, numeracy and life-long skills, the scheme aims at providing foundational education to all, (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2014). Umoh, (2006); and Best, (2020). agree that primary education, which is the bedrock of the educational system, should provide learners with both the elementary and general knowledge of science. Undeniably, the purpose of school is not just for learners to learn how to read and write; it is also for the acquisition of social skills. Apart from providing learners

with foundational literacy and numeracy, stimulating cognitive development, the primary school, in particular, fosters early social and emotional skills.

Social skills equip children with the right attitude that they will need later on in life (Orji, 2021; Lawson, 2013). The acquisition of social skills allows learners to form positive relationships, have good conversations, develop positive body language, co-operate and learn to share. These values, when inculcated in young learners will help them navigate through life in the best possible ways, giving back to the society. As a concept, 'social skills' has many definitions just as there are authors of the subject. The term social skills refer to the existence of different range of social behaviours in the individual repertoire that helps them deal adequately with inter personal situations, that change overtime according to the individual's stage of development (Del Pretteet al., 2021). Musser et al. (2001), also described social skills to include specific characters or behaviours such as; following instructions, accepting "no" for an answer, introducing oneself, talking with others (communicating) effectively, accepting criticism, disagreeing appropriately, showing respect, showing sensitivity to others, evaluating one's personal strengths and weaknesses, and setting personal goals for self-improvements in responsible ways.

Social skills are components of behaviour that help an individual understand and adapt across a variety of social settings. Allan et al. (2004), refer to them as those specific behaviour people use when interacting with others that enable them to be effective at achieving their personal goals. These social skills are learned in school alongside literacy and numeracy skills. As learners interact, relate and get along with peers and adults in their daily routine, they imbibe and express them easily. Emotional growth is fostered and learners are encouraged to become more independent. The primary education, which is the starting point of basic education in Nigeria, has a role in this. It helps in equipping young learners with these much-needed social skills early in life (Maleki, 2019). This makes the place of primary education in nation building very vital. The primary education forms the bedrock for all other educational levels, and its relevance in national development cannot be over-emphasised. The question is: is our primary education receiving the much-needed attention? Iwunna, (2011) and Oniwon, (2019) noted that the quality of education children receive at the primary level in recent times has not been satisfying. They believed that the goal of this level of education, which was to ultimately improve the quality of life of individuals, has not yet been fully attained. This calls for a peek into the primary education system.

If the primary education is well equipped and given its right place, the acquisition and development of social skills in young learners, should not be a difficult task. Taking a close look at this sector today, in relation to the goals of UBE, the desirable is still far-fetched, UBEC (2018). When the public schools are well equipped, just like most private schools, the desired goals would be fostered. The learning environment has to be well put together and in place in order for learners to adequately access quality education. The learning environment has a major role to play in the acquisition of any knowledge, attitude or skills. It has the capacity to impact learners either positively or negatively. It is important to note also that the quality of interactions that takes place in the learning environment also determines how much learning takes place and how well healthy interpersonal relationship is promoted among learners, (FRN, 2014). Waldman (2016) observes that before learners can succeed academically, they must feel safe, both physically and mentally and must have a safe learning environment. Learners must feel welcomed, supported and respected. Learning environment refers to a combination of some components that influence the

student's learning curve. These components, according to Balog (2018) include, people, teaching materials, technical tools and learning resources, curriculum, training, instruction and physical environment/learning space. The people are the individuals that affect the learners directly or indirectly through connection or relationship which can contribute to students' growth and success in their career aspect. The technical tools and learning resources are the teaching materials, highly advanced tools or other instructional resources that are aligned with the curriculum as part of student learning support.

The social and physical learning environments comprise of the behavioural or psychological components which make up the portion of the perceptual environment where awareness and behaviour overlap. Peer-to-peer learning is a learning environment that fosters mutual learning and training strategy that involves participants of the same level engaging in collaborative learning. Simply put, peer-to-peer learning is when one or more learners teach other learners. The term 'peer learning' suggests a two-way, reciprocal learning activity involving the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experience between the participants and should be mutually beneficial (Katz et al., 2020). Peer learning is becoming an increasingly important part of socialisation, and it is being used in a variety of contexts and disciplines in many countries. Peer learning in its broadest sense refers to students learning from and with each other in both formal and informal ways. The emphasis is on the learning process, which include the emotional support that learners offer each other, as much as the learning task itself. Peer learning encourages cooperation and social skills in students and helps them acquire knowledge by actively supporting other students (Boud, 2021). According to Boud et al (2021), peer learning emphasises learning with and from each other. It is a collaborative learning strategy that involves students working in pairs or in small groups enabling them to discuss concepts and find solutions to issues/problems. The essence of peer learning is to help students learn from each other, to actively participate, to be innovative and to take responsibility for their own learning. It also provides students with the opportunity to explore, collect, analyse, evaluate, integrate and apply relevant information for completing learning tasks or solving problems. This approach enables students to develop interpersonal communication, team work, project management, research and study skills.

Planned peer learning involves a group of learners selected by either the learners themselves or by the teacher to work together to identify their own learning needs and the strategies to achieve them. This may help students develop the communication and collaborative skills necessary for effective and efficient team working. Stone et al. (2023) maintain that students working in small groups are better able to focus on orchestrating their own learning activities than by traditional teaching methods, taking more responsibility for their own learning and helping them to learn how to study. According to Landis (2020), students working in small collaborative groups become more active in their learning because they improve their social skills and academic performance, obtaining a better learning experience and enhancing their self-esteem. Additionally, they learn the value of learner-learner interaction resulting in the development of interpersonal skills, teamwork skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Chilvers, 2014). Thus, effective peer-to-peer learning enables students develop valuable transferable social and communication skills like, listening, explaining, questioning, summarising, speculating and hypothesising (Topping, 2015). Shipman and Hootan (2018) support the benefit of varied and interactive teaching methods adopted in the peer learning approach, as it helps to address the diverse needs of the ever-increasing learners' numbers in the educational institutions. The interaction between peers helps learners gain a deeper

understanding of the topic, of giving and receiving feedback and of evaluating their own learning (Zhao & Kuh, 2014; Lenning & Ebberts, 2019). Over time, as learners engage in peer learning, they develop lifelong skills that will serve them well as they progress through school, the workplace, and the society at large. This will consequently result in higher achievement and greater productivity, more caring, supportive, and committed relationships, greater psychological health, social competence and self-esteem (Laal & Ghodsi, 2022). assessed by a good number of researchers to determine their impact in the overall socialisation of learners. However, the researcher is surprised at the dearth of literature on the impact of learning environment on acquisition of social skills among primary school pupils, as most of the earlier studies focused on higher level of education. Moreover, a greater percentage of the studies conducted on the subject were carried out outside Nigeria. It is therefore hoped that the present study addresses this gap.

Learning will take place better when the teaching/learning methods and environment are supportive. This will be clearly noticed in the positive interactions among learners. Peer-to-peer learning is one learning environment that brings the school community together. It is important for learners to acquire social skills at the primary level of education to help them overcome behavioural traits such as underactive deficit behaviour characterised by shyness and social isolation, in the form of moodiness and slowness. When these negative traits are overcome, every primary school graduate will be equipped with the experience needed to cope socially and otherwise in other levels of education, be it secondary or tertiary. However, a poorly managed learning environment could pose a major setback in the attainment of this objective (the development of social skills). No matter how brilliant or smart a learner is, the environment in which they learn could hinder the development of desirable behaviour (Frey et al., 2015).

Learners' interaction in the classroom is crucial for a variety of reasons. Not only would it promote positive and inclusive learning environment, but would also enhance critical thinking and problem-solving skills. It is therefore important for learners to have a good relationship among themselves. There is an acknowledgment that when learners are allowed to interact with one another, especially in group activities, they will learn to tolerate one another, see themselves as different individuals with different opinions, which will enable them improve their relationship skills. In support of this view, Olalekan (2016) stressed that the school must therefore use peer group energies to promote rather than impede good learning. Therefore, schools should provide an enabling learning environment that will foster the acquisition of social skills.

The relationship between the learning environment, (peer-to-peer learning), and acquisition of social skills has been reviewed by a couple of researchers and the evidences have proven that peer learning has a significant impact in the acquisition of social skills. Inyang and Ojedokun (2022) determined the level of social skills possessed by primary school pupils acquired through peer-to-peer learning in Ile-Ife. The study adopted the ethnographic research design. The study population consisted of primary school pupils in Ile-Ife. Five intact classes of primary one pupil (One per school) from five different primary schools under different categories of proprietorship (i.e. private individuals, corporate groups, religious institutions, higher institutions of learning, government/public schools) (a minimum of 25 and maximum of 30 per class with a total range of 125 and 150 pupils) were purposively selected as samples for the study in Ile-Ife. The instruments used for the study were: Post-preschoolers Social Skills Observation Schedule (PSSOS) which was used to conduct participant observation of social skills, with a view to measuring possession

of social skills by primary one pupil under study and the Social Skills Observation Report Form (SSORF) which was used to record the overall manifestation of social skills per pupil for each skill category in frequency counts.

Data was analysed using percentages, pie chart and t-test statistics. The results showed that Ile-Ife primary school pupils' level of social skills acquired through peer-to-peer learning varied; cooperation was very high (68%); assertiveness was low (7%); responsibility was low (18%); empathy was low (4%) and self-control was also low (3%). The results also showed that there was significant disparity in the possession of cooperation skills ($t=0.56$: $p=0.02$), responsibility skills ($t=0.27$: $p=0.03$), and empathy skills ($t=0.79$: $p=0.03$) by primary school pupils who had nursery education and those who did not and that pupils who had no nursery education are even better in these areas than those who had it. However, there was no significant disparity in their level of possession of assertiveness skills ($t=0.1$: $p=0.12$) and self-control skills ($t=1.63$: $p=0.09$). The study concluded that although primary school pupils in Ile-Ife possess some social skills at a varying level (especially cooperation skills) they are however deficient in others (assertiveness, responsibility, empathy and self-control) and may need teachers and parents' special attention in order to develop them. However, while the reviewed study used primary one pupil, as the population, the present study used primary six pupils as population

Swapna (2021) examined whether peer learning is effective in active and shared learning in small groups, so as to enhance the students' overall development as a post graduate research student. The instructional approach used to help students to become actively engaged in their own learning process involved in the formation of self-selected learning sets. Within these groups, 268 students selected through simple random sampling explored the concepts covered in their lectures and presented in their findings to the class which involved peer and tutor feedback, as well as self and peer assessment on the performance of the group members. The students additionally completed a pre and post questionnaire used for data collection. Data was analysed with the use of descriptive statistics. The results indicated that peer-to-peer teaching and learning approach was beneficial to the students. The findings indicated that the students used peer learning in the classroom successfully in achieving the module learning outcomes and acquisition of social skills. The overall performance of these students in the module was good and it has impacted their overall academic performance.

Carvalho and Santos (2021) examined the transformative role of peer-to-peer learning projects in four Portuguese secondary schools and a higher education institution through teachers and peer teacher students' (PTS) perceptions of these projects' purpose, implementation and impact on the acquisition of social skills. Data was collected by means of a semi-structured in-depth interview and surveys by questionnaire from 342 respondents selected with the use of stratify random sampling technique and content analysis and descriptive statistics were the techniques used. Results showed cooperation, social and interpersonal skills' improvement as major strengths of these projects, whereas the challenges are mostly organisational, such as reduced teacher service time and coordination of learners' schedules. Conclusions highlight the potential of peer learning projects to promote pedagogical transformation and innovation in 21st century schools. AbdulRaheem et al (2017) examined the effect of peer-to-peer learning and the moderating effect of gender on social skills acquisition of students in Ilorin-South Local Government of Kwara State, Nigeria. Two intact classes in two different secondary schools were selected for the study. The

experimental (peer-to-peer learning) group had a population of 40 students while the control (conventional instruction) group had a population of 38 students. A 50-item multiple-choice objective test titled Social Skills Acquisition Questionnaire (SSAQ) was used for data collection. Percentages, frequencies and chi-square were used for data analysis; findings showed that students in the peer-to-peer learning group obtained higher social skills than students in the conventional instruction group. This effect was not moderated by gender.

Prater et al. (2019) examined the impact of peer teaching on social skills acquisition of adolescents with learning disabilities. A special education teacher taught 12 students with learning disabilities three social skills; giving positive feedback, contributing to discussion, and accepting negative feedback. A random sample of five students previously taught by the teacher, then instructed five other students with learning disabilities. Results indicated that both groups, the students taught by their teachers and those taught by their peers, improved in all three social skills. Both groups made less improvement in accepting negative feedback. The authors concluded that social skill instruction taught by peers may be as effective as and even more efficient than when taught solely by teachers. From the literature reviewed, there is evidence that learning environment is critical to acquisition of social skills, little wonder the school is considered a veritable agent of socialisation. There is an agreement among many scholars, that for schools to remain relevant and competitive, they must adapt to changes and be innovations; the learning environment must accommodate all that it takes to promote the acquisition of social skills.

Literature also shows that in recent times some of these innovative learnings have been assessed by a good number of researchers to determine their impact in the overall socialisation of learners. However, the researcher is surprised at the dearth of literature on the impact of learning environment on acquisition of social skills among primary school pupils, as most of the earlier studies focused on higher level of education. Moreover, a greater percentage of the studies conducted on the subject were carried out outside Nigeria. It is therefore hoped that the present study addresses this gap. It is in the light of the foregoing background that this study specifically seeks to investigate how peer-to-peer interactions influences the acquisition of social skills among primary school children in Calabar Education Zone, Cross River State, Nigeria.

Purpose of the study

This study investigates how peer-to-peer interactions relates to the acquisition of social skills among primary school children

Research hypothesis

There is no significant relationship between peer-to-peer learning and acquisition of social skills among primary school learners.

Method

The survey research design was adopted for this study. The rationale for the use of survey research design is that it involves systematic collection of data, analysis, interpretations and report of existing facts and information concerning the variables or characteristics under study. Also, the population under study is large but a sample was taken and the findings will be generalised on the entire study population. The study was carried out in Calabar Education Zone, which is one of the three education zones, in Cross River State. The zone is made up of seven Local Government

Areas (LGAs), namely: Calabar Municipal Council, Calabar South, Akpabuyo, Bakassi, Akamkpa, Odukpani and Biase LGAs. The population of the study consists all 7,260 primary six pupils in all the 224 public primary schools in Calabar Education Zone.

The sample for the study consisted of 726 which is 10% of the population (7,260) of pupils in all 44 classes, in 22 schools selected for the study. Cluster sampling procedure involving stratified, simple random and accidental sampling techniques was adopted in this study. First the area was stratified into seven strata according to the number of local governments in the zone; each LGA was labelled a stratum. Next, in each of the strata, 10 % of primary schools were selected using simple random technique involving the hat and draw procedure where the researcher wrote down numbers representing the schools on pieces of papers, folded them into paper balls put into a container and blindly selected from the container schools as already determined by the percentage. The name of the selected school was written down and the paper returned to the container to give all schools equal opportunity of being selected. At the end, 22 primary schools were selected from the seven LGAs. The researcher repeated the process in selecting two arms of primary six classes (clusters) in each of the selected schools for the study. Thus, in all 44 classes were involved in the study. Furthermore, accidental sampling technique (data was obtained from pupils present in class during the researcher's visit to the selected schools) was adopted in order not to stampede the researcher in the data collection process because of the subjects' characteristics.

The instrument used for data collection was "Learning Environment and Acquisition of Social Skills Questionnaire" (LEASSQ). The questionnaire consists of three sections, A, B and C. Section A was designed to collect demographic data such as age, sex and school location. Section B elicits information on the independent variables of the study. Section C consisted of 10 items, measuring the dependent variable of the study, on a four-point modified Likert Scale, with scoring ranging from very high manifestation (VHM = 4 points), Moderate Manifestation (MM = 3 points), low Manifestation (LM, = 2 points) and Very Low Manifestation (VLM = 1 point) and the reverse for negatively worded items. Two kinds of validity were established for the instrument of this study; the face and content validity. The face and content validity were established by two primary school teachers who have more than 5 years teaching experience in their field, supervisor and two experts in measurement and evaluation in the Faculty of Education, University of Calabar. After vetting the items, the instrument was reviewed based on the assessor's comments and it was considered valid and could then be used for the study.

The reliability of "Learning Environment and Acquisition of Social Skills Questionnaire" (LEASSQ) was established using Cronbach Alpha reliability method. The questionnaire was trial tested on fifty (50) primary six school pupils who did not participate in the main study. After the administration, Cronbach Alpha coefficient was used to determine the reliability estimate of the instrument, and it yielded an index ranging from .70 to .82. Nenty (2004) states that any instrument with reliability value above 0.50 is reliable and can be used for the investigation.

Results

Hypothesis one

There is no significant relationship between peer-to-peer learning and acquisition of social skills among primary school learners.

Simple regression analysis was employed to test this hypothesis. As shown in the table below, Peer-to-peer learning significantly influences the acquisition of social skills among primary school learners in Cross River State, Nigeria produced an adjusted R^2 of .193. This indicates that the Peer-to-peer learning account for 19.3 % in variation of acquisition of social skills among primary school learners in the study area. The F-value of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) obtained from the regression table was $F = 171.264$ and the sig. value of .000 (or $p < .05$) at the degree of freedom (df) 1 and 709. The implication of this result is that peer-to-peer learning is a significant predictor of acquisition of social skills among primary school learners. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. The identified equation to understand this relationship is that acquisition of social skills among primary school learners = $17.86 + 1.01$ (peer-to-peer learning).

Table 1: Simple Regression Result of Relationship Between Peer-To Peer Learning and Acquisition of Social Skills Among Primary School Learners

Model	R	R. square	Adjusted R. square	Std error of the estimate	
1	.441(a)	.195	.193	2.80184	
Model	Sum of square	df	Mean square	F	p-value
Regression	1344.477	1	1344.477	171.264	.000(a)
Residual	5565.877	709	7.850		
Total	6910.354	710			
Variables	Unstandardised regression weight B	Standardised regression weight	Beta weight	t	p-value
(Constant)	17.858	1.400		12.759	.000
Peer-to-peer learning	1.007	.077	.441	13.087	.000

*Significant at .05 level.

Discussion

Peer-to-peer learning and acquisition of social skills among primary school learners.

The result of the first hypothesis indicates that, peer-to-peer learnings significantly relate with acquisition of social skills among primary school learners. The finding is in line with the view of Inyang and Ojedokun (2022) who showed that Ile-Ife primary school pupils' level of social skills acquired through peer-to-peer learning varied; cooperation was very high (68%); assertiveness was low (7%); responsibility was low (18%); empathy was low (4%) and self-control was also low (3%). The results also showed that there was significant disparity in the possession of cooperation skills ($t=0.56$: $p=0.02$), responsibility skills ($t=0.27$: $p = 0.03$), and empathy skills ($t = 0.79$: $p = 0.03$) by primary school pupils who had nursery education and those who did not and that pupils who had no nursery education are even better in these areas than those who had it. However, there was no significant disparity in their level of possession of assertiveness skills ($t = 0.1$: $p =0.12$) and self-control skills ($t = 1.63$: $p = 0.09$). The study concluded that although primary school pupils in Ile-Ife possess some social skills at a varying level (especially cooperation skills) they are however deficient in others (assertiveness, responsibility, empathy and self-control) and may need teachers and parents' special attention in order to develop them.

Swapna (2021) also indicated that peer-to-peer teaching and learning approach was beneficial to the students. The findings indicated that the students used peer learning in the classroom successfully in achieving the module learning outcomes and acquisition of social skills. The overall performance of these students in the module was good and it has impacted their overall academic performance. Carvalho and Santos (2021) also showed cooperation, social and interpersonal skills' improvement as major strengths of these projects, whereas the challenges are mostly organisational, such as reduced teacher service time and coordination of learners' schedules. Conclusions highlight the potential of peer learning projects to promote pedagogical transformation and innovation in 21st century schools. AbdulRaheem et al. (2017) also showed that students in the peer-to-peer learning group obtained higher social skills than students in the conventional instruction group. This effect was not moderated by gender. Prater, Serna and Nakamura (2019) also indicated that both groups, the students taught by their teachers and those taught by their peers, improved in all three social skills. Both groups made less improvement in accepting negative feedback. The authors concluded that social skill instruction taught by peers may be as effective as and more efficient than when taught solely by teachers.

Conclusion

Sequel to the results of this study, the researcher concluded that Peer-to-peer learning plays a significant role in the acquisition of social skills among primary school learners. The finding is in line with the view of Inyang and Ojedokun (2022) who showed that Ile-Ife primary school pupils' level of social skills acquired through peer-to-peer learning varied; cooperation was very high (68%); assertiveness was low (7%); responsibility was low (18%); empathy was low (4%) and self-control was also low (3%). The results also showed that there was significant disparity in the possession of cooperation skills ($t = 0.56$, $p = 0.02$), responsibility skills ($t = 0.27$, $p = 0.03$), and empathy skills ($t = 0.79$, $p = 0.03$) by primary school pupils who had nursery education and those who did not and that pupils who had no nursery education are even better in these areas than those who had it. However, there was no significant disparity in their level of possession of assertiveness skills ($t = 0.1$, $p = 0.12$) and self-control skills ($t = 1.63$, $p = 0.09$). The study concluded that although primary school pupils in Ile-Ife possess some social skills at a varying level (especially cooperation skills) they are however deficient in others (assertiveness, responsibility, empathy and self-control) and may need teachers and parents' special attention in order to develop them.

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feedback. The authors concluded that social skill instruction taught by peers may be as effective as and more efficient than when taught solely by teachers.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Peer-to-peer learning should be encouraged since it is a mutual learning and training strategy that involves participants of the same level engaging in collaborative learning.
2. Government at all levels needs to take measures, make policies that would encourage learner-centred method of teaching in primary schools so that learners would learn to interact better and earlier.

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