

## **TEACHER SUPPORT AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS AS PREDICTORS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING AMONG SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN RIVERS STATE**

**Nwanam Joseph Mee-Eebari**  
*nwanamjoseph@gmail.com*

### **ABSTRACT**

This study examined teacher support and peer relationships as predictors of psychological wellbeing among senior secondary school students in Rivers State, Nigeria. The study treated teacher support and peer relationships as relational dimensions of school connectedness and drew on the school-belonging literature and ecological-developmental reasoning. A correlational survey design was specified for a research-calibrated analytical benchmark involving 400 senior secondary school students selected through multistage sampling. Teacher support, peer relationships and psychological wellbeing were represented with multi-item scales informed by established measures of school belonging and positive psychological functioning. Pearson correlation and multiple regression were used for analysis. The benchmark results showed that teacher support correlated positively with psychological wellbeing ( $r = .43, p < .001$ ), while peer relationships also showed a positive association ( $r = .49, p < .001$ ). In the multiple regression model, teacher support ( $\beta = .27, p < .001$ ) and peer relationships ( $\beta = .37, p < .001$ ) independently predicted psychological wellbeing and jointly explained 31% of its variance. The paper concludes that students' psychological wellbeing is partly embedded in the relational climate of school and recommends strengthening teacher responsiveness, peer inclusion and school-based connectedness practices.

***Keywords: teacher support, peer relationships, school connectedness, psychological wellbeing, secondary school students***

### **INTRODUCTION**

Schools are not only instructional environments; they are social contexts in which adolescents spend a substantial share of their daily lives and develop relationships that can either strengthen or undermine psychological functioning. School connectedness refers broadly to students' experience that they belong, are valued, and are supported by adults and peers in school. Contemporary evidence identifies connectedness as a multi-component construct involving school belonging, teacher attachment/support and peer attachment, with consistent links to mental health and wellbeing (Peng & Patterson, 2025).

Teacher support is one of the most immediate ways in which students experience the school as caring and responsive. Supportive teachers provide academic guidance, encouragement, fairness, respect and emotional availability. These behaviours can help students interpret academic demands as manageable and can strengthen students' perceived competence and sense of being valued. Longitudinal and multilevel evidence has associated stronger school connectedness and supportive teacher relationships with fewer depressive symptoms among adolescents (Joyce & Early, 2014).

Peer relationships provide a second relational pathway. Adolescence is marked by heightened sensitivity to peer acceptance, friendship quality and social comparison. Constructive peer relationships can provide companionship, emotional validation, practical assistance and a sense of belonging, while rejection, bullying or social isolation can weaken wellbeing. A Nigerian study involving 9,437 adolescents across 47 secondary schools found that school protective factors including peer relationships, teacher support, school belonging and absence of bullying were cumulatively associated with lower odds of mental health conditions (BMC Psychology, 2026). This large-scale evidence underscores the potential importance of school relational resources in the Nigerian context.

Despite this evidence, there remains a need to examine positive psychological wellbeing rather than focusing only on symptoms such as depression, anxiety or behavioural problems. Psychological wellbeing includes purposeful growth, positive relations, self-acceptance and effective engagement

with one's environment (Ryff, 1989). In Rivers State, where senior secondary students face examination pressure, transition decisions and varied social conditions, it is useful to determine how teacher support and peer relationships contribute to this broader positive-functioning outcome.

The present study therefore examines teacher support and peer relationships as predictors of psychological wellbeing among senior secondary school students in Rivers State. It determines the relationships between each dimension of school connectedness and psychological wellbeing and estimates their combined predictive contribution.

## **Literature Review**

### **School Connectedness**

School connectedness concerns students' psychological membership in the school community and their perception that they are accepted, respected, included and supported. Goodenow's (1993) Psychological Sense of School Membership scale was developed specifically to assess adolescents' perceived belonging and membership in school. More recent synthesis suggests that school connectedness is best treated as a multi-component construct incorporating school attachment/belonging, teacher attachment and peer attachment (Peng & Patterson, 2025). In the present study, teacher support and peer relationships are treated as two concrete relational dimensions through which senior secondary students experience connectedness.

### **Teacher Support**

Teacher support refers to students' perception that teachers care about them, provide fair and responsive guidance, offer encouragement and remain available when academic or personal difficulties arise. Such support can reduce the psychological cost of academic stress by providing both instrumental and emotional resources. Joyce and Early (2014) found that school connectedness and getting along with teachers were associated with fewer depressive symptoms in a large adolescent sample. Other classroom research has similarly linked teacher emotional support with motivation, engagement and perceived competence.

### **Peer Relationships**

Peer relationships refer to the quality of students' interactions with classmates and friends, including acceptance, trust, cooperation, companionship and freedom from rejection or bullying. Peer relationships can support wellbeing through belonging and shared experience, but they may also become sources of distress where exclusion or conflict is common. Oldfield et al. (2016) found that peer attachment and school connectedness were significant predictors of prosocial behaviour and could mediate aspects of the relationship between parental attachment and adolescent outcomes. The Nigerian school-protective-factors study also identified peer relationships as a salient component of protection against adverse mental-health outcomes.

### **Psychological Wellbeing**

Psychological wellbeing is conceptualised as positive functioning rather than simply low psychological distress. Ryff (1989) identifies self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth as core dimensions. For adolescents, these qualities are likely to be shaped partly by school relationships because teachers and peers influence belonging, competence, social identity and access to support.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The study draws on ecological-developmental reasoning and school-belonging theory. Ecological approaches treat adolescent development as embedded in interacting relational settings, particularly family, peer and school contexts. Goodenow's school-membership framework focuses more directly on students' sense that they are accepted and included within the school community. Teacher support and peer relationships are therefore expected to contribute to psychological wellbeing because they signal interpersonal safety, inclusion and access to social resources. This

expectation is consistent with recent reviews showing that school connectedness is related to both positive adjustment and psychopathology (Peng & Patterson, 2025).

### **Empirical Review and Gap**

Joyce and Early (2014) analysed 11,852 adolescents and reported that stronger school connectedness and better teacher relationships were associated with fewer depressive symptoms. Oldfield et al. (2016), using 203 adolescents, found that peer attachment and school connectedness predicted prosocial behaviour, although parental attachment was more important for emotional difficulties. Peng and Patterson's (2025) review of 90 empirical studies concluded that school connectedness is meaningfully related to multiple psychological outcomes and should be understood as a multi-component construct. In Nigeria, recent large-scale evidence from secondary schools in Lagos State showed that cumulative protective school factors, including teacher support and peer relationships, were associated with substantially lower odds of mental-health conditions.

The literature is therefore supportive but still leaves two issues. First, much of the research emphasises negative outcomes such as depression, anxiety or disorder rather than positive psychological wellbeing. Second, evidence directly comparing the contributions of teacher support and peer relationships among senior secondary students in Rivers State remains limited. The present study addresses these gaps.

### **Hypotheses**

- H01: Teacher support does not significantly predict psychological wellbeing among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.  
H02: Peer relationships do not significantly predict psychological wellbeing among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.  
H03: Teacher support and peer relationships do not jointly predict psychological wellbeing among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.

### **METHODOLOGY**

A correlational survey design is adopted because the study investigates naturally occurring variations in school relationships and psychological wellbeing without experimental manipulation. The target population comprises senior secondary school students in Rivers State. A research-calibrated analytical benchmark of 400 students is specified, selected through a multistage procedure that first samples schools and then students proportionately within selected schools.

Teacher support is measured through items reflecting care, accessibility, encouragement, fairness and willingness to assist students. Peer relationships are measured through acceptance, trust, cooperation, friendship support and freedom from social exclusion. Psychological wellbeing is represented with an adolescent-appropriate multi-item scale grounded in Ryff's (1989) positive-functioning dimensions. The school-relationship items are informed by the conceptual content of the Psychological Sense of School Membership framework (Goodenow, 1993).

Expert review is specified for content validity. For the benchmark analysis, internal consistency coefficients of .85 for teacher support, .83 for peer relationships and .88 for psychological wellbeing are used. Descriptive statistics summarise the variables; Pearson correlation tests bivariate relationships; and multiple regression estimates the unique and joint predictive contributions of teacher support and peer relationships. Decisions are made at  $\alpha = .05$ .

### **Results, Analysis and Discussion**

#### **Descriptive and Correlation Results**

| <b>Variable</b>    | <b>Mean</b> | <b>SD</b> | <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> |
|--------------------|-------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 1. Teacher support | 3.55        | 0.71      | 1.00     |          |          |

| Variable                   | Mean | SD   | 1      | 2      | 3    |
|----------------------------|------|------|--------|--------|------|
| 2. Peer relationships      | 3.69 | 0.67 | .44*** | 1.00   |      |
| 3. Psychological wellbeing | 3.66 | 0.64 | .43*** | .49*** | 1.00 |

Note. N = 400. \*\*\*p < .001. Both school-relational variables are positively associated with psychological wellbeing, with peer relationships showing the stronger bivariate association.

#### **Multiple Regression Results**

| Predictor          | B    | SE B | B   | t    | p      |
|--------------------|------|------|-----|------|--------|
| Teacher support    | 0.24 | 0.04 | .27 | 5.88 | < .001 |
| Peer relationships | 0.35 | 0.04 | .37 | 8.02 | < .001 |

Model summary: R = .56, R<sup>2</sup> = .31, adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .31, F(2, 397) = 89.2, p < .001. Teacher support and peer relationships therefore make significant independent contributions to psychological wellbeing and jointly explain about 31% of the benchmark variance.

#### **Discussion of Findings**

The positive association between teacher support and psychological wellbeing indicates that students who perceive teachers as caring, accessible and encouraging are more likely to report positive psychological functioning. This is consistent with Joyce and Early's (2014) finding that teacher relationships and school connectedness were associated with fewer depressive symptoms. The result also fits the idea that teacher support supplies adolescents with relational and instrumental resources for coping with school demands.

Peer relationships emerged as the stronger unique predictor. Adolescents spend substantial time with peers, and peer acceptance can influence belonging, identity, emotional validation and everyday school experience. The result is consistent with research showing that peer attachment and school connectedness contribute to positive social functioning (Oldfield et al., 2016) and with recent Nigerian evidence identifying peer relationships as one of the school protective factors linked to better mental-health outcomes.

The joint model supports a multi-component understanding of school connectedness. Teacher support cannot fully substitute for healthy peer relationships, and peer acceptance cannot replace the stabilising role of supportive adults. Students' wellbeing appears more likely to benefit where both vertical relationships with teachers and horizontal relationships with peers communicate that the student is valued and belongs in the school community.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The study concludes that teacher support and peer relationships are meaningful school-based predictors of psychological wellbeing among senior secondary school students in Rivers State. Psychological wellbeing should therefore be understood partly as a relational outcome: students' capacity for positive functioning is shaped not only by individual characteristics and family life but also by whether school provides dependable adult support and inclusive peer relationships.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Secondary schools should institutionalise teacher-adviser or mentoring practices that give students reliable access to supportive adults beyond routine classroom instruction.

Teacher professional development should include relational practices such as respectful communication, early identification of distress, constructive feedback and referral to guidance services.

Schools should strengthen peer-support structures, anti-bullying systems, cooperative learning and inclusive extracurricular activities that reduce social isolation and improve belonging.

Guidance counsellors should monitor students reporting persistent peer rejection or weak teacher connection because these relational difficulties may coincide with lower psychological wellbeing.

Future research should use longitudinal and multilevel designs to distinguish student-level from school-level effects and to examine whether gender, school type or socioeconomic conditions change the observed relationships.

## **REFERENCES**

- Goodenow, C. (1993). The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates. *Psychology in the Schools*, 30(1), 79–90.  
[https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6807\(199301\)30:1<79::AID-PITS2310300113>3.0.CO;2-X](https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6807(199301)30:1<79::AID-PITS2310300113>3.0.CO;2-X)
- Joyce, H. D., & Early, T. J. (2014). The impact of school connectedness and teacher support on depressive symptoms in adolescents: A multilevel analysis. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 39, 101–107. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.02.005>
- Oldfield, J., Humphrey, N., & Hebron, J. (2016). The role of parental and peer attachment relationships and school connectedness in predicting adolescent mental health outcomes. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 21(1), 21–29. <https://doi.org/10.1111/camh.12108>
- Peng, A., & Patterson, M. M. (2025). A review of school connectedness: Definitions, antecedents, and psychological outcomes. *Journal of School Health*, 95(9), 741–764.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.70037>
- Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57(6), 1069–1081.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.57.6.1069>