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Peer support for learning among senior secondary school children in Sri Lanka: Gender as factor

Jalal Deen Careemdeen
Faculty of Education, The Open University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

* Corresponding Author: **Jalal Deen Careemdeen**

Article Info

Abstract

Peer relationship plays a considerable role in successive educational achievement in different ways. This study investigates peer educational support for learning based on gender differences in senior secondary school children in Sri Lanka. The objectives of the investigation were to: (i) identify the level of peer educational support for learning; (ii) investigate peer educational support differences based on gender. The population of the study is senior secondary school children in Sri Lanka. A total of 1350 secondary school children from the North, South, East, West and Central part of the country served as participants in this study. A stratified sampling technique was used to select the sample for this study. A survey research design and quantitative research approach were used to conduct the study. A self-administered questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale was used as the instrument for data collection from students. Data are analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23. The descriptive and inference analyses use frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation and MANOVA. The pilot study was carried out using Cronbach's Alpha for all variables, and the pilot study showed high reliability at 0.917–0.934. The results of the survey generated through SPSS indicate that most students strongly agreed (mean = 4.325 and SD 0.695) that their peers support their learning activities. The study's results, in line with peer support for student learning, elaborated that there are significant differences based on Gender. The study results show that peer educational support based on gender is higher for female students than male students among secondary school children in Sri Lanka. It was recommended to stakeholders that male peers should be encouraged to assist their friends in learning.

Introduction

A child's peers become increasingly important to them as he/she moves away from his parents and toward independence. Peers are a group or similar individuals, often of the same age, gender, socio-economic status and interests. The functions performed for a person by classmates and friends are referred to as peer support. Peer relationship plays a considerable role in successive educational achievement in different ways (Hofman, 2016). Peer support refers to the functions performed for a person by classmates and friends, consisting of informational (material or behavioural assistance with problems or practical tasks), emotional (demonstration of encouragement, value and esteem, caring and love sympathy) and instrumental support (advice and facts that assist individuals in solving problems) (Evans-Whipp, Mundy *et al.* 2017) [11].

Children undergo social learning through their peers (Abd. Razak and Salleh 2010) [1]. Peers are an informal agent for children and adolescents, providing experiences they may not have had with their family or school. From his peers, he/she learns many things he/she needs to know to become an adult (Brembeck 1971) [6]. Peer influence is stronger among students who do not want much engagement with their parents and teachers (Kindermann and Vollet 2014) [17]. "Although parents are the most salient influence on youngsters' long-term educational plans, peers are the most potent influence on their day-to-day behaviors in school:

how much time they spend on homework, whether they enjoy coming to school each day, and how they behave in the classroom" (Steinberg, Darling *et al*. 1995) [24].

This is true when children enter secondary school and, parental involvement in children's education decreases. In this study, peer educational support includes sharing educational materials, school and class related information, encouraging participating in learning and programmes, assisting for learning and helping each other for educational purposes. This study investigate the level of peer educational support for learning, and peer educational support differences based on gender.

Literature Review

Peers explain various complex concepts as well as introduce various perspectives and ideas (Mishra 2019) [19], study together (Cole and Espinoza 2008) [9], share relevant educational materials and information about their education (Martin 2009) [18], mutually help to eliminate examination-related anxiety and mutually help clarify course-related expectations, enhance students'expectations (Tinto 2012) [12], resulting in better outcomes (Pérez II and Taylor 2016) [21].

Peer learning strategies encompass a few different learning techniques both in and out of the classroom, including peer tutoring, small and large groups for class discussion, and online discussion and feedback. These methods have been proven effective in helping students' academic and social skills if peer learning techniques are monitored and carefully structured (Wessel 2015) [26]. Likewise, cooperative learning can improve students' peer acceptance and perception of peer support (Smith 2017) [23].

Peer academic and emotional support are considered factors that influence students' classroom engagement, academic motivation, and school belonging. Peer support in terms of academic, emotional and social support is related to the responsive learning environment and have unique implications for supporting adolescents' academic motivation, classroom engagement, and school belonging and relationships with classmates cause students to feel "secure and happy", keeping their sense of school belonging (Kiefer, Alley *et al*. 2015) [15].

There is a correlation between peer support for mathematics subjects and students' mathematics engagement among secondary school students in a boarding school in Malaysia (Din, Ayub *et al*. 2016). Moreover, Din *et al*. demonstrated that secondary school students receive support from their peers to solve mathematical tasks, help each other in learning mathematics, and check each other's mathematical tasks and work. Moreover, they showed that support from peers is higher than support from parents.

Peer support causes student motivation to engage in learning and academics successively (You 2011) [27]. Students' relationships with their best friends contributed more to engaging in the behavioural domain, and it was indicated that the girl's behavioural engagement was higher than the boys' engagement (Kilday and Ryan 2019). Peer support in terms of academic aspiration and academic value significantly impacts adolescents' engagement and development, and children's expectations among peer group are one of the main factors which lead to positive or negative school experiences (You 2011) [27].

The relationship between peers and classmates immensely influences students' wellbeing (Ratnik and Rüütel 2017) [22]. Positive peer relationship is associated with a higher level of participation in learning, a higher level of school attendance and a higher level of completing school life (Noble and McGrath 2015) [20]. Student and peer relationships play a more significant role in successive educational achievement in different ways (Hofman, 2016). Peer support effectively decreases school students; academic stress (Bariyyah 2015) [5].

There are concurrent associations between peer relationship experiences and academic performance, and better academic performance was associated with greater peer acceptance, more friends, and less rejection by peers (Zitzmann 2005) [28]. Girls, but not boys, perform better academically in the years they have more friends and are not rejected by their classmates filed (Zitzmann 2005) [28].

Peer feedback is considered a productive pedagogical educational activity that improves student learning through giving and receiving feedback. Students perceived different levels of learning in terms of receiving and giving peer reviews and four different designs in value placement: advantage from giving feedback only, advantage from receiving feedback only, benefit from both receiving and providing feedback and advantage from neither receiving nor giving feedback and, students learning was mediated by motivation for peer feedback, group dynamics, engagement with evaluation criteria and within-group differences in writing ability (Cao, Yu *et al*. 2019) [8].

Students seated close to or next to their peers may play a significant role in students' academic outcomes because they can interact with them during lesson activities in the classroom. There is the importance of three types of peers for students' academic involvement and academic outcomes: friends, near-seated peers, and near-seated peers who are friends (Gremmen, Van den Berg *et al*. 2018) [13]. When friends' scores are high, students' engagement and grades become higher, and students' engagement and grades are lower when near-seated peers who were not friends score high, and students' engagement and grades become high when friends who are near seated score high, showing more similarity (Gremmen, Van den Berg *et al*. 2018) [13].

Peer support has a significant impact on their academic achievement. Students will always imitate or follow their peers' gestures and behaviors (Alsagoff 1983) [3]. Also, students' attitudes and behaviors are influenced by their peers. In individual development, everyone will tend to choose peers who share the same interests and aspirations. This makes it easier for them to share their ideas, opinions, and experiences with the same interests. The effects of such interactions will create a sense of comfort in the students' interactions with them (Abu and Eu 2017) [2].

On the other hand, peer rejection leads to lower participation in the lesson and school activities (French and Conrad 2001) [12]. "A lack of social support and (peer) rejection spoils students' school performances and increases the risk of isolation and long-term emotional and behavioral difficulties" (Gest *et al*. 2001). Thus, peer support is considered as an inevitable factor in contributing to enhancing children's involvement in learning, academic achievement, development, and well-being.

Aims of the Study

This study attempted to identify the level of peer educational support for student learning and differences in peer educational support based on gender among secondary school

children in Sri Lanka.

Objectives
The present study aims to: 01. Investigate the levels of peer educational support for learning among secondary school children in Sri Lanka. 02. Identify the differences in peer educational support based on student gender.

Methodology
This survey used a quantitative research design. The population of the study consists of secondary schoolchildren in Sri Lanka. A total of 1350 secondary schoolchildren were selected for the study using a stratified random sampling technique to select the study sample. The questionnaire tool was developed in line with the needs of the survey. It included two sections one section to identify students' demographic backgrounds and the next section to measure students' perception of peer educational support. The respondents were given five choices for the peer educational support construct based on the Likert Scale (1–5): Never (1), Rarely (2), Occasionally (3), Often (4) and Always (5). The opinions of

experts from the sociology of education were used to establish the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. The internal consistency of the instrument was based on the report of Cronbach's alpha coefficient values (0.933). Descriptive and inferential statistics were used in analysing the data. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23 was used for the data analysis. Descriptive analysis was used to obtain the mean and standard deviations to determine the overall level of peer educational support for learning. MANOVA analysis determines significant differences in peer educational support based on gender amongst Sri Lankan secondary school children.

Results
The values, such as mean and standard deviation, obtained from the descriptive analysis are used to determine the level of peer educational support. Seven items were constructed that would be rated by the respondents using a 5-level scale (Never, Rarely, Occasionally, Often, Always) on the aspect of peer educational support, as shown in Table 01.

Table 1: Level of Socio-Environmental Support in terms of Peer Support

No.	Item	Mean	S. D	Interpretation
	My peers /classmate/ friends ………………….			
1	Share with me educational and learning materials (pen, pencil, class notes etc.)	4.417	0.918	High
2	Share with me school and class -related information (exam schedules, assignments etc).	4.273	1.000	High
3	Share with me ideas and information related to our lesson activities	4.197	1.023	High
4	Encourage me to participate in educational programs.	4.037	1.120	High
5	Encourage me to participate in learning activities	4.068	1.120	High
6	Assist me to involve myself in group discussions which enable me to participate effectively in the group discussions	4.025	1.131	High
7	Help me to conduct group activities accepting my leadership.	4.003	1.160	High
	Overall	**4.146**	**0.810**	**High**

Table 01 shows the level of peer support for the different items relating to student learning; the overall mean for this is 4.146, overall S.D is 0.810, and the interpretation high. For the highest item in this category the mean is 4.417 (S.D. =0.918) and the interpretation high. This item is about sharing educational and learning materials such as pen, pencil, class notes, etc. among peers (1). The second highest item is sharing school and class-related information such as exam schedules, assignments, etc. among peers (2) and in this case the mean is 4.273, S.D. =1.000 and the interpretation high.

The lowest item in this category is helping peers conduct group activities by accepting the leadership of their peer (7). For this category the mean is 4.003 (S.D. =1.160), and the interpretation high. These results show that students have a high level of educational support from their peers for their learning involvement.
Table 2 shows the MANOVA analysis for the difference in mean scores obtained for peer educational support based on gender.

Table 2: MANOVA Difference Aspects of Peer Educational Support based on Gender

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	S. D	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Total Square	F	Sig.
Peer Support	Male	675	4.003	0.835	27.715	1	27.715	43.566	0.000
	Female	675	4.289	0.758					

Table 2 shows there are significant gender-wise differences in peer educational support [F = 43.566 and sig = 0.000]. Moreover, Table 2 shows that peer support for female students (Mean = 4.289 and S.D. = 0.758) is higher than for male students (Mean = 4.003 and S.D. = 0.835).

Discussion and Conclusion
Peer support is indicated at a high level. Peers' academic and social support may foster a responsive learning environment and have unique implications for adolescents' academic motivation, classroom engagement and school belongingness (Kiefer, Alley et al. 2015) [15]. The highest mean value of peer support is about sharing educational and learning materials.

Peers tend to share relevant materials and information for their education (Martin 2009) [18]. The lowest mean value is for conducting group activities accepting their leadership. Small, peer-led collaborations made learning worthwhile and enjoyable even with complicated tasks (Hooker 2011) [14]. The results show significant differences in peer educational support based on gender, as female support is significantly higher than male students. Socio-environmental factors such as teachers, parents and peers, and the curriculum are significant support for classroom participation among boys more than girls, who are more influenced by the classroom environment (Aziz, Quraishi et al. 2018). Perceived peer support levels are the same for male and female students

(Bursal 2017) [7]. It was recommended to stakeholders that male peers should be encouraged to assist their friends in learning.

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