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A Narrative Inquiry on Peer Influence and Academic Engagement in the Kathmandu Valley

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze influence of peers on students' academic engagement from the perspectives of secondary-level learners in the Kathmandu Valley. The relationships students form with their peers greatly influence their academic involvement, both positively and negatively. In secondary schools, strong and positive peer connections play an important role in enhancing students' academic success. For this purpose, both primary and secondary sources of information were used. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations of five students from two institutional schools. The findings revealed that positive interactions among peers—such as encouraging one another and working together—boosted students' engagement and confidence in their academics. In contrast, negative peer pressure led to disengagement and lower academic achievement. Learning is essentially a social process, and peers play a significant role in influencing how students learn. The shared emotions, intellectual efforts, and common goals within peer groups contribute to students' growth in school. Offering support during difficult times, experimenting with various learning methods, and embracing shared values all help shape a student's educational experience. Additionally, positive peer learning not only improves academic outcomes but also fosters the development of good character in students.

Keywords: Peer influence, capable peers, academic engagement, narrative inquiry, academic performance.

Introduction

The focus of this study is to explore how peer influence shapes academic engagement among secondary-level learners. This study examines the lived experiences of students in institutional schools of the Kathmandu Valley, highlighting both the positive and negative dimensions of peer interactions in their academic journey—an area we have been closely engaged with through over 20 years of professional experience. During adolescence, peers often become central figures in students' lives, exerting a greater influence than parents or teachers in shaping their behaviors, attitudes, and academic engagement (Wentzel, 2020). The author explores how peer dynamics influence motivation, learning behaviors, emotional support, and the formation of academic identity. Particularly during adolescence—a developmental phase marked by identity exploration and heightened social sensitivity—peer groups often exert greater influence than parents or teachers (Wentzel, 2020). As learners spend considerable time within these peer circles, their academic behaviors, motivation, and self-concept are profoundly shaped by the social and emotional dynamics they experience.

Research from global contexts indicates that supportive peer environments foster academic engagement, promote persistence in challenging tasks, and enhance self-efficacy (Wang & Degol, 2017; Ryan & Shin, 2018). However, not all peer interactions produce positive outcomes. Negative peer pressure can result in disengagement, diminished interest in schoolwork, and behavioral problems (Steinberg & Monahan, 2019). Therefore, understanding the nuanced mechanisms of peer influence is essential for developing comprehensive educational strategies that effectively support learners.

This study conceptually grounded in two prominent educational theories: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) and Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) emphasizes that learning occurs within a social context through interactions with more capable peers, particularly within the Zone of Proximal Development. Bandura's theory complements this by positing that individuals learn by observing others, suggesting that students model the behaviors and attitudes of their academically engaged peers.

Various studies have revealed that peer influence is very important on students' academic engagement. For example, Wentzel (2019), Wang and Degol (2017), and Ryan and Shin (2018) studies demonstrated that supportive peer groups foster collaborative learning, enhance self-efficacy, and boost academic motivation. Similarly, negative peer associations have been linked to disengagement and academic underperformance. Thematically, peer influence is understood through domains such as mutual encouragement, behavioral modeling, peer pressure, emotional support, and shared

academic goals. Given the diversity of peer groups and the complexity of adolescent social interactions, there is a pressing need to explore how students themselves construct and interpret the influence of peers on their academic engagement (Tucker & Dixon, 2017).

In Nepal, Kathmandu Valley, with its educational diversity and urban influences, offers a unique setting to explore how cultural and social contexts shape peer relationships and academic motivation. During adolescence, secondary-level students tend to engage more with their friends than with parents or other family members. They are often drawn into close peer groups formed at school, sports clubs, neighborhoods, or diverse communities (Jackson & Tomé, 1993)

Learning transcends traditional boundaries such as home or school, with a learner's intrinsic motivation playing a crucial role in their pace of learning. Peer groups significantly influence students in areas where they are most engaged and interested (Frontiers study, 2021). Social networking emerges as one of the most influential factors shaping academic development during secondary education. Moreover, teenage learners' future career trajectories are often shaped by their peer relationships (Liem, 2011). Positive peer interactions, including peer praise, promote pro-social behaviors across academic and social domains, thereby enhancing self-esteem and yielding broader societal benefits. Teenagers frequently share their emotions within these peer groups, which have a profound impact on their academic achievements. Peers can serve as sources of both positive and negative influence; while supportive peer relationships foster higher academic success, negative peer interactions can hinder academic engagement (Clasen & Brown, 1985)

Nepalese cultural norms that emphasize collectivism and group harmony amplify the influence of peers on students' academic outcomes (Sharma, 2013). However, most research in Nepal focuses on teacher-student interactions, infrastructure, or curriculum reform, often overlooking the emotional and social experiences of adolescents. Despite growing global interest in peer influence during adolescence, there is a significant gap in Nepal's educational research in capturing students' lived experiences through qualitative approaches. Existing studies are largely quantitative and fail to explore the emotional, cultural, and psychological complexities of peer dynamics or how students navigate support and pressure within peer groups over time. Sharma (2019) identified both positive and negative aspects of peer influence, highlighting how cultural norms and school environment values shape these dynamics. He also examined how learners' interactions impact academic engagement. Yet, a significant gap remains in

understanding peer interaction from students' own perspectives particularly in secondary schools within the Kathmandu Valley.

Addressing this gap, this paper aims to provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers in how students perceive peer relationships & how these perceptions contribute to their academic engagement and success. Employing a narrative inquiry approach, the study captures students' personal experiences of peer influence. Through in-depth interviews and observations, the research explores numerical data to interpret the meanings, motivations, and behavioral changes as expressed by the learners themselves. This culturally contextualized understanding of peer dynamics within Nepali schools underscores the need for policymakers and educators to acknowledge the powerful role of peer relationships in shaping academic engagement.

Methods and Materials

This paper is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, (which was adopted because the study sought to understand students' lived experiences from their own perspectives. Narrative inquiry was chosen as the research design as it allows the researcher to capture and interpret personal stories within social and cultural contexts and employs a qualitative narrative-based approach. The research is based on both primary and secondary sources. Non-probability purposive sampling was employed to select participants for this narrative inquiry. Five secondary-level students - three from one institutional school and two from another - were purposively chosen from the Kathmandu valley based on predefined criteria with assistance from class teachers and school principals. Selected participants were those who had demonstrable experiences of peer influence impacting their academic journey. In-depth interviews, naturalistic classroom and playground observations, and reflective field notes were used for primary data collection. In addition, secondary data were collected from various materials, including relevant theories, academic journals, online resources, and school records.

In this study, only five students from two institutional schools in the Kathmandu Valley were selected because narrative inquiry emphasizes depth over breadth, prioritizing rich, detailed accounts of lived experiences rather than statistical generalization. The two schools—both situated within accessible urban areas of Kathmandu were chosen due to their willingness to support prolonged engagement, provide access to classrooms, and accommodate in-depth observations. Other types of schools, such as public or community schools, were not included because the study aimed to maintain contextual homogeneity and ensure that peer influence dynamics were examined within similar institutional and socio-cultural environments. The selected students, aged 14–16 years, represented both

genders and came from diverse socio-economic and family backgrounds. Although race and ethnicity were not used as selection criteria, participants reflected the typical cultural diversity of urban Nepali secondary schools. These characteristics helped ensure that the narratives collected were contextually grounded, ethically manageable, and analytically meaningful within the scope of a small-scale qualitative narrative inquiry.

The study followed a narrative inquiry procedure involving three stages: field text collection through interviews and observations, interim text formation through coding and meaning-making, and final research text construction aligning participants' stories with the theoretical framework. Clear inclusion criteria, interview protocols, and observation guidelines were used to ensure consistency in the data collection process.

In this study data were analyzed using a naturalized transcription method (Azevedo et al., 2017) to capture both verbal and non-verbal cues. Following Cope's (2009) interpretive approach, themes were linked to research questions within Vygotsky's and Bandura's theoretical frameworks. Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement, rapport building, and triangulation, while transferability, confirmability, and dependability were supported through thick descriptions, faithful representation of voices, and a clear audit trail. Narrative inquiry dimensions temporality, sociality and place were considered to understand peer influence across time, personal and social contexts, and physical settings. Ethical standards were upheld through informed consent, confidentiality, and participants' rights.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory posits that learning is fundamentally a social process, occurring through interactions with more knowledgeable others—whether teachers, adults, or peers. Complementing this, Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory emphasizes the importance of observational learning, imitation, and modeling in shaping behavior.

Vygotsky's and Bandura's theories provide a dual theoretical lens to interpret how academic engagement is socially mediated and behaviorally acquired. Vygotsky offers insight into the interactive and co-constructive nature of peer relationships, while Bandura helps explain the mechanisms of influence through observation and imitation. These frameworks are particularly suitable for narrative inquiry, which centers on understanding how learners construct and express their lived experiences through interaction and reflection. Their combined application enables a deeper understanding

of how peer dynamics—both supportive and negative—shape the academic identities and trajectories of secondary-level learners in institutional schools of the Kathmandu Valley.

Results and Discussion

Behavioral imitation and role modeling

A recurring pattern in narratives involved behavioral imitation, particularly in academic habits. One participant recounted observing a peer's disciplined approach to note-taking and eventually adopting it. This resonates with Bandura's (1977) assertion that modeling is a central mechanism of learning. When peers serve as accessible role models, they normalize desirable academic behaviors.

"I think maybe few of my friends are really good in public speaking and also poetries. Now I am also quite trying to get over the fear of public speaking. I restarted to write poems from grade 9." Modified name Sujata (15 years old) student found herself influenced by peers who displayed confidence in public speaking and literary expression. Imitating their courage and skills, she pushed herself to participate more in class activities and rekindled her passion for poetry. This led to both personal and academic enrichment, showing how peer modeling can unlock dormant talents.

"I learned guitar skills from a friend who was an amazing guitarist. His dedication and passion for music motivated me to keep improving." Modified name Samir (16 years old) student of class nine imitation went beyond academics he observed and adopted his friend's musical habits. This not only improved his creative skills but also built discipline and patience, traits which translated into his academic persistence. His story reveals how personal development through imitation can contribute indirectly to scholastic growth.

"I copied my friends' disciplined lifestyle, which made me focus on studies and manage time better." Modified name Ronish (14 years old) student internalized the study habits and time management routines of his academically focused peers. The imitation helped him become more structured in his learning approach. His transformation reflects how emulating responsible behaviors can lead to measurable academic improvements.

"I saw my friend wake up very early in the morning. At first it was difficult but later it became a habit." Modified name Rohan's (15 years old) academic habits were reshaped when he started following a friend's early morning study routine. Initially hesitant, he

gradually found it effective for long-term retention and discipline. This experience highlights the power of consistent peer modeling in forming beneficial routines.

“My friend encouraged me to change my schedule. I started waking up early and revising with more focus.” Modified name Lujha (16 years old) observed and adopted her friend's habit of early revision. Imitating this behavior helped her build focus and maintain consistency in her studies. The outcome was not only better academic performance but also improved self-discipline and confidence.

Each participant's experience demonstrates how peer modeling—whether intentional or unintentional—shaped behaviors that contributed to their personal and academic growth. Through observing and imitating peers, whether in study habits, creative expression, or skill development, students bridged the gap between seeing and doing. This aligns with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes learning through observation, especially when behaviors yield positive results. Participants internalized not only actions but also attitudes, reflecting deeper cognitive engagement and increased self-efficacy—the belief in their own abilities. From Vygotsky's Sociocultural perspective, this peer-based learning functions as informal scaffolding within the social environment, where capable peers provide support within the Zone of Proximal Development. Ultimately, imitation is portrayed not as simple copying but as a deliberate process of transformation grounded in trust, respect, and aspiration.

Development of reading habits from peers

“I usually read by repeatedly going through the texts and using dictionaries to know the correct pronunciation. Reviewing my notes and summarizing key ideas helped me a lot.” Sujata developed reading strategies mostly through self-practice, like using dictionaries and summarizing. While she didn't directly attribute this to her peers, her learning methods may have been reinforced in academic group settings. Her approach shows metacognitive awareness in how reading strategies enhance comprehension.

“I started breaking (textbooks) into smaller sections using flashcards to test myself repetition and review made it easier to remember.” Samir built his reading habit through a structured, strategy-based approach, using techniques like breaking content into chunks and frequent self-testing. Although he doesn't explicitly mention peer support here, his method mirrors commonly shared strategies within group learning environments, indicating indirect peer influence.

“Pradeep, an avid reader friend, encouraged me to read. We even formed a group to discuss books every week. Now, I finish at least one book a week.” Ronish’s reading transformation was directly influenced by his friend Pradeep. Initially reluctant, he began with small goals like reading five pages a day, later expanding into a peer-led reading group. His progress was both socially supported and personally internalized.

“When I see that large number of paragraphs, I used to scare. But I decided to break it into smaller sections. My friend encouraged me to do so and helped me stay focused.” Rohan’s reading challenge was overcome through a strategy he picked up from peers breaking down long passages and focusing on small goals. Encouragement from his friend helped him transition from anxiety to confidence in reading complex academic texts.

“My friend gave me a book and said, ‘I think you’ll enjoy this one’ Later we made a small group and discussed the book together That habit stayed with me.” Luja’s reading journey was catalyzed by peer recommendation and sustained by regular reading group discussions. Social accountability and shared reflection were key factors in helping her develop not only the habit but also a love for reading.

The development of reading habits among participants reflects a strong social influence, whether direct (Ronish, Luja) or indirect (Rohan, Samir). Sujata and Samir relied more on individual strategies, but their techniques often mirrored practices seen in collaborative academic settings.

These stories illustrate Vygotsky’s concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners benefit from the guidance of more capable peers in this case, through peer reading groups, encouragement, or modeling effective strategies. The peer setting fostered emotional safety and encouraged experimentation with difficult texts. In Bandura’s Social Learning Theory, the idea of vicarious reinforcement is clear: seeing others benefit from reading motivated participants to adopt similar behaviors. Social environments became catalysts for building consistent reading routines and confidence in comprehension. Ultimately, peer interaction not only helped develop reading skills but also collaboration and shared purpose, demonstrating how learning thrives in socially embedded practices.

Increasing communication from teachers and peers

“I used to revise by summarizing and asking friends if my points were correct. Sometimes they corrected me or added missing points.” Sujata used collaborative peer communication as a learning verification method. Her conversations served as **academic**

checks and balances, ensuring her understanding was accurate. This interaction boosted her confidence and filled learning gaps through **peer clarification**.

“My science teacher was really friendly. I used to ask him after class about things I didn’t understand. He used examples from real life that made everything clearer.” Samir’s academic growth was significantly influenced by his ability to communicate freely with his teacher. This student-teacher dialogue not only clarified difficult concepts but also connected theory with practice, deepening his understanding and retention.

“I usually ask my friends about class notes and missed lessons. They always explain things in simple words.” Ronish relied on peer explanation to make up for missed information or unclear lessons. His learning was enhanced through informal peer tutoring, which used familiar language and personal examples, making concepts more relatable.

“I feel comfortable asking friends about difficult math questions and I also help them in English. We solve things together.” Rohan’s communication with peers was both reciprocal and cooperative. He created a learning loop asking for help in one subject and offering help in another. This mutual exchange nurtured his skills across multiple areas and strengthened social trust.

“My teacher used to call me after class and ask if I understood the lesson. That motivated me to work harder.” For Lujha, teacher communication had a motivational impact. Her teacher’s follow-up conveyed care and expectations, which pushed her to engage more actively with the material. It fostered academic responsibility and emotional validation.

All five participants emphasized that communication—with both peers and teachers—was crucial to their academic progress. Peers offered relatable and comforting support, while teachers provided authority and clear guidance. Communication served as the essential link between confusion and understanding, illustrating Vygotsky’s idea that social interaction and language foster cognitive development. According to Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory, these interactions also promote social reinforcement and build students’ confidence. The narratives reveal that learning is a collaborative process, where students actively co-construct knowledge and deepen their understanding by engaging in academic dialogue with others.

By using a narrative inquiry approach focused on students’ lived experiences, this paper captures the unique social, cultural, and emotional aspects of peer relationships in this particular context. It explores how peer interactions shape academic engagement,

motivation, and identity among secondary learners, while also considering local factors like cultural norms and school environments that influence these dynamics. Participants like Rohan show how academic conversations become **collaborative processes**, where teaching others further reinforces one's own understanding.

Peer pressure for disengagement

Not all peer influence was positive. One participant reflected on being temporarily swayed by a group that devalued academics, resulting in a decline in study habits and performance. This supports Steinberg & Monahan's (2017) findings that negative peer pressure can disrupt academic engagement during adolescence a period marked by heightened susceptibility to group dynamics. It means obstacles such as social isolation, ridicule, or strained relationships within the group. This resistance can create emotional stress and reduce a sense of belonging as peers may view nonconformity as a challenge to group unity. While standing apart can protect personal values and academic priorities it often requires resilience to handle the potential conflicts and barriers that emerge from going against the collective will.

Emotional support and confidence building

Peers were also found to provide significant emotional scaffolding. For example, when facing academic stress or personal struggles, participants turned to their friends for moral support. Such relational bonds reinforced a sense of belonging which is essential for sustained academic engagement (Kiefer & Wang, 2017). Students' narration says that learning increases through Groups and Collaboration

Navigating conformity and resistance

One compelling theme was the negotiation of conformity. Some participants selectively engaged with peer norms, embracing academically supportive behaviors while resisting those they deemed detrimental. This highlights the agency students possess in shaping their learning environments, echoing findings by Tucker & Dixon (2017). Students' narration says students' conscious decision-making in navigating peer influence accepting behaviors that supported their learning while deliberately avoiding those that could hinder it.

Peer interaction in digital forums

These results align with previous research by Wentzel (2019) and Ryan & Shin (2018) and emphasize that positive peer dynamics serve as a catalyst for engagement while negative dynamics risk detachment. The students' narrations in this context reveal

that their academic engagement is strongly shaped by the nature of peer interactions supportive peers inspire motivation and active participation, whereas discouraging or disruptive peer behaviors can lead to withdrawal from learning activities.

Mutual encouragement and motivation

Participants frequently described how encouragement from friends enhanced their motivation and confidence, for instance, shared that a friend's support rekindled her passion for poetry, leading to participation in literary competitions. Such peer-driven encouragement aligns with Ryan & Shin (2018), who argue that supportive peer networks increase student perseverance and emotional engagement. The students' narrations reveal that their academic engagement is strongly shaped by the nature of peer interactions supportive peers inspire motivation and active participation whereas discouraging or disruptive peer behaviors can lead to withdrawal from learning activities.

Conclusion

This study explored how peer influence shapes academic engagement among secondary-level learners in the Kathmandu Valley. Findings revealed that peers significantly affect students' motivation, learning habits, confidence, and academic identity. Positive peer interactions such as encouragement, collaborative learning, and role modeling strengthened academic engagement, whereas negative peer pressure contributed to disengagement and reduced performance. Students demonstrated agency by selectively accepting helpful peer behaviors and resisting harmful ones. The study highlights the need for schools to foster supportive peer environments and structured peer-learning opportunities to enhance academic engagement and reduce negative peer influence.

The narratives revealed that peer-based learning often supplies or even replaces traditional teacher-led instruction. Students actively assist each other in making sense of complex lessons, employing creative methods like songs, poems, and simplified explanations. Such informal, student-centered approaches foster a safe, creative, and collaborative learning environment where students become not only consumers but also creators of knowledge. When formal schooling fails to meet their needs, peer learning becomes an accessible and effective alternative.

This paper concludes that all educators, parents, and policymakers to integrate the social dimensions of learning within educational practices. Emphasizing the vital role of peers can enhance academic engagement, support holistic development, and prepare students to contribute meaningfully to society.

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