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TEACHERS' INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS AS CORRELATES OF ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT OF STUDENTS IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

This study examined teachers' interpersonal relationships and communication skills as correlates of students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. Specifically, the study examined the correlation between teachers' interpersonal relationships and students' academic engagement and determined the correlation between teachers' communication skills and students' academic engagement. A correlational research design was adopted. The population comprised 23,601 Senior Secondary II students in 274 public secondary schools across the six education zones in Anambra State. A sample of 500 students was selected using a multistage sampling technique. Data were collected using three researcher-developed instruments: Teachers' Interpersonal Relationships Questionnaire (TIRQ), Teachers' Communication Skills Questionnaire (TCSQ), and Students' Academic Engagement Questionnaire (SAEQ). The instruments were validated by three experts. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients were 0.81, 0.82, and 0.79 for interpersonal relationships, communication skills, and academic engagement, respectively. Data were analysed using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation, and the hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 significance level. In the simulated results, 480 questionnaires were returned and found usable. Teachers' interpersonal relationships had a strong positive correlation with students' academic engagement ($r = 0.624$, $p<.001$), while teachers' communication skills had a

strong positive correlation with students' academic engagement ($r = 0.587$, $p<.001$). Both null hypotheses were rejected. The study concluded, within the simulated scenario, that favourable teacher–student relationships and effective communication were positively associated with students' academic engagement. It was recommended that school administrators promote supportive teacher–student interactions and strengthen teachers' classroom communication through professional development programmes.

Keywords: Interpersonal Relationships, Communication Skills, Academic Engagement, Public Secondary Schools

Introduction

Quality of education depends on the relevance of curriculum content, teachers' professional competence, effective instructional practices, adequate learning resources, fair assessment, and supportive relationships within the school environment. These characteristics enable learners to acquire knowledge, develop critical thinking, demonstrate practical skills, and prepare for responsible participation in society. Quality education also requires equitable learning opportunities, emotional safety, and meaningful participation rather than an exclusive emphasis on examination results. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020) emphasises that educational quality involves inclusion, equity, effective learning, and the conditions necessary for learners to succeed. Achieving these expectations requires schools to provide environments that encourage participation, particularly in public secondary schools.

Public secondary schools provide formal education to adolescents from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and prepare them for higher education, vocational development, and productive citizenship. Their responsibilities extend beyond curriculum delivery to include character development, social integration, discipline, and the provision of equitable learning opportunities. These schools depend substantially on teachers to translate educational policies into meaningful classroom experiences through effective instruction, constructive feedback, appropriate assessment, and supportive interactions. However, differences in school resources, classroom conditions, and teachers' professional practices may influence the quality of learning opportunities available. The Universal Basic Education Commission and UNICEF (2025), through the National Assessment of Learning Achievement in Basic Education, assessed learning proficiency among 23,564 Junior Secondary Two learners nationwide, highlighting the importance of examining educational conditions and students' learning experiences.

Students occupy a central position in the educational process because their participation determines how effectively teaching opportunities translate into learning experiences. Their academic responsibilities include attending lessons, completing assignments, asking questions, collaborating with classmates, practising newly acquired knowledge, and applying feedback to improve performance. Students also differ in their motivation, confidence, learning needs, social experiences, and willingness to participate in classroom activities. These differences require teachers to recognise individual learning difficulties and create conditions that encourage sustained involvement. When students feel supported, understand classroom expectations, and receive constructive guidance, they may become more willing to participate actively. Such participation involves observable classroom behaviour, emotional attachment to learning, and intellectual investment, collectively reflected in students' academic engagement.

Students' academic engagement is reflected in their participation, persistence, emotional involvement, and intellectual effort during learning activities. Fredricks and colleagues' multidimensional approach, discussed in contemporary educational research, distinguishes behavioural engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement as complementary aspects of students' involvement in learning. Behavioural engagement includes attendance, task completion, and classroom participation; emotional engagement concerns interest, belonging, and positive feelings towards school; while cognitive engagement involves concentration, strategic thinking, and persistence when tasks become difficult. These dimensions show that engagement extends beyond physical classroom attendance to the quality of students' involvement. Conner (2018) also examines behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement as distinct but related dimensions, providing a useful framework for understanding students' academic engagement in secondary schools.

Academic engagement benefits students by strengthening their opportunities to understand subject content, develop independent learning habits, and achieve educational goals. Consistent participation enables learners to clarify difficult concepts, practise problem-solving, receive feedback, and identify gaps in their understanding before examinations. Emotional involvement can also encourage belonging, confidence, and willingness to seek assistance, while cognitive engagement promotes reflection, persistence, and deeper processing of information. These benefits are particularly important during adolescence, when students are developing personal identities and establishing patterns that may influence later educational decisions. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019) highlights the importance of students' sense of belonging, motivation, and school experiences in understanding educational outcomes, reinforcing the value of active engagement in learning.

Poor academic engagement presents challenges such as inattentiveness, incomplete assignments, irregular participation, weak study habits, limited classroom interaction, and superficial understanding of subject content. Students who rarely ask questions or practise newly taught

concepts may accumulate learning gaps, while those who frequently disengage may struggle to prepare adequately for assessments. These concerns are relevant to Nigeria, where educational participation and learning proficiency remain important policy issues. UNICEF's Nigeria Education Fact Sheets (2023), drawing on household survey data, reported that the out-of-school rate was 25% at junior secondary level and 31% at senior secondary level. These figures concern participation in education rather than classroom engagement itself, but they demonstrate wider challenges surrounding sustained educational participation and the conditions supporting students' learning.

Poor academic engagement may contribute to persistent learning difficulties, weak examination performance, reduced confidence, grade repetition, and increased vulnerability to school withdrawal. For example, students who repeatedly avoid assignments may enter examinations without sufficient practice, while learners who feel disconnected from classroom activities may become reluctant to seek help when they encounter difficulties. Such experiences can limit progression to further education and reduce opportunities to acquire competencies needed for employment. The National Assessment of Learning Achievement in Basic Education, conducted by the Universal Basic Education Commission and UNICEF (2025), assessed proficiency in English, mathematics, basic science and technology, and social studies among Junior Secondary Two learners across Nigeria, illustrating the continuing importance of measuring learning achievement alongside educational participation. Addressing these challenges requires attention to the social environment in which students learn, particularly interpersonal relationships.

Interpersonal relationships shape how teachers and students interact, establish trust, manage disagreements, and respond to one another's academic and emotional needs. Pianta's relationship-based perspective, as applied in subsequent educational research, draws attention to the importance of supportive teacher–student interactions for learners' school experiences. In practical terms, interpersonal relationships involve mutual respect, empathy, approachability, fairness, patience, and appropriate professional boundaries. Teachers demonstrate these qualities when they listen to students' concerns, recognise individual differences, encourage struggling learners, and correct mistakes without humiliation. Positive relationships may strengthen students' sense of acceptance and willingness to participate, whereas hostile or dismissive interactions can discourage questions and classroom contributions. These relational practices provide an important foundation for examining students' academic engagement in public secondary schools.

Interpersonal relationships can be understood as the patterns of interaction through which individuals develop mutual understanding, trust, respect, and social connection. In educational settings, they encompass the quality of communication, emotional support, cooperation, and conflict management between teachers and students. Alemu and Woldetsadik (2020) examined teacher–student relationships and academic engagement, identifying the learning environment and the nature of interactions as relevant considerations in students' educational experiences. This

perspective suggests that positive relationships involve more than teachers maintaining classroom discipline; they require consistent concern for students' needs and constructive responses to their contributions. When teachers demonstrate fairness, empathy, and approachability, they can foster classroom conditions in which students feel sufficiently secure to participate.

The relationship between interpersonal relationships and students' academic engagement is reflected in how students respond to teachers, classroom activities, and learning challenges. Respectful relationships can encourage learners to ask questions, express uncertainty, contribute ideas, and persist when academic tasks become difficult. Conversely, ridicule, perceived favouritism, intimidation, and persistent teacher–student conflict may create emotional barriers that discourage participation. In Anambra State, Okaforcha and Aniefuna-Mokwugwo (2025) reported that teachers' social competence significantly predicted students' academic engagement, with a reported \(R^2\) of .555 and \(p=.026\). Although social competence is broader than interpersonal relationships, this finding supports investigating teachers' relational practices as potential contributors to engagement. Effective relationships must also be sustained through clear, respectful, and purposeful communication skills.

Communication skills involve the ability to convey information, explain ideas, listen attentively, interpret responses, and adjust messages to suit the audience and situation. Hargie (2019) presents interpersonal communication as a process involving verbal and non-verbal behaviours through which people exchange information and establish mutual understanding. In classroom practice, verbal communication includes clear explanations, appropriate questioning, constructive feedback, and understandable instructions, while non-verbal communication encompasses facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, posture, and tone of voice. These elements influence whether students understand academic expectations and feel encouraged to contribute. Teachers therefore need communication practices that make complex content accessible, minimise misunderstanding, and support respectful exchanges between teachers and students during instructional activities.

Communication skills can influence students' academic engagement by determining how clearly learning tasks are explained and how confidently students interact with their teachers. Clear instructions help learners understand expectations, while purposeful questioning stimulates thought and gives teachers opportunities to identify misconceptions. Constructive feedback enables students to recognise progress and improve their work, whereas dismissive language or unclear explanations may discourage participation. Ohamobi and Ukeh (2025), in a study of public secondary schools in Anambra State, reported that teachers' verbal and non-verbal communication patterns significantly predicted students' academic performance. Although academic performance differs from academic engagement, the finding demonstrates the educational relevance of teachers' communication practices. Examining communication alongside interpersonal relationships may clarify how teachers' everyday interactions support or constrain students' active involvement in learning.

In public secondary schools in Anambra State, insufficient attention to teachers' interpersonal relationships and communication skills may weaken students' willingness to participate, ask questions, collaborate with peers, and seek academic assistance. For example, teachers who respond harshly to incorrect answers may discourage learners from contributing, while unclear explanations and inadequate feedback may leave students confused about assignments and lesson content. Such classroom experiences may contribute to disengagement, particularly among students who already lack confidence or require additional learning support. Akulue, Obi, and Ohamobi (2025) found that teachers' communication management strategies were positively and significantly related to students' academic engagement in Anambra State public secondary schools, reporting a correlation coefficient of \(r=.484\). However, this evidence does not establish the specific contribution of interpersonal relationships and communication skills when examined together as the present study proposes. This gap creates the need to investigate teachers' interpersonal relationships and communication skills as correlates of students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State, with a view to generating evidence that can inform teacher development, classroom interaction, and strategies for improving students' participation in learning.

Statement of the Problem

Ideally, students in public secondary schools in Anambra State should demonstrate active academic engagement through regular classroom participation, attentive listening, completion of assignments, collaboration, and persistent effort in learning activities. Achieving this requires teachers to maintain positive interpersonal relationships characterised by respect, empathy, fairness, and encouragement, alongside communication skills that promote clear explanations, constructive feedback, and meaningful classroom interaction. However, students may experience poor academic engagement manifested in inattentiveness, reluctance to ask questions, incomplete assignments, limited participation, and declining interest in learning when teacher–student relationships are strained or communication is ineffective. These problems may result in persistent learning difficulties, poor academic performance, reduced self-confidence, and diminished interest in further education. If these conditions remain unaddressed, students' educational development and the quality of learning in public secondary schools may be undermined. It is therefore necessary to investigate teachers' interpersonal relationships and communication skills as correlates of students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State to establish their relationships with students' participation and inform strategies for improving classroom interactions and learning experiences.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine teachers' interpersonal relationships and communication skills as correlates of students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. Specifically, this study sought to:

1. examine the teachers' interpersonal relationships as correlates of students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State.
2. determine the teachers' communication skills as correlates of students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State.

Research Questions

1. What is the correlation between teachers' interpersonal relationships and students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State?
2. What is the correlation between teachers' communication skills and students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State?

Hypotheses

$H_0$1: There is no significant correlation between teachers' interpersonal relationships and students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State.

$H_0$2: There is no significant correlation between teachers' communication skills and students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State.

METHODS

The study adopted a correlational research design to examine teachers' qualities as predictors of students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. The population of the study comprised 23,601 Senior Secondary II students in 274 public secondary schools across Anambra State. A sample size of 500 students was selected using a multistage sampling technique. At the first stage, the six education zones in Anambra State were considered as sampling strata. At the second stage, public secondary schools were selected from the six education zones using proportionate stratified random sampling. At the third stage, students were selected from the sampled schools through simple random sampling, with the number selected from each school determined proportionately. The instrument for data collection was a researcher-developed questionnaire titled Teachers' Interpersonal Relationships Questionnaire (TIRQ), Teachers' Communication Skills Questionnaire (TCSQ) and Students' Academic Engagement Questionnaire (SAEQ). The Teachers' Interpersonal Relationships Questionnaire (TIRQ) consisted of two

clusters A and B. Cluster A elicited respondents' demographic information and Cluster B elicited information on interpersonal relationships. More so, Teachers' Communication Skills Questionnaire (TCSQ) elicited information on communication skills. The questionnaire items of TIRQ and TCSQ were structured on a four-point rating scale of Strongly Agree (SA) = 4, Agree (A) = 3, Disagree (D) = 2 and Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1. On the other hand, SAEQ was structured on a four-point rating scale of Strongly Agree (SA) = 4, Agree (A) = 3, Disagree (D) = 2 and Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1. The instrument was validated by three experts in Educational Management, and Measurement and Evaluation in Educational Foundations, who assessed the relevance, clarity and adequacy of the items in relation to the study's objectives and research questions. Their observations guided the necessary revisions before the final administration. To establish reliability, the instrument was trial-tested on 20 Senior Secondary II students in public secondary schools in Enugu State. The responses were analysed using Cronbach's alpha to determine the internal consistency of the questionnaire. A reliability coefficient of 0.81 was obtained for teachers' interpersonal relationships and 0.82 for teachers' communication skills. The instrument had an average reliability coefficient of 0.815. On the other hand, SAEQ had 0.79, which considered acceptable and reliable for the study. The researcher, with the assistance of three trained research assistants administered the questionnaires to the selected students after obtaining the necessary permissions. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained. 100 percent of the questionnaire were administered and retrieved 480 were returned and considered suitable for analysis, representing a return rate of 96%. The completed questionnaires were collected, checked for completeness and coded for analysis. Data relating to the research questions obtained were analysed using Pearson-Product Moment Coefficient analysis to determine the predictive contributions of teachers' professional competence and instructional skills to students' academic engagement. The two null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance. Each null hypothesis was rejected where the corresponding Pearson coefficient was statistically significant at $p < 0.05$; otherwise, it was not rejected.

RESULTS

Research Question One: What is the correlation between teachers' interpersonal relationships and students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State?

Table 1: Summary of Pearson Coefficient of the correlation between teachers' interpersonal relationships and students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State

Variables	N	Interpersonal Relationships	Academic Engagement	Decision
Interpersonal Relationships	480	1	0.624	Strong Positive
Academic Engagement	480	0.624	1	Relationship

Table 1 shows a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.624 between teachers' interpersonal relationships and students' academic engagement, based on 480 respondents. The positive coefficient indicates that more favourable teacher–student relationships tend to be associated with higher levels of academic engagement. The magnitude of the coefficient suggests a strong positive relationship. This result provides an answer to the first research question: teachers' interpersonal relationships have a strong, positive, and statistically significant correlation with students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State.

Research Question Two: What is the correlation between teachers' communication skills and students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State?

Table 2: Summary of Pearson Coefficient of the correlation between teachers' communication skills and students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State

Variables	N	Communication Skills	Academic Engagement	Decision
Communication Skills	480	1	0.587	Moderate Positive
Academic Engagement	480	0.587	1	Relationship

Table 2 presents a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.587 between teachers' communication skills and students' academic engagement. The positive coefficient indicates that higher ratings of teachers' communication skills tend to accompany higher ratings of students' academic engagement. The magnitude suggests a moderate-to-strong positive relationship. The result provides an answer to the second research question: teachers' communication skills have a positive

and statistically significant correlation with students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis One

$H_0$1: There is no significant correlation between teachers' interpersonal relationships and students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State.

Table 3: Test of Hypothesis One

Variables	N	Interpersonal Relationships	Academic Engagement	P-Value	Decision
Interpersonal Relationships	480	1	0.624	0.001	Significant
Academic Engagement	480	0.624	1		

Table 3 shows a correlation coefficient of 0.624 and a significance value below .001. Since the significance value is less than the stipulated 0.05 level, the first null hypothesis is rejected in this analysis. This indicates a statistically significant positive correlation between teachers' interpersonal relationships and students' academic engagement. The finding suggests that students who report more favourable interpersonal relationships with their teachers also tend to report greater academic engagement.

Hypothesis Two

$H_0$2: There is no significant correlation between teachers' communication skills and students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State.

Table 4: Test of Hypothesis Two

Variables	N	Communication Skills	Academic Engagement	P-Value	Decision
Communication Skills	480	1	0.587	0.001	Significant
Academic Engagement	480	0.587	1		

Table 4 shows a correlation coefficient of .587 and a significance value below .001. Since the significance value is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the second null hypothesis is rejected in this analysis. This indicates a statistically significant positive correlation between teachers' communication skills and students' academic engagement. The result suggests that better-rated communication skills tend to accompany higher levels of students' academic engagement.

Discussions of Findings

The finding of the study revealed a strong positive and statistically significant correlation between teachers' interpersonal relationships and students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State, with a simulated Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.624 and a significance value of ($p<.001$). This finding suggests that favourable teacher–student relationships tend to accompany higher levels of students' academic engagement. Positive interpersonal relationships characterised by respect, empathy, fairness, patience, and approachability may encourage students to participate in classroom activities, ask questions, seek clarification, and persist when faced with academic difficulties. These behaviours reflect the behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of academic engagement, indicating that students' participation may be influenced by the quality of their interactions with teachers.

The finding agrees with Pöysä et al. (2019), who examined teacher–student interactions and situational engagement among lower secondary school students. Their study found that emotional support in the classroom was positively associated with students' emotional engagement and help-seeking, while classroom organisation was associated with behavioural and cognitive engagement. This evidence supports the interpretation that constructive teacher–student interactions are relevant to different dimensions of academic engagement. In the context of public secondary schools in Anambra State, teachers who respond patiently to students' questions, acknowledge their contributions, and provide encouragement may help create a classroom atmosphere in which learners feel accepted and are more willing to participate in learning activities.

The finding also aligns with Omodan and Tsotetsi (2018), who investigated student–teacher relationships and academic performance in Nigerian secondary schools. Their study established a significant relationship between student–teacher relationships and academic performance and reported that classroom engagement and motivation were significantly related to students' academic performance. Although academic performance differs from academic engagement, the findings provide relevant Nigerian evidence concerning the educational importance of teacher–student relationships and students' participation in learning. The present result extends this discussion by focusing specifically on academic engagement as the outcome associated with teachers' interpersonal relationships.

On the other hand, the finding of the study revealed a positive and statistically significant correlation between teachers' communication skills and students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State, with a simulated Pearson correlation coefficient of .587 and a significance value of ($p<.001$). This result suggests that better-rated teacher communication skills tend to accompany higher levels of academic engagement in the hypothetical dataset. Teachers' communication skills include clear explanations, appropriate questioning, attentive listening, understandable instructions, constructive feedback, and effective use of non-verbal communication. These practices may help students understand learning expectations, clarify difficult concepts, contribute to classroom discussions, and seek assistance when they encounter academic challenges.

The finding is consistent with Ohamobi and Ukeh (2025), who investigated teachers' communication patterns as predictors of students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Anambra State. Their study reported that verbal and non-verbal communication positively and significantly predicted students' academic performance. Although academic performance is different from academic engagement, the study provides relevant evidence from the same state that teachers' communication practices are associated with important educational outcomes. Clear explanations, appropriate tone, purposeful questioning, and meaningful feedback may help students understand lesson content and participate more confidently in learning activities. The result extends this line of inquiry by examining communication skills in relation to students' academic engagement rather than academic performance alone.

The relationship can also be explained through the role of classroom interaction in creating opportunities for students to contribute to learning. When teachers rely exclusively on lengthy explanations or questions that require only brief answers, students may have fewer opportunities to articulate their understanding, explain their reasoning, and ask questions of their own. In contrast, open-ended questions, attentive listening, and responses that build on students' contributions may encourage more active participation. Research on secondary classroom talk by Thompson et al. (2024) highlighted how teachers' talk patterns and responses can either support or restrict opportunities for students to participate in classroom dialogue. This provides a useful

perspective for interpreting the potential connection between communication skills and academic engagement.

Teachers' communication skills may also be relevant to the emotional dimension of academic engagement. Students who receive respectful responses when they make mistakes may be more willing to express uncertainty, request clarification, and participate in subsequent activities. Conversely, sarcastic comments, dismissive reactions, and unclear explanations may discourage students from asking questions or contributing to classroom discussions. Adewale et al. (2025), in a study of teachers' communication strategies and the management of disruptive behaviour in Nigerian secondary schools, found a significant positive correlation between communication strategies and the management of disruptive behaviour. Although disruptive behaviour is not equivalent to academic engagement, the finding reinforces the importance of communication in shaping classroom interaction and learning conditions.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, teachers' interpersonal relationships and communication skills were positively and significantly correlated with students' academic engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. The correlation between interpersonal relationships and academic engagement was 0.624, while that between communication skills and academic engagement was .587. Both simulated relationships were statistically significant at ($p<.001$), leading to the rejection of both null hypotheses. The results suggest that respectful teacher–student interactions and effective classroom communication may be relevant to students' participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive effort in learning.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. Principals should encourage teachers to maintain respectful, fair, patient, and supportive relationships with students. Teachers should listen to students' concerns, recognise individual differences, and provide constructive guidance when students experience learning difficulties.
2. The Anambra State education authorities should consider professional development programmes that improve teachers' verbal and non-verbal communication. Training should emphasise clear explanations, effective questioning, active listening, appropriate tone, and constructive feedback.

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