REVIEW ARTICLE

INFLUENCE OF PEER GROUP ON ADOLESCENT LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

A peer group is a normal social group consisting of human beings that share common interests. This group has strong negative and positive influences on members who are mostly adolescents. Such influences reflect their learning and general behaviour. This paper tries to x-ray the positive and negative influences exerted on members. Social and academic roles are among the positive roles the group hands over to adolescent members. Some of the groups wage war against negative influences that can ruin many adolescents such as drug abuse and other delinquent acts. The paper recommended among others the use of behaviour modification therapies by guidance counsellors as ways of mitigating these negative peer influences.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents have always been exposed to peer influence. This arises following the need of the adolescent to achieve status and maturity that will enable him to play adult roles. In order to achieve the need, he strives for maturity which he is usually insecure to attain. For this reason he seeks to form an alliance by attaching himself closely with others who look alike, that is, his age mates. Thus, he performs a union of age mates through which he finds strength and the will to assert himself in the struggle for a place in the adult world. The union so formed is the peer group (NERC, 1981, Ayorinde, 2014). 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 behaviour. Peer group influence have generated positive results in creating productive social group living environments and have helped reduce aggressive behaviour in group living settings. The impact of peer influence on adolescent development is generally associated with negative connotations. This does not always hold true. It is necessary to accept that membership in peer groups is a powerful force during adolescence. These groups normally provide an important developmental points of reference through which adolescents gain an understanding of the world outside their families. Sometimes failure to develop

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close relationship with age mates may result in a wide range of problems for most adolescents. These problems range from delinquency and substance abuse of psychological disorder (Hops, Davis, Alpert & Longoria, 1997). It is a known fact that as children, progress through adolescence, they build knowledge bases that help them navigate social situations. That is why adolescents who had developed positive peer relationship generated more alternative solutions to problems offered more mature solutions and were less aggressive than youths who had developed negative peer relationships. In support of this statement, Dodge (1993) found out that poor peer relationships were closely associated with social cognitive skill deficits. This is buttressed in the fact that peer influence serves as a pointer or focus for individual behaviour, members of a group can easily influence each other's work habits for better or for worse. Thus, it is necessary to encourage the positive attitude of peer influence as a basis for more efficient performance. In addition, students need to be encouraged to set standards for themselves and compete favourably to meet those standards.

The concepts of peer Groups

A peer group is an egalitarian group in which members share a common characteristic such as age or ethnicity. These attachments grow throughout childhood and adolescence. By the time students are in secondary school, they are likely to belong to some sort of student subculture. It is in the peer groups that the adolescent develops his ability to interact

effectively in the society. Peer groups start in early adolescence with small, isolated, unisex cliques. The cliques are groups of boys and girls who live in the same neighbourhood, go to the same school or neighbourhood schools, belong to the same church, play the same games or have similar interests. A peer group is a social group consisting of humans or a primary group of people, typically informed, who share a similar or equal status and/or of the same age bracket. Interaction with peers plays a vital role in a child's social development. Peer groups may enhance or detract from the process of socialization that helps in acquiring knowledge, skills and behaviours needed to become productive members of the society. Similarly, the Nigeria Education Research Council (NERC) (1981) observed that peer group plays vital and ever increasing role in determining the sort of individuals the adolescent will be. Things considered as vital both for man's age, sex and social class are learnt through peer influence. The peer group is important during a child's development since it gradually replaces the family as a primary source of need satisfaction. The child continues to depend on his family for the satisfaction of his basic physiological needs through out most or all of the period before he leaves home to establishing on his own. Many of these psychological needs can be taken over more effectively through the peer group than through the family. Peer groups appear to be as important in the lives of adult as in the lives of children and adolescents. Indeed, most adults belong to many peer groups, work groups, groups of friends or relatives, social groups, athletic groups, political groups and other. Having been accepted in each group, the individual derive the self-esteem, independence, confidence and affection he needs.

Positive Influence of Adolescent Learning

There is a general belief that all peers influence is negative. Research shows that spending more time with peer does not always translate into trouble. Lingren (1995) feels stronger that peer influence can keep youths busy participating in religious activities, playing in sports teams even when they are not leaders. The peer group serves as a source of affection, sympathy, understanding and a place of experimentation. This factor is consistent with Bowmeister and Learny's "belongingness theory" which states that there is a genetically based need to belong. The implication of this theory is that people of all ages seek inclusion as against exclusion. As peers define themselves by the groups they affiliate they enjoy such values as programme of studies, programme, and programme of activities and of guidance in schools. They compete for achievement in their classes, engage in social activities and also decide whether or not to engage in delinquent activities (Akuma, 2008).

In the light of this, Siddique (2003) remarked as follows:
The effect of social class family and classroom climate becomes more widespread as children become adolescents and young adults. The school in general and the teacher in particular have to provide more and more individual attention and guidance as the child gets up the age and class ladder. More avenues for learning should be provided and more ways sought for the individual to realize his full capabilities.

Educators and parents should be aware that peer groups provide many experiences for adolescents. According to Castro Giovanni (2002), these experiences are:

- Opportunity to learn how to interact with others.
- Support in defining identity, interests, abilities and personality.
- Autonomy without control of adults and parents.
- Opportunities for witnessing the strategies others use to cope with similar problems and for observing how effective they are.
- Involve emotional support, and;
- Building and maintaining friendships.

Black (2002) agrees with the above as he writes that peer groups provide a forum where teens construct and reconstruct their identities. Teenagers learn what is acceptable in their social group by reading their friends, reactions to know how they act, what they wear and what they say (Nicole 2004). The peer group gives this potent feedback through their words and actions that either encourages or discourages certain behaviours and attitudes. Anxiety can arise when adolescents try to predict how peers will react, and this anxiety plays a large role in peer influence. Burns and Darling (2002) state that self-conscious worrying about how others will react to future actions is the most common way adolescents are influenced by their peers. For instance, adolescent who takes an unpopular stand and goes against the expectations or norms of the peer groups, he or she is at risk of being ridiculed. Most adolescent conform to peer influence or pressure about fairly insignificant things like music, clothing and hair styles, but when it involves more important issues like moral values, parents are very likely to remain more inferential and resolute than peer group. Developmental psychologists like Jean Piget, Erik Erikson, etc all agree that peer relationships provide a unique context for cognitive, social and emotional development which enhances children's reasoning, abilities and concern for others. Siegler (2006) echoes these sentiments showing that social and emotional gains are indeed provided by peer interaction. Peer groups serve as an avenue for teaching members gender roles. Through gender role socialization, group members learn about sex differences, social and cultural expectations. The group can comprise all males, all females or both male and female. Adolescent peer groups provide support for children and teens as they assimilate into the adult society decreasing dependence on parents and increasing self sufficiency. By this period individuals expand their perspectives beyond the family and develop cordial relationship with others in the social system. Peers serve as social referents. Espelage, Holt and Henkek (2003) agree that peer groups have influence on individual member's attitude and social issues such as drug use, violence, academic achievement and development and expression of prejudice. Peer groups provide an influential social setting in which group norms are developed and enforced through socialization processes bthat promote within-group similarity. Within the group cohesion is determined and maintained by such factors as group communication, group consensus and group conformity concerning attitude and behaviour. As members of the group interconnect and agree, a normative code arises. The code can become very rigid-deciding group behaviour. The group individually may increase by normative codes and inter group conflict. If a member deviates from the strict normative code, it can lead to the member's rejection from the group.

The problem of negative peer groups

It is clear that peer group can be positive but negative peer groups do exist. Such group should be recognized by education practitioners. One important aspect that may contribute to the

existence of negative peer group is passive acceptance of peer-group structure. Some teachers expect that students should behave in a certain way that is consistent with their peer group affliction. This is not always the case since human beings are very complex "animals".One of the major problems that lead to negative peer groups is favouritism. Some group of students may be specially favoured such as athletes. They often receive more esteem in school especially when they win prizes for the school. This to other students is a special favour or treatment. The special treatment could come in form of scholarships, academic awards etc. The treatment can be very discouraging to non athletes who will then develop jealous attitudes. That can spark off problems. Alderman (2000) notes that; ability tracking is one of the measures that create peer groups. This involves separating students in problem in classes according to different achievement levels. Each level forms its own peer culture. In essence, ability grouping/teaching forces students to form groups that may not result in the best outcome. It is good to note that high achieving students can benefit from interaction with low achieving students and vice versa.

Recommendations

It is not an easy task to try to mitigate on negative peer pressures. That notwithstanding, teachers have to put in their best to achieve it. This involves drawing a fine line between taking an authoritarian role and mellowing down sometimes to allow individual freedom. Nicole (2004) suggests that teachers can increase their personal awareness of adolescents' social systems by investigating more energy in getting to know their students and the groups to which they belong. In the schools, academic excellence in areas outside the core curriculum should be recognized. For instance outstanding performances in school debates, leadership (Students' Union Government-SUG), Arts exhibition and other Co-Curricular activities should be highlighted and encouraged. Harnessing the power of peers can be important to create a school supportive of academic excellence (Burns and Darling, 2002). Adults and families would play some role in mitigating peer pressures by abandoning the idea that peer groups are always thinking negative. They could achieve this by promoting positive peer relations. This would necessitate for the need for professional counsellors to set up parent's education programmes. For families with teenagers, this will target poor social skills and aggressive tendencies of teenagers and help them to adjust positively. The positive adjustment could be achieved by guidance counsellors using behaviour modification therapies. Also, appropriate ways of communication, dealing with anger, raising self esteem could be part of the curriculum content in such programmes. Parents can still help in reducing negative peer pressures by cultivating in their teens self confidence for them to avoid being at risk of imbibing such undesired peer influences. For instance, teens can be praised for smart choices they have made and also compliment adolescents' accomplishments. Parents should know their child's friends by occasionally inviting them to their home. Activities to include teens they approve on could be organized on behalf of their own teens. Such activities may include after school clubs, church programmes, boys' brigade and girls' guide meetings. If parents find out that their teen is engaging in unacceptable behaviour with other friends, such parents should not hesitate in addressing the issue to make his expectation of the adolescent clear. Parents could liaise with school counsellors if possible to address the problem as early and it starts. For instance, the quality time spent together with these adolescents has a very high added value. If parents have a busy schedule such that they cannot be physically present always, they could still make their presence felt in the home through phone calls, personal notes or other forms of communication. Black (2002) is of the view that teenagers with close ties to their parents are far less likely to become delinquents or suffer depression than students who are distant from their families. It is most worthy to remind parents of adolescents to be tolerant, patients caring showing unconditional love can never be over emphasised. Also, they should realize that adolescence is not terminal.

Conclusion

Adolescence is a stage when old and new friendships begin. Peer influence is very glaring among the adolescents be it negative on position some parents tend to dislike their teens of this stage their sudden change of attitude. Adolescents prefer to spend time with their friends than staying at home to attend to household chores and chart with parents. Instead of emphasizing on negative influence of peer groups, more should be done by parents to help teenagers experience both the family and peer group as a positive environment. All hands should be on deck to enable families, churches, schools to become fully involved in raising healthy and well-adjusted young adults.

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