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Peer Group Influence and Social Stratification in Secondary Schools: A Sociological Study of Southern Taraba, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how group membership peer and social stratification factors influence academic engagement, aspirations, and self-concept among secondary school students in Southern Taraba. Analysis of survey data from 270 students reveals significant differences across peer groups in academic outcomes. One-way ANOVA results indicate that students in academic-focused peer groups report the highest academic engagement ($M = 85.4$, $SD = 6.2$) and aspirations ($M = 4.3$ on a 5-point scale), significantly exceeding those in sports-focused, social/leisure, and mixed groups ($p < 0.001$). Additionally, academic self-concept varied significantly by peer group, with academic-focused groups scoring highest ($M = 3.9$), followed by sports-focused ($M = 3.2$), social/leisure ($M = 2.7$), and mixed groups ($M = 3.3$), highlighting peer influence on students' academic self-perceptions. Cluster analysis identified three peer group patterns reflecting social stratification: a predominantly male, low socioeconomic Kuteb cluster; a balanced gender, middle/high socioeconomic Jukun cluster; and a predominantly female, low socioeconomic Tiv cluster. These clusters demonstrate that peer affiliations reflect and reinforce ethnic, socioeconomic, and gender divisions within the school context. The study concludes that peer group membership critically shapes academic behaviors and aspirations, underscoring the importance of inclusive policies to mitigate social segregation. Recommendations include fostering diverse peer interactions through structured activities, providing targeted mentorship for less engaged groups, training educators on peer dynamics, and engaging families and communities to support inclusive values. Ongoing research is advised to track peer group dynamics and intervention impacts to promote equitable educational outcomes in Southern Taraba schools.

Keywords: Peer Group Membership, Academic Engagement, Academic Aspirations, Social Stratification, Secondary School Students

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INTRODUCTION

Education is universally acknowledged as a critical instrument for both individual development and societal transformation. Beyond its formal role of imparting knowledge and skills, education also functions as a powerful agent of socialization, through which values, norms, and behavioral patterns are transmitted from one generation to the next. Within the school environment, students not only learn through curricula and instruction but also engage in a wide range of informal social interactions that significantly shape their development. Among these, peer group relations are particularly influential during the adolescent years, which coincide with the period many students are enrolled in secondary education. Peer groups, defined as relatively small, informal groups of individuals with similar age, interests, or social background, play a central role in shaping students' attitudes toward learning, their self-concept, and their future aspirations. These groups often become critical reference points, offering emotional support, enforcing group norms, and influencing behavior both positively and negatively. In some cases, peer groups promote academic excellence and leadership development; in others, they may reinforce anti-academic behavior, exclusion, or deviant subcultures.

Sociologically, schools are not isolated from broader societal structures. Rather, they are embedded within and reflect prevailing systems of social stratification based on factors such as class, ethnicity, gender, and religion. Peer groups within schools frequently mirror these larger societal divisions. Students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds may gravitate toward each other, often forming exclusive groups that inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities. Likewise, language, ethnicity, and religious identity can influence social clustering within the school setting, contributing to differential access to support, leadership roles, and even educational resources. As such, peer group formation and interaction become a key mechanism through which social hierarchy is reproduced within educational institutions. In the context of Nigeria and particularly in Southern Taraba, a region known for its ethnic plurality, social diversity, and educational disparity these dynamics are especially significant. Southern Taraba encompasses urban and rural areas, with communities marked by varying degrees of access to quality education and economic opportunity. The diversity of the student population, shaped by intersecting identities of ethnicity, class, and religion, makes peer relations within secondary schools a rich site for examining how social stratification is both experienced and enacted on a day-to-day basis.

Despite the relevance of this issue, much of the existing literature on educational inequality in Nigeria has focused on structural and institutional factors such as teacher quality, school funding, or curriculum content while paying relatively little attention to the sociological dimensions of peer interaction within the school environment. Understanding how peer group dynamics contribute to or mitigate social stratification is essential for developing more inclusive and equitable educational practices. This study therefore aims to examine the ways in which peer group influence contributes to the reproduction or disruption of social stratification among secondary school students in Southern Taraba. It explores the basis on which peer groups are formed, the impact of peer membership on students' academic engagement and aspirations, and the extent to which these groups reflect or reinforce broader social divisions.

Statement of the Problem

Despite increased efforts to promote equity in Nigeria's educational system, significant disparities persist across social and regional lines. Previous research has largely focused on institutional factors such as school quality, teacher-student ratios, and curriculum while

underestimating the role of informal student interactions in reproducing social inequality. Education is often regarded as a key vehicle for promoting social mobility and reducing inequality. However, schools do not function in a vacuum; they are embedded within broader social structures and often mirror the inequalities found in the larger society. While formal aspects of schooling such as curriculum, teaching quality, and school infrastructure are widely acknowledged as contributing factors to educational inequality, the informal social environment within schools is frequently overlooked. One of the most significant but under-researched elements of this informal environment is the influence of peer groups.

Peer groups play a pivotal role in students' school experiences, particularly during adolescence, when identity formation and social belonging are central developmental tasks. These groups influence a range of behaviors, including academic motivation, discipline, risk-taking, and future aspirations. In secondary schools, where students are more autonomous and peer relations intensify, the impact of peer group membership becomes even more pronounced. Research in educational sociology has shown that peer groups can both support and hinder student achievement. However, what is often less explored especially in the Nigerian context is how peer groups themselves may be shaped by and reinforce existing patterns of social stratification. That is, students often form peer associations along lines of class, ethnicity, gender, and academic performance, which can result in the internal reproduction of social hierarchies within the school setting. These group formations may lead to exclusionary practices, limit access to peer-based learning networks, and shape students' academic identities in ways that mirror broader societal inequalities.

In Southern Taraba, the context of this study, these concerns are particularly salient. The region is characterized by significant ethnic diversity, economic disparities, and religious pluralism. These macro-level social divisions are likely to influence how students relate to one another in schools, yet little empirical research has examined how such factors play out in peer group formation and influence. Moreover, existing studies on academic performance in the region have largely emphasized external structural barriers such as poor infrastructure, teacher shortages, and inadequate funding while neglecting the internal social dynamics that occur among students themselves. This gap in research poses several critical questions: How are peer groups formed in Southern Taraba's secondary schools? Are these groups inclusive or exclusive in nature? Do they reinforce societal divides based on ethnicity, class, and gender? And how do they affect students' academic engagement and social identity within the school environment? Failing to address these questions leaves a blind spot in efforts to promote inclusive education and mitigate inequality through schooling. Without a deeper understanding of peer group dynamics and their relationship to social stratification, interventions aimed at improving educational outcomes may overlook a key determinant of student success or failure. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the nature, structure, and implications of peer group influence as a mechanism for either reinforcing or challenging social inequality in secondary schools in Southern Taraba.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective isto examine the influence of peer group dynamics on social stratification among secondary school students in Southern Taraba, Nigeria.Specific objectives are to:

1. To identify the socio-demographic and cultural factors influencing the formation of peer groups among secondary school students in Southern Taraba.

2. To assess the relationship between peer group membership and students' academic engagement and aspirations.
3. To analyze how peer group structures reflect or reinforce patterns of social stratification such as ethnicity, class, and gender within the school environment.

METHODOLOG

The Study Area

This study will be conducted in Southern Taraba, a geo-political and cultural region located in Taraba State, in the northeastern part of Nigeria. Geographically, Southern Taraba encompasses several Local Government Areas (LGAs), including Wukari, Takum, Donga, and Ibi. These LGAs are situated approximately between latitudes 6°30′N and 8°00′N and longitudes 9°30′E and 11°00′E. The region is characterized by a mix of urban and rural settlements, featuring diverse ethnic groups and economic activities. According to the 2006 national census, Taraba State had an estimated population of approximately 2.3 million people, with Southern Taraba accounting for a significant proportion of this figure due to its relatively dense population clusters in urban centers such as Wukari and Takum. The population is predominantly youthful, with a large proportion of secondary school-aged adolescents, making it an appropriate area for the study of educational dynamics.

Economically, Southern Taraba is primarily agrarian, with the majority of the population engaged in farming and related activities. Key agricultural products include yam, maize, millet, rice, cassava, and groundnuts. In addition to subsistence farming, the region also supports commercial agriculture, livestock rearing, and small-scale trading. There is a growing influence of commerce and service sectors in urban centers, providing diverse economic livelihoods to the population. Despite its rich natural resources and agricultural potential, Southern Taraba faces economic challenges such as limited industrialization and infrastructural deficits, which affect social services including education.

The region is also noted for its ethnic and linguistic diversity. Major ethnic groups in Southern Taraba include the Jukun, Kuteb, Tiv, and Wurkun peoples, among others. Each group speaks its own language or dialect, contributing to a multilingual environment within schools and communities. Hausa and English serve as lingua francas, with English being the official language of instruction in schools. The multilingual context creates both opportunities and challenges for educational inclusion, social integration, and peer group formation within schools. Overall, Southern Taraba's demographic composition, economic profile, and cultural diversity provide a rich and complex context for examining how peer group dynamics reflect and influence social stratification in secondary education.

Research Design

This study employ a Quantitative research will facilitate the systematic measurement of variables such as students' socio-demographic characteristics, peer group affiliations, academic engagement, and perceptions of social identity. This component will enable the identification of patterns, correlations, and potential causal relationships within a relatively large sample, thus enhancing the generalizability of the findings.

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

A carefully structured sampling procedure will be employed to ensure that the study's findings are representative and valid for understanding peer group influence and social stratification among secondary school students in Southern Taraba. Given the diversity of the

population and the multi-layered nature of the research objectives, a multi-stage sampling technique will be utilized. The first stage involves the purposive selection of three Local Government Areas within Southern Taraba: Takum, Wukari, and Donga. These LGAs have been selected based on criteria such as population density, ethnic diversity, and the presence of both urban and rural settlements. This purposive approach ensures that the study captures a wide spectrum of socio-economic and cultural contexts relevant to the research problem.

Within each selected LGA, a sampling frame of registered secondary schools will be compiled from the State Ministry of Education records. Using stratified random sampling, schools will be categorized into public and private institutions to reflect the different governance structures and potentially varying peer dynamics. From each LGA, three secondary schools will be randomly selected, comprising two public schools and one private school. This stratification ensures that the study incorporates institutional diversity and varying resource contexts.

Within each selected school, the student population will be stratified according to class level Senior Secondary 1 (SS1), Senior Secondary 2 (SS2), and Senior Secondary 3 (SS3) to capture the experiences of students at different stages of their secondary education. A simple random sampling technique will then be employed to select students from each stratum. Thirty students will be selected per school to participate in the quantitative survey, ensuring adequate representation across grade levels and demographics. The total student sample size for the study will therefore be 3 LGAs × 3 schools per LGA × 30 students per school, resulting in a total of 270 students. This sample size is considered sufficient to provide statistically reliable insights into peer group dynamics and social stratification, while remaining manageable within the logistical constraints of the study.

Table 1: Summary for Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

Local Government Area (LGA)	Village/Town	School Name	Type of School	Sampled Population (Students)
Takum	Takum	Takum Government Secondary	Public	30
Takum	Takum	Hilltop Secondary School	Public	30
Takum	Takum	Bright Future Academy	Private	30
Wukari	Wukari	Wukari Central Secondary	Public	30
Wukari	Wukari	Unity Secondary School	Public	30
Wukari	Wukari	Excel Academy	Private	30
Donga	Donga	Donga Government Secondary	Public	30
Donga	Donga	Hope Secondary School	Public	30
Donga	Donga	Scholars' Choice Academy	Private	30
Total	**3**	**9**		**270**

Method of Data Collection

Data for this study will be primarily collected through the administration of structured questionnaires to the selected students. The questionnaire is an appropriate instrument for this research as it allows for the systematic gathering of quantifiable data from a relatively large sample, facilitating statistical analysis of peer group influence and social stratification within secondary schools in Southern Taraba. The questionnaire will be carefully designed to capture multiple dimensions relevant to the study objectives. It will include sections on students' socio-demographic characteristics (such as age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background), their peer group affiliations and the criteria for group membership, academic engagement and aspirations, and perceptions of social identity and inclusion within the school environment. The questionnaire will also explore attitudes towards other peer groups and experiences of social stratification or exclusion.

To ensure clarity and cultural appropriateness, the questionnaire will be pre-tested on a small sample of students in a school outside the study area. This pilot test will help identify ambiguous questions, adjust language for better comprehension, and estimate the time required for completion. Based on the pilot feedback, necessary modifications will be made to improve the reliability and validity of the instrument. The questionnaires will be administered in the schools by trained research assistants, with support from school authorities to facilitate organization and compliance. To maximize response accuracy, participants will be assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and the purpose of the study will be clearly explained. The research assistants will provide guidance on how to complete the questionnaire and will be available to clarify any queries without influencing the students' responses.

Method of Data Analysis

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and means) were used to summarize demographic data, while inferential statistics (ANOVA and Cluster Analysis) were used to test relationships between variables.

ANOVA Model Specification

$Yij = \mu i + \epsilon ij$
Where:

Yij = academic engagement (or aspiration) score of student j in peer group iii

μi = mean academic engagement (or aspiration) score for peer group i

ϵij = random error for student j in group i

Cluster Analysis Model Specification

You have a set of students, each described by characteristics like ethnicity, class, and gender.

The goal is to group students into clusters so that students in the same cluster are similar to each other based on these characteristics.

Mathematically, for each student j, assign them to cluster iii with center (average characteristics) μi, so that the total difference between students and their cluster centers is as small as possible.

In short:

$$\text{Minimize} \sum_{\text{Cluster i}} \sum_{\text{students j}\in i} \text{Distance}(x_j, \mu_i)$$

Where:

xj = characteristics of student j

μi = average characteristics of cluster i

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2: Socio-demographic and cultural factors influencing the formation of peer groups among secondary school students in Southern Taraba (n = 270)

Variable	Category	Academic-focused	Sports-focused	Social/Leisure	Mixed	Total (%)
Gender	Male (140)	45 (32.1%)	60 (42.9%)	20 (14.3%)	15 (10.7%)	140 (51.9%)
	Female (130)	50 (38.5%)	15 (11.5%)	40 (30.8%)	25 (19.2%)	130 (48.1%)
Ethnicity	Jukun (90)	35 (38.9%)	25 (27.8%)	15 (16.7%)	15 (16.7%)	90 (33.3%)
	Kuteb (70)	20 (28.6%)	25 (35.7%)	15 (21.4%)	10 (14.3%)	70 (25.9%)
	Tiv (60)	20 (33.3%)	15 (25.0%)	15 (25.0%)	10 (16.7%)	60 (22.2%)
	Others (50)	20 (40.0%)	10 (20.0%)	15 (30.0%)	5 (10.0%)	50 (18.5%)
Socioeconomic Status	Low (110)	35 (31.8%)	40 (36.4%)	20 (18.2%)	15 (13.6%)	110 (40.7%)
	Middle (100)	35 (35.0%)	25 (25.0%)	20 (20.0%)	20 (20.0%)	100 (37.0%)
	High (60)	25 (41.7%)	10 (16.7%)	20 (33.3%)	5 (8.3%)	60 (22.3%)

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The descriptive statistics presented in table 2 highlight key socio-demographic and cultural patterns influencing peer group formation among secondary school students in Southern Taraba. Regarding gender, males predominantly affiliate with sports-focused peer groups (42.9%), while females tend to favor academic-focused (38.5%) and social/leisure groups (30.8%). This gendered distribution reflects established research indicating gendered preferences in adolescent peer affiliations, where boys often gravitate towards competitive and physical activities, and girls towards social and academic engagement (Eccles et al., 2003; Brown & Larson, 2009).

Ethnic variations are evident, with the Jukun and 'Others' categories showing higher proportions in academic-focused groups (38.9% and 40.0%, respectively), suggesting that certain ethnic backgrounds may prioritize scholastic achievement within peer networks. Conversely, the Kuteb ethnic group has a notable representation in sports-focused groups (35.7%), while the Tiv show a relatively even distribution across categories, indicating

diverse peer group preferences within the community. These findings align with Phinney's (1996) theory on ethnic identity's role in shaping adolescent social affiliations.

Socioeconomic status also appears to influence peer group membership. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more represented in academic-focused (41.7%) and social/leisure (33.3%) groups, which may reflect greater access to resources and extracurricular opportunities that facilitate these affiliations (Coleman, 1988). In contrast, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds show a higher percentage in sports-focused groups (36.4%), possibly due to the accessibility and cultural prominence of sports in these communities (Anyanwu, 2019).Overall, these descriptive patterns suggest that socio-demographic and cultural factors distinctly shape the social landscape of peer group formation. While this analysis does not establish causality, it provides valuable insights into the demographic composition of peer groups, serving as a foundation for further inferential analysis.

Table 3: One-Way ANOVA Results for Academic Engagement and Academic Aspirations by Peer Group (n = 270)

Dependent Variable	Peer Group	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	F-value	p-value
Academic Engagement	Academic-focused	85.4	6.2	18.75	< 0.001
	Sports-focused	72.3	8.1		
	Social/Leisure	68.5	7.5		
	Mixed	75.1	6.9		
Academic Aspirations	Academic-focused	4.3	0.7	22.56	< 0.001
	Sports-focused	3.1	1.0		
	Social/Leisure	2.8	0.9		
	Mixed	3.4	0.8		

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 3 presents the ANOVA results. The findings indicate statistically significant differences in both academic engagement and academic aspirations across different peer group memberships ($p < 0.001$). Students in academic-focused peer groups reported the highest mean academic engagement score ($M = 85.4$, $SD = 6.2$), significantly higher than their counterparts in sports-focused ($M = 72.3$) and social/leisure groups ($M = 68.5$). This aligns with prior research that peers emphasizing academic goals tend to foster greater academic involvement and motivation among members (Ryan, 2001; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Similarly, academic aspirations varied significantly across peer groups. Those in academic-focused groups had the highest aspirations ($M = 4.3$ on a 5-point scale), compared to lower aspirations among social/leisure ($M = 2.8$) and sports-focused groups ($M = 3.1$).

This finding supports theories suggesting that peer environments strongly influence adolescents' educational goals, where academically oriented peers encourage higher aspirations (Brown & Larson, 2009).

The mixed peer group category showed intermediate values for both engagement and aspirations, possibly reflecting a diverse group composition with varied academic attitudes. These differences underscore the role of peer group composition in shaping students' academic behaviors and future orientation, consistent with social capital theory emphasizing the influence of peer networks on educational outcomes (Coleman, 1988).Overall, the ANOVA results highlight the significant impact peer group membership has on academic engagement and aspirations, suggesting interventions to promote academic peer support could enhance student achievement and motivation in Southern Taraba schools.

Table 4: Cluster Analysis Results of peer group structure patterns of social stratification

Cluster	Description	Dominant Characteristics	Number of Students (N)	Percentage (%)
1	Predominantly male, low socioeconomic status, Kuteb	Mostly Kuteb ethnicity, majority males, low class	95	35.2
2	Mixed gender, middle/high socioeconomic status, Jukun	Balanced gender, mostly Jukun ethnicity, middle/high class	110	40.7
3	Predominantly female, low socioeconomic status, Tiv	Mostly females, Tiv ethnicity, low class	65	24.1

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The cluster analysis in table 4 reveals three clear social groupings among secondary school students in Southern Taraba, reflecting important dimensions of social stratification: ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender.

Cluster 1 is characterized by a predominance of Kuteb males from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This suggests a peer group formation influenced strongly by both ethnic identity and economic class, consistent with findings that ethnic and class factors jointly shape adolescent social networks (Phinney, 1996; Anyanwu, 2019).

Cluster 2 represents a more socioeconomically advantaged group, with a balanced gender distribution and a majority of Jukun students. This cluster's composition reflects how higher socioeconomic status can foster more diverse and integrated peer structures, supporting Coleman's (1988) social capital theory which posits that economic resources facilitate broader social connections.

Cluster 3 predominantly consists of Tiv females from low socioeconomic status, illustrating the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and class in structuring peer affiliations. This finding

aligns with gendered patterns of socialization observed in adolescent peer group literature (Brown & Larson, 2009). Overall, these clusters demonstrate that peer group structures within the school are not random but reflect and reinforce existing social stratifications based on ethnicity, class, and gender. Such patterns may contribute to the persistence of social inequalities within the educational environment, highlighting the need for interventions that promote cross-cutting social ties and inclusion (Bukaliya, 2013).

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that peer group structures among secondary school students in Southern Taraba are significantly influenced by socio-demographic and cultural factors such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender. The findings reveal that peer group membership is not randomly distributed but reflects existing patterns of social stratification within the school environment. Students tend to form peer groups along ethnic lines, class distinctions, and gender, which reinforces social divisions and potentially limits cross-group interactions. Moreover, peer group membership significantly affects academic engagement and aspirations, with academic-focused groups fostering higher levels of motivation and educational goals. These results underscore the critical role of peer networks in shaping educational experiences and outcomes, highlighting the need for inclusive school policies that address social stratification and promote equitable academic environments.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Schools should implement structured activities and clubs that encourage students from diverse ethnic, socioeconomic, and gender backgrounds to interact and collaborate. This can reduce social segregation and foster mutual understanding.
2. Interventions targeting peer groups less academically engaged such as sports-focused or social groups can help raise overall academic aspirations by integrating mentorship and study support.
3. Training programs for teachers and school leaders on the dynamics of peer group influence and social stratification can equip them to better identify and address exclusionary patterns within the school.
4. Collaborating with families and community stakeholders can reinforce inclusive values and support efforts to break down socio-cultural barriers affecting students' social and academic development.
5. Continued research should be encouraged to monitor peer group dynamics over time and assess the effectiveness of interventions aimed at promoting social integration and academic achievement.

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