
Peer Support and the Academic Outcomes of African-American Adolescents: A Review

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Introduction

The academic performance of African Americans has long been a topic of interest in the research community. Findings have consistently indicated that the educational outcomes of African American students are not as positive as the outcomes for other groups, such as European and some Asian Americans (Patchen, 1982; Steele, 1992; 1998). For example, African Americans have historically experienced negative educational outcomes such as lower grade point averages, achievement test scores (Nettles & Perna, 1997), and higher dropout rates (Finn, 1989; Nettles & Perna, 1997; Slaughter, 1974). Further, disparities in academic achievement eventually contribute to lower enrollment in institutions of higher learning (NCES, 1995; Nettles & Perna, 1997), as well as more difficulty obtaining gainful employment (e.g., Nettles & Perna, 1997; Wilson, 1987).

Research investigating the reasons behind these disparities in academic achievement, college enrollment, and gainful employment has chiefly focused on issues that involve the genetic and cultural makeup of African Americans. Thus, a large portion of “mainstream” research has focused on the cognitive and cultural “shortcomings” of African Americans. However, in opposition to the logical and empirical inconsistencies of these studies, which often use a deficit approach, other researchers have sought to find alternative explanations for the “achievement gap.” Therefore, their investigations have chosen to examine the “shortcomings” of the environment in which African Americans are educated.

In an effort to examine antecedents to these inequities in academic performance, the present review examines social factors that may relate to the academic outcomes of African American adolescents. Specifically, I will review studies that have examined the relationship between support from the adolescents’ peer group and academic outcomes. As there is a preponderance of research that examines the dysfunctional aspects of African American adolescents’ development and outcomes, particularly in terms of peer influence, I have chosen to take a more normative approach to adolescent development. However, I will first review the approaches that have dominated studies of the relationships between peers and academic outcomes in African American adolescents.

Adolescent Peer Influence and Academic Achievement

Adolescence has commonly been characterized as a time during which the peer group becomes increasingly important to the adolescent as a socializing force (e.g., Berndt, 1979). The assumption that adolescents begin to reject the values of their parents in order to follow along with their peers has led to an abundance of research which has focused on the peer influence phenomenon in terms of antisocial behaviors, such as smoking, drug use and sexual behavior (e.g., Bahr, Marcos & Maughan, 1995; Diclemente, 1991). Further, peer influence has dominated studies of the role of the peer group and academic outcomes, and has been associated with adolescents' motivation on subsequent academic achievement in a number of studies (e.g., Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Epstein, 1983; Kindermann, 1993; Steinberg, Dornbusch & Brown, 1992; Wong, Eccles & Taylor, in press). For example, Berndt, Laychak and Park (1990) found that peers do influence achievement motivation, particularly when they have a close, nonconflicting relationship.

Despite findings that have linked adolescent peer influence to both positive and negative outcomes across several domains (e.g., Brown, 1982; Clasen & Brown, 1985; Epstein, 1983), researchers have continued to examine solely the negative impact of peer influence. Little emphasis has been placed on the positive aspects of peer socialization (via influence), particularly when investigating African American adolescents. For example, a number of researchers have contended that African American students' opposition to the notion that education is a viable resource for upward mobility contributes substantially to the gap in academic achievement (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1991). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) found that the African American students they studied equated doing well in school with "acting White." As a result, Steinberg, Dornbush and Brown (1992) argue that African American students receive less support for achievement from their peers of the same ethnic background, and do not fare as well in school as European American students.

Researchers argue that this opposition to academic excellence manifests itself in active discouragement of academic achievement, such that those who dare to do well suffer socially as a consequence (Ford, 1991; 1993). Ford (1993) found that the "gifted" (as measured by achievement tests) African American adolescents she investigated often underachieved to avoid teasing and ostracism by their fellow classmates. Therefore, in order to gain acceptance from their classmates, these underachieving students did not perform to their potential, and expressed less interest in their schoolwork and classroom activity.

Although this compelling research may begin to explain the reasons for which some students do not do well in school, this work fails to account for some of the contextual factors within the school that may moderate or mediate oppositional attitudes

toward school. For example, the culture of the school, that is, the school's system or organization, can prove to be either a motivating or discouraging force in academic achievement (Eccles & Midgley, 1984). Moreover, the availability of peers who endorse achievement-related behaviors may serve as a buffer from negative attitudes, and a school culture that is not conducive to the motivation of its students.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) generalized the students' attitudes and values in one school to all African American children. In so doing, they failed to acknowledge the diversity in attitudes and values that exist among African American students. For example, Senior and Anderson (1993) found that students in the urban, predominantly African American high schools they studied respected the "smart but popular" students the most. Moreover, the "smart" students were also highly respected, which demonstrates that some African American children do respect academic success and the students who do well in school. Furthermore, Fordham and Ogbu may have failed to make the distinction between different aspects of ethnic identity (see Sellers, Chavous & Cooke, 1998). They may also have failed to distinguish between behavioral conceptions of ethnic identity (i.e., "acting" African American or European American) and cognitive conceptions of ethnic identity (i.e., what it means to be African American). Clearly these two concepts are related but may not have the same impact on academic outcomes.

The existing research on peer influence as it relates to the academic achievement of African Americans has provided a plausible, but incomplete picture of the role of the peer group. Although there is evidence to support both positive and negative interactions among adolescents and their peers, in general, researchers have chosen to focus largely on the negative aspects of peer interaction when investigating African American adolescents. Just as a link has been established between negative peer influence and academic outcomes (Berndt, Laychak & Park, 1990; Berndt & Keefe, 1995), a similar link may be established between positive peer influence and academic outcomes (e.g., Epstein, 1983). In thinking about ways in which peers can impact the academic achievement of adolescents, it is important to investigate the impact of positively oriented peer influences as related to academic achievement. One way to think about this issue is to examine the effects of peer support on adolescents' academic outcomes.

Peer Support among Adolescents

Although the social support literature is fraught with methodological inconsistencies, researchers contend that in general, social support has either a direct, indirect and/or mediating effect on a number of outcomes (see Brownell & Schumaker, 1984)¹. However, the majority of the small body of research pertaining specifically to adolescents and the support they receive from their peer group has found either

indirect or buffering effects for social support (e.g., Herman-Stahl & Petersen, 1996; Wasserstein & LaGreca, 1996). It should be noted that of those studies, few have found direct effects, and some investigations have found a negative relation between peer support and outcomes for adolescents (e.g., Cauce, Felner & Primavera, 1982; Cotterell, 1992; McFarlane, Bellissimo & Norman, 1995).

In the academic domain, peer support during adolescence has been investigated most frequently in relation to academic adjustment and academic achievement (e.g., Cauce, et al., 1982; Cotterell, 1992; Fenzel & Blyth, 1986; Fuligni, 1997; Wentzel, 1994). The findings have been equivocal at best. In addition, few studies have included African American adolescents. Fuligni (1997) examined the relative impact of peer support, as well as other proximal environmental factors, on the academic achievement of students from immigrant families (primarily from Asian countries), and found that peer support for achievement had no independent effects on academic achievement. In contrast, other studies have found evidence of a negative or inverse relation between peer support and achievement outcomes (Cauce, et al., 1982; Cotterell, 1992). For example, Cauce, et al. (1982) found a positive relation between informal (i.e., peer and non-familial adult) support and school absenteeism, as well as a negative relation between peer support and grade point average. Similarly, Cotterell (1992) found male adolescents' perceptions of supportive ties to be negatively related to academic self-concept and academic plans. However, Levitt, Guacci-Franco and Levitt (1994) found peer support to be positively related both directly and indirectly to achievement (measured by SAT scores) through self-concept in their sample of African American, Latino and European American eighth and ninth grade students.

Some evidence indicates that the relation between peer support and academic achievement-related outcomes is more social in nature (e.g., Cotterell, 1992; Wentzel, 1994). For example, Wentzel found that academic support from peers was positively related to the pursuit of academic prosocial goals, as well as efforts to achieve academic social responsibility goals. Therefore, the adolescents in this investigation who were supported by their peers were more engaged in socially responsible behavior in the classroom. Appropriate social behavior has been identified as an important factor in peer acceptance which, in turn, is related to academic achievement (French, Conrad & Turner, 1995; Walters & Bowen, 1997). Therefore, those students who are supported by their peers tend to act in a more socially acceptable manner, which garners further acceptance by their peers.

Conclusions

In sum, the existing research that pertains to factors that may underlie the disparities in African Americans' academic achievement has provided us with some information as to how the peer group may function with respect to academic outcomes. At

the same time, however, the current research has neglected several issues in terms of research focus, measurement and methodology. One of the larger issues is the overwhelmingly large proportion of research on adolescents and their peers that focuses on negative behavior. This is especially true of research that has been conducted with African Americans, as there is a disproportionate amount of research that investigates the relation between their peers and negative outcomes (e.g., Mason, Cauce, Gonzales & Hiraga, 1996; Romer, Black, Ricardo, & Fiegelman, et al., 1994).

Another issue concerns the inconsistent findings in studies that look at the relation between peer support and adolescents' academic outcomes. These inconsistencies can be attributed, in part, to variation in measurement, which makes the comparison and interpretation of results across studies difficult (Schumaker & Brownell, 1984). Although most studies are correlational, there are several measures that have been created to assess various dimensions of support (e.g., Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ), Social Support Function Inventory, (SSFI), Social Relations Questionnaire (SRQ), "My Family and Friends"). This variation in measurement stems from lack of clarity in defining social support. For example, the existing research has defined social support in terms of quantity of connections, quality of connections, utilization of connections, the individual's perception of the availability of support, the individual's perception of support received, satisfaction with support, and the ability to mobilize support, to name a few (Brownell & Schumaker, 1984). The constant expansion of the definition of support has made it difficult to make the distinction between behaviors that are "authentically" supportive and behaviors that are not. Moreover, few studies have attempted to ascertain what conceptions of support lead to specific outcomes, or serve certain functions in certain situations. Brownell and Schumaker (1984) further contend that the nebulous conceptualization of support may be rooted in the intuitiveness of the construct. That is, the assumption is that support is so central to everyone's life that the chance of misunderstanding the concept or construct is minimal. However, given its multidimensionality, clarity and consistency is quite necessary (Rook & Dooley, 1985).

Inconsistent measurement is not a problem that is exclusive to the measurement of social support. The variation in research findings examining the relation between peer support and academic outcomes can be partially attributed to inconsistent measures of academic achievement and academic adjustment. Although academic achievement is most often conceptualized as a measure of academic performance (i.e., grade point average), many studies have chosen to broaden the definition of performance to include performance on standardized tests (e.g., Levitt, et al., 1994). Furthermore, academic performance is often used as a component of an overall school adjustment measure (e.g., Cauce, et al., 1982; Cotterell, 1992).

As is true with the peer influence research, participants in adolescent social support

research are largely European Americans and middle class. Therefore, there is no clear indication of how social support may function in other groups. This oversight is pertinent when considering people of color, as they may face different stressors on a daily basis solely as a result of their group membership. In addition, only a small subset of the adolescent support literature is conducted within the school context, or addresses issues related to education, even though adolescents spend a large portion of their time in school. This lack of attention to issues surrounding school in terms of social support, specifically peer support, is a clear indication that the overarching attitude toward adolescents' friends is that their influence can only be negative.

As a number of studies have concluded, adolescents (particularly ethnic minorities) may face adversity in academic situations as a result of stigma (Steele, 1992), as well as cultural and environmental mismatch (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Finn, 1989; Hale, 1982; Hilliard, 1992). Research has also suggested that each of these stressful situations negatively impact academic performance (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Finn, 1989; Hale-Benson, 1982; Steele, 1992). Support from one's peers may serve as a buffer in these adverse situations.

Future Directions

Upon review of the research findings examining the role of the peer group in adolescents' academic achievement, it is evident that the link between peer socialization (via peer influence and/or support), achievement motivation, and academic achievement remains unclear. To fully understand the complexity of peer relationships during adolescence, researchers must begin to approach the study of peer group dynamics in a more normative fashion, by considering the positive aspects of the adolescent peer group. Peer influence, as it has been examined to date, carries a strong negative connotation in spite of research findings that highlight its positive aspects. Taking a more normative approach to the impact that the peer group has on the lives of adolescents is even more important for African American adolescents, for the current research is replete with studies that examine negative outcomes.

We must work toward a clearer understanding of the role and function of peer support, particularly as it relates to academic performance. A greater understanding of this phenomenon may come from two areas: 1) clear and consistent conceptualization and measurement of support, and 2) within-group studies of the impact of support on various outcomes. Consistency in terms of measurement will enable researchers to make clearer inferences from research findings and within-group studies will provide a more balanced impression of the role of the peer group with respect to academic outcomes, while examining the diversity within the group. In so doing, we may begin to clarify the relationship between peer support and academic outcomes—a possible contributor to academic excellence.

¹ Brownell & Schumaker (1984) define indirect effects as those which decrease the number and severity of stressors, while mediating effects “mitigate the adverse effects of stressful life events” (p.3).

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