

**RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEER ATTITUDES TOWARDS
SCHOOL, SELECTED PEER GROUP ACTIVITIES AND
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF SECONDARY SCHOOL
STUDENTS IN NAIROBI**

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ABSTRACT

The study was designed to investigate the relationship between peer group attitudes towards school, peer group activities (including sports and games), and academic achievement of secondary school students in Nairobi urban area. Eight public and eight private secondary schools were selected for the study. A sample of 240 randomly selected form four students from these schools completed the peer effect questionnaire (PEQ). Students' mock examinations marks were used as a measure of their academic achievement. Pearson Product Moment Correlation at $P < 0.05$ was used to test the hypotheses related to peer group attitudes towards school, selected peer group activities, and students' academic achievement. Hypotheses on gender and students' residential status at school (as factors in peer influence) were tested using the Kruskal – Wallis Non Parametric test at $P < 0.05$. Among other findings, the results of analyses revealed a significant relationship between peer influence on attitudes towards school, peer group activities and academic achievement. Further research was recommended with respect to factors such as age, socio – economic class, race, introversion and extroversion; that may bring variations in peer group influence in students.

INTRODUCTION

Major factors that emerged during the last century are increasingly contributing to the rise and importance of adolescent – peer groups. Urbanisation and industrialisation processes, technological advancement, the spread of institutionalised age segregation of the young, and changes in the workplaces and in the family that have segregated the young from the old (UNESCO Paris, 1987; Coleman, 1990; Kiminyo, 1992; Steinberg, 1993), are among factors which bring about sociological changes that characterise the modern society, thus leading adolescents to rely more and more on age mates. Furthermore, these processes have broken down the African traditional family structure and ways of life. As a result of the contraction of the modern African families, both in size

and function, families are no longer able to cater for the entire social and moral needs of the young people; hence, schools and administrations have increasingly taken over this role from the parents (UNESCO Paris, 1987).

Additionally, most modern parents spend a lot of their time on many activities such as business, further studies, employment, seminars and workshops, at the expense of offering adequate care to their children (Kiminyo, 1992). At the same time most young people spend the better part of their life in learning institutions, where they are segregated as per their age bracket. According to Steinberg (1993), from the time youngsters enter school at a tender until they graduate at a later age (18 years or so), they are grouped with children of their own age. They then have little

contact with people who are older or younger, outside of relatives. Furthermore, at school they are educated in subjects that are often unrelated to their primary social interests and needs (UNESCO, 1987). Consequently, this situation predisposes them to peer group influence, which may eventually affect their academic achievement.

Coupled with such social changes is the nature of adolescence period itself, which is characterised by emancipation from parental authority. Coleman (1990) asserts that during adolescence, the individual develops the urge to seek for more peer group relations, thus altering family relations to some extent. As a result he/she begins to encounter many new demands in social situations, which are at the same time well expressed in the peer group. Therefore, the adolescents, relative to children, are more involved and intimate with peers, increasingly sharing and influencing each other in their thoughts and feelings. Thus, as the importance of the family in transmitting the 'appropriate culture' is diminished, the peer group becomes important in influencing and determining an adolescent's attitudes, social behaviour, and hence, personality (Coleman, 1990).

Such are among factors characteristic of Nairobi that have resulted in more peer group socialisation among adolescents. Indeed, a number of studies indicate that urban adolescents show greater conformity to and influence from their peers than their rural counterparts, who show greater conformity to their parents than to their peers (Meenakshi, Reeta & Padma, 1985; Kinai, 1994; Ochieng', 1996).

Statement of the Problem

Modern parents, teachers, educators and other adults in Nairobi have realized that peer groups may have an effect on behaviour, values and attitudes of their adolescents. The peer group influence therefore, may be an important factor among other factors that play a leading role in determining the levels of academic achievement in learners. However, this realization does not fully guarantee this fact unless it is scientifically investigated. Thus, it was in this light that this study was designed to investigate peer influence on

academic achievement in students in secondary school.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study was to explain academic achievement of secondary school students in both public and private secondary schools in Nairobi by analysing the impact of their peer group interactions at school. Peer group influence was analysed in terms of peer group attitudes towards school and the specific group's activities (academic or non-academic) that may affect students' academic achievement in either positive or negative ways. The study further examined this influence in relation to gender and the residential type of the school (i.e. day school or boarding).

Theoretical Rationale

The study adopted the Sullivan's (1953) Interpersonal approach. According to Sullivan, people are social beings shaped by their cultural and interpersonal environment. And that personality accordingly evolves largely from the manner in which individuals learn to adapt to their socio-cultural context.

Statistical hypotheses

- Ho₁ There is no significant relationship between peer group attitudes towards school and students' academic achievement.
- Ho₂ There is no significant relationship between the selected peer group activities and students' academic achievement.
- Ho₃ There is no significant relationship between peer group attitudes towards school and the selected peer group activities.
- Ho₄ There is no significant difference in peer group attitudes towards school between girls and boys.
- Ho₅ There is no significant difference in the selected peer group activities between boys and girls.
- Ho₆ There is no significant difference in peer group attitudes towards school between boarders and day scholars.
- Ho₇ There is no significant difference in the selected peer group activities between boarders and day scholars.

Methodology

A correlation research design was used because it indicates the degree of relationship that exists in a group of people between one aspect of their behaviour and another. Eight public and eight private secondary schools – Single sex and Co – educational, and, Boarding and Day schools – were selected using purposive, stratified and random sampling techniques, in that order. A sample of 240 randomly selected form four students from these schools completed the peer effect questionnaire. The students' mock examinations marks were also collected and used as a measure of their academic achievement

Instrumentation: A peer effect questionnaire was used to collect data in this study. It consisted of three sections. Section A consisted of items that provided students' background information (i.e. demographic data which gave such details like gender and residential status of the respondent). Section B consisted of a five – point likert scale (i.e. strongly agree, agree, strongly disagree, disagree and not sure) that assessed peer group attitudes towards school and academic achievement. Finally, section C consisted of items that gave the selected peer group activities, mostly engaged in by the students' peers, which were or were not related to their academic achievement.

Pre-testing: A pilot study was done in order to ascertain the reliability and validity of the research questionnaire used in this study – the peer effect questionnaire. Using split – half method, reliability was found by Spearman – Brown method. A reliability coefficient of 0.9 was obtained. This indicated that the questionnaire was reliable, because according to Mugenda and Mugenda (1999), a coefficient of 0.8 or more implies a high degree of reliability.

Data Analysis Techniques: The peer effect questionnaire (PEQ) was scored and coded for statistical analysis by the computer using statistical packages for social sciences – SPSS (Malim et al, 1997). Descriptive statistics were used to describe and summarise the data. Pearson Product Moment Correlation at $P < 0.05$ was used to test hypotheses 1 – 3. Kruskal – Wallis Non

Parametric test at $P < 0.05$ was used to test hypotheses 4 – 7

Summary of the Results

- There was a positive significant relationship between peer group attitudes towards school scores and students' academic achievement scores at $P < 0.05$ (0.00).
- There was a positive significant relationship between selected peer group activities scores and students' academic achievement scores at $P < 0.05$ (0.00).
- There was a significant relationship between peer group attitudes towards school scores and selected peer group activities scores at $P < 0.05$ (0.00).
- No significant difference was found between boys and girls in relation to peer group attitudes towards school scores at $P > 0.05$ (0.585).
- There was no significant difference between boys and girls in relation to selected peer group activities scores at $P > 0.05$ (0.321).
- No significant difference was found between day scholars and boarders in relation to peer group attitudes towards school scores at $P > 0.05$ (0.664).
- A significant difference was found between day scholars and boarders in relation to selected peer group activities scores at $P < 0.05$ (0.00).
- In the study's population sample, most students were positively influenced in their attitudes towards school by their peer group members (84 percent), and most of them indicated participation in peer group academic related activities (75 percent).

Discussions

According to the results, there was a statistically significant relationship between peer group attitudes towards school scores and students' academic achievement scores. This implied that those students who were influenced positively attained higher levels of academic achievement, while those who were influenced negatively achieved low academic levels. These results are consistent with those found in a number of previous related studies. The study findings of Hanson and Ginsburg (1988), Berndt, Laychak and Park (1990), Rono (1991) and,

Rosenthal and Fieldman (1991), indicated that there was a positive significant relationship between peer group influence and students' academic achievement levels. However, the findings were contrary to Steinberg and Levine (1992) and Kirk (2000), who indicated a negative peer group influence on students' academic achievement levels. In the present study, majority of students indicated a positive peer group effect (84 percent).

A positive significant relationship was also found between selected peer group activities scale scores and students' academic achievement scores. The selected peer group activities comprised of academic and non – academic activities. This indicated that students from peer groups that participated so much in academic activities, like subject content discussions, achieved high academic levels. On the contrary, those whose peer groups indulged in non – academic activities (such as sports) most of the time scored less in academic subjects. These results reflect the findings by Hanson and Ginsburg (1988), which indicated that the participation of students' peers in extra – reading, doing homework and discussions on subject content, made individual students to score high in their academic work. 75% of students in the present study indicated that their peer groups participated more in academic activities.

A statistically significant relationship was also established between peer group attitudes towards school scale scores and the selected peer group activities scale scores. This is also evident in Hanson and Ginsburg (1988). In these studies the kind of peer group activities, that is, academic or non – academic, were determined by the attitudes and values placed on academic achievement by students' peer group members. Hence, if one's peer group members valued schooling, more often than not the group was involved in academic activities. On the contrary, those whose peer group members did not value schooling were more likely to involve themselves in non – academic activities. This consistency between peer group attitudes and activities was clearly depicted in this study, since an average of 78 percent of students indicated a positive attitudinal influence from their peers and participation in peer group academic activities. 22%

indicated a negative attitudinal influence and indulgence in non – academic activities.

No statistically significant difference was found between boys and girls (gender factor) in relation to both peer group attitudes towards school scale scores and selected peer group activities scale scores. Rono (1991) reported similar findings. However, these results are different from those of Brown (1982) and Poole (1983), who reported that significant sex differences existed in relation to peer attitudes towards school. From these studies it was reported that attitudinally, girls' peers positively influenced each other than boys' peers. Poole (1983), however, pointed out that such satisfaction did not however correlate with their ability and achievement measures.

On the contrary, Coleman (1990) indicates different results altogether. In his studies on adolescent peer groups, he reported that girls' peers experienced more pressure towards social skills and popularity than in academic outstanding, while boys' peer groups emphasized on athletics and academic achievement. Such difference in results could be attributed to differences in cultural settings of the groups studied.

There was also no statistically significant difference found between day scholars and boarders in relation to peer group attitudes towards school scale scores. This implied that the perception of peer group influence was the same in both day scholars and boarders, despite the fact that boarders were having constant interaction with their peers than day scholars. This finding is contrary to some previous studies' results reported by Rono (1991). She found a significant difference between day scholars and boarders in relation to peer group effects, with day scholars experiencing positive pressure from their peers than boarders in pupils in Kericho primary schools – a semi-urban centre. The results found in the present study could be due to the characteristics of the sample population (secondary school students) and the area studied (Nairobi). This is because, owing to the socio – economic and cultural setting in Nairobi; both day scholars and boarders may have experienced relatively same exposure to learning resources, role models, and media.

However, there was a statistically significant difference between day scholars

and boarders in relation to the selected peer group activities scale scores. In this case, the results were similar to some of Rono (1991) findings, in which day scholars in her study sample, perceived more pressure to do homework than boarders were. In the present study, it was still evident that day scholars indulged more in academic related peer group activities than boarders did, as they recorded the highest mean score (72.55) on the peer group activities scale than boarders (64.44).

Although there was a significant relationship between peer group attitudes scale scores and the selected peer group activities scale scores, as discussed under the testing of hypothesis H_{03} ; the difference established in above results could have been due to actualization of these attitudes into activities with regard to students' residential status at school. In this case, day scholars perceived themselves as having less time for studies unlike boarders who had plenty of time at their disposal to read and get high-class scores. Peer group members in day schools, therefore, encouraged each other at every opportunity to compensate for any time lost in either home based chores or limited time at school. This could be the reason as to why they indulged more in academic related peer group activities than boarders did.

Conclusion

The above results depict clear evidence that peer influence is a contributing factor to students' academic achievement at school. Indeed, as theorized by Sullivan (1953) that the significant other has an impact in one's life, it is thus obvious that the results of this study reflect a similar premise to that effect with regard to significance of peer group to students' school achievement.

Recommendations

Students: They should realize the importance of their group members as it regards to many aspects of their life at school such as personal, social, moral, sexual, and more so, academic and vocational. Hence, they should be cautious when choosing friends - choose friends who will contribute towards positive development in various aspects at school. They should also cultivate positive attitudes

towards school aspects amongst themselves in their peer groups.

Parents and Teachers: They should know the role of peer groups in students' life. Hence, they should be at the forefront in guiding students on the choice of important friends, and in monitoring the development and the status quo of students peer groups. They can also use the powerful influence of students peer groups to instill positive attitudes towards school life in students, that is, peer counseling procedures.

Policy Makers: In a bid to utilize the powerful tool of peer group influence in students, policy makers in the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology should devise and implement programs that will formally include students' peer group influence in the teaching - learning processes (i.e. in-school peer helping relationships). This may be used as a vehicle for diversifying and re - defining the role of the classroom teacher, as a response to personnel and resource limitations; while facilitating learning through the powerful influence of students' peer group relationships.

Further Research: Further research is recommended with respect to other factors, which may affect peer group influence. These factors include age, socio - economic class, race, introversion and extroversion.

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