

Examining how students' social networks and relationships at school and home affect academic performance: The case of selected secondary schools in Mangochi, Malawi

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the influence of social networks and relationships on academic performance among students in two secondary schools in Mangochi. We used mixed methods, applying both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The findings indicated factors as low peer study habits, poor family involvement and lack of teacher-student relationships as impeding academic performance. A significant number of respondents (50%) reported that their friends discouraged them regarding academic efforts, highlighting a lack of supportive peer dynamics. Family engagement was also limited, as 58.3% of respondents stated that their parents rarely checked their academic progress, underscoring the importance of family support in students' educational journeys. Teacher-student relationships emerged as a critical factor, with many students feeling unsupported and perceiving their teachers as somewhat unapproachable. Only 41.7% of respondents reported receiving adequate academic guidance outside of class. The study highlighted the need for improved communication among peers, families, and educators to foster a supportive learning environment. The findings suggested several practical interventions, including enhancing peer collaboration programs, increasing parental involvement, and improving teacher training to promote approachability. The research emphasized the necessity for educational stakeholders to address issues of peer influence, family support, and teacher engagement to cultivate an environment conducive to academic success.

Keywords: Academic performance, peer influence, family relationships, teacher-student dynamics.

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INTRODUCTION

Education has been widely recognized as a key driver of personal and national development, serving as a foundation for economic growth, social progress, and improved quality of life (UNESCO, 2015). While academic performance has often been attributed to factors such as teacher competence, availability of learning materials, and school infrastructure (Goodenow, 1993), the role of students' social networks and relationships remains an understudied yet crucial aspect of educational success. Empirical Studies indicate that students' social interactions within their home and school environments significantly influence their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral

engagement in learning (Wang and Eccles, 2012; Mlangeni, 2015; Barrington and Handa, 2016). Similarly, Martinot et al. (2022) demonstrated that support from peers and teachers directly impacts students' sense of belonging and engagement in school activities.

It is pertinent to note that at both school and home, learners engage with peers, teachers, family members, and community members in relationships that can either foster or hinder their academic achievement. In Malawian rural Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSS), students navigate a myriad of complex social dynamics that militate against their educational outcomes. Against

that background of barriers, family expectations, peer influence, and teacher-student relationships play a critical role in determining learners' motivation, self-discipline, and ability to concentrate on their studies. Studies in the psychology of learning have also shown that students who receive emotional and academic support from their families tend to demonstrate higher levels of persistence and academic achievement (Epstein, 2001). Conversely, those who experience adverse social conditions, such as peer pressure, family conflicts, or the absence of academic role models, often struggle to maintain focus and motivation in their education (Kuyokwa and Bowa, 2020). Additionally, peer interactions significantly shape students' attitudes toward learning, with positive peer influence encouraging academic excellence, while negative peer pressure could lead to disengagement and risky behaviors (Jeynes, 2016).

Previous studies in Malawi have further demonstrated that economic constraints, teacher quality, and school resources availability are underlying determinants of academic success (Kuyokwa and Bowa, 2020; Rock et al., 2016), few have delved deeply into the impact of students' social interactions. The paucity and dearth of adequate research on this correlate create a knowledge gap, making it difficult for educators and policymakers to design interventions that leverage social relationships for academic improvement. In schools, students come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, and their home and school relationships vary widely. Some learners receive academic support from their family and friends, while others struggle with peer distractions, family disputes, or unsupportive social circles (Kuyokwa and Bowa, 2020). This study, therefore, sought to investigate how students' social networks both at school and at home affect their academic performance. We addressed the gap by assessing the impact of peer influences on students' academic motivation and achievements, examining the role of family relationships in shaping students' academic discipline and performance, exploring the effect of teacher-student relationships on classroom engagement and learning outcomes, and developing practical interventions that enhance positive social relationships and support students' academic success.

METHODOLOGY

We adopted an exploratory sequential mixed-method design, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. Triangulation strengthened the validity and reliability of findings through integrating diverse perspectives and methodologies. The qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of students' lived experiences, perceptions, and interactions within their home and school environments. The quantitative approach provided a structured analysis by collecting numerical data that helped identify patterns and

correlations between social factors and academic performance. This mixing of approaches also fostered complementarity and ensured objectivity, allowing for the potential representativeness of findings to a broader population of secondary school students in Malawi. The approach also ensured a comprehensive and balanced investigation, capturing both subjective experiences and measurable academic trends. Two conveniently sampled schools, namely Monkey Bay Community Day Secondary School (CDSS) and Lisumbwi Secondary School, both located in the Eastern region of Mangochi district, Malawi, were involved.

This study setting is characterized by a diverse population and a rich cultural tapestry, making it an ideal setting to explore the social dynamics affecting education. This linguistic diversity adds a layer of complexity to the social networks among students, as effective communication plays an essential role in building relationships and support systems that can enhance academic success. The academic performance of students attending Monkey Bay CDSSs was likely to be influenced by their home environment, as students at CDSSs in Malawi commute from and return home daily, which potentially creates a unique interplay between their family dynamics, household responsibilities, and community interactions. Lisumbwi Secondary School, as a boarding school, on the other hand, afforded students a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in a focused academic setting, which potentially or likely fostered strong peer relationships and supportive teacher-student dynamics. The school, like most conventional Secondary schools in Malawi, emphasizes holistic education, integrating moral and ethical development alongside academics. This approach was therefore deemed to align with the broader goals of the Malawian education system, which seeks to nurture well-rounded individuals capable of contributing positively to society.

The target population for this study consisted of students, parents, and teachers from the two selected schools. This group was chosen due to their direct involvement in the social and academic lives of students. A representative sample was randomly selected from the target population to ensure that every individual had an equal probability of participation. The sample consisted of Students (both male and female) from Forms 1 and 4, representing different academic levels and maturity stages. This diversity allowed for a comparative analysis of how social factors influence students at different stages of their secondary education. Parents of randomly selected students ensured a mix of backgrounds (e.g., working-class and non-working parents) to capture varied perspectives on home-based support. Teachers from different subjects, particularly those with direct interactions with students in both academic and counseling roles, were sampled through the snowball approach. The estimated sample size for this study consisted of 60 respondents.

Simple random sampling for students ensured unbiased

representation, giving every student an equal chance of participation regardless of odds of confounders as academic performance, gender, or social background. We also employed purposive sampling for teachers and parents to ensure that these key informant participants possessed relevant knowledge and experience related to the research objectives. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the topic, we employed semi-structured questionnaires to collect quantitative data on academic performance, peer influence, and teacher-student interactions. We further used focus group discussions with students to facilitate peer interactions and shared experiences. Parents and teachers participated in one-on-one interviews to provide detailed insights into how family dynamics and school environments affected students' academic motivation and success. For the analysis of quantitative data collected through semi-structured questionnaires, we employed descriptive statistics involving computation of frequencies, percentages and cross-tabulations. On the other hand, to analyze qualitative data collected through interviews with parents and teachers as well as focus groups with students, we used thematic analysis with manual isolation of codes, themes for interpretation. Descriptive statistics (such as percentages and frequency distributions) were applied to questionnaire responses to identify trends and correlations in how students' social environments affected their academic performance. By integrating both thematic and statistical analysis, the study ensured a comprehensive interpretation of data, combining empirical evidence with qualitative depth. Ethical considerations were followed in line with precepts involving research with human participants and to ensure participant safety, confidentiality, and respect for rights. All participants were thoroughly informed about the purpose and objectives of the study, their roles, and any potential risks prior to their involvement. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, the identities of participants were rigorously protected throughout the study by using non-identifiers as aliases and codes. We also emphasized data protection, complied with relevant regulations to safeguard participant information by keeping all data in a password-encrypted format.

RESULTS

Informed by the four study objectives first, the impact of peer influence on students' academic motivation and achievements, second, the role of family relationships in shaping students' academic discipline and performance, third, the effect of teacher-student relationships on classroom engagement and learning outcomes, and fourth practical interventions that participants perceived would enhance positive social relationships and support students' academic success. We present results as they emerged from participants in line with the four objectives,

but first, their demographic characteristics.

Demographic characteristics of respondents

Gender characteristics of respondents

In terms of gender demographics, out of the 60 respondents, 33 (55%) were female, while 27 (45%) were male (Figure 1).

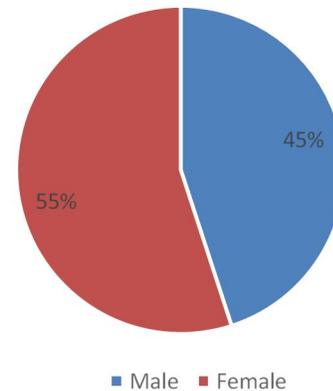


Figure 1. Gender demographics of respondents.

Age characteristics of respondents

With respect to age demographics, 24 respondents (40%) were in the age range of 14-19 years, 20 respondents (33.3%) were aged 20-25 years, 10 respondents (16.7%) fell within the 26-30 years category, and 6 respondents (10%) were over 30 years old. This age profile suggests that the majority of respondents were relatively young, with 73.3% under the age of 25 (Figure 2).

Marital status of respondents

For key informants, regarding marital status, 42 respondents (70%) were single, while 18 respondents (30%) were married (Figure 3).

Class levels of students

Student demographics also showed varied distribution across class levels, where Form 1 had 10 students, representing 16.7% of the sample, while Form 2 included 15 students (25%). Form 3 consisted of 20 students, representing 33.3%, and Form 4 had 15 students, representing 25%. Out of 60 respondents, 36 students (60%) attended community schools while 24 students (40%) were enrolled in boarding school (Figure 4).

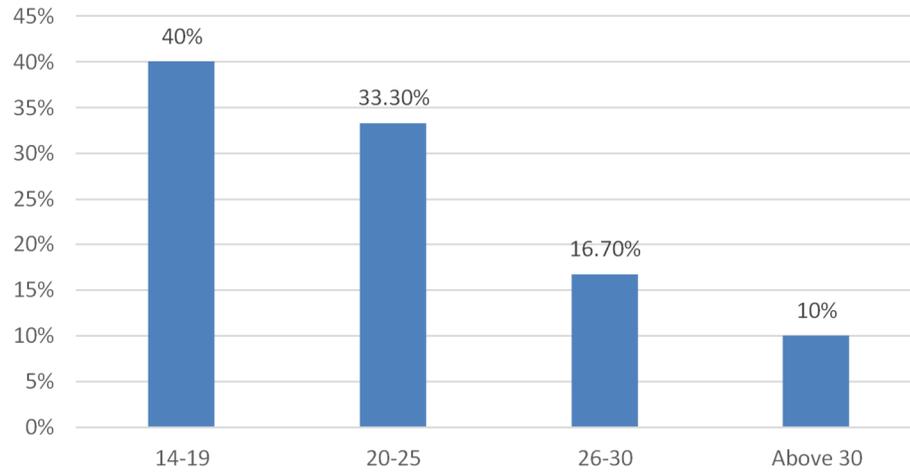


Figure 2. Age groups of respondents.

Marital status of respondents

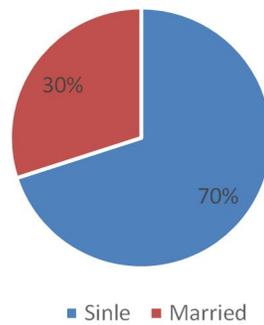


Figure 3. Marital status of participants.

Class levels of students

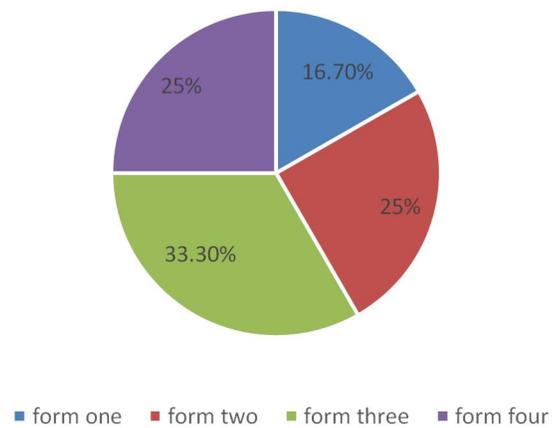


Figure 4. Student class levels.

Objective 1 - The impact of peer influence on students' academic motivation and achievements

To determine the impact of peer influences on students' academic motivation and achievement, we first assessed the frequency of peer studying among students. The findings indicated that 36 respondents (60%) reported studying with their peers sometimes, 12 respondents (20%) stated they rarely did, and 6 (10%) reported never studying with peers, while 6 respondents (10%) indicated they studied with their peers always. Queried as to what impeded the motivation to study with peers, a majority of respondents-30 representing 50% conceded that their friends discouraged them from studying with them, while 10 respondents, representing 16.7% felt strongly discouraged by their friends, with 20 (33.3%) reporting that their friends strongly encouraged them to study together.

On whether peer competition impacted peer conformity to study together, findings show that out of 25 respondents representing 41.7% indicated neutral effects, while 20 (33.3%) viewed competition as somewhat having a negative effect, and only 15 respondents representing 25% believed it affected them very positively. When it came to group study sessions, a total of 60 students responded that they were aware of such an approach to learning. Among them, 15 respondents (25%) stated they rarely participated, 20 (33%) indicated they never participated, and only 10 respondents (17%) conceded engaging in such sessions weekly.

Objective 2 - The role of family relationships in shaping students' academic discipline and performance

To determine the role of family relationships in shaping students' academic performance, we first sought to determine barriers to parental engagement, and the results showed several challenges, including a lack of guidance and counseling available to students, financial instability, long distances to school, peer pressure, and issues related to communication within families. Relative to the same, we also investigated parental monitoring of student academic progress. The results indicated that 35 respondents (58.3%) reported that their parents rarely or never checked their academic progress, and only 10 respondents (16.7%) reported their parents checked daily, while 15 (25%) indicated they did weekly.

Queried on how they perceived such support, the finding indicated that only 10 (16.7%) respondents felt their families were very supportive, while 20 (33.3%) reported they were not at all supportive, and 30 respondents (50%) reported that their families were somewhat supportive. In terms of ever sharing or disclosing their goals with their family, 30 respondents (50%) reported rarely doing so or never discussing their goals, while 20 (33%) indicated doing so sometimes, while only 10 respondents (17%)

reported these discussions occurred always.

On why there was that gap with parents, results showed that 20 respondents (33.3%) felt not involved in discussing goals, while 25 (41.7%) stated somewhat being involved, and only 15 respondents (25%) considered their families showed interest in ever being involved. Similarly, on whether guidance and counseling were included in student-parent relationships, findings indicated that 22 respondents (37%) stated that guidance was "rarely" or never provided, and 15 respondents (25%) reported parents always provided academic guidance, while 23 (38%) indicated guidance being furnished sometimes provided.

Objective 3 - The effect of teacher-student relationships on classroom engagement and learning outcomes

We also sought to determine the effect of teacher-student relationships on classroom engagement and learner outcomes. Asked whether they received any support from their teachers, 30 (50%) of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 15 (25%) were neutral, and another 15 respondents (25%) strongly agreed or agreed they had support from teachers. Further queried on reasons for their sentiments, 10 respondents (16.7%) felt teachers were not approachable, while 25 (41.7%) stated they were somewhat approachable, and another 25 respondents (41.7%) contended their teachers were very approachable. The results also showed concerning classroom discussions that 15 respondents (25%) reported rarely or never participating in class discussions, with 25 (41.7%) indicating they sometimes participated, while 20 respondents (33.3%) affirmed they participated in discussions always.

Objective 4 - Practical interventions that participants suggested would enhance positive social relationships and support students' academic success

We lastly sought to explore from participants practical interventions they surmised could enhance positive social relationships and support student academic success. On potential support programs for students, 25 respondents (42%) selected workshops on study skills, while 20 (33%) chose mentorship programmes, and 15 respondents (25%) identified "peer tutoring as an effective support program. Further queried on whether they had ever been involved in any such programmes before, out of the 60 respondents, 18 representing 30% stated they had rarely or never been engaged in such school programmes, with 22 (37%) indicating they were sometimes engaged, while 20 respondents representing 33% reported participating often. Also asked whether those programmes had any

effect on student academic performance or learning outcomes; out of the 60 respondents, 10 representing 16.7% contended they were ineffective, with 30 (45%) viewing them as somewhat effective, while 20 respondents representing 33.3% believed they were very effective.

Support programs and social challenges

Transitioning from the potential impact of suggested programmes on student academic performance and learning outcomes, we went on to determine the plausible effect of support programmes on student social change. Concerning determining this potential impact, many parents were of the sentiment that tutoring services were essential for their children's academic success. In an interview, one parent reiterated:

'Better communication with teachers is a major concern for us parents.'

The results also indicated that peer pressure was a common barrier to social behavior change. There were also views that serious challenges, such as long distances to school, strict punishments, and a lack of school fees, impeded social behavior change and the translation or intervention skills into positive outcomes such as improved academic performance. One student in focus group discussions conceded that:

'Financial worries about school fees cause anxiety for us students, affecting our ability to cope and continue with our education.'

Participants unanimously contended that creating a collaborative environment was important for student success, hence the need for interventions and support programmes. There was also a pointer to the view that ongoing training was necessary in helping teachers be more approachable and proactive.

DISCUSSION

We investigated the influence of social networks and social relationships on academic performance among students in two secondary schools in Mangochi. The findings indicate a concerning trend in peer study habits, with 60% of respondents reporting that they rarely studied with peers, while only 10% indicated they always studied with their peers. This finding is not promising for students in schools, with empirical research in education showing that peer collaboration and dynamics are vital for enhancing student academic performance (Johnson et al., 2014). Wentzel (1998), for one, in a study published in the 'Journal of Educational Psychology' entitled 'Social relationships and motivation in middle school: The role of parents, teachers,

and peers,' emphasized the vital role peer relationships play in shaping students' academic motivation.

Regarding peer competition, 41.7% of respondents in the current study alluded to neutral effects of competition, with 33.3% viewing it as somewhat negative, which resonates with Bandura's (1997) contention that competition could potentially create anxiety and diminish motivation among some students, reinforcing the idea that educational settings should prioritize collaboration over rivalry. The findings also revealed a substantial lack of engagement in group study sessions, with 58% of respondents stating they rarely participated in such sessions. This result contradicts Dillenbourg's (1999) collaborative learning research conclusions, highlighting that collaborative learning environments significantly enhance student engagement and performance.

Our study findings also indicated essential gaps in family engagement in their wards' academic activities, with 58.3% of respondents reporting that their parents rarely or never checked their academic progress, contrary to Fan and Chen's (2001) empirical assertion that parental involvement is a key determinant of academic success, as it encouraged accountability and communicates to students that their education was valued. Further to that, only 16.7% of students felt very supported by their families, while 50% reported being somewhat supported. Previous empirical research and meta-analysis on perceptions of and the impact of parental involvement on academic performance, learner motivation, and student morale, however, suggest that strong family support significantly enhances students' motivation, performance, and emotional well-being (Hill and Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2016). Psychological research on parenting and child social control posits the link between parental guidance, including in academic or moral support, and overall cognitive as well as child psychosocial development (Hirschi, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978; Deci and Ryan, 2017).

Paradoxically, the study findings also posit a lack of consistent academic guidance from teachers, with 37% of respondents contending that teacher guidance was rarely or never provided. In all academic settings, much as the student remains the center-point of education, teacher support has always been an integral component since classical times (Plato, 1871; Dewey, 1902; Thomas Aquinas, 1990). Pianta (1999), in his study, like classical and contemporary education thinkers or theorists, emphasizes that teacher support is crucial for promoting student engagement and academic success. Regarding teacher approachability, 41.7% of students found their teachers somewhat approachable, while 16.7% felt they were not approachable. McLoyd (1990) notes that teacher approachability was significant for fostering a positive learning environment. We also noted from the findings that limited participation in class discussions by respondents, with 25% of respondents reporting rarely or never participating. Empirical research in education, as well as psychological educational theory, correlates active learner

participation in classroom discussions with improved academic outcomes (Freeman et al., 2014; Vygotsky, 1978; Bandura, 1986; Piaget, 1952).

The study went further to also explore the substantial need for diverse social support systems and interventions for student academic improvement and social change. Findings indicated that 42% of respondents identified peer tutoring as being effective as an interventional programme. This result resonates with Topping's (1996) research, positing the effectiveness of peer tutoring in significantly enhancing academic performance. In the same vein, the fact that participation by respondents in school-related activities was low echoes Eccles and Barber's (1999) research findings, highlighting the need to foster optimal involvement since extracurricular activities were shown to positively correlate with academic success and social development in their study. This finding also indicates the need for substantial improvement in the way these clubs operate in the current study. Fredricks and Eccles (2006), in their chapter published in the 'Handbook of educational psychology' entitled 'Student engagement', also noted that extracurricular activities, if well aligned with students' interests, could potentially enhance social engagement and academic performance.

Conclusion

The study revealed that many students faced challenges related to peer influence, family support, and teacher-student relationships, all of which adversely affected their academic performance. The lack of consistent peer engagement, insufficient parental involvement, and limited teacher support contributed to a learning environment that did not adequately foster student success. The findings emphasize the need for educational stakeholders to address these critical areas to create a more supportive atmosphere conducive to academic achievement. It is recommended that schools implement structured peer study programmes that encourage collaborative learning. Schools should also develop tailor-made programmes to engage parents in their children's education, such as regular workshops on the importance of monitoring academic progress. Schools should furthermore evaluate and enhance the effectiveness of extracurricular activities and support programmes, ensuring they align with students' interests. Lastly, establishing systems for regular feedback from students regarding their academic experiences can help educators identify areas for improvement. Methodologically, surveys or focus groups can provide valuable insights into students' needs and perceptions.

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