
The Role of Peer Relationships in Student Academic and Extracurricular Engagement

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Abstract

Friends and other peer relationships can motivate students to engage in school work as well as in extracurricular activities. To understand when and how peers matter, research on the positive and negative engagement “effects” of friends, peer support, and socially marginalizing experiences, such as peer rejection and bullying, is reviewed. The chapter starts with a brief summary of research demonstrating the links between school belonging and academic engagement and extracurricular involvement. The ways in which selection of friends and the influence of friends, quality of friendships, and type of friendship support (academic or emotional) are related to academic engagement and extracurricular involvement in school are then discussed. Studies examining whether the number of friends or the size of peer network is related to school engagement are also included. The chapter ends with a discussion about future research needs in relation to the role of peer relationships and student engagement, and implications for school policies (e.g., academic tracking, grade retention, and extracurricular practices).

Peers are a major part of schooling. Given the amount of time students spend with their classmates and friends in school, they are likely to be influenced by them. Moreover, when students

have friends and feel socially connected and supported at school, one would expect these factors to predispose them to feel positively toward academic work and other school activities. The assumptions guiding this review are first, that friends and other peer relationships can motivate students to engage in school work as well as in extracurricular activities. However, we recognize that some peers and social experiences in school can also discourage engagement. To be able to understand when and how peers matter, we review research on the positive and negative “effects” of friendships and peer support, and

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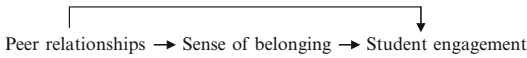


Fig. 18.1 Conceptual framework guiding this review

socially marginalizing experiences, such as peer rejection and bullying, on student engagement. Our second guiding assumption is that positive relationships with schoolmates facilitate a sense of belonging to school. We presume that both peer relationships and belonging to school are related to student engagement, with peer relationships contributing to both the sense of belonging and student engagement, as indicated in Fig. 18.1.

In our review, terms referring to school belonging (i.e., sense of connection) and peer relationships are used broadly. For example, we use “belongingness” and “connectedness” interchangeably. The term “peer relationships” is used as a superordinate construct to refer to close friendships (i.e., relationships characterized by mutual liking) as well as to peer group affiliations (i.e., less tight relationships united by common interests and activities).

We also use a broad definition of student engagement, focusing primarily on observable indicators, such as attendance and classroom participation. Although we primarily focus on engagement behaviors as a means to achieve good grades, we also refer to findings regarding academic performance as an indication of student engagement. School-based extracurricular involvement in sports, arts, and other activities is included in this review for two reasons. First, by assessing engagement in both academic and non-academic activities, we are able to determine whether peer relationships operate in similar ways across these two domains. Second, although extracurricular participation mostly involves nonacademic activities, such involvement is related to student engagement in academic activities, including school attendance (e.g., Mahoney, 2000). Thus, we review how peer relationships affect and are affected by extracurricular involvement in ways that can facilitate academic engagement.

We start the chapter with a brief summary of research demonstrating the links between school

belonging and academic engagement and extracurricular involvement. We then proceed to review the ways in which selection of friends and the influence of friends is related to students’ school engagement. Quality of friendships and type of friendship support (academic or emotional) are discussed. Studies examining the relationships between number of friends and the size of peer networks and student engagement are also reviewed. Research on students who are rejected or bullied by their peers shows, in turn, the ways in which negative social experiences may alienate students from school and possibly increase the chances of their dropping out. The chapter ends with a discussion about future research needs in relation to the role of peer relationships and student engagement, and implications from the work already done on this topic for school policies (e.g., academic tracking, grade retention, and extracurricular practices).

School Belonging

Research on school belonging is based on the assumption that environments characterized by caring and supportive relationships facilitate student engagement (e.g., Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003; Felner & Felner, 1989; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Voelkl, 1997). Consequently, motivation and achievement are presumed to be undermined when students feel unsupported and disconnected from others (e.g., Becker & Luthar, 2002; Finn, 1989, 1993). A particularly strong association between peer acceptance and school belonging (Adelabu, 2007) suggests that school-based relationships are critical. Although both relationships with teachers and peers are likely to matter (Furrer & Skinner, 2003), the need to “fit in” with one’s peers is especially pronounced during adolescence (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010). Hence, it is not surprising that much of the existing research on school belonging has focused on middle and high school students. Yet, school belonging matters as early as elementary school.

Does School Belonging Promote Academic Engagement?

Capitalizing on a large sample of over 4,000 students across 24 elementary schools, Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, and Schaps (1995) investigated the association between students' sense of school community (e.g., perceptions of caring and supportive school-based relationships) and a range of measures tapping attitudes, motivation, and achievement. Using hierarchical linear modeling techniques that allow examination of students nested within schools, the findings revealed that a greater sense of school community was associated with higher levels of class enjoyment, lower levels of work avoidance, and higher mathematics scores. Generally, stronger associations were documented in schools serving the most economically disadvantaged families, suggesting that school belonging might be particularly important for students from educationally and financially disadvantaged homes.

In one of the earliest studies on school belonging in middle school, Goodenow and Grady (1993) demonstrated that a strong sense of school belonging was associated with increased academic engagement among an ethnically diverse sample of students. Based on self-report measures, a positive association between school belonging, the importance of schoolwork, and persistence with schoolwork was observed. Sampling middle schools serving predominantly White youth from working class families, Roeser, Midgley, and Urdan (1996), in turn, showed that school belonging was associated with higher levels of academic performance. The association was robust inasmuch as other relevant motivational constructs (e.g., goal structures fostered by the school, personal achievement goal orientations) were taken into account in the analyses.

The link between school belonging and student engagement has been studied most extensively among high school students. Focusing on a predominantly Latino sample of urban high school seniors, Sánchez, Colón, and Esparza (2005) documented that school belonging was associated with more frequent classroom participation,

homework completion, exam preparation, and better school attendance. Consistent with these findings, analyses of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) of 20,000 ethnically diverse students from 132 secondary schools showed that higher levels of school belonging were associated with fewer school absences (Anderman, 2002). A large-scale longitudinal study of Australian secondary school students, in turn, demonstrated that low school connectedness decreased the likelihood of students finishing school (Bond et al., 2007).

In sum, these findings suggest that students' school belonging, which we presume to be integrally linked with school-based peer relationships (although student school belonging also encompasses relationships with adults in the school) (e.g., Hamm & Faircloth, 2005), is an important factor associated with engagement in academic work especially in secondary school. However, we are not in the position to conclude that school belonging causes students to engage. The association between school belonging and engagement may operate in both directions, possibly in a mutually reinforcing manner. That is, the more engaged students are, the stronger their sense of belonging; and the more strongly they feel they belong, the more actively they engage academically. In the next section, we turn to extracurricular engagement to review research on sense of belonging and participation in voluntary activities in school.

Is Extracurricular Participation a Way to Strengthen School Belonging?

A handful of survey and qualitative studies have examined the association between school belonging and students' engagement in extracurricular activities. Students with a stronger sense of school belonging are more likely to engage in activities, such as after-school sports or extracurricular academic programs. Sampling an ethnically diverse group of seventh through twelfth grade students, Brown and Evans (2002) showed that extracurricular activity participation was significantly associated with greater school connection, which was measured with school belonging

as one of its main dimensions. Although the authors only tested a direct path from extracurricular activities to school connection, they posited that participation in extracurricular activities facilitates positive school-related experiences, which in turn, facilitate school belonging and commitment to school. In a study using daily phone interviews of African-American students in sixth to ninth grade, Dotterer, McHale, and Crouter (2007) found that the more time students spent on extracurricular activities, the more strongly they bonded with school. Such a positive association may, however, merely indicate that youth who are school-oriented and who feel that they belong and fit in at school spend time in school with peers sharing similar interests.

Research utilizing mixed methods provides some insights into whether extracurricular involvement in fact affects school belonging or whether those who feel they belong are more likely to participate in activities provided by school. Barnett (2006) surveyed female high school students before, and interviewed them after, they received notification of whether they had been selected to the cheer or dance team following competitive try-outs. In the initial surveys, all applicants reported liking school and wanting to be at school, which is partly tapping into the sense of school belonging. The girls who made the team maintained their high levels of school liking, whereas school liking significantly decreased among the unsuccessful aspirants not only the day after the decision was made, but also 2 months after the decision. When interviewed, one of the nonselected girls explained that one of the main reasons why she wanted to be on the dance team was “to find a way to be connected with my school.” Thus, individuals may have different reasons to pursue extracurricular activities.

Research shows positive links between school belonging and academic engagement, such as classroom participation and school attendance, and involvement in extracurricular activities. Although the rest of our review is based on the premise that positive peer relationships are important in facilitating a sense of school belonging, it becomes evident that not all peer relationships are related with increased levels of engagement.

Peer Selection and Socialization

Children tend to have relationships and affiliate with similar others (Hallinan, 1983). That is, students engaged in classwork form friendships with engaged classmates, whereas students who are not so engaged are friends with similarly disengaged peers. Given the similarities between friends, it is not surprising that friendships amplify students’ school-related behaviors (Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews, & Patterson, 1996; Mounts & Steinberg, 1995). In other words, engaged students get more involved in academic work, whereas disengaged students become alienated from school-related activities. Whether these peer “effects” are due to selection of friends, or their influence – or both – is less clear (Kandel, 1996).

Characteristics of Friends and the Relation with Academic Engagement

Perhaps the best evidence for peer influence on academic engagement comes from studies on peer networks (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Kindermann, 1993; Kindermann, McCollam, & Gibson, 1996). Kindermann et al. (1996) found that when students were members of groups with high average academic engagement, their own individual academic engagement improved over time. The opposite effect was obtained for members of groups with low academic engagement profiles. In spite of relatively high turnover of specific members across the school year, the groups’ engagement “profiles,” or overall orientation toward school work, remained stable. This finding highlights that students select peer groups, and groups accept members based on similarities.

Besides academic orientation, a wide range of characteristics of friends is related to academic engagement. A survey study of almost 1,000 adolescents examined how a set of academic, social, and mental health attributes of friends was related to students’ academic engagement and performance from seventh to eighth grade

(Cook, Deng, & Morgano, 2007). Cook and colleagues discovered that students with all-around adjusted friends spent more time doing homework and in extracurricular activities, and were absent less frequently, than were students with friends who obtained lower grades and engaged in drug use or other misbehaviors. Students with all-around adjusted friends also improved their grade point average from seventh to eighth grade. Thus, friends' academic behaviors and socioemotional well-being were each related to student engagement in academic work and extracurricular activities.

The studies described above relied on independent assessments of friends' behaviors and other attributes (i.e., friends were identified and they provided self-reports). Methodologically less strong research relies on subjective perceptions of friends' behaviors or values, perceptions which may be biased by the student's own values and behavior. However, the same patterns are evident. In cross-sectional studies, student perceptions of their friends' behaviors and values are consistently related to students' own engagement and conduct. For example, in a survey study of seventh and ninth grade students, Nelson and DeBacker (2008) showed that perceptions of one's best friend having high academic values (e.g., "My best friend believes that school is more important than most people think") were related to self-reports of a greater desire for mastery of school work (e.g., "I do the work in this class because I like to understand what I am learning").

Perceptions of friends' behavior also predict changes in engagement over time. Berndt and Keefe (1995) found that seventh and eighth graders became more involved in classroom activities over the course of the school year, as indicated by self-reports, when they perceived that their three closest friends were highly involved in classroom activities at the beginning of the school year. Conversely, students who perceived their friends to disrupt class in the beginning of the year become more disruptive themselves across the year. With a sample of about 2,500 students, Simons-Morton and Chen (2009) showed that students who perceived a higher proportion of their five closest friends engaging in negative

behaviors (e.g., being disrespectful of teachers) reported making less effort in class and lower motivation to do well in school over the course of sixth to ninth grade. These findings are particularly troublesome because decreases in academic engagement levels appear to be a precursor of dropping out of school (Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008), indicating that friends may indirectly influence school dropout (a topic that we will return to later in the chapter).

Extracurricular Engagement: Are Friends a Reason to Get and Stay Involved?

Consistent with findings regarding academic engagement, students with friends who are highly involved in extracurricular activities are more likely to participate in activities themselves. An interview study with highly involved high school students explored the factors that motivate students to become involved and maintain their involvement in extracurricular activities (Fredricks et al., 2002). Students discussed their friends' involvement in the activities as a reason to continue their own participation. The role of friends seems to be especially important in encouraging continued involvement, potentially even when individual interest in the activity itself has waned.

Beyond the influence of existing friendships, Fredricks et al. (2002) found that high school students were motivated to join extracurricular activities in order to acquire new friendships. Moreover, through extracurricular participation, students are likely to be exposed to peers they may not normally associate with over the course of the school day. Dworkin, Larson, and Hansen (2003) used focus group methodology to examine the ways in which extracurricular involvement is related to friendships among high school students. Students specifically commented on the opportunities that extracurricular activities provided to socialize with peers outside of their typical friendship groups, including students of different racial backgrounds. This research suggests that extracurricular activities can play an

important role in helping students form new relationships with peers with whom they might otherwise not interact.

In sum, friends' behaviors and engagement are related to student academic and extracurricular engagement. Although the mechanisms of peer influence and selection are not necessarily investigated in most studies, research suggests that students with more academically engaged friends perform better academically than those whose friends are disengaged. Similarly, those with friends involved in extracurricular activities are more likely to start and stay engaged in the activity. Thus, friends seem to amplify students' initial level of involvement. What is not clear from these studies is whether the quality of friendships and the type of peer support might matter also in terms of student engagement.

Quality of Friendships and Type of Peer Support

High-quality friendships typically involve positive features such as support, companionship, and commitment, as well as low levels of conflict (Berndt, 2002). A number of studies have shown direct effects of high-quality friendships on student engagement behaviors. For example, Berndt and Keefe (1995) examined the importance of friendship quality in addition to friends' school-related behaviors (class involvement and disruptiveness) in a study of seventh and eighth graders. The perceived quality of the friendship predicted changes in self-reported behaviors across the school year. Students with a supportive, intimate, and validating closest friend became more involved in class across the school year. In contrast, students whose closest friendship involved frequent conflict and rivalry or competition increased in disruptive behavior during the school year. These results highlight that it is not only the behaviors of friends, but also the relationship qualities of friendships, that matter.

The quality of friendships also matters because stable, supportive relationships with classmates encourage student engagement through consistent reinforcement. In the same investigation

described above, Berndt and Keefe (1995) discovered that students who retained stable friendships over the course of the academic year reported less disruptive behavior, were rated by their teachers as involved in class, and also received higher grades than peers with unstable friendships. Because stable friendships with specific qualities might encourage student engagement, it is also possible that students with good grades select friends with whom they can study together. In a longitudinal survey study of seventh through ninth grade students examined at two time points, an earlier high grade point average indeed correlated with subsequent social support obtained from friends (DuBois, Felner, Brand, Adan, & Evans, 1992). Thus, the association between supportive friends and academic engagement is likely to work both ways.

The *type* of peer support received might also matter. That is, while academic support might be particularly critical in allowing students to work together on homework or projects, emotional or social support might be especially critical at times of heightened distress. In concurrent and short-term longitudinal analyses (i.e., start and end of kindergarten), Ladd, Kochenderfer, and Coleman (1996) found that when young elementary school students considered their friends as sources of aid and validation, they were particularly likely to develop positive attitudes toward school as the year progressed.

Wentzel (1994) examined whether social support, defined as peers' concerns about an individual's emotions (e.g., "My classmates care about my feelings"), and academic support, defined as peers' concern for an individual's learning (e.g., "My classmates care about how much I learn"), were related to students' pursuit of socially valued outcomes in middle school. The results revealed that sixth and seventh grade students' perceptions of both social and academic support were associated with willingness to follow classroom rules. Peers' academic support was additionally related to what Wentzel described as students' academic social responsibility goals, such as the desire to comply with teacher requests.

Most importantly, perceived academic support from peers is related to active class participation.

Focusing on seventh grade students, Murdock (1999) demonstrated that students who reported high levels of academic support from peers were rated by their teachers as attending classes, participating in class, and completing assignments more frequently than those who did not feel academically supported by their peers. Perceived academic support from peers was also related to lower rates of discipline problems (e.g., detention, in-school suspension).

While relatively little is known about the relation between extracurricular involvement and peer support, it is possible that at least some types of extracurricular activities foster skills that allow students to be more supportive of one another. In a focus group study of high school students who took part in extracurricular and community-based activities, students reported that their involvement in the activities helped them develop a stronger sense of empathy and ability to handle stress and anxiety (Dworkin et al., 2003). This may mean that the effects of extracurricular activities on academic engagement are indirect. Personal skills and competencies to understand and support peers in distress gained in the context of extracurricular activities may help students to provide academic support.

In sum, the research available suggests that the quality of student friendships and peer support are each related to academic engagement. Students with stable, nonconflictive friendships are likely to engage in academic tasks. While close friends can encourage student engagement, students are also likely to seek friends who can help them with academic work. Although friends are in the position to provide various types of support, not surprisingly, academic support is consistently related to academic engagement. Extracurricular involvement, in turn, may aid the ability to support others.

Does the Number of Friends and Ability to Make Friends Matter?

As shown above, school-based friendships often serve as sources of instrumental and social support. Does this mean then that students with

larger friendship networks are more engaged in school? Focusing on initial school entry and the year of kindergarten, Ladd (1990) found that children with multiple existing friendships during school entrance developed more favorable school attitudes during the first 2 months of kindergarten. Those maintaining these friendships also liked school more over time. These findings are particularly robust because students' preschool experience, mental age, and gender were taken into account in the analyses. Ladd (1990) also found that children who formed new friendships during kindergarten performed better academically (as measured by teacher reports and student performance on school readiness and achievement tests) than children who did not establish friendships. New friendships accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in academic performance even when controlling for existing friendships.

In a study of students transitioning from fifth to sixth grade, Kingery and Erdley (2007) relied on both student self-reports and peer nominations to examine the role of schoolmates as students acclimate to their new middle school. Correlation analysis showed that greater peer acceptance and number of friends prior to the transition to middle school was related to greater involvement (e.g., participating in class and other school activities) at the start of the sixth grade. Hence, having more friends even before the transition seems to help students when transitioning to a new school. However, larger friendship networks may simply reflect the social skills of students. That is, the most socially skillful students (who are likely to have lots of friends) may have the easiest time navigating in a new environment, and therefore they remain highly engaged.

Although a greater number of friends might help, having one friend may be sufficient to help adjust to a new school environment. The power of one friend is highlighted in research on school transitions, when students frequently experience a disruption in peer networks and loss of friends (Kenny, 1987). Linking early middle school friendships with school outcomes in a longitudinal survey study over the course of middle school, Wentzel, Barry, and Caldwell (2004) found that

students with no friends in the first year of middle school were initially more distressed and received lower grades in their school record than students with at least one friend. Although a lack of friends may have caused distress which interfered with achievement, it is also possible that stress caused by low grades from elementary school made it hard for students to make friends. Nevertheless, this study demonstrates that an absence of even just one friend is related with compromised academic performance.

Research on extracurricular activities also suggests that one friend may be sufficient to get students engaged in nonacademic activities. Huebner and Mancini (2003) showed that high school students with just one friend whom they could “count on” were more likely to report that they participated in after-school extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, clubs), regardless of whether that friend participated in that activity or not. Thus, it is possible that a close friendship provides enough support and confidence for students to explore and become involved in school, much like secure attachment to a caregiver is related to exploration early in life.

While one good friendship may be enough to get students more engaged in school, friends are not the only way to improve academic outcomes. Wentzel et al. (2004) also found that the students with no friends in the first year of middle school did improve their academic performance over the course of middle school, despite initially having lower grades in sixth grade than those with friendships. It is possible that friendless students obtain support for academic engagement from other sources (e.g., adults at school, parents).

In sum, the existing research shows that lack of close friendships is associated with lower student engagement (especially at times of school transitions), while the ability to develop and maintain friendships is related with academic engagement. Although a larger number of friends might increase the probability of receiving positive support for academic performance, the size of the peer network may simply reflect social skills that are particularly helpful to students during school transitions. Yet, having just one friend is enough to help students become involved in

both academic and extracurricular activities. One study also suggests that academic progress is possible without friends. But what happens when a student is rejected or bullied in school? We now turn to research on negative social experiences with peers.

Negative Social Experiences: Rejected and Bullied Students

Given the literature covered thus far, it appears that having high-quality, supportive friendships can promote school engagement behaviors possibly because such relationships facilitate school belonging. Conversely, students who are friendless are less engaged, perhaps because they feel they do not belong in school. In this section, we go beyond the lack of friends to examine how negative peer experiences (rejection and bullying) are related to academic disengagement, and potentially to alienation from school.

Peer rejection is commonly defined as peers' social avoidance of, dislike of, or reluctance to affiliate with a student. Therefore, rejection by classmates may threaten school belonging even more than lack of friends, inasmuch as rejection affects group membership at the classroom level (Furman & Robbins, 1985). Indeed, peer rejection is associated with avoidance of school, less positive perceptions about school, and lower academic performance in kindergarten (Ladd, 1990), as well as lower grades in the first and second grade (O'Neil, Welsh, Parke, Wang, & Strand, 1997). In secondary school, peer rejection is associated with increased absenteeism and truancy (DeRosier, Kupersmidt, & Patterson, 1994; Kupersmidt & Coie, 1990) as well as subsequent grade retention (Coie, Lochman, Terry, & Hyman, 1992).

Even temporary rejection is associated with negative academic outcomes. Examining peer rejection across time among elementary school students, Greenman, Schneider and Tomada (2009) showed that students rejected at even just one time point performed worse academically than children who had never been rejected. Moreover, Buhs, Ladd, and Herald (2006) demonstrated that students who were excluded and

victimized in elementary school became increasingly less engaged over time. Thus, negative experiences with schoolmates can also be associated with lasting disengagement.

Given that aggressive students are at high risk for being rejected by classmates at least in elementary school (Asher & Coie, 1990), it is important to understand whether peer rejection independently contributes to subsequent problems or whether it functions merely as a marker of problem behaviors (Parker & Asher, 1987). Following a large sample of African-American children from elementary school to middle school, Coie et al. (1992) demonstrated that childhood peer rejection contributed to behavior problems 3 years later, over and above earlier levels of aggression. Subsequent analyses of data from the same sample revealed that the combination of childhood aggression and peer rejection significantly increased the risk of committing assaults by the second year in high school (Coie, Terry, Lenox, & Lochman, 1995). Because aggression is associated with school disengagement, independent of rejection (e.g., Lessard et al., 2008; Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & Toblin, 2005), it is therefore likely that rejection amplifies the risk for subsequent school disengagement.

In the studies described above, peer rejection is assessed via peer nominations by asking students to name classmates they do not like to sit next to or spend time with. But self-reports also show associations between feeling rejected by peers and student, disengagement. Buhs (2005) found that fifth grade students who reported that they were excluded by their peers, were less likely to participate in class. In a cross-sectional study of sixth and seventh graders, Lopez and DuBois (2005) showed that students who felt disapproved of by their peers had lower grade point averages and were absent from school on more days than students who felt accepted. The authors suggested that both perceived rejection and the low self-esteem associated with such perceptions make it difficult for students to concentrate on schoolwork and engage in productive, collaborative work with peers.

Consistent with the findings of research on rejected students, victims of bullying in elemen-

tary school are less likely to feel that they belong in school and are more likely to disengage. Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996) showed that bullied kindergartners displayed increased loneliness and school avoidance by the end of the school year. Examining the association between bullying experiences and teacher-rated academic engagement as well as grade point average in middle school, Juvonen, Wang, and Espinoza (2011) discovered that bullied students were less engaged and obtained lower academic grades across 3 years of middle school. Although the study did not test the directionality of the associations (i.e., whether bullying experiences preceded disengagement or vice versa), the robust association between bullying experiences (regardless of being based on self-reports or peer nominations) and the academic indicators among an ethnically diverse sample of about 1,500 students suggest that bullying cannot be ignored when trying to improve academic engagement and performance.

Nishina, Juvonen, and Witkow (2005) reported evidence for both direct and mediated effects of bullying on middle school functioning. Among close to 2,000 students of diverse ethnic backgrounds, bullying experiences at the start of the sixth grade were linked with subsequent psychological maladjustment as well as health complaints, which were related to end-of-the-year absences and grades. At the same time, symptoms of psychological distress at the start of the sixth grade also increased the chances of students being bullied by the end of the year, which was associated with higher absences and lower grades. Hence, negative peer experiences and distress are interrelated in a cyclical manner (see also Egan & Perry, 1998) and therefore especially likely to compromise academic engagement (see also Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2000).

Bullying research suggests that emotional distress associated with hostile peer interactions contributes also to negative school attitudes and a desire to withdraw from or avoid school. The mere prospect of potential rejection may discourage academic success, at least among older students. Ishiyama and Chabassol (1985) surveyed seventh to twelfth graders about their concerns of the social implications of high academic achievement

(e.g., peer rejection and/or criticism, pressure to continue success). Seventh to ninth grade students (particularly girls) expressed more concern about the social repercussions of performing well than older participants. Hence, students' concern about rejection may temper their classroom participation. Given that earlier academic performance sets the stage for subsequent performance, it is particularly troublesome if young teens downplay their academic success and engagement.

In sum, both peer rejection and bullying experiences are associated with lower levels of academic engagement and academic performance. It is likely that negative social experiences cause students to disengage. However, it is also possible that low-performing students are bullied and rejected by their classmates. In the latter case, the odds against these students accumulate. Their distress and concerns about being ridiculed or excluded can propel students into avoiding school altogether. Thus, the associations are likely to be cyclical. Moreover, even mere concerns about rejection are related to decreased academic engagement in middle and high school. Although additional longitudinal research on this topic is warranted, there is important evidence illustrating that a sense of social alienation precedes an ultimate form of disengagement, namely dropping out of school, as summarized below.

Social Alienation and Dropping Out

When interviewed about reasons for dropping out, one out of four youth reported that they did not belong at school (U.S. Department of Education, Center for Education Statistics, 1993). Finn (1989, 1993) proposed that the relationship between students not participating in school and dropping out is explained by a lack of sense of belonging and identification with school. Consistent with this idea, an early study (Dillon & Grout, 1976) reported that students become alienated from school when they feel they are denied meaningful participation in both classroom and other school activities.

Extracurricular involvement may serve as a meaningful activity, and thereby protect youth

from dropping out of school. Focusing on Mexican-American and White non-Hispanic high school-aged students who were either in good academic standing or had dropped out of school, Davalos, Chavez, and Guardiola (1999) found that students who had been involved in any extracurricular activity were more than twice as likely to be enrolled in school. In a prospective longitudinal study, Mahoney and Cairns (1997) demonstrated that students who participated in extracurricular activities in middle or high school were less likely to drop out of school. This effect was particularly strong for those considered at high risk of dropping out who participated in extracurricular activities early in high school (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997). In a subsequent study, Mahoney (2000) showed that participation in extracurricular activities before 11th grade decreased the chance of leaving school early or engaging in criminal behavior as an adult among students considered at high risk. Moreover, the likelihood of dropping out was reduced further when the students' friends also participated in school extracurricular activities. These findings suggest that opportunities to engage in school-related activities together with peers are critical, especially for youth who might otherwise be at risk of leaving school prematurely (Hymel, Comfort, Schonert-Reichl, & McDougall, 1996).

Consistent with the importance of the sense of school belonging, Kaplan, Peck, and Kaplan (1997) showed that in addition to low grades and lack of motivation, social alienation from school-based peer networks and relationships with deviant schoolmates during eighth and ninth grade independently contributed to the risk of dropping out. Also, students who were held back during middle school were seven times more likely to drop out of school than their peers with similar academic performance who were not held back (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001). The authors concluded that this independent effect of grade retention partly reflects a lack of social integration. Hence, feeling that one does not socially fit in or belong is an important risk factor for dropping out.

In sum, socially alienated youth who feel that they do not fit in and are not engaged in school

are at risk of dropping out of school. Although both grade retention and behavior problems may in part alienate youth from their peers as well as their teachers, negative peer experiences may also increase sense of alienation. In addition to not retaining students, encouraging socially vulnerable youth to participate in extracurricular activities might help keep these students engaged in the schooling process.

Conclusion

One of the main reasons given by high school students for attending school is that they get to see their friends (Brown & Theobald, 1998). Students select to affiliate with certain types of peers, and the way they feel about fitting in with their schoolmates is associated with their level of engagement in school. We now briefly summarize some of the positive and negative effects of peers, as well as point out questions that need to be further examined.

Summary of Positive Peer “Effects”

Relationships with friends who are academically engaged in school are associated with higher academic motivation and achievement. Friends’ overall social adjustment (e.g., lack of behavior problems) is also associated with academic engagement and involvement in extracurricular activities. Although having a greater number of friends may help students get engaged in school, having just one friend helps alleviate the stress related with transitioning to a new school. Friends are typically good sources of emotional and social support; however, it is academic support that is most clearly associated with increased achievement motivation and classroom participation. Extracurricular activities, in turn, provide students with opportunities to form new friendships, just as those with friends are more likely to explore new extracurricular options and stay involved. Based on the research reviewed, we conclude that friendships and peer affiliations with engaged classmates generally facilitate a

sense of belonging in school that in turn promotes engagement, as suggested by the pathway depicted in the beginning of the chapter.

Summary of Negative Peer “Effects”

Not all friendships are beneficial, however. Not only do critical qualities (e.g., supportiveness, validation) of friendships vary, but also the level of support and collaboration on school assignments varies depending on the abilities and aspirations of friends (e.g., Berndt, 1989, 2002). Students who have disengaged friends are unlikely to excel academically. Additionally, negative social experiences with classmates may make rejected youth seek the company of other students who misbehave and encourage bullied students to avoid school. Feelings of social alienation from the institution and repeated absences, in turn, increase the risk of dropping out of school. Thus, particular types of friendships, lack of any friendships, as well as bullying and rejection experiences are all related to school disengagement.

Are Peers Necessary to Maintain School Engagement?

Although many students are motivated to attend school to spend time with their friends, it should be clear from the research reviewed that peers are not always essential for student engagement and achievement. There is evidence suggesting that parent support and teacher support may be more important than peer support for student engagement (Chen, 2005; Garcia-Reid, 2007; Wentzel, 1998). When and if these other sources of support can compensate for the support that friends provide in relation to engagement in academic work is a critical question to further investigate. This issue may be best studied with students who lack friendships. It would be equally important to know whether other sources of support, besides support from peers, can alleviate the distress associated with negative social experiences (such as bullying).

The studies reviewed in this chapter also convey that not all peer relationships promote academic engagement. Clearly, there are peer groups of disengaged students whose effects are more harmful than productive. Also, while a lack of friends might be a sign of social isolation or alienation, there are students with no friends in school who do well. For some, it may be to their benefit not to form close ties with classmates who are not engaged. Moreover, youth can form valuable peer relationships outside of school. That is, neighborhood friends or friends from out-of-school activities may compensate for the lack of close ties in school. These are questions that remain to be investigated.

Implications for Future Research and School Policies

A few key longitudinal studies suggest that both selection of friends and their influence play a part in whether students engage in class or get involved in extracurricular activities. It is therefore important to consider the opportunities that schools provide for students to seek and find friends who are in the position to provide support. This is particularly critical when considering how certain educational policies and practices may restrict students' opportunities to establish and maintain positive peer relationships. Based on the current review, it seems that academic tracking is particularly problematic. In low-track classrooms that often have an overrepresentation of disengaged students, youth lack opportunities to form positive peer relationships supporting academic involvement. Similar problems can arise in classrooms that segregate students with disabilities. That is, the range of potential friends is limited.

For extracurricular activities, in turn, selection procedures are problematic. Exclusion based on tryouts can disengage and alienate students from school. When nonselected students are the ones who need most support, an opportunity to make them feel part of the school is lost. Therefore, schools should consider offering meaningful alternative activities for students who are not

among the top performers within their extracurricular activities.

The benefits of having at least one friend through the transition to a new school are consistent across studies of kindergartners to middle school students. Similarly, research on bullying suggests that one friend is enough to both decrease the risk of getting bullied as well as to buffer the emotional distress associated with peer harassment (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997). Whether one friend or *any* friend is enough in other stressful situations as well is less clear. It is therefore important to examine the potential power of one friend when youth experience academic difficulties or when they get cut from a team. Equally important is research examining the ways in which some extracurricular involvement (e.g., team sports) might help students provide support to one another. Unless group work and other cooperative methods are used in classrooms, certain extracurricular activities may be one of the only ways to learn support giving.

Because the bodies of research on academic and extracurricular activities are largely separate, it is valuable to compare the two domains of engagement. It is interesting not only to note differences in assumptions and research traditions for each but also to learn about the generalizability of the findings across the two domains. For example, it appears that rejection by peers and exclusion from a sports team may have similarly alienating effects that are related to disengagement. Whether course selections, much like extracurricular choices, might be influenced in part by whether friends or high-status (i.e., popular) peers are involved in the class is also needed. Particularly intriguing is the idea that extracurricular activities or peer relations fostered by those activities might help academic engagement.

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