PEER INFLUENCE IN RELATION TO ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND

SOCIALIZATION AMONG ADOLESCENTS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

by

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ABSTRACT

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Adolescents have always been exposed to peer influence, but the kinds of peer influence that they encounter have changed tremendously in the past years. Peers can influence everything from what an adolescent chooses to wear to whether or not an adolescent engages in drug related or other delinquent behavior. This is an important topic because if society and education related professionals understand the issues surrounding negative peer influence, they are more likely to prevent it and be more adequately prepared to help a teenager facing negative aspects of peer pressure.

This research is a review of the existing literature on the positive and negative aspects of peer influence among adolescents in relation to academic performance and socialization. Directions for future research and implications for professional practice are also included.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a time of transformation in many areas of an individual's life. In the midst of these rapid physical, emotional, and social changes, youth begin to question adult standards and the need for parental guidance. It is also a time for individuals to make important decisions about their commitment to academics, family, and perhaps religion. Young adults begin to ask questions such as, "Is school important to me?" and "How do I want to spend my time?" The choices that adolescents make regarding their motivation, engagement, and achievement in school (and in life) and the satisfaction they obtain from their choices depend, in part, on the context in which they make such choices (Ryan, 2000).

Teachers, parents, and peers all provide adolescents with suggestions and feedback about what they should think and how they should behave in social situations. These models can be a source of motivation or a lack thereof. Modeling refers to individual changes in cognition, behavior, or effects that result from the observation of others (Ryan, 2000). Observing others perform a particular behavior or voice a certain opinion can introduce an individual to new behaviors and viewpoints that may be different from his or her own. Observation also enlightens an individual on the consequences of such behavior and opinions. Depending on these consequences, observation of a model can strengthen or weaken the likelihood the observer will engage in such behavior or adopt such beliefs in the future. The current literature review focuses

on both the positive and negative roles of peer groups in adolescent socialization and academic performance.

According to Castrogiovanni (2002), a peer group is defined as a small group of similarly aged, fairly close friends, sharing the same activities. In general, peer groups or cliques have two to twelve members, with an average of five or six. Peer groups provide a sense of security and they help adolescents to build a sense of identity. Adolescents ask questions relating to social identity theory such as, "Who am I?" and "What do I want out of life?" Feeling part of a group, be it the stereotypical jocks, goths, or punks, allows adolescents to feel like they are on the way to answering some of these questions. Given that adolescents spend twice as much time with peers as with parents or other adults, it is important to study the influence or pressures that peers place on each other.

Adolescents are well aware that they influence each other. Lashbrook (2000) reported on a national Gallup poll release that surveyed 13- to 17-year-olds. It was found that 40 percent of the sample cited peer influence when asked why they thought the Columbine High School shooting happened. The Gallup poll release shows that America's teenagers put the blame for tragedies such as Columbine directly on themselves rather than on parents, gun laws or media violence. The poll also reported that this country's youth suggest that one of the best ways to prevent future occurrences is to find ways to foster better communication among students, and to break down the barriers that apparently create hostility between groups in today's American high schools. This research shows that peer influence can be a scary phenomenon for both adolescents and adults in the school setting.

As already eluded to, peers can also provide many positive elements in an adolescent's life. It is important, however, to remember that peer influence can potentially have a deadly impact or other various negative effects. It is vital for education-related professionals to understand the complex aspects of peer influence in order to stop these negative effects before they occur.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the relevant existing literature on the positive and negative effects of peer influence on adolescents. More specifically, this research paper focuses on how peer influence relates to academic performance, socialization, and other areas of concern to education-related professionals. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What do peer groups provide for adolescents?

2. How does peer influence affect an adolescent's socialization?

3. How does peer influence affect a student's motivation and engagement at school?

4. What are the gender and SES differences that exist in regards to peer influence?

5. What are some positive aspects of peer influence?

6. What leads to negative peer groups?

7. What can be done by professionals to combat negative peer influence?

8. What can be done by families to combat negative peer influence?

Assumptions

It is assumed that peer influence can have both positive and negative effects on an adolescent's academic performance and socialization. It is also assumed that peer groups may not allow an adolescent to be "themselves" in the truest sense of the word. Adolescents sometimes need to put on an act in order to gain acceptance from the specific group with which they would like to be associated. Furthermore, it is assumed that peers, as well as parents, siblings, and teachers, all play a large role in how adolescents function in everyday living.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is a review of the existing literature relevant to the topic of peer influence among adolescents. More specifically, this chapter is a review of topics including: what peer groups provide for adolescents; facts about adolescent peer relations; how peer influence affects academic performance and socialization; gender and SES differences and how they manifest in adolescent peer groups; positive peer influence; contributing factors to negative peer groups; and ways to combat negative peer influence.

What do Peer Groups Provide for Adolescents?

Educators and parents should be aware that peer groups provide a variety of positive experiences for adolescents. Castrogiovanni (2002) cited the following: (1) the opportunity to learn how to interact with others; (2) support in defining identity, interests, abilities, and personality; (3) autonomy without control of adults and parents; (4) opportunities for witnessing the strategies others use to cope with similar problems, and for observing how effective they are; (5) involved emotional support and; (6) building and maintaining friendships.

According to Black (2002), peer groups provide a forum where teens construct and reconstruct their identities. Castrogiovanni (2002) stated that at no other stage of development is one's sense of identity so unstable. A peer-labeling process may be contributing to the construction of positive identities for some adolescents but negative identities for others (Downs & Rose, 1991). Unfortunately, members of groups may

accept negative labels, incorporate them into their identity, and through the process of secondary deviance, increase levels of deviant behavior.

Teenagers learn about what is acceptable in their social group by "reading" their friends' reactions to how they act, what they wear, and what they say. The peer group gives this potent feedback by their words and actions, which either encourages or discourages certain behaviors and attitudes. Anxiety can arise when teens try to predict how peers will react, and this anxiety plays a large role in peer influence. In fact, Burns and Darling (2002) stated that self-conscious worrying about how others will react to future actions is the most common way adolescents are influenced by their peers. When a teen who takes an unpopular stand and goes against the expectations or norms of the peer group, he or she is at risk for being ridiculed. Ridicule is not an easy thing to accept at any age, let alone when you are twelve or thirteen years old. This leads to the topic of peer pressure.

Peer pressure is defined as when people your own age encourage or urge you to do something or to keep from doing something else, no matter if you personally want to do it or not (Ryan, 2000). The more subtle form of peer pressure is known as peer influence, and it involves changing one's behavior to meet the perceived expectations of others (Burns & Darling, 2002). In general, most teens conform to peer pressure about fairly insignificant things like music, clothing, or hairstyles. When it comes to more important issues like moral values, parents still remain more influential than the peer group (Black, 2002).

Biddle, Bank, and Marlin conducted a study to examine parental and peer influence on adolescents. The data collected was part of a field study of expectations and reported behaviors conducted by interviews with American adolescents. Subjects for the study consisted of 149 adolescents, then enrolled in public high schools in a Midwestern state. The respondents constituted a quota-sample design that was approximately balanced for age, sex, social class, race, and community of residence. In comparison with the total population, the sample contained more blacks and disproportionately few who lived in rural areas; and the sample was obtained within a single, Midwestern state and consisted only of adolescents who were then enrolled within public schools. In other respects the sample was presumably representative.

The researchers found that peer behaviors are more likely to affect the adolescent than parental behaviors, whereas parental norms are more likely to affect the adolescent than peer norms. Parents have had a longer time to influence adolescents and retain a responsibility to represent the standards of the adult world. Peers, in contrast, may be shunned if they attempt to impose standards on their adolescent friends but are likely to be omnipresent as behavioral models within schools (Biddle, Bank, & Marlin, 2001). It is unfortunate that many adolescents do not have parents who are actively involved in their lives, do not provide appropriate supervision, and are unable to clearly communicate their values. This puts these adolescents in an even greater danger of giving in to negative peer pressure.

James Jaccard, professor of psychology at the University at Albany in New York, noted that young people might be influenced as much by what they think their peers are

doing as by what they are really doing. A young person may think that everyone is

smoking or everyone is sexually active and may therefore feel pressure to try those

behaviors (cited in Fischhoff, Cromwell, & Kipke, 1999).

Facts about Peer Relations

Peer groups are constantly evolving and many factors play a role in how peer

groups function today. Lingren (1995) cited some interesting facts about peer relations.

These facts may help adults better understand the potential foundation of some peer

group behaviors during adolescence. Adults should understand the facts surrounding peer

relations before forming an opinion about adolescent groups in general.

First, during adolescence, parents and their children are more physically and

psychologically distant from each other. This is a normal process, but it is shown in

decreases in emotional closeness and warmth, increases in parent-adolescent

conflict/disagreement, and an increase in time adolescents spend with peers. Second,

increases in family strains, such as economic pressures and divorce, have prompted

teenagers to depend more on peers for emotional support. Third, in ten to twenty percent

of families, parents and adolescents are in distressed relationships characterized by

emotional coldness and frequent outbursts of anger/conflict. Fourth, youth gangs

commonly associated with inner-city neighborhoods are becoming a more common

phenomenon among youth in smaller cities, suburbs, and even rural areas. Fifth, formal

dating patterns have been replaced with informal socializing patterns in mixed-sex

groups. This may encourage casual sexual relationships that heighten the risk of teenage

pregnancy, AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases. Sixth, ethnicity is replacing

individual abilities or interests as the basis for defining peer "crowds." Finally, the increase in part-time employment among youth has had little effect on peer relations. In order to spend time with peers, teenagers drop extracurricular activities, reduce time spent on homework, and withdraw from family functions.

It is clear that everything from family strain to ethnicity plays a role in how peer groups develop and operate. All of these factors have the potential for creating greater peer influence in or outside of school, and sometimes have the consequence of generating increased pressures on adolescents to engage in problematic behaviors. Some parents may assume that they are the only family experiencing frustration with some of their adolescent's behaviors when, in reality, frustration between parents and adolescents is a fairly universal occurrence.

Similarity and Socialization

According to Ryan (2000) an important component of interpersonal attraction and selection of friends is similarity. Brown, Mounts, Lamborn, and Steinberg (1993) also suggested that adolescent peer group members select each other based on similar characteristics just as adults do. It is unusual for a young person to select a friend who uses cigarettes or alcohol if they do not. Even when a non-using adolescent has a best friend who uses cigarettes or alcohol, research has shown that peer influence was relatively small and was mediated by family factors, such as parental monitoring (Fischhoff, Cromwell, & Kipke, 1999). This finding is further evidence that parents can still have strong influence over their sons and daughters.

In earlier years, Cohen (1983) suggested that whether socialization results in reinforcement or change depends on initial similarity. If individuals are similar on a particular characteristic, then the pressure will be to remain the same on that characteristic. On the other hand, if individuals are different on a particular characteristic, the pressure will be for change to occur so that similarity may be achieved. Because it is impossible to select friends who are similar in all characteristics, Ryan (2000) stated that it makes sense that selection focuses on the characteristics that are most central to an individual's identity (i.e., the characteristics most valued). In general, adolescents overestimate how similar they are to their friends and perception is vital to influence.

As far as socialization is concerned, there are two important dimensions when friendships are formed that influence the socialization process. These two dimensions are similarity and value. Similarity on any given characteristic affects the pressure that exists among peers to change. High similarity results in pressure to stay the same or at least no pressure to change and low similarity results in pressure to change. This information corresponds with the similarity principle in that we like people who are like us. Cohen (1977) found evidence for similarity regarding the use of alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, and also issues concerning academic outcomes. Best friends have been found to be similar in regards to frequency of cutting class and time spent on homework.

Ide, Parkerson, Haertel, and Walberg (1981) conducted a meta-analysis of studies published from 1966 to 1978 which examined similarity of best friends and students' lists of close friends in the academic realm. Across the ten studies reviewed, friends were similar in regards to academic achievement: An individual and his or her friends' grades

and test scores were moderately correlated. In addition, friends were similar regarding

college aspirations. Landau (2002) supported this conclusion by stating that students who

care about learning are more likely to associate with peers who share this interest in

academics than those who have less interest in learning. The personal value that an

individual attaches to a characteristic also affects the individual's response to change.

High value results in resistance to change, and low value results in receptiveness to

change (Ryan, 2000).

Motivation, Engagement, and Academic Performance

Another important aspect of adolescent peer groups is motivation. The difference

between motivation and engagement is that motivation is more focused on student

cognition underlying involvement in schoolwork (i.e., beliefs) and engagement is more

focused on actual involvement in schoolwork (i.e., behavior). Ryan (2000) found that

peer groups were influential regarding changes in students' intrinsic value for school (i.e.,

liking and enjoying) as well as achievement (i.e., report card grades). The peer group was

not, however, influential regarding changes in students' utility value for school (i.e.,

importance and usefulness). It was found that associating with friends who have a

positive affect toward school enhanced students' own satisfaction with school, whereas

associating with friends who have a negative affect toward school decreased it (Ryan,

2000). Landau (2002) stated that an adolescent's expectancy of success was the primary

predictor of academic effort and grades. A sense of belonging and support of a peer group

was also significantly associated with these outcomes.

Athletics, dating, and sexual behavior, as well as alcohol, drug, and tobacco use have been shown to be important to friendship choice in adolescence. For some adolescents, other interests may compete with or take charge over similar academic motivation and engagement as criteria for selecting a peer group. This could put an adolescent's motivation and engagement in school in a precarious position (Ryan, 2000). Through selection, some adolescents may place themselves in peer group situations that support or foster their achievement-related beliefs and behaviors. Others may place themselves in contexts that weaken achievement-related beliefs and behaviors.

Gender and SES Differences

As males and females develop into adults, they also develop their own attitudes toward peer groups and handle peer pressure differently. Zeijl, te Poel, du Bois-Reymond, Ravesloot, and Meulman (2000) conducted a study to investigate the degree to which pre-adolescents as well as adolescents associate with parents and peers in their leisure time. A questionnaire was designed for children and young teens aged ten to fifteen years. A total of 927 Dutch juveniles from different social classes participated in the study. The total sample included an approximately equal number of boys (n = 50.8%) and girls (n = 49.8%).

The researchers found that fourteen and fifteen-year-old boys, especially those from higher social classes, strongly focused on peer groups, whereas girls of the same age had a stronger preference for dyadic friendships. Since boys generally have more freedom of movement in peer groups than do girls, they are more frequently found in public with their peer groups. Girls are more likely to hang out in their homes. Together

with one or a few intimate girlfriend(s), they create a "bedroom culture" (Zeijl et al., 2000). It was also found that thirteen-year-old girls from higher and middle social classes are single/friendship kids. This means they spend as much time alone as with a steady friend. Interestingly enough, the researchers found that teenage girls from lower social classes encountered the most parental attention concerning peer contacts.

Communication within peer groups is another area of interest for education-related professionals. Not surprisingly, group norms are communicated differently among boys and girls. Ryan (2000) cited gossip, teasing, and humor as the predominant ways of enforcing norms among adolescent girls. Gossiping about others, for example, is a means of clearly communicating unacceptable peer behavior without confrontation. Such indirect methods allow for understanding to take place without outwardly expressing strong negative feelings. In another realm, boys who are high on antisocial behavior also use humor to encourage antisocial behavior by laughing when a friend jokes about deviant or illegal activities (Ryan, 2000).

As far as mixed groups are concerned, young adolescents begin looking for contact with peers of the opposite sex while they are in the "safe" seclusion of same sex groups. Only in mid-adolescence do mixed groups arise, after the leaders of same sex groups have taken the initiative of starting individual contacts with the opposite sex (Zeijl et al., 2000). The researchers further mentioned that girls swap their safe seclusion of the same sex group for mixed groups at a younger age than do boys.

Overall, Zeijl, te Poel, du Bois-Reymond, Ravesloot, and Meulman (2000) found that children and teens from families with higher social status spend more time with peer

groups than those from families of lower social status. This finding has the potential for both positive and negative consequences. Furthermore, students who are female, from high socioeconomic status families, or with strong academic backgrounds, were more likely to have friends who cared about school learning and were less likely to associate with peers who were interested in engaging in delinquent activities (Landau, 2002).

Positive Peer Influence

Contrary to popular belief, not all peer influence is negative. Spending more time with peers does not always translate into trouble. Peer influence can, in fact, keep youth participating in religious activities, going to 4-H meetings, and playing on sports teams, even when they are not leaders (Lingren, 1995). The peer group is a source of affection, sympathy, understanding, and a place for experimentation. This factor is consistent with Bowmeister and Leary's "belongingness hypothesis" in that there is a genetically based need to belong. The basic premise is that people of all ages seek inclusion and avoid exclusion. Influence in these primary peer groups can vary from joining the track team or drama club to motivation, engagement, and achievement in algebra class.

As already suggested, students define themselves by the groups with which they affiliate. Values that are important to most adolescents include: school learning and achievement; social activities; and whether or not to engage in delinquent activities (Landau, 2002). Fischhoff, Cromwell, and Kipke (1999) cited a systems theory perspective, arguing that groups that provide a lot of positive feedback encourage action to maintain good feelings. These good feelings are often reported in peer groups, and actions could lead to engaging in risky behaviors to keep the "fun" going. According to

Ryan (2000), students who were identified as "jock-populars" perceived more pressure in the area of school involvement and less pressure toward misconduct than students identified as "druggie-toughs."

Peer Group Developmental Stages for High-Risk Youth

Ungar (2000) conducted a qualitative study to examine the construct of peer pressure in relation to mental health for 41 high-risk adolescents. The participants were ages thirteen to eighteen and they had all been in therapy within the last twelve months. Two groups participated. The first group included twenty-one white adolescents, twelve female and nine males, from several small urban centers in southwestern Ontario, Canada. The second group included four females and sixteen males from a long-term treatment program in a young offender, closed-custody facility in eastern Canada. Seventeen were white and three were Native Canadians. Participation in the study was voluntary. A small stipend was paid to all the participants to ensure the inclusion of less altruistic youth and to emphasize the distinction between this research and therapy.

Each teen participated in interviews lasting one to one-and-a-half hours. The interviews included open-ended questions, covering issues related to adolescence, mental health, relationships, competencies, coping strategies, and experiences of power and control.

The researchers maintain that in three stages, adolescents progress towards greater power and self-expression in their interactions with peers, family members, and others in the community. During the first developmental stage, high-risk teens are stuck with one self-definition. Although some choice may be exercised in the selection of this identity,

there are few alternatives from which to choose. The peer group helps to reinforce the one label the individual teen controls. These teens typically include the repeat offender whose only talent is getting into trouble, the suicidal youth who has few other coping strategies, and the youth who sacrifices his or her needs for the needs of others.

The second developmental stage is reached when teens become chameleons. They appear to adopt the labels available to them from the different groups of people with whom they interact, including peers. These youths are the ones who do fine in school, but act violently toward themselves or others when at home, or appear confident when in leadership positions, but surprise adults with their lack of self-esteem.

The third developmental stage is achieved when youths experience the control and competence necessary to construct self-definitions of their own choosing, which are accepted by peers, family, and community members. These are resilient, self-assured individuals who steadfastly proclaim to the world, "This is who I am. Accept me." They use the peer group to assert unique aspects of their identity.

The researchers in this particular study concluded that for many adults, the concept of peer pressure leads to the belief that the peer group demands conformity to its norms, which may include delinquency. The notion that adolescents experience anxiety or frustration when unable to follow "the dictums of their peers" supports the idea that teens sacrifice personal agency. However, the high-risk youths in the present study provided a different perspective. The peer group was experienced as a forum in which to participate in the collective construction of both a group and individual identity.

Overall, Ungar (2000) depicted peer groups in a positive light. He closed his article by stating the following:

> By exploiting opportunities available to them through the peer group, high-risk youths challenge the stigmatizing labels assigned to them by their families and community. As they participate with peers in the creation of self-definition, they move from feelings of worthlessness and disempowerment to confidence and well-being.

What Leads to Negative Peer Groups?

While it is clear that peer groups can be positive for identity formation, negative peers groups do exist and should be of concern to education-related professionals. One aspect that may contribute to the continuation of negative peer groups is passive acceptance of peer-group structure. Teachers expect that students will behave in a certain way that is consistent with their peer group affiliation and consequently make no attempt to intervene with the structure. In other words, teachers passively accept the "brain-nerd" differentiation. Another problem that arises in the school is favoritism toward athletes. Athletes often receive more esteem in school and are often seen by other students as receiving special treatment. Special treatment could come in the form of more teacher-student interaction or more academic help from advisors. This extra attention given towards athletes can be very discouraging for non-athletes and can spark jealousy. If educators focus too much on the athletes and/or popular students, they may not even fully notice a struggling student slip through the cracks.

An additional drawback in the eyes of Alderman (2000) is ability tracking. Ability tracking involves separating students based on their achievement in school in the past. Ability grouping forces isolation among students at different achievement levels, with each group forming its own peer culture. Low achievers are isolated from models of achievement motivation and more effective strategies to succeed. In essence, ability tracking forces students to form groups that may not result in the best outcome. High achieving students can benefit from interacting with low achieving students and vice versa.

Lastly, effort may be diluted when adults use stereotypical images to either excuse or blame students on social identity categories and crowds to which they belong. For example, a teacher may excuse poor student test performance on the basis of family lifestyle, or instead blame the family background for the performance. Blaming poor performance on situational factors gets the student nowhere. Regardless of background, students should be given equal opportunities to succeed and be treated just like everyone else. Standards should be upheld and consequences for not performing well on a test are not always a bad thing. Otherwise, the student may also begin to blame the situational factors and give up trying.

Combating Negative Peer Pressure

Diminishing negative pressures involves walking a fine line between taking an authoritative role and stepping back to allow individual freedom. Teachers can increase their personal awareness of adolescent social systems by investing more energy in getting to know their students and the groups to which they belong. In the classroom, teachers

should avoid making achievement a game of winners and losers. One step to accomplish this is to use criterion-based grading instead of grading on a curve. Most importantly, the school system and community should enhance the status of academic achievement. Schools should recognize academic excellence in areas outside of the core curriculum by having trade fairs. It is important to avoid sending mixed messages about the relative worth of academic versus nonacademic achievement. This involves being aware of the peer-group social structure that operates in a particular school, the norms that operate within each group, the relationship of one group to another, as well as the loyalty students display towards their own group (Alderman, 2000). Harnessing the power of peers can be important to create a school climate supportive of academic excellence (Burns & Darling, 2002).

It would also be beneficial for adults and families to abandon the stereotype of peer groups always being negative, promoting positive peer relations, and perhaps setting up parent education programs for families with teenagers. Establishing peer intervention programs could target teens with poor social skills and aggressive tendencies. These groups could teach appropriate ways to communicate, deal with anger, and even raise self-esteem.

There are some ways parents can cultivate teens' self-confidence so they are not at risk for the negative peer influences. For instance, adults can praise smart choices and compliment adolescents' accomplishments. It is important for parents to get involved and know their child's friends, which could be accomplished by inviting them to the home, carpooling, and asking appropriate questions. Questions like: "Where are you going?,"

Who will you be with?," and "When will you be home?" are traditional, but crucial for parental involvement. Parents can also encourage activities that are likely to include teens they approve of. These activities might include after school clubs, church youth groups, and scouts. When teens are secretive about new friends, they may be hiding individuals they know their parents will not approve of. If a parent finds out that their teen is engaging in unacceptable behavior with their friends, the adult should be direct in addressing the issue and make their expectations clear. It is always possible for parents to talk with school counselors and professionals to help with the problem.

Overall, parents need to be present in their adolescent's lives. They should never underestimate the value of quality time spent together. If parents have a busy schedule and cannot be physically present, they should still make their presence felt in the home through phone calls, personal notes, or other forms of communication. Black (2002) stated that teenagers with close ties to their parents were far less likely to become delinquent or suffer depression than students who felt distant from their families. The bottom line is that it is of utmost importance for parents to be tolerant, patient, and show unconditional love during the teen years, and to realize that adolescence is not terminal, it just feels like it!

Summary

Adolescence is a time when old friendships end and new ones begin. As one can clearly see from the research, peer groups do have an influence on adolescents, whether it is positive or negative. Even within stable peer relationships, the socialization process is active and constantly developing. Parents during this time can feel a sense of rejection

and loss as the child who previously loved to bake cookies or toss around a football with mom and dad now prefers to spend every free minute with friends. Typically peers reinforce family values, but they do have the potential to encourage problem behaviors as well. Although the negative influence of peers is overemphasized in the minds of most adults, more can be done to help teenagers experience both the family and the peer group as a positive environment. The community, families, churches, and schools must all become involved to raise healthy, well-adjusted young adults.

CHAPTER THREE

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this literature review was to discuss peer influence in relation to academic performance and socialization among adolescents. It is clear from the research that peers do, in fact, have a relatively strong influence over the daily functioning of adolescent students. A critical analysis of the relevant literature includes directions for future research and practice.

Limitations of Literature Review

This literature review inherently has several limitations. While this researcher attempted to be exhaustive in reviewing all the literature available on peer influence in relation to academic performance and socialization, some research may have been overlooked. Thus, this review may present a biased view regarding peer influence. Further, other areas that may influence adolescents' academic performance and socialization were not discussed, such as the media, sports heroes, or political leaders within society. Additionally, this literature review is merely a summary of pervious research. No empirical research was conducted. Therefore, it does not add or contribute new information to the field of education.

Implications for Future Research

Further research is needed regarding the types of peer influence that exist and the different contexts in which peer influence occurs. Specific contexts for further study may include the home setting and school extracurricular activities, including athletic teams. Since peer influence is constantly evolving, researchers need to be alert to both the subtle

and not so subtle changes that occur within each new generation. Research has shown that peer influence has some broad similarities from years past, but there are also some important variations that need to be taken into consideration. Interacting with students on a regular basis and asking questions are effective ways to stay current on peer group functioning.

Other areas for further study may include looking at research on elementary-aged students in relation to peer influence, ethnicity and peer groups, the effects of divorce on peer relations, youth gangs, or research related to peer influence on adolescent sex and drug usage. There is an abundance of literature available on these topics, so this researcher chose to limit the scope of research to areas of academic performance and socialization among adolescents. As a result, the above-mentioned topics were not covered in depth in the present literature review.

Finally, more research is needed to determine the potential causes and effects of negative peer influence. Knowing the causes of negative peer influence can be helpful for developing prevention tactics. Knowing the effects of negative peer influence on adolescents can help an educator further understand a student experiencing negative peer influence. While complete avoidance of negative peer influence is virtually impossible, educators should be receptive to prevention techniques that decrease the negative effects of peer influence in schools.

Implications for Professional Practice

Throughout the rapid transformation that teens experience, adults need to balance proper guidance with adequate freedom for the adolescent to make his or her own

choices. Education-related professionals need to realize that both positive and negative

peer influence is inevitable in the school setting. Middle and high school teachers and

psychologists should be aware that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to all forms of

peer influence.

Teachers should focus on promoting classrooms of acceptance. They should avoid

playing favorites and abandon negative images of students that they already possess.

Additionally, teachers should avoid placing students in groups based on ability level.

Mixed groups provide integration and allow students to get to know a variety of students

they might not otherwise interact with.

School psychologists should focus on creating school-wide acceptance and

appreciation for diversity. They should also not display favoritism towards any particular

group of students in the school, by treating all students with respect. A crucial element

for the role of a school psychologist or a school counselor is simply being available.

Students should know that these individuals are there for them and that they can talk

about peer groups or most any other issue confidentially. Awareness is a key component

to creating an optimal learning environment for all students.

Summary

Overall, peer groups provide a strong sense of security that allows an adolescent

to build a sense of identity. For better or for worse, adolescents spend much of their

structured and unstructured time with peers. Parents can have some influence in how that

time is spent if they encourage activities they approve of without being over-bearing.

Based on research, the bottom line is that it is important for parents to be actively

involved in their adolescent's life. They should ask questions and be able to get a sense of how their son or daughter is spending his or her time. Parents need to be approachable and keep communication lines open in order for this to happen.

Another area that was highlighted in this literature review was gender differences. Peer influence happens differently among males and females. Research has shown that males are more likely to associate with larger peer groups, while females are more likely to form close, dyadic friendships. Furthermore, males tend to be seen in public more often with their peers and females tend to spend more time with peers in the home. In either case, males and females both exert influence on their peers, just in slightly different ways.

In closing, this researcher would like to further stress the point that not all peer influence is negative. Peer groups are, in essence, necessary for adolescent growth and development. As such, educators should praise the positive choices that students make in regards to peers and work to combat the negative ones. It is obvious that peer groups are not a fad or a trend, they are around to stay. For this reason, peer influence is a phenomenon that will be studied throughout time.

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