

A Correlational Study of Peer Social Support and Student Engagement Among Junior High School Students

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ABSTRACT: Student engagement is widely regarded as a key determinant of successful learning, yet preliminary observations at a state Islamic junior high school (Madrasah Tsanawiyah) in South Sumatra indicated that students' affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement had not yet developed optimally. One contextual factor thought to contribute to this pattern is peer social support, given that friendship relationships become increasingly important during early adolescence for meeting the psychological needs of belonging and relatedness. This study aimed to empirically examine the relationship between peer social support and student engagement among seventh- and eighth-grade students. A quantitative correlational design was employed, involving 205 students drawn from a population of 500 through simple random sampling based on the Isaac and Michael table at a 95% confidence level. Data were collected using two five-point Likert scales: a Student Engagement Scale developed from the affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement dimensions proposed by Lam et al. (2014), and a Peer Social Support Scale based on the appraisal, tangible, belonging, and self-esteem support dimensions proposed by Cohen and Wills (as cited in Schonfeld, 1991). Data were analyzed using simple linear regression with SPSS version 27. The results revealed a positive and highly significant relationship between peer social support and student engagement ($r = 0.329$; $R^2 = 0.108$; $p = 0.000$), with peer support accounting for 10.8% of the variance in engagement. These findings indicate that greater peer social support is associated with higher student engagement, although most of the variance in engagement is explained by factors beyond peer support alone.

KEYWORDS: peer social support, student engagement, junior high school students, early adolescence

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a central role in shaping competent and competitive human resources, as it enables individuals not only to acquire knowledge and skills but also to develop character and critical thinking. Classroom learning, however, is frequently accompanied by challenges such as limited student attention during lessons, low interest and motivation, academic pressure that undermines a comfortable learning atmosphere, and insufficient effort in understanding material and completing assignments. These challenges are shaped by both internal factors (motivation, interest, self-confidence, and students' psychological condition) and external factors (peer support, teacher support, classroom environment, and academic pressure), all of which are closely tied to the extent to which students are able to fulfill their role in the learning process (Bandura, 1986).

This condition cannot be separated from the developmental characteristics of junior high school students, who are in early adolescence, a transitional period between childhood and adulthood, marked by physical and psychosocial change driven by hormonal factors as well as social and peer pressures (Nasution et al., 2024). During this phase, individuals undergo rapid development in social cognition, including understanding others' perspectives (mentalizing), regulating emotion, and responding to peer influence, alongside the continued maturation of social-brain structures that persists into adulthood (Andrews et al., 2020). Adolescence has long been characterized as a period of storm and stress encompassing risk-taking behavior, mood disruption, and parent-adolescent conflict (Buchanan et al., 2023). Adolescents' capacity for emotion regulation is itself not yet fully optimal, because the prefrontal cortex, particularly the ventrolateral region responsible for cognitive control, continues to mature into young adulthood (McRae et al., 2012).

These biological, psychological, and social dynamics of adolescence are also reflected in how students engage in learning activities. Students who fulfill their learning obligations well attending to teachers' explanations, showing interest in the material, and demonstrating persistence and responsibility in completing tasks are more likely to achieve academic success, whereas less engaged students are at greater risk of struggling to understand the material (Finn & Rock, 1997). This overall involvement is what education scholars term student engagement, which Appleton et al. (2008) regard as a powerful antidote to academic failure and dropout.



Fredricks et al. (2004) define student engagement as encompassing how students act (behavioral), feel (emotional), and think (cognitive) at school, operationally reflected in classroom participation, emotional responses to learning activities, and the mental effort invested in processing information (Pino-James et al., 2019).

This pattern was also evident in the field. Preliminary observations conducted across three grade levels at a state Madrasah Tsanawiyah in Empat Lawang Regency, South Sumatra, found that the hallmarks of student engagement task completion, comfort within the school environment, and self-regulation in learning had not yet developed optimally, particularly regarding emotional attachment. An initial survey of 153 students reinforced this picture: only 30 students (19.6%) reported that they persisted in completing tasks on time even when the work felt difficult, while 132 students (86.3%) reported that they only studied when instructed by teachers or parents, without setting their own study schedule. These findings are consistent with de Carvalho and Veiga (2025), who documented a significant decline in student engagement across adolescence, as well as with Jamain et al. (2024) and Fadhilah and Mukhlis (2021), who highlighted the roles of learning motivation and the social environment including peer interaction in students' engagement and learning outcomes.

Fredricks et al. (2004) explain that student engagement is shaped by a range of contextual factors at the classroom level, including teacher support, peer support, classroom structure, autonomy support, and the nature of learning tasks. The present study specifically focuses on peer social support, given that adolescence brings a shift in social orientation from parents toward peers as part of fulfilling the psychological needs for belonging and esteem (Maslow, 1970), and because peer groups serve as an important context for integrating self and other perspectives during the transition toward independence (Crone & Fuligni, 2020). Consistent with this view, Christenson et al. (2012) argue that student engagement is not a fixed trait but an alterable state of being, strongly shaped by the capacity of schools, families, and peers to provide consistent expectations and support for the learning process.

Peer support itself is defined as the provision of emotional assistance, appraisal, and information by members of a social network who share similar characteristics (Dennis, as cited in Peterson et al., 2012), reflected in the willingness to offer space for sharing experiences, empathy, and help with academic tasks (Zimet et al., as cited in Nasywa, 2025). Prior studies have examined the relationship between social support and student engagement across various educational levels and cultural contexts, ranging from senior high school students (Mayanti et al., 2023) and Islamic senior high school students (Islami & Shofiah, 2023), to boarding-school students (Maryama et al., 2025), and university students in several countries using structural equation modelling (Junianto & Hidayah, 2023; Li, 2025; Zhang & Han, 2026) as well as qualitative approaches (Parmar et al., 2025). However, research that specifically examines the direct relationship between peer social support and student engagement among Madrasah Tsanawiyah students particularly seventh- and eighth-graders who are at an early stage of forming peer relationships, and in regions still underrepresented in the educational psychology literature such as Empat Lawang, South Sumatra remains very limited.

Based on this background, the present study aims to empirically examine the relationship between peer social support and student engagement among junior high school students. The hypotheses proposed are: H_a , there is a positive and significant relationship between peer social support and student engagement; and H_0 , there is no relationship between the two variables.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design and Setting

This study employed a quantitative approach with a correlational design (Sugiyono, 2013), aimed at examining the relationship between peer social support as the independent variable and student engagement as the dependent variable. The study was conducted at a state Madrasah Tsanawiyah in Empat Lawang Regency, South Sumatra, Indonesia, during July–August 2026.

Participants

The population comprised all seventh- and eighth-grade students, totaling 500 students. Sample size was determined using the Isaac and Michael table at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, yielding a sample of 205 respondents. Simple random sampling was used, whereby every member of the population had an equal chance of being selected. Prior to the main data collection, an instrument try-out was conducted with 295 students drawn from the remaining population not included in the research sample.

Instruments

Data were collected using two five-point Likert scales (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) comprising favorable and unfavorable items. The Student Engagement Scale was developed based on three dimensions from Lam et al. (2014): affective

engagement, behavioral engagement, and cognitive engagement, comprising 60 initial items (30 favorable and 30 unfavorable). The Peer Social Support Scale was developed based on four dimensions from Cohen and Wills (as cited in Schonfeld, 1991): appraisal/informational support, tangible/instrumental support, belonging support, and self-esteem support, also comprising 60 initial items.

Data Collection Procedure

The instrument try-out was conducted from 14 to 17 July 2026 online via Google Form with 295 students, using simple random sampling. The main data collection was conducted from 31 July to 3 August 2026 using paper-based questionnaires with 205 respondents, also using simple random sampling.

Data Analysis

Item validity was tested using item-total correlation coefficients, with a minimum acceptable criterion of > 0.30 (Azwar, 2012). Instrument reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. Prior to hypothesis testing, assumption tests were conducted, comprising a normality test (Kolmogorov-Smirnov) and a linearity test. Hypothesis testing was carried out using simple linear regression together with correlation analysis to determine the strength of the relationship between variables. All analyses were performed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 27 for Windows.

RESULTS

Instrument Validity and Reliability

Of the 60 items on the Student Engagement Scale, validity analysis identified 55 valid items with corrected item-total correlations ranging from 0.341 to 0.695, while 5 items were dropped. The scale demonstrated a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.953. Similarly, all 60 items on the Peer Social Support Scale were found to be valid, with corrected item-total correlations ranging from 0.431 to 0.753, and none were dropped. The scale demonstrated a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.973. Both instruments were considered reliable and suitable for data collection.

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics for both study variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables (Empirical Scores)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min Score	Max Score
Peer Social Support	179.58	10.97	153	207
Student Engagement	165.00	10.40	140	190

Based on score categorization ($X \geq \text{mean} = \text{high}$; $X < \text{mean} = \text{low}$), of the 205 students, 104 (50.7%) showed a high level of peer social support and 101 (49.3%) a low level. For student engagement, 110 students (53.7%) fell into the high category and 95 students (46.3%) into the low category, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Categorization of the Study Variables

Variable	Category	n	%
Peer Social Support	High	104	50.7
	Low	101	49.3
Student Engagement	High	110	53.7
	Low	95	46.3

Assumption Tests

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test showed that data for both variables were normally distributed, with a significance value of $p = 0.200$ (KS-Z = 0.051) for peer social support and $p = 0.200$ (KS-Z = 0.050) for student engagement, both exceeding 0.05. The linearity test indicated a linear relationship between the two variables, with $F = 23.806$ and $p = 0.000$ ($p < 0.05$), further supported by a Deviation from Linearity significance value of 0.728 ($p > 0.05$).

Hypothesis Testing

Simple linear regression analysis revealed a positive and highly significant relationship between peer social support and student engagement, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Simple Linear Regression Results

Relationship	r	R Square	p	Remarks
Peer Social Support Student Engagement	0.329	0.108	0.000	very significant

The significance value of $p = 0.000$ ($p < 0.01$) indicates that the relationship is statistically very significant, so the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_a) was accepted. The coefficient of determination (R Square) of 0.108 indicates that peer social support accounts for 10.8% of the variance in student engagement, while the remaining 89.2% is explained by other factors outside the scope of this study. Based on these results, it can be concluded that as peer social support increases, student engagement also tends to increase, and vice versa.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that peer social support has a highly significant relationship with student engagement among junior high school students ($p = 0.000$), meaning that greater peer support received by students is associated with higher engagement in the learning process, and vice versa. The statistical significance obtained from a relatively large sample ($N = 205$) indicates that this relationship is not a matter of chance but a consistent and reliable pattern.

This finding reinforces Fredricks et al.'s (2004) view of peers as one of the important components of the classroom context that shapes student engagement, whereby peer acceptance and support are linked to students' satisfaction with school as part of emotional engagement, and to academic effort as part of behavioral engagement. The finding also aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that individuals have a basic psychological need to feel connected to and accepted by their social environment (relatedness). The appraisal, instrumental, belonging, and self-esteem support provided by peers (Cohen & Wills, 1991) essentially function as mechanisms that help fulfill this need for relatedness, thereby promoting emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement.

More specifically, belonging and appraisal support from peers tend to satisfy students' emotional needs, thereby fostering affective engagement, while instrumental support such as help with schoolwork contributes to behavioral engagement. Self-esteem support, meanwhile, may strengthen students' confidence in processing information more deeply, which relates to cognitive engagement. Peer social support thus appears to operate through distinct pathways that correspond to different dimensions of student engagement.

Compared with previous research, the direction of the relationship found here is consistent with Mayanti et al. (2023), who also found a significant contribution of peer social support to student engagement among senior high school students. The 10.8% contribution obtained in this study is also broadly consistent with Islami and Shofiah (2023), who found that peer social support alone accounted for roughly 11% of student engagement when analyzed together with learning motivation. By comparison, Akmal et al. (2022) reported a larger contribution of social support (25.9%) to student engagement among vocational school students; however, that study combined general social support with self-efficacy as predictors, which naturally produces a larger effect size. Meanwhile, Junianto and Hidayah (2023) found that peer support did not directly affect student engagement but operated entirely through the mediation of achievement motivation, reinforcing the notion that much of peer support's influence on engagement may be indirect.

A similar pattern emerges in several international studies. Li (2025) found that peer support functioned as a full mediator between collaborative learning and student engagement rather than as a standalone direct predictor, while Ulmanen et al. (2024) showed that



peer support was related to students' life satisfaction indirectly, through study engagement and a sense of relatedness. Chen et al. (2023) likewise found that social support influenced university students' academic engagement both directly and through the mediation of life satisfaction and academic motivation. Taken together, these findings consistently confirm that the direct effect of peer support on student engagement tends to be modest when mediating variables are not accounted for, a pattern also observed in the present study.

The 89.2% of variance in student engagement not explained by peer social support is likely attributable to other factors, both internal, such as learning motivation and self-efficacy, and external, such as teachers' emotional support, challenging and authentic task design, and a supportive classroom climate (Fredricks et al., 2004). The substantial proportion of unexplained variance underscores that improving student engagement requires a comprehensive approach rather than reliance on strengthening peer relationships alone. In addition, the institutional context of the madrasah, with its distinctive religious and cultural values, warrants consideration, as the dynamics of peer relationships in such settings may differ from those in general schools.

This study has several limitations. First, it examined only a single predictor without accounting for other theoretically relevant variables such as learning motivation or teacher support. Second, the correlational design does not permit causal inference. Third, data were collected using self-report scales, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Fourth, the study was conducted at a single madrasah with a specific population, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other populations with different demographic and cultural characteristics.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that there is a highly significant relationship between peer social support and student engagement among junior high school students ($R^2 = 0.108$; $p = 0.000$), such that the alternative hypothesis (H_a) is accepted. Peer social support accounts for 10.8% of the variance in student engagement, while the remaining 89.2% is explained by other factors beyond the scope of this study, such as learning motivation, self-efficacy, and teacher support. These findings confirm that peer support plays an important, though not exclusive, role in fostering students' affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement.

Practically, schools are encouraged to develop peer mentoring programs for incoming students and peer counseling activities to strengthen supportive friendships, without neglecting other contributing factors such as the quality of teacher-student interaction and a participatory classroom climate. Future research is recommended to incorporate mediating or moderating variables, adopt longitudinal designs, and broaden the scope of participants across multiple schools to enhance the generalizability of findings.

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