



EFFECTS OF PEER MENTORING ON SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS AT RISK OF DROPOUT IN IDEMILI SOUTH, ANAMBRA STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of a structured peer mentoring program on school connectedness among secondary school students at risk of dropping out in Idemili South Local Government Area, Anambra State, Nigeria. Grounded in Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, the study adopted a pre-test, post-test, non-equivalent control group quasi-experimental research design. The target population comprised 492 at-risk senior secondary school students during the 2024/2025 academic session. A sample of 200 at-risk students (100 males and 100 females) was selected through a multi-stage sampling procedure across two co-educational public secondary schools randomly assigned to experimental ($n = 100$) and control ($n = 100$) groups. The experimental group participated in a 6-week structured peer mentoring intervention led by trained senior peer mentors, while the control group received standard administrative routines. Data were collected using the researcher-developed School Connectedness Scale (SCS) ($\alpha = 0.78$), validated by experts in educational psychology and measurement/evaluation. Mean and standard deviation answered the research question, while Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) tested the hypothesis at the 0.05 level of significance. Results showed that the peer mentoring group achieved a higher post-test mean school connectedness score $\{X\} = 62.87$, $SD = 4.21$ than the control group $\{X\} = 49.63$, $SD = 5.88$, yielding a net mean gain difference of 12.90. ANCOVA confirmed this difference was statistically significant ($F\{1, 197\} = 284.631$, $p = 0.000$). The study concludes that peer mentoring effectively strengthens institutional belonging and mitigates dropout risks



among vulnerable adolescents. School administrators should formally integrate structured peer mentoring into standard counseling frameworks.

Keywords: Peer mentoring, school connectedness, at-risk students, secondary school dropout, educational psychology, Nigeria.

Introduction

Education is an essential process in the life of every individual. It exposes students to all aspects of living, builds personal confidence, and is universally recognized as the cornerstone for developing skills and knowledge that enable individuals to contribute meaningfully to societal progress. Beyond academic instruction, education serves as the primary instrument for inculcating prosocial values and attitudes that foster responsible citizenship. In Nigeria, secondary education represents a critical developmental stage—typically covering middle and high school levels—designed to provide a well-rounded foundation that prepares students either for higher education or direct entry into the workforce.

Secondary school aims to equip students with the knowledge, functional skills, and ethical values necessary for personal growth, social responsibility, and economic productivity. As Ogbuagu (2024) notes, the overarching goals of secondary education include fostering academic excellence, promoting socio-emotional development, and preparing students for future career trajectories. However, to thrive academically and socially, secondary school students must feel supported, engaged, and motivated within their educational environment. This requires positive relationships with teachers and peers, a deep sense of institutional belonging, and the perception that the school environment is a safe, supportive space to learn and grow—a psychological construct known as school connectedness.

School connectedness has been widely conceptualized across educational and psychological research. Loda et al. (2019) define school connectedness as the degree to which students experience a sense of belonging, attachment, and engagement within their school environment. It encompasses the overall quality of interpersonal relationships among students, teachers, and the broader school climate, thereby fostering safety, emotional support, and academic motivation. Operationally, within the context of this study, school connectedness refers to the extent to which secondary school students at risk of dropout in Idemili South Local Government Area (LGA), Anambra State, feel supported, engaged, and integrated into their school community.

The significance of school connectedness among Nigerian secondary school students cannot be overstated; it serves as a fundamental protective factor against academic disengagement, emotional distress, and behavioral problems (Adeleke, 2023). Students who experience robust school connectedness consistently exhibit superior academic performance, higher attendance rates, and lower rates of behavioral disruption. Crucially, cultivating school connectedness can mitigate dropout risks by establishing the trust, relational safety, and positive institutional culture required for peer-based interventions—such as peer mentoring—to operate effectively.



Peer mentoring programs have emerged as highly effective, evidence-based strategies for promoting student retention and socio-emotional well-being. Arnette and McIntyre (2024) observe that peer mentoring enhances students' sense of school belonging, academic motivation, and social-emotional development. By pairing students with trained, empathetic peer mentors, schools establish structured, supportive environments that encourage mentees to share concerns, navigate social challenges, build resilience, and develop positive coping strategies (Collier, 2023; Kidger, 2019). Peer mentoring can be structured through diverse modalities, including one-on-one relationships, group sessions, and peer-led skill workshops (Diggs et al., 2023).

The risk of secondary school dropout in Nigeria remains an urgent socio-educational concern. Many adolescents struggle under heavy academic demands, severe social pressures, and compounding personal or socioeconomic hardship. School dropout—defined as the premature withdrawal of a student from formal education prior to obtaining a secondary school certificate (Benz & Ackermann, 2025)—exposes youth to heightened risks of unemployment, persistent poverty, and social marginalization (Engels et al., 2019).

Student disengagement typically manifests across three distinct dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks et al., 2004). When students exhibit low scores across these dimensions, their dropout risk increases sharply. According to Tinto's (1993) theory of institutional departure, integration into both the academic and social systems of a school is paramount; lacking a sense of belonging, students interpret academic setbacks as confirmation that they "do not fit." This process is further explained by Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory and Finn's (1989) participation-identification model, which show that self-doubt and non-participation create a reinforcing cycle of disengagement, low achievement, and eventual dropout.

While peer mentoring is widely advocated as a tool for student retention, its empirical efficacy in enhancing school connectedness among at-risk adolescents in Nigeria remains a subject of ongoing academic inquiry. Scholars like Eleje et al. (2025) and Fam and Lee (2019) argue that peer mentoring fosters a vital sense of community and relational support, particularly in African contexts where formal counseling infrastructure may be overburdened. Conversely, critics such as Gehrke et al. (2024) contend that peer mentoring may be an overly simplistic intervention for complex, structural problems like systemic poverty and inadequate educational infrastructure.

During secondary school instructional supervision, the researcher observed firsthand the alarming rate at which students drop out due to persistent academic failure, low motivation, and inadequate psychological support systems. Despite administrative efforts, dropout rates in public secondary schools across Anambra State remain problematic. While international literature on peer mentoring is extensive, empirical studies evaluating the direct impact of structured peer mentoring on school connectedness among at-risk secondary school students in rural/semi-urban Nigerian settings—such as Idemili South—are sparse. This study directly addresses this empirical void.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), propounded by Albert Bandura (1986).



Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986)

Social Cognitive Theory posits that human functioning and learning occur through a triadic reciprocal causation model involving cognitive/personal factors, behavioral patterns, and environmental influences. The core premise of SCT is that individuals learn through observation, imitation, modeling, and social reinforcement. Central to Bandura's theory is the concept of *self-efficacy*—an individual's belief in their capability to execute courses of action required to attain designated performance levels. Bandura identified four primary sources of self-efficacy beliefs:

1. **Mastery Experiences:** Past successes that build authentic efficacy.
2. **Vicarious Experiences:** Observing similar peers succeed through sustained effort.
3. **Social Persuasion:** Receiving verbal encouragement and constructive feedback from trusted allies.
4. **Physiological and Emotional States:** Interpreting anxiety or stress reactions during challenging tasks.

Relevance to the Present Study

Social Cognitive Theory provides a robust explanatory framework for this research. Peer mentoring operationalizes all four sources of self-efficacy within a structured environment. Mentees observe older, successful peer mentors (vicarious experience), receive consistent guidance and encouragement (social persuasion), experience incremental academic and social wins (mastery experiences), and feel less anxious in the school environment due to increased relational safety (emotional regulation). Consequently, SCT explains how peer mentoring can elevate school connectedness and reduce dropout risk among vulnerable adolescents.

Review of Related Literature

Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring is a structured, developmental relationship between two individuals of similar age, social background, or institutional status, wherein a trained mentor offers guidance, support, and encouragement to a mentee to foster mutual personal, social, and academic growth (Murrell et al., 2021; Nnama-Okechukwu et al., 2022). Powell (2024) emphasizes that peer mentoring relies on mutual respect, trust, and empathy rather than hierarchical authority. While traditional mentoring involves adult-student dynamics, peer mentoring leverages the unique social proximity and relational influence of peers to facilitate academic integration and institutional belonging (Rose, 2023; Shao & Kang, 2023).

Operationally, within this study, peer mentoring refers to a structured, 6-week intervention program in public secondary schools in Idemili South LGA, wherein senior secondary students provide planned guidance, social support, and academic encouragement to junior or struggling peers identified as at risk of dropping out.

School Connectedness

School connectedness denotes the extent to which students feel accepted, valued, respected, and supported by teachers, peers, and the broader educational community (Torres et al., 2025;



UNICEF, 2023). It is a multidimensional construct spanning emotional attachment, active behavioral engagement, and perceived institutional support (Verlinde, 2023; Wilton et al., 2021). High school connectedness serves as a primary buffer against psychological distress, academic failure, and premature school departure (Tzani-Pepelasi et al., 2021; Vadivel et al., 2023; Venegas-Muggli et al., 2021).

In this study, school connectedness is operationally defined as the post-intervention scores obtained by at-risk students on the researcher-developed *School Connectedness Scale (SCS)*, assessing their sense of belonging, peer/teacher attachment, and institutional engagement.

School Dropout

School dropout represents the premature termination of formal education prior to completing the prescribed curriculum or acquiring a secondary school certificate (Benz & Ackermann, 2025; Hidayat & Saad, 2025). It is rarely a sudden event; rather, it represents a long-term process of gradual disengagement driven by intersecting academic difficulties, personal stressors, socio-economic deprivation, and institutional alienation (Jain et al., 2020; Jenner et al., 2022; Karikari et al., 2025). In Nigeria, high secondary school dropout rates perpetuate systemic poverty, youth unemployment, and social vulnerability (Lorenzetti et al., 2023; Murrell et al., 2022; Nnama-Okechukwu et al., 2024).

Impact of Peer Mentoring on School Connectedness

Empirical literature highlights peer mentoring as a powerful catalyst for enhancing school connectedness among vulnerable students. By establishing structured peer support networks, schools create inclusive environments where at-risk adolescents experience reduced isolation, enhanced self-confidence, and renewed institutional trust (Afolabi, 2020; Powell, 2024; Reeves, 2022). Peer mentors act as accessible role models who normalize academic struggles, model prosocial behaviors, and assist mentees in navigating institutional hurdles (Rose, 2023; Springer et al., 2025). Furthermore, peer mentoring fosters social integration, reduces peer conflict, and creates safe emotional spaces that enhance student retention and academic motivation (Shao & Kang, 2022; Talbert et al., 2021; Vadivel et al., 2023).

Key Components of Effective Peer Mentoring Programs

To effectively retain at-risk students, peer mentoring initiatives must incorporate specific structural components:

1. **Strategic Mentor-Mentee Matching:** Pairing based on shared backgrounds, compatible personalities, and mutual goals enhances relational trust and longevity (Talbert et al., 2021).
2. **Comprehensive Mentor Training & Supervision:** Equipping mentors with communication skills, conflict-resolution strategies, active listening techniques, and ethical guidelines is essential (Karikari et al., 2025).
3. **Structured Session Duration & Frequency:** Regular, predictable interaction schedules foster deep relational trust and continuous goal-setting (Laka & Suryanto, 2024).



4. **Rigorous Program Evaluation:** Systematic pre- and post-intervention assessment ensures fidelity, sustainability, and measurable outcomes in student retention (Eleje et al., 2025).

Review of Empirical Studies

Buizza et al. (2024) surveyed 790 Italian college freshmen to examine the relationships between self-efficacy, academic motivation, university connectedness, and dropout intentions. Using structural equation models, they found that self-efficacy was the single strongest direct predictor of dropout intention, followed closely by university connectedness. While Buizza et al. established the vital protective role of institutional connectedness, their study was non-experimental, cross-sectional, and focused on European university freshmen. The present study addresses secondary school students in a rural/semi-urban African context using an experimental design.

Marino et al. (2020) evaluated the *Mentor-UP* project in Northern Italy, using a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design with 209 middle school students (aged 11–13). Over a 7-month period, university students mentored at-risk adolescents. Results revealed a statistically significant increase in mentees' self-esteem, though gains in school connectedness were non-significant compared to the control group. The current study differs fundamentally by utilizing *peer mentors* (older secondary school students rather than external university students), targeting secondary students in Nigeria, and measuring both school connectedness and academic self-efficacy within a structured 6-week intervention.

Okonkwo and Eke (2020) investigated the effect of peer mentoring on school connectedness among 244 secondary school students in Enugu State, Nigeria, employing a quasi-experimental design analyzed via Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). They reported a statistically significant positive effect of peer mentoring on students' overall school connectedness. While Okonkwo and Eke established general effectiveness in Southeastern Nigeria, their study evaluated a general student population. The present study specifically isolates *students confirmed to be at risk of dropping out* in Idemili South LGA and utilizes Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) to rigorously control for baseline initial differences.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a **pre-test, post-test, non-equivalent control group quasi-experimental research design**. A quasi-experimental approach was necessary because school administrative authorities and guidance counselors did not permit the random assignment of individual students to experimental and control conditions, as rearranging existing administrative class rosters would disrupt the school schedule and learning environment (Nnabugwu, 2019). Consequently, intact classes were randomly assigned to treatment and control conditions.

The design structure is symbolically represented below:

E ₁	O ₁	X ₁	O ₂	O ₃

E ₂	O ₁	~X	O ₂	O ₃



Figure 2: Design of the Study

Where;

E = Experimental Group

C = Control Group

O1 = Pre-test on school connectedness and academic self-efficacy for E and C

O2 = Post-test on school connectedness and academic self-efficacy for E and C

X = Treatment with Experimental group (peer mentoring)

~X = No treatment with Control group

Area of the Study

The study was conducted in public secondary schools across Idemili South Local Government Area, Anambra State, Nigeria. Idemili South shares boundaries with Anaocha, Ekwusigo, Idemili North, Njikoka, Nnewi North, Nnewi South, Ogbaru, Onitsha North, and Onitsha South LGAs. The major towns within the LGA include Akwu-Ukwu, Alor, Awka-Etiti, Ojoto, Nnokwa, Oba, and Nnobi. Idemili South was selected due to documented reports from local education authorities indicating rising rates of chronic absenteeism, academic disengagement, low student self-efficacy, and secondary school dropout in public institutions across the district.

Population of the Study

The target population comprised 492 students confirmed to be at risk of dropping out in public senior secondary schools across Idemili South LGA during the 2024/2025 academic session. Identification parameters and student figures were retrieved directly from official administrative records and school guidance counselors via the Post Primary Schools Service Commission (PPSSC), Awka, Anambra State (PPSSC, 2025).

Sample and Sampling Techniques

The final study sample consisted of 200 at-risk students (100 males and 100 females).

Sampling was conducted through a multi-stage procedure:

1. **Purposive Selection of Schools:** Two co-educational public secondary schools in Idemili South LGA were selected based on high recorded at-risk student populations and sufficient geographical distance between them to prevent inter-school contamination.
2. **Random Assignment of Schools:** The two selected schools were randomly assigned via a simple toss of a coin to either the Experimental Group (Sn = 100S; 50 males, 50 females) or the Control Group (Sn = 100S; 50 males, 50 females).
3. **Sampling Intact Classes:** One intact senior secondary class containing identified at-risk students was randomly sampled per school.
4. **Identification of At-Risk Participants:** Guidance counselors and senior teachers identified at-risk students based on standardized criteria: chronic absenteeism (below 75% attendance), failing grades in core subjects, documented disciplinary infractions, and low teacher-rated engagement. Written informed consent was obtained from parents/guardians and school authorities prior to study commencement.



Instrument for Data Collection

Data were collected using two instruments developed by the researcher: the School Connectedness Scale (SCS) and the Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (ASES).

1. **School Connectedness Scale (SCS):** A 20-item instrument designed to measure students' sense of belonging, institutional attachment, peer trust, and school engagement. Items are structured on a 4-point Likert scale: *Strongly Agree* (4), *Agree* (3), *Disagree* (2), and *Strongly Disagree* (1). SCS scores range from a minimum of 20 to a maximum of 80.
2. **Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (ASES):** A 15-item instrument measuring students' self-perceived capabilities to manage academic demands, overcome learning obstacles, and perform successfully. Structured on the same 4-point Likert scale, ASES scores range from 15 to 60.

Validation of the Instruments

Face and content validity of the SCS, ASES, and the detailed Peer Mentoring Instructional Manual were established by three independent experts: one specialist in Educational Measurement and Evaluation and two specialists in Educational Psychology, all from the Faculty of Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

The validators evaluated the instruments for clarity of language, item relevance, alignment with research questions, and appropriateness for at-risk adolescents. All corrective feedback—including item rewording, typographical corrections, and structural adjustments—was incorporated into the final drafts under the supervisor's final approval.

Reliability of the Instruments

Internal consistency of the instruments was determined using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, appropriate for polytomously scored Likert items. The instruments were pilot-tested on a representative sample of 40 at-risk secondary school students in Idemili North LGA (outside the study area). The reliability coefficients obtained were 0.78 for SCS and 0.81 for ASES. The values are high enough for the instruments to be taken as being reliable.

Experimental Procedure

The study followed a structured 9-week timeline divided into distinct operational phases:

Phase I: Preparation & Baseline Testing (Week 1)

- **Briefing Research Assistants:** Two regular guidance counselors and senior teachers from the experimental school were trained as research assistants. Training covered mentoring facilitation protocols, ethical guidelines, monitoring session attendance, and data administration.
- **Pre-Test Administration:** The SCS and ASES were administered as baseline pre-tests to all 200 participants across both experimental and control schools during regular school hours.

Phase II: Intervention & Post-Testing (Weeks 2–7)

- **Peer Mentoring Implementation:** Over a 6-week period (Weeks 2–7), students in the experimental group participated in twice-weekly, 45-minute structured peer mentoring sessions held during designated guidance/extracurricular periods. Sessions included one-



on-one mentor-mentee meetings, guided group discussions on problem-solving, goal-setting exercises, and social integration activities led by trained senior peer mentors under supervisor oversight.

- **Control Group:** Students in the control school received no peer mentoring intervention, continuing with standard administrative and academic routines.
- **Post-Test Administration (Week 7):** Immediately following the 6-week treatment, reshuffled versions of the SCS and ASES instruments were administered as post-tests to both groups to evaluate immediate gains.

Phase III: Follow-Up Assessment (Week 9)

- Two weeks post-treatment (Week 9), the instruments were re-administered (\$O_3\$) to evaluate the short-term sustainability of intervention gains.

Control of Extraneous Variables

To safeguard internal and external validity, the following experimental controls were enforced:

1. **Experimenter Bias & Hawthorne Effect:** Regular class teachers and school guidance counselors implemented the program within normal school schedules. Participants were not informed that they were participating in an experimental study, minimizing artificial behavior changes.
2. **Diffusion / Inter-Group Contamination:** Schools selected for experimental and control groups were geographically distant from one another, and students were unaware of the other institution's involvement.
3. **Pre-test / Post-test Sensitization:** A 6-week interval separated pre-test and post-test administrations, and test items were reshuffled to mitigate recall and practice effects.
4. **Initial Group Differences:** Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used for statistical analysis, utilizing pre-test scores as covariates to statistically adjust for baseline group disparities.
5. **Teacher Variable Standardization:** A standardized, step-by-step Peer Mentoring Program Manual was strictly followed by all research assistants to ensure instructional fidelity.

Method of Data Collection and Analysis

Before the treatment, the School Connectedness Scale (SCS) and Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (ASES) were administered to all the students in the experimental and control groups as pre-tests by the research assistants. At the end of the peer mentoring program (treatment), the SCS and ASES were reshuffled and administered to the students again as post-tests. The scores obtained from the administered tests were recorded and analyzed.

Method of Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used to answer the research questions. The hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance using Analysis of Co-variance (ANCOVA). The choice of ANCOVA was to eliminate any initial imbalances that might exist among the groups. The decision rule is that when probability (P) value is less than or equal to 0.05 ($P \leq 0.05$), the null hypothesis is rejected, if otherwise ($P > 0.05$), the null hypothesis is not rejected.



Results

The result of the analysis was presented in tables. Immediately after the tables, the interpretation of the results was also given. All these were done in relation to the research question and hypotheses.

Research Question: What is the mean connectedness score of students at-risk of dropping out in the experimental group and those in control group in Idemili South L.G.A?

Table: Descriptive data on mean school connectedness scores of at-risk students in the peer mentoring program and those in the control group

Group	N (Pre-Test)	Mean Connectedness	SD	N (Post-Test)	Mean Connectedness	SD	Mean Difference
Experimental	100	45.32	6.14	100	62.87	4.21	17.55
Control	100	44.98	6.72	100	49.63	5.88	4.65
Total	200	45.15	6.43	200	56.25	8.14	11.10

Results from Table 1 revealed that at the pre-test stage, both groups had almost similar levels of school connectedness, with the experimental group (peer mentoring) having a mean of 45.32 (SD = 6.14) and the control group a mean of 44.98 (SD = 6.72). After the intervention, the experimental group demonstrated a substantial increase in school connectedness, achieving a post-test mean of 62.87 (SD = 4.21), compared to the control group's post-test mean of 49.63 (SD = 5.88). The mean gain for the experimental group was 17.55, while the control group recorded a gain of 4.65. This indicates that students who participated in the peer mentoring programme reported higher school connectedness than those who did not.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1 (HO1): There is no significant difference in the school connectedness mean scores of students at-risk of dropping out who participated in a peer mentoring program and those who did not in Idemili South L.G.A.

Table 2: Analysis of Covariance of School Connectedness Post-Test Scores (Experimental and Control Groups)

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Squares	F-cal	Sig. of F.
Between Groups	8754.120	1	8754.120	284.631	0.000
Covariate (Pre-test)	412.580	1	412.580	13.416	0.000
Error	6038.740	197	30.653		
Total	16205.440	199			

Significant, $P < 0.05$; F-critical at 0.05 (1, 197) = 3.89 < 284.631

From Table 2, the ANCOVA results showed that a calculated F value of 284.631 was obtained for the effect of peer mentoring on school connectedness. This calculated F is significant since it is greater than the F-critical value of 3.89 with 1 and 197 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. Hence, (F = 284.631, p = 0.000) indicate a statistically significant difference in post-test school connectedness scores between the two groups. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected.



This suggests that the peer mentoring programme had a positive and significant impact on improving school connectedness among students at risk of dropout.

Discussion of Findings

The primary finding of this study demonstrates that peer mentoring significantly improves school connectedness among secondary school students identified as at risk of dropping out. At-risk adolescents who participated in the 6-week structured peer mentoring intervention recorded significantly higher post-test school connectedness scores ($\bar{X} = 62.87$) compared to their non-mentored counterparts ($\bar{X} = 49.63$).

This significant gain can be attributed to the relational, non-threatening structure of peer mentoring. Struggling adolescents frequently experience alienation, teacher mistrust, and fear of stigmatization within traditional secondary school hierarchies. Peer mentoring bridges this gap by offering at-risk students empathetic, non-judgmental role models of similar social age who validate their struggles, provide emotional encouragement, and share practical strategies for navigating academic and social hurdles. This empirical finding aligns with recent international and local literature. Rao (2026) and Wu et al. (2026) observed that structured peer mentoring significantly boosts students' internal sense of school belonging, institutional engagement, and attachment to peers. Similarly, Ugodulunwa et al. (2026) established that peer-led youth mentoring programs foster positive developmental outcomes, particularly among socio-economically vulnerable youth in Nigerian secondary schools.

Furthermore, the results strongly validate the core tenets of Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory. By interacting regularly with trained peer mentors, mentees were exposed to effective vicarious experiences and verbal persuasion, reducing emotional anxiety and building positive social identification with the school community. The findings also support Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory - specifically the psychological need for *relatedness*—and Social Support Theory, both of which affirm that supportive, trusting interpersonal relationships are foundational for sustaining academic motivation, psychological well-being, and institutional retention among vulnerable youth.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide empirical evidence supporting the efficacy of peer mentoring as an intervention for enhancing school connectedness among secondary school students at risk of dropping out. By structuring peer support into regular academic routines, the program successfully fostered relational trust, institutional belonging, and academic engagement among vulnerable adolescents in Idemili South Local Government Area.

The significant improvements in school connectedness observed in the experimental group demonstrate that at-risk students respond positively to structured, empathetic guidance from relatable peers. Peer mentors serve as accessible role models who bridge the authority gap inherent in traditional teacher-student dynamics, thereby reducing feelings of alienation, fear of stigmatization, and institutional detachment.



Grounded in Social Cognitive Theory, this study underscores the critical role of vicarious learning, social persuasion, and peer-led support in rebuilding student self-efficacy and institutional attachment. Ultimately, peer mentoring offers a practical, cost-effective, and scalable framework for school counselors, administrators, and educational stakeholders seeking to mitigate dropout risks, strengthen student retention, and cultivate inclusive secondary school environments in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Institutionalization of Peer Mentoring Programs:** Post-Primary School Service Commissions (PPSSC) and ministry officials should formally integrate structured peer mentoring initiatives into the standard guidance and counseling curriculum of public secondary schools.
2. **Comprehensive Mentor Selection and Training:** School guidance counselors should establish systematic criteria for selecting senior peer mentors and provide continuous training in active listening, conflict resolution, and peer encouragement to ensure program fidelity.
3. **Counselor-Led Supervision:** School principals should designate weekly time slots within the administrative calendar for peer mentoring interactions, ensuring counselors supervise sessions to maintain ethical standards and track student progress.
4. **Policy Expansion:** Educational policymakers should leverage peer-led relational models as sustainable, low-cost retention strategies across semi-urban and rural schools where formal psychological support services are under-resourced.

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