Peer Relationships As Correlates Of Academic Achievement Among Form Three Students In Murang'a County, Kenya

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Abstract: The trend of academic achievement in Murang'a County has been worrying as it has remained poor for a number of years. The purpose of this study was to examine peer relationships as a correlate of academic achievement among form three students in Mathioya Sub County, Murang'a County. The objective of the study was to: establish the link between peer relationships and academic achievement of form three students. This research adopted the Social Learning Theory by Bandura (1977). A correlational research design was adopted. Purposive sampling was used to select Mathioya Sub-County in Murang'a County. Stratified sampling technique was used to group the schools into three categories i.e. boys boarding, girls boarding and co-educational secondary schools, and finally simple random sampling was used to get the research participants from the sampled schools. The research population comprised of all 2614 form three students in the 32 public secondary schools in Mathioya Sub- County in the year 2023. For data collection, two tools were used namely: a peer relationships scale developed by Terzian, A.M. (2012) to collect data on peer relationships and a proforma summary of students' academic results to collect data on academic achievement of the students for the end of term one 2023 examination. Thirty four students were selected from one of the schools in the study location to take part in the pilot study. These students, however were not used to participate in the actual study. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22 was used to analyse the quantitative data that were collected. Multiple regression and t-test for independent samples were used to analyze the data and the results obtained presented in tables. Finally conclusions and recommendations were made based on the outcome of the analysed data. The study found that peer relationships positively and significantly correlated with the academic achievement of form three students in Murang'a County. An important implication and recommendation of the study was that teachers, parents and all the educational stakeholders work together to encourage positive peer interactions among learners which may go a long way in boosting their levels of motivation and by extension improve their academic achievement.

Keywords: Peer Relationships, Academic Achievement.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is globally accepted that education is a leading instrument in fostering national economic growth, so much that Nelson Mandela, the former president of South Africa once said that it is the most powerful weapon which one can use to change the world (The New York Times, Dec 5, 2013). Agreeing with this fact, the Daily Outlook newspaper in Afganstan (March 7, 2018) stated that no nation has ever succeeded to change its destiny without strategic investment in its citizens' education. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) listed achievement of universal primary education as one of its millennium development goals. In its 2015 report, it was reported that globally, the number of children who were not attending school had fallen to 57 million down from 100 million in 2000 (The MDG Report, 2015). It is no wonder therefore that factors contributing to

academic success have generated a lot of interest over the years.

Academic success has been associated with benefits for both the individual person and the society at large. Raghupathi , V. & Raghupathi, W. (2020) used empirical data from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and World Bank for 26 OECD countries (of which Kenya is a member) for 20 years (1995 – 2015) to assess the association between education and health. The results indicated that adults with higher educational attainment have better health and lifespans compared to their less educated counterparts. The UNICEF report (2021) entitled " A Transforming Education in Africa: An Evidence Based Overview and Recommendation for Long-Term Improvement", opines that education is the best tool in fighting poverty in the society as it equips people to survive and thrive even in the midst of adversity. The 2012 OECD report states that when a child fails in education, it's like they have been penalized for life. It continues to state that those who drop out of school or leave school without the relevant skills have fewer life prospects in terms of life-time earnings, have more difficulties in adapting to the rapidly changing economies, suffers higher risks of unemployment and are less able to participate fully in the civic and democratic aspects of modern society. According to the report, the society also suffers from the effects of educational failure. It states that this imposes high costs on the society as a poorly educated populace limits the economies' capacity to produce, grow and also innovate thus retarding development. For these reasons therefore, the report proposes that success in education by improving its and reducing school failure should be prioritized by all countries.

Success in education is depicted through the learners' scores in their examinations, both internal as well as national examinations. This is commonly referred to as academic achievement which is defined as a performance result that shows the degree to which a person has achieved particular objectives that were the focus of learning activities (Steinmayr et al., 2014).

Access to and provision of quality education has seen many governments, Kenya included spend millions of money for its success since it is recognized as one of the most important national goals. Academic excellence is viewed as a key to a brighter future as it prepares the learners for future careers and its absence is looked at with disdain. However, poor academic achievement has been a widespread phenomenon among students raising concerns to the parents, governments and other educational stakeholders. On its part the government of Kenya has been putting measures in place to ensure that the education given is not only quality but also relevant to the needs of the citizenry. Sessional paper 1 of 2018 states:

The government continues to review the whole education cycle in order to appropriately respond to the current issues thus facilitating the achievement of the country's goals and aspirations. The Kenyan Constitution of 2010 places the Bill of Rights at its center, and the Kenya Vision 2030 recognizes the necessity of reforming education and training and developing a sector appropriate for this use. The policy directives contained in this paper as a result satisfy the constitutional obligations and national objectives and provide guidance for upgrading and repositioning the country's education and training system.

This policy document clearly demonstrates the governments' commitment to improving the educational standards in the country. The introduction of the new Competence Based Curriculum (CBC) is an attempt to revamp education in Kenya with an aim to making it more relevant to the learners' needs and levels of understanding and by extension yield higher learning outcomes.

The county government of Murang'a also has not been left behind in the quest for better academic results in the county. Through its charity program (Murang'a County Initiative), the county has been sponsoring bright but needy students to pursue high school education. The charity initiative plans to support some of its beneficiaries to join American universities (KNA, January 14, 2019). In 2013 the governor of Murang'a County launched a mentorship initiative dubbed "Murang'a Child Can" which was aimed at stimulating change in the education sector. In the program, mentors (various county professionals) adopted schools of their choice and worked in conjunction with the county government to put in place measures to improve the education standards in their respective schools.

Due to the importance attached to education, many research studies have been conducted to try and establish some of the possible predictors of academic achievement. In Turkey, Ozcan (2021) conducted a study to determine factors affecting students' academic achievement according to teachers' opinion. The study found that the learners' academic achievement was affected by the family's education level, the school's physical conditions, school's management, it's environment as well as the teacher's professional competency and attitude.

Alfifi and Abed (2017) carried out a research at the College of education in Dammam University, Saudi Arabia, to examine factors contributing to academic performance of the students. The research outcome revealed that the academic achievement of learners was affected by their learning preferences, the number of daily study hours, their secondary school average as well as their level of proficiency in the English language. The females also outperformed their male counterparts.

A research study was carried out in Nigeria by Owoeye et al. (2022) to examine student factors and parental involvement on academic performance of senior secondary school students' qualifying examination in Osun state secondary schools. The results showed that the academic performance of the learners was affected by their study habits, their self-efficacy, parental care and also the teachers' influence.

In Meru County, Kenya Marigu and Maitho (2019) conducted a study to assess the factors influencing academic performance in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examination in Imenti Central sub-county, Meru County. The outcome revealed that the academic performance of the learners was influenced by their parents' socio-economic factors, students' discipline, drug and substance abuse as well as gender.

Njuguna, R. (2021) did a study in Makuyu sub county, Murang'a County to examine factors influencing academic

performance of public primary schools in Makuyu, Muranga South sub county. The research outcomes showed that the pupils' academic performance was influenced by a combination of school based, socio-economic as well as socio-cultural factors. School based factors include the use of mother tongue and substandard English and Kiswahili in the course of the learning process, ineffective monitoring of private studies, inadequacies in assignments and feedback and poorly maintained physical and material resources. The socio-economic factors included low parental/guardian education level, low income and pre-occupation with work by the parents. The socio-cultural factors included low regard for education by the community, early involvement in sexual immorality by the pupils and the entrenchment of the outlawed Mungiki sect.

Many other studies have been carried out focusing on various factors predicting academic achievement of learners examples of which are; students' achievement gaps (Hung et al. 2019), behavioral patterns (Kassaring et al. 2018), family background and structural factors (Lyu et al. 2019) and teachers' quality (Olawoyin & Isuku, 2019), but few researches have paid attention to how the combination of peer relationships and academic motivation can predict academic achievement of learners in secondary schools.

Among the factors that have been identified as predictors of academic performance of learners is peer relationships and. Peer group is defined by the Oxford Learners' Dictionary as age mates and also people having the same social status. Peer relationships therefore refers to the interactions between the learners themselves. According to Uzezi and Dega (2017) peer group has an important influence throughout one's life but it plays a more critical role during the developmental years of childhood and adolescence. This is the first social group that every child will seek to be accepted outside the home environment. They continue to state that the adolescents spend twice as much time with peers as with their parents or other adults and that they always tend to copy their peers in everything they do. With this in mind, understanding the implication that this interaction has on their academic achievement would be important. According to Uzezi and Dega, depending on the member being accepted or rejected by the peers and also depending on the quality of the friendship, the implication on individual members can either be positive or negative. Peer acceptance has been associated with improved academic performance while lack of peer acceptance (peer rejection) contributed to poor academic performance according to a study conducted by Zhang et al. (2017).

A peer group can serve as a good role model. For instance, if a learner is a part of a group of students who are ambitious and put forth significant effort to achieve high academic goals, they may feel under pressure to do the same to avoid being left out of the group, Ayademi et al. (2019). Conversely, a negative peer influence could result in poor academic outcomes since the group will spend a lot of time in non-academic activities which will undermine their performance in academics.

Wentzel (2017) states that relationships with peers are of central importance to children throughout childhood and adolescence. He goes on to explain that children who relate well with their peers tend to be more engaged in and even excel in academic tasks. The author adds that social competence with peers is consistently and positively related to academic accomplishments throughout the school-age years.

Several studies done in Spain, Philippines, Italy, Uganda and Nigeria have established a strong and positive relationship between peer influences and academic achievement of learners (Ayademi et al., 2019; Gallardo et al. 2016; Ntudde, 2021; Vangie et al., 2019 and Zucchetti et al., 2015). In Kenya, Wangeci (2017) established a positive correlation between academic performance of primary school pupils and peer influence. Based on the apparent dearth of research studies on peer relationships and how they relate to academic achievement of learners in Murang'a County, this study hoped to attempt to fill this gap.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Murang'a County has been having a challenge of low academic achievement for a number of years with the latest mean score of 4.1 and 4.3 in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education results of the year 2022 and 2023 respectively. Data acquired from the Ministry of Education website indicate that in the last two years, the county lagged behind the national mean scores which stood at 4.4 and 4.5 respectively. Further scrutiny revealed that 46% of the candidature who sat for examinations failed to attain the minimum grade which could have enabled them to proceed to the next level of training. This kind of performance becomes a great frustration to the parents and guardians who invest heavily in their children's education.

Many studies have been conducted in the county to find out the possible factors contributing to this poor performance, and among many others, the focus has been on classroom interactions on learners' academic achievement, the effects of parental alcoholism on the students' academic achievement, principals' collaborative practices on students' performance, head teachers' supervisory role on pupils' academic achievement and perceived psychosocial dynamics on the academic performance. Research has also revealed that peer relationships plays an important role in academic achievement of the learners as they encourage and motivate one another in learning in the learning process. Although extant literature has revealed a relationship between peer relationship and academic achievement, much of the available research has been conducted in other countries such as Spain, Philippines, Nigeria and Tanzania among others and little attention been paid on its role in Muranga County, Kenya.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to find out if there is a relationship between peer relationships and academic achievement of form three students in public secondary schools in Murang'a County

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study was to establish the relationship between peer relationships and academic

achievement of form three students in public secondary schools in Murang'a County.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by the Social Learning Theory (S.L.T.) by Bandura (1977). The theory, pioneered by Albert Bandura, addresses human interactions involved in learning and explains that people learn from one another through observation, imitation and modelling. According to the theory, learning takes place through observation (vicarious learning) and then "modelling" or acting out what has been observed. The theory posits that behavior and the environment affect each other and that people both influence and are influenced by the world around them (David, 2016).

In the light of this theory then, if a student interacts with peers who appreciate learning activities then they will engage in similar learning activities imitating or "modelling" the peers. This way they might work harder at learning thereby excelling in their academics. Setting objectives for academic success will be permitted and fostered by peers who have positive attitudes and behaviors toward education. Conversely, if the student interacts with others who have negative attitudes towards learning, they will most likely not prioritize learning and may end up performing dismally in their academics.

The application of this theory in a classroom situation can lead to the learners maximizing on their potential since they not only imitate each other but their teachers as well. A teacher who is a good role model to the learners e.g. by becoming open to them, acting responsibly and being passionate with his/her teaching will be imitated by the learners. The teacher too can put the students into groups that are of varied academic capabilities for group discussions. This way, the learners will learn from each other with the bright and motivated students in the group influencing the others to imitate them according to this theory.

The theory also identifies four principles necessary for learning to take place. These are: attention, retention, reproduction and motivation. Students cannot improve on their academic performance if they are not focused on their learning activities. However if they see something appealing or captivating in the course of their learning, they are more likely to pay attention to it. Retention has to do with the learners internalizing what they have learnt from what they paid attention to. In reproduction, the learners apply the knowledge and skills they have obtained during the learning process to solve their problems. The motivation aspect refers to the learners having the desire to continue learning especially after learning something new.

Some researchers have used this theory for example, Sika et al. (2016) examined the connection between girls' academic performance in mathematics and other disciplines in secondary schools in Gem Sub County, Kenya, using this theory. The results showed that peers influence academic performance in mathematics.

According to Social Learning Theory, learning takes place in a social setting through observation and then acting out what has been observed. In the course of learning therefore, learners influence one another in the process of their interaction. This theory was therefore relevant in helping to understand the nature of these interactions and how they impact the learners' performance.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

We identified many studies that have been conducted to investigate the relationship between peer relationship and academic achievement. Gallardo et al. (2016) conducted a study in Spain to assess how peer acceptance and friendships during adolescence impacted on the level of adolescents' academic performance. The sample size involved 447 students aged between 11-16 years. Of these learners, 51% were girls while 49% were boys. The learners' academic achievement data were collected during autumn semester (time 1) as well as during the spring semester of the same year (time 2). Regression analysis was conducted on the data obtained which indicated that peer acceptance was positively associated with academic achievement. This study was done in Europe whose culture is different from the Kenyan one. Spain, the country where the study was done has a different education system from Kenya. Supposing it was done in Africa and specifically in Kenya, would the results be the same? The aim of the current study, therefore was to establish how peer relationships and academic achievement correlate using an African, and specifically a Kenyan context.

In Philippines, Vangie et al. (2019) conducted a study to assess how students' peer pressure correlated with their academic achievement. The sample size comprised of 96 respondents from a senior high school in the city of Mandaue, Philippines. The students' mean age was 17 years with 52% being males and 48% being females. A descriptive research design was adopted by the study. The results indicated a positive correlation between the learners' academic achievement and their level of perceived peer influence. This study was undertaken within an urban setup with students who follow a different education system from the Kenyan one as well as different cultural background. The current study was undertaken in a rural setup using a Kenyan context to assess how peer influences relate with the learners' academic achievement.

In Nigeria, a research was conducted by Ayademi et al. (2019) in Babcock University, Ogun state which sought to establish how peer group correlated with academic achievement of the students. A sample size of 116 students aged between 16 and 24 years was used. Out of the sample size of 53(45.7%) were females while 63 (54.7%) were males. The sample size was arrived at using stratified random sampling method. Mixed methods, descriptive survey and ex-post facto designs were used to analyze the data. The results obtained showed that there was a significant positive relationship between peer group and academic performance of learners. While the study used learners at the university level of education, the current research will use students in secondary schools to establish the relationship that exists

between peer relationships and academic achievement. The study also focused on form three students who were younger in age as compared to university students.

Ntudde (2021) conducted a survey to investigate the influence of peer groups on the academic achievement of students at Makerere University. The sample size comprised of 100 third year students from five courses in the school of statistics and planning. The average age was 23 years of who 60% were males. 75% of the respondents resided in hostels and university halls of residence. Research outcomes revealed that peer groups did significantly affect the students' academic achievement; 77% were positively influenced while 13% were negatively affected. This research was carried out among students at the university level of education aged around 23 years while the current study was carried out among high school students whose age was much lower than the university students. Socially the students at the university have higher levels of autonomy in regards to who to interact with and when. The current study focused on high school students whose social interactions are more controlled, especially the heterosexual kind of relationships.

Wangeci (2017) did a correlational study in Kapsoya Zone within Eldoret municipality, Uasin Gishu County, hoping to assess how group discussions and pupils' performance in their academics in primary schools related. The study adopted the social development theory by Vygotsky with a sample size of 424 pupils aged between 12 to 16 years. Out of the sample size, 57% were boys while 43% were girls. This sample size drawn from 20 primary schools using stratified random sampling method. Teachers' and pupils' questionnaires were used to collect data with the pupils' scores being obtained from the zonal examinations record at each school. There was no substantial correlation between group conversation and academic achievement, according to the study. However, a weak but positive relationship was found between peer influence and academic performance. The study sample in this research involved primary school pupils while the current study focused on high school learners in examining the relationship that exists between the study variables i.e. peer relationships and academic achievement. This study also was done in a different county and focused on learners within an urban set up while the current study was carried out in Murang'a County and focused on learners within a rural set up.

III. METHODOLOGY

DESIGN

The study adopted a correlational research design. According to Lau et al. (2016) this design is used when the researcher wants to determine if a relationship exists between two or more variables and if so, to what degree the relationship exists. In the design, no attempt is made by the researcher to control the variables in the study and thus, in the present study, the researcher did not seek to identify causal relationship among the variables but sought to determine the relationship that existed between them. Correlational research design was the best research design for this study as it sought

to examine the correlation between peer relationships, academic motivation and academic achievement of form three students in Murang'a County.

MEASURES

The study adapted a Peer Relationship Scale developed by Terzian, A.M. (2012) measuring the importance of friendships for academic success. The tool is a sixteen item questionnaire scaled on a 5 point Likert scale. The response options for each item is as follows: 1 = Strongly Disagree (SD), 2 = Disagree (D), 3 = neither agree nor disagree (N), 4 = Agree (A) and 5 = Strongly Agree (SA). The questionnaire on peer relationships consists of positive and negative statements and hence reverse coding was done for all the negative statements to ensure that the scores for all the statements were positive. For each participant, the scores from every question was summed up. These scores ranged between 16 and 80. Higher scores indicated strong peer acceptance while lower scores indicated peer rejection. The original reliability was found to be 0.86 and after piloting the internal consistency was found to be 0. 87. The tool was free for use tool with proper citation, thus no permission was sought to use the tool.

A Proforma Summary of Students' Academic Results also was used to capture the students' grades from the end of term two 2023 examination. The researcher requested the teachers to avail the students' academic records for the said examination to facilitate the capturing of their respective grades guided by their admission numbers. These scores were converted into z scores by taking each score and subtracting the mean of the scores and then dividing it by the standard deviation. To get the T score the following formula was used: $T= (z \times 10) +50$ where the z score was multiplied by 10 and added to 50. This conversion was done to allow for better comparisons between the scores obtained by the different students.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

In this study the target population were all 2023 form three students in public secondary schools in Murang'a County. Form three secondary school students (N = 298) whose ages ranged from 13 to 18 years participated in the study. The participants consisted of more females (58.1%) than males (41.9%). Form three students were considered appropriate because they had an already defined direction, having selected their preferred subjects in readiness for KCSE examination. Having been in school for about three years it was hoped that they had formed a definite circle of peers who may have influenced their academic endeavors to a certain extent.

Before collecting data, research permit was sought from the Graduate School of Kenyatta University as well as authorization letter from National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Permission to collect data from the targeted schools was granted by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST) offices in Murang'a County. Permission was also sought from the principals of the various schools to be visited for data collection. Written informed consent was sought from the

participants before the actual data collection. Moreover, participants' confidentiality was assured. The questionnaires were printed, packed and labeled according to the various schools for ease of data collection. The questionnaires were filled by the participants in the presence of the researcher who collected the duly filled questionnaires at the end of the session. The researcher then requested the respective class teachers to assist in accessing the students' academic results for the end of term two 2023 examinations. The academic results for the respondents were then filled in the proforma summary of students' academic results.

IV. RESULTS

A preliminary descriptive analysis of peer relationship was done as presented in Table 1

Descriptive Statistics on Peer Relationship

	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Std. Deviation
My peers refuse to let me study with them	55.7	37.2	2.3	2.3	2.3	1.583	.845
My peers do not choose me as their study mate	47.7	35.2	14.8	0.0	2.3	1.718	.800
My peers exclude me from their sporting activities	27.2	27.5	17.8	17.1	10.4	2.560	1.327
I am not liked much by my peers	39.9	30.2	17.4	10.	2.3	2.047	1.090
My peers make fun of me when i give a wrong answer in class	35.9	37.6	9.7	12.1	4.7	2.120	1.162
I would like to have a lot more friends to study with	5.0	5.4	17.4	47.3	24.8	3.815	1.029
I am popular with others who are not my age	15.1	30.5	21.8	20.1	12.4	2.842	1.260
I am always doing academic activities with my friends	12.4	12.4	12.1	33.6	29.5	3.553	1.355
I wish that more people of my age liked me	5.4	27.5	37.9	17.1	12.1	3.030	1.071
I have a lot of friends in school	15.4	30.5	14.4	32.2	7.4	2.855	1.234
I find it hard to make friends in class	37.2	40.6	10.1	9.7	2.3	1.993	1.037
I help where my friends need me during academic group discussion	0.0	2.3	4.7	52.3	40.6	4.312	.671
I would stand up for my friends if another student was distracting them from their studies	5.4	4.7	9.7	41.9	38.3	4.030	1.074
I help close friends remain focused on their academics	2.3	2.3	2.3	52.7	40.3	4.261	.815
I congratulate my friends when they do well in their exams	0.0	0.0	7.7	54.7	37.6	4.298	.604
I encourage my friends to do their best in their exams	0.0	2.3	2.7	34.9	60.1	4.526	.667

Note: SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, N = neither agree nor disagree, A = agree and SA = strongly agree.

Table 1

From the findings the respondents agreed with a mean of 4.52 (SD=0.66) that they encourage their friends to do their best in their exams. They also agreed that they help where their friends needed them during academic group discussion, as shown by the mean of 4.32(SD=0.67). The respondents also agreed with a mean of 4.03 (1.07) that they would stand up for their friends if another student was distracting them from their studies. Further, they agreed that they congratulate their friends when they do well in their exams, as shown by the mean of 4.29 (SD=0.60). With a mean of 4.26(SD=0.8) the students agreed that they help their close friends remain focused on their academics. The students also agreed that they would like to have a lot more friends to study with, as shown by the mean of 3.81 (SD=1.02). With a mean of 3.55(SD=1.35), the students agreed that they always do academic activities with their friends. The findings imply that the respondents highly value supporting their friends academically, as evidenced by their willingness to encourage, assist, and stand up for them during academic pursuits. Additionally, the desire for more study companions and the tendency to engage in academic activities primarily with friends suggest the importance of peer relationships in shaping students' academic experiences and outcomes.

The participants were neutral on the statement indicated that they wished more people of their age liked them as shown by a mean of 3.03 (SD=1.07). According to Uzezi and Dega (2017) a peer group is the first social group that every child will seek to be accepted outside the home environment. In addition, the students were neutral on the statement indicating that they have a lot of friend in school as shown by a mean of 2.85(SD=1.23). According to Dechant (2011), friendship quality positively correlated with students' academic achievement. Further, the students were neutral on the statement indicating that they were popular with others who are not their age as shown by a mean of 2.84(SD=1.26). Also, the students were neutral on the statement indicating that their peers exclude them from their sporting activities as shown by a mean of 2.56 (SD=1.32). The findings suggest that the participants express a neutral stance regarding their desire for

more peer acceptance within their age group, the number of friends in school, and their popularity with individuals not their age. Additionally, the neutrality observed in statements regarding peer exclusion from sporting activities underscores the need for further exploration into the dynamics of peer relationships, as social acceptance and friendship quality are known to influence academic achievement.

With a mean of 2.12 (SD=1.16) the respondents disagreed with the statement indicating that their peers make fun of them when they give a wrong answer in class. Further, the students disagreed with the statement indicating that they are not liked by their peers, as shown by a mean of 2.04(SD=1.09). With a mean of 1.99 (SD=1.03) the students disagreed with the statement indicating that they find it hard to make friends in class. With a mean of 1.718 (SD=0.80), the students disagreed with the statement indicating that their peers do not choose them as their study mate. Also, the students strongly disagreed indicating that their peers refuse to let them study with them as shown by a mean of 1.58 (SD=0.84). The findings suggest that the respondents generally feel accepted and valued by their peers, as they disagreed with statements indicating ridicule for wrong answers, disliking by peers, difficulty in making friends, and exclusion from study groups. Additionally, the strong disagreement with peers refusing to study together implies a supportive and inclusive peer environment, which likely contributes positively to students' social and academic experiences.

The dependent variable in this study was academic achievement. In the study, 80 to 100 points represented grade A, 75 to79.99 points represented grade A-, 70 to 74.99 points represented grade B+, 65 to 69.99 points represented grade B, 60 to 64.99 points represented grade B-, 55 to 59.99 represented grade C+, 50 to 54.99 points represented grade C, 45 to 49.99 points represented grade C-, 40 to 44.99 points represented grade D+, 35 to 39.99 represented grade D, 30 to 34.99 points represented grade D- and 29.99 and below points represented grade E as shown in Table 2.

Academic Achievement in terms of Grades

Grades	Frequency	Percent
D	19	6.4
D+	46	15.4
C-	63	21.1
C	79	26.5
C+	55	18.5
B-	29	9.7
B	7	2.3
Total	298	100.0
Minimum		*38.00*
Maximum		*65.00*
Mean		*50.65*
Std. Deviation		*6.98*

Table 2

From the results, 26.5% of the respondents had grade C, 21.1% had grade C-, 18.5 had grade C+, 15.4% had grade D+, 9.7% had grade B-, 6.4% had grade D and 2.3% had grade B. The highest score was 65 points while the person who had the lowest number of points achieved 38 points giving a range of 27 points. The mean of 50.65 (*SD*=6.98) meant that majority of the participants had an average performance.

To establish if there was any significant relationship between peer relationships and academic achievement of students a null hypothesis was tested as shown in Table3.

Correlation Coefficients for Peer Relationships and Academic Achievement

		Academic Achievement	Peer Relationship
Academic Achievement	Pearson Correlation	1	.471**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	298	298

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3

From the results, there was a positive and significant relationship between peer relationships and academic achievement of the students (r=0.47, p-value=0.00). As such, the null hypothesis was rejected.

V. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

These findings agree with Gallardo et al. (2016) observation that peer acceptance was positively associated with academic achievement of learners in Spain. The findings also agree with Vangie et al. (2019) and Ayademi et al. (2019) whose studies in Philippines and Nigeria respectively confirmed that students' peer relationships were positively correlated to their academic achievement. This implies that irrespective of the study locale, peer relationships positively predict the academic achievement of learners. The study also agree with studies done in Makerere University, Uganda by Ntudde (2021) and in Eldoret municipality by Wangeci (2017) among primary schools pupils confirming that peer relationships positively predict academic achievement of learners irrespective of the level of education.

From the study results, peer relationships are seen to be positively correlated to academic performance of learners in Murang'a County. Positive peer relationships indeed have been found to contribute positively to academic performance of many students. This result may imply that there are other factors other than this variable that negatively contributes to poor academic performance in Murang'a County. In line with these findings, positive peer interactions need to be encouraged among the learners through the use of varied teaching methods that enhance peer interactions like cooperative learning and group discussions. This according to the research findings is likely to positively impact on individual student's resulting in improved academic performance.

VI. CONCLUSION

The current study objective was achieved. The study results revealed that there is a positive and significant relationship between peer relationships and academic achievement of form three students. The study found that the students encourage their friends to do their best in their exams and helped one another during academic group discussions. They also helped their close friends remain focused on their

academics and took time to congratulate their friends when they do well in their exams. It was therefore concluded that positive peer relations played a significant role in boosting the students' academic achievement.

This study has implications for School administrators and teachers. It's important to encourage peer relationships in a learning environment, hence, schools can develop programs and activities that encourage positive peer interactions and relationships, such as peer tutoring, group projects, and team-building activities. In addition, schools can offer academic support programs, such as tutoring and study groups, to help students improve their academic performance and build positive relationships with their peers.

This study however had some limitations; it was carried out among form three students in Murang'a County and therefore the results cannot be generalized to other counties without proper investigation. Secondly, the study relied on self-report questionnaire and some degree of subjectivity may not be ruled out in the results. Finally, correlational research design was used and so causation may not be inferred.

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