

The Role of Peers in Students' Academic Achievement: A Qualitative Study from an Educational Psychology Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the role of peers on students' academic achievement from an educational psychology perspective using a qualitative, descriptive phenomenological approach. The study was conducted at the State Islamic University of Palangka Raya with active student participants selected purposively based on high, medium, and low academic achievement categories. The selection of participants was carried out to obtain a variety of experiences regarding the influence of peer interactions on the learning process in the university environment. Data were collected through an initial questionnaire and in-depth interviews to explore students' experiences, perceptions, and the dynamics of social relationships within academic friendship groups. Data validity was carried out through source triangulation, technical triangulation, and member checking. Data analysis used the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results showed that peers have a significant influence on students' academic achievement. Positive influences are seen through academic support, increased learning motivation, information exchange, and learning behavior modeling that helps students understand lecture material and increase learning engagement. Interactions in small groups or circle study groups also encourage self-confidence and academic cooperation. However, this study found negative influences in the form of learning distractions, procrastination, imbalanced contributions within groups, and social pressure that can reduce students' focus on learning. These findings indicate that the role of peers is dynamic and contextual, necessitating appropriate management of social interactions through academic mentoring and peer mentoring programs to optimize the positive impact on student academic achievement.

Keywords : Peers, Academic Achievement, Social Interaction

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in the modern era faces complex challenges in improving student achievement. Academic achievement is not only determined by individual abilities but also influenced by the social environment in which students interact. Social support, especially from peers, is an important factor that helps students face academic demands and the adaptation process in the campus environment (Yulian Hermanus Wenno, Rusnawati Ellis, 2025) . This social environment plays a role in shaping student character through daily interactions with peer groups or "circles" who are of relatively similar age and academic status. These interactions can influence students' habits, behaviors, mindsets, learning styles,

and even academic achievement (Prio Utomo, 2022; Salsabila et al., 2025) . Research by (Alfred Liubana, Eeng Ahman, Endang Supriadi, Susanti Kurniawati, Kurjono, 2025) shows that peer support acts as a moderating variable that strengthens the relationship between student learning interest, learning discipline, and learning motivation, especially in the 3T (Underdeveloped, 3T) regions.

In the learning process, a person's ability to adapt to the environment and social stimuli is an important aspect because it will give rise to certain reactions in learning activities (Agung et al., 2025; Kadek et al., 2025) . Social interactions between peers are known to have an influence on student academic achievement. Research (Fani et al., 2024) explains that peer social support has a significant relationship with the achievement motivation of students who are active in organizations. In addition, (Maliana Julia Saputri, 2025) found that the higher the social support felt by students, the lower their academic stress levels. Peer social support is also positively correlated with self-regulated learning in students living away from home, which contributes to academic achievement (Fitria et al., 2024; Nadiya Ayu Permatasari, 2025) . Other studies show that peer social support is positively related to the psychological well-being of students living away from home, thus helping emotional stability and academic adaptation (Andriani et al., 2024) . In everyday campus life, this influence is seen through group discussions, collaboration in completing assignments, and the exchange of ideas that can change students' learning patterns from passive to more active.

This phenomenon aligns with Vygotski's *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) theory, which explains that peers function as social mediators who help individuals achieve their maximum learning potential through collaboration. Group interactions enable students to develop abilities beyond their individual capacities. Furthermore, Bandura's *Social Cognitive Theory* emphasizes that student learning behavior is shaped through modeling and observing peer behavior (Firmansyah & Saepuloh, 2022) . According to Bandura, students tend to be motivated to increase their learning motivation and persistence when they see their peers successfully overcome academic challenges and achieve good results. Thus, peers serve not only as a source of social support but also as learning models that can shape students' academic behavior.

Positive social relationships among peers can also strengthen students' enthusiasm for learning, self-confidence, and self-identity. This is supported by research (Salsabila et al., 2025) , which states that positive and meaningful social interactions with peers play a crucial role in the formation of students' self-identity and psychological well-being. Another study by (Indra et al., 2024) found that peer social support significantly contributed 23.7% to the psychological well-being of out-of-town students in Jakarta by increasing autonomy, social relationships, and emotional balance.

However, peer influence is not always positive. A preliminary survey of 20 students at the State Islamic University of Palangka Raya showed that 65% of respondents frequently studied with peers, 25% occasionally, and 10% rarely. These data indicate that academic interaction within peer groups is quite high and is part of the student learning culture. However, social interaction can also hinder academic achievement if students are in a negative friendship environment. Research (Nadiya Ayu Permatasari, 2025; Rostiawan et al., 2025) shows that certain peer support can actually exacerbate students' academic stress when

the interactions are negative. The qualitative study, *Exploring Peer Pressure on Academic Performance among University Students*, also found that peer pressure can negatively impact academic achievement, with 45% of students experiencing decreased academic performance due to pressures such as cheating and academic distraction (Javaid et al., 2025) .

Based on previous research, most studies on peer influence and academic achievement still focus on the relationship between specific variables such as academic stress, learning motivation, or self-efficacy using quantitative approaches. These studies generally measure influence statistically, but have not explored students' subjective experiences regarding how peer interactions shape learning behavior, motivation, academic collaboration, or social pressures in everyday campus life. Furthermore, previous research tends to discuss the positive and negative influence of peers separately, thus not providing a holistic picture of the dynamics of the role of peers from an educational psychology perspective.

The novelty of this research lies in its in-depth exploration of students' experiences related to the role of peers in academic achievement through a qualitative phenomenological approach. This research not only focuses on social support, but also comprehensively examines the dynamics of collaborative learning, academic behavior modeling, competition, and peer social pressure based on the perspectives of Vygotsky's ZPD theory and Bandura's *Social Cognitive Theory* . Furthermore, this research aims to develop a structured *peer mentoring model* based on educational psychology that can optimize positive interactions between students while minimizing the negative influence of peers on academic achievement. Therefore, this research is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions to the development of academic mentoring strategies in higher education.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a phenomenological approach, a study aimed at understanding and describing phenomena based on individuals' subjective experiences in depth within a natural context (Supriadi, 2021) . The phenomenological approach was chosen because it focuses on the experiences, perceptions, and meanings constructed by students regarding the role of peers in academic achievement from an educational psychology perspective. Through this approach, researchers seek to understand how social interactions between students influence learning motivation, academic behavior, and the dynamics of achievement within the campus environment. Research subjects were purposively selected from UIN Palangka Raya students with high, medium, and low academic achievement categories to obtain a variety of experiences and perspectives. Prior to primary data collection, researchers distributed an initial questionnaire as part of a preliminary study. This questionnaire aimed to obtain a general overview of academic conditions, social environments, and respondents' initial perceptions of peer influence. Furthermore, the initial questionnaire served as a basis for determining and grouping relevant informants for more in-depth interviews based on the research focus.

Primary data collection was conducted through *in-depth interviews* , the primary technique for exploring respondents' experiences and subjective meanings related to peer interactions in academic life. The research data was also supported by a literature review as a theoretical basis to strengthen the interpretation of the research findings. In this study, the researcher

acted as the primary instrument, directly collecting data, establishing interactions with informants, interpreting interview results, and maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process. This position as the primary instrument enabled the researcher to understand the social context and participants' experiences in greater depth, while maintaining objectivity and openness to the data found in the field. To strengthen the credibility and validity of the data, this study employed triangulation and *member checking techniques*. Triangulation was conducted through source triangulation and technical triangulation, namely by comparing data from interviews, initial questionnaires, and literature reviews to ensure the consistency of the information obtained. Furthermore, *member checking* was conducted by asking participants to review the interview results and the researcher's interpretations to ensure that the data presented aligns with the respondents' experiences and intentions. This validation strategy was used to increase data validity and minimize bias in the research interpretation process.

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Sugiono, 2020). In the data reduction stage, researchers transcribed interview results, coded them, and sorted them based on themes relevant to the research focus, such as academic support, learning motivation, behavioral modeling, and social distractions. The next stage was presenting the data in narrative form and categorizing the themes to facilitate understanding of the relationships between findings. In the final stage, researchers interpreted and drew conclusions based on patterns emerging from the field data. This approach is naturalistic and flexible, emphasizing the process of interpreting participants' experiences, allowing the research to comprehensively explore the social dynamics of education and produce a holistic understanding of the influence of peers on student motivation and achievement (Sahir, 2021; Supriadi, 2021).

RESULTS

Based on the results of data collection conducted through the distribution of initial questionnaires and in-depth interviews, this study identified four main aspects of the findings. These four aspects include: (1) the role of peers as a source of academic support, (2) the role of peers in the process of modeling and shaping learning behavior, (3) group dynamics in relation to academic achievement, and (4) the negative influence of peers on academic achievement. These four aspects illustrate that the role of peers is not singular, but rather dynamic and contextual, encompassing both positive and negative influences in the student learning process.

Researchers distributed questionnaires to 20 students to obtain a general overview of peer dynamics in the academic process. The results showed that:

1. 65% of respondents often study with peers, 25% sometimes, and 10% rarely.
2. 70% of respondents stated that peers helped them understand the lecture material, 20% said they were quite helpful, and 10% said they were less helpful.
3. 75% of respondents felt more motivated to learn when they were in an environment with diligent friends.
4. 50% of respondents admitted to being distracted by friends' invitations to non-academic activities before completing assignments, 30% sometimes, and 20% rarely.

These data indicate that academic interaction within peer groups is quite high, but also has the potential for distraction. Consequently, the data obtained from the questionnaire on respondents' initial perceptions and the data from the interviews contain the following results:

1. The Role of Peers as a Source of Academic Support

Both respondents indicated that peers have an important role in helping students understand lecture material.

Respondent AL: *"If it's a discussion system, especially if there are only a few people and they're close, it's easier to understand... if someone explains it, it's like you already have an idea, so it's easier to understand than reading it yourself."*

AL stated that discussions in small, intimate groups make the material easier to understand, especially when there's a direct exchange of ideas. He noted that explanations from peers are often easier to understand than reading alone.

Similar things were also conveyed by respondents

TS: *" Usually we explain to each other... if someone doesn't understand, the others help explain, so we understand the material better. "*

TS explained that group discussions help overcome learning difficulties, especially when there are differences in understanding among group members. The process of explaining things to each other is an effective strategy for improving academic understanding.

2. Intensity of Academic Interaction

Academic interactions between peers occur quite frequently, especially in the context of group assignments and material discussions.

AL: *"Just talk as much as necessary... mostly discuss assignments. But if you're in a circle, discuss material and assignments more often."*

AL is of the opinion that he tends to interact as necessary with friends outside his circle, while in small groups the interactions are more intense and focused on academics. Meanwhile,

TS: *"If it's a group assignment, there's often discussion... usually we also remind each other in the group chat if there's an assignment or deadline. "*

TS stated that academic interactions occur more frequently in small groups or circles, especially when dealing with group assignments. Communication also occurs through social media such as chat groups to remind each other about assignments and academic activities.

3. Group Dynamics and Learning Motivation

The dynamics of peer groups tend to be flexible, namely a combination of relaxed and serious atmospheres.

AL: *"It's just a mix... sometimes we discuss material, sometimes there's gossip too, but then it's back to the assignment."*

AL said that in his group there was a mix of academic discussions and casual interactions such as joking or sharing stories, but always returned to the focus on the

task.

TS: " Usually there is a division of tasks... even if some are less active, the others still help so that the task is completed."

TS: "If you're tired of organizing, usually a friend reminds you or invites you to do something, so you're motivated again."

TS also described how tasks are often divided within the group, although not all members contribute equally. However, having active peers encourages other members to participate. Furthermore, peer support also increases learning motivation, especially when facing fatigue from other activities such as organizational commitments.

4. Negative Influence of Peers

Despite its positive impact, peers can also negatively impact academic achievement. Both respondents acknowledged distractions, such as invitations to hang out or engage in non-academic activities before completing assignments.

AL: "I was once invited to hang out, so my assignments were neglected for a while... but I usually still got them done afterward."

AL stated that invitations to hang out sometimes make assignments neglected, even though in the end they are still completed.

TS: "Sometimes we gather and then eat first, so the assignments are postponed... even though we still think about them, our focus is disturbed."

TS also revealed that the habit of postponing work because of other activities such as eating or hanging out can disrupt focus on studying.

TS: "I often have friends who don't want to do the work... so the others have to work more."

In addition, TS stated that group dynamics are also influenced by members who contribute less, thus creating an imbalance in group work and potentially reducing learning effectiveness.

DISCUSSION

Peers are social groups that enable the educational process and individual development through ongoing interactions. Peer groups are formed based on similarities in age, social status, interests, needs, and life experiences, thus creating emotional closeness and a sense of belonging among members (Salsabila et al., 2025) . In the context of higher education, these relationships not only function as a means of friendship, but also become a space for the formation of academic identity, the development of learning motivation, and the formation of students' social behavior. On the other hand, academic achievement is an important indicator of the success of the educational process because it reflects the level of student mastery of learning materials that are influenced by both internal and external factors simultaneously (Putri et al., 2026) . Therefore, peer relationships need to be understood not only as ordinary social interactions, but also as psychological mechanisms that influence students' learning processes.

1. The Role of Peers in Enhancing Academic Understanding

The study results show that peers play a significant role in enhancing students' academic understanding through discussions, collaborative learning, and information exchange. Seventy percent of respondents reported that peers helped them understand the course material, while 20% reported that they were quite helpful, and 10% felt they were not very helpful. These findings demonstrate that students' learning process is not solely individual but also develops through social interactions that enable collective knowledge construction.

Psychologically, this phenomenon can be explained through Lev Vygotsky's *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) theory. This theory explains that individuals can achieve higher levels of ability when they receive assistance from other, more competent individuals. Vygotsky In this study, peers function as *scaffolding*, namely temporary assistance that helps students understand concepts that were previously difficult to understand independently. This mechanism is seen when students find it easier to understand peer explanations because the language used is simpler, contextual, and appropriate to their learning experiences. Thus, peer interaction acts as a cognitive mediation medium that expands students' thinking capacity.

Furthermore, research findings also demonstrate the existence of a modeling process as described in Bandura's *Social Cognitive Theory*. Students tend to imitate the learning strategies, thinking patterns, and academic habits of friends who are considered successful or have better achievements than Bandura. In this context, peer influence occurs not only through direct assistance but also through social observation. When students see their friends actively studying, disciplined in completing assignments, and achieving good academic results, a *vicarious learning process emerges* that influences the self-confidence (*self-efficacy*) and learning motivation of other students. This strengthens the research findings (Pertwi et al., 2024) which state that peer support influences individual behavior through increased *self-efficacy*. Thus, peers function as social learning agents that influence students' cognitive and motivational development.

2. Intensity of Academic Interaction and Social Support

This study shows that the intensity of academic interaction among peers is relatively high, particularly in group discussions, collaborative work on assignments, and communication through digital media. Small groups (*circles*) become the center of student academic interaction because they provide a sense of security and emotional closeness during the learning process. These findings suggest that students need not only academic support but also emotional support to cope with the pressures of higher education.

From an educational psychology perspective, peer social support has emotional, informational, and instrumental functions. Emotional support is seen in a feeling of acceptance, appreciation, and understanding within the peer group, while informational support emerges through the exchange of materials, assignment explanations, and academic discussions (Almun & Shiddiqy, 2021). Instrumental support is evident in the form of cooperation in completing assignments and other technical assistance. These three

forms of support can psychologically increase students' self-confidence and reduce academic stress.

The findings of this study also reinforce the results of previous studies that stated that peer social support is positively correlated with students' learning motivation and psychological well-being (Fani et al., 2024; Indra et al., 2024) . Students in a supportive social environment tend to have higher learning engagement because they feel they receive emotional support and social validation. In Maslow's theory of social needs, this condition indicates that the need for belongingness *can* be the basis for the emergence of self-actualization motivation in the academic field. Thus, high intensity of social interaction can create a conducive learning climate and increase student engagement in academic activities.

3. Group Dynamics and Its Influence on Learning Motivation

The peer group dynamics in this study exhibited flexible characteristics, combining a relaxed and serious atmosphere during the learning process. This environment made students feel more comfortable and less stressed when studying together. Seventy-five percent of respondents stated they were more motivated to learn when surrounded by diligent and academically oriented peers. This finding suggests that students' learning motivation is influenced by the social norms that develop within their peer groups.

From a social psychology perspective, this phenomenon can be explained through the concept of social conformity. Students tend to adapt their behavior to group norms to gain social acceptance. When a group has a positive learning culture, group members are encouraged to engage in productive academic behavior. Conversely, if the group is less supportive of academic activities, student motivation to learn can also decline. This suggests that peer groups function as *social reinforcement* , strengthening certain learning behaviors.

Additionally, peers also serve as a *motivational support system* . Support in the form of study prompts, assignment reminders, and emotional encouragement helps students maintain consistent learning, especially when experiencing fatigue due to organizational activities or other academic pressures (Wahyudi, 2024) . This finding aligns with research (Luky Kurniawan, 2025) showing that peer influence and emotional state are significant predictors of student academic performance. Psychologically, this support can increase intrinsic motivation because students feel they have an environment that supports their development.

However, this study also found an imbalance in contributions within the group. Some students were more active than others, leading to dependency on certain members. This phenomenon indicates that group dynamics are not always ideal. In collaborative learning theory, this situation can lead to *social loafing* , the tendency for individuals to reduce their contributions when working in groups. If not managed properly, this situation can reduce the effectiveness of collaborative learning.

4. Negative Influence of Peers on Academic Achievement

Despite its many positive influences, this study also shows that peers can negatively impact students' academic achievement. Fifty percent of respondents admitted to being distracted by friends' invitations to engage in non-academic activities before completing

assignments, 30% sometimes, and 20% rarely. These negative influences include procrastination, poor focus on learning, and reduced study time efficiency.

Psychologically, this condition can be explained through the concept of *peer pressure*. Students often experience a conflict between academic needs and the social need for group acceptance. When group norms are oriented toward non-academic activities, students tend to follow these behaviors to maintain acceptance within their social group. This suggests that peer relationships can be a source of distraction if not accompanied by strong self-regulation skills.

These findings reinforce previous research stating that negative peer influence can reduce students' learning motivation and academic achievement (Permatasari, 2023; Rostiawan et al., 2025). Furthermore, the study *Exploring Peer Pressure on Academic Performance among University Students* showed that peer social pressure can lead to decreased academic achievement and negative academic behaviors such as cheating (Javaid et al., 2025). From an educational psychology perspective, these conditions indicate that unmanaged social interactions can hinder students' academic development because they affect motivation, learning discipline, and self-control.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that the role of peers is dynamic and contextual. Peers can be a source of academic support, motivation, and self-development, but they can also be a source of distraction and social pressure. Therefore, more targeted management of social interactions is needed through the formation of healthy study groups and *peer mentoring programs*. From an educational psychology perspective, these strategies are crucial for creating a social environment that supports optimal student cognitive, emotional, and academic development.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that peers have a complex and contextual role in student academic achievement from an educational psychology perspective. Peers not only function as a social environment, but also as psychological agents that influence students' cognitive, motivational, and learning behavior processes. Interactions in small groups (circles) have been shown to improve academic understanding through active and flexible discussion, collaboration, and information exchange. In this context, peers act as scaffolding that helps students achieve higher levels of understanding as explained in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory. In addition, the modeling process that emerges through observing peers' learning behavior also strengthens students' motivation and self-efficacy, in line with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory.

This study shows that the quality of social interactions is a key factor in determining whether peer influence is constructive or destructive to academic achievement. A supportive peer environment can increase students' learning motivation, academic engagement, and self-confidence. Conversely, less focused interactions can lead to learning distractions, procrastination, and reduced collaborative learning effectiveness due to an imbalance in group members' contributions. These findings confirm that peer influence is not linear, but rather influenced by group dynamics, social norms, and students' self-regulation abilities in responding to social pressures in the academic environment.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of educational psychology studies by strengthening the understanding that student academic achievement is not only influenced by individual factors but is also shaped through social interactions that occur within the peer group. This research expands the application of ZPD and Social Cognitive Theory in the context of higher education, specifically to the dynamics of student learning groups. Furthermore, this research demonstrates that peers can function simultaneously as a source of social support, a mediator of learning, and a source of socio-academic pressure. Thus, this research provides a more holistic perspective on the psychological mechanisms of peer influence on student academic achievement.

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that students be more selective in choosing friendships that support academic development and are able to develop self-regulation in managing social activities and learning in a balanced manner. Universities and lecturers also need to facilitate the formation of healthy study groups and structured peer mentoring programs to optimize the positive influence of peers on student motivation and academic achievement. Furthermore, further research is expected to involve a broader and more diverse group of participants, and examine other factors such as social background, academic culture, and social media use that have the potential to influence the dynamics of peer interactions in the learning process at university.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the limited number of respondents and the use of a qualitative approach mean that the results cannot be broadly generalized to all students. Second, the data obtained depended on interviews, and were therefore heavily influenced by the respondents' perceptions, honesty, and ability to express their experiences. Nevertheless, this study provides a relevant and contextual overview of the dynamics of the role of peers in student academic achievement and can serve as a basis for further research with a broader scope and more diverse methods.

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