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Date of publication: February 28th, 2018

Edition period: February 2018 – June 2018

To cite this article: Leach, N. (2018). Peer bonds in urban school communities: an exploratory study. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 7(1), 64-86. doi:10.17583/qre.2018.3062

To link this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/qre.2018.3062>

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Peer Bonds in Urban School Communities: An Exploratory Study

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(Received: 31 October 2017; Accepted: 09 February 2018; Published: 28 February 2018)

Abstract

The literature identifies three main types of peer associations: cliques, crowds, and dyadic friendships. When schools create learning communities, an additional type of peer association may emerge that is not based on interactions but instead is based on membership in a shared community. The aim of this study is to qualitatively explore the nature and characteristics of this association, labeled peer bonds. Observational data (n=432) and semi-structured interviews (n=33) were collected in two urban high schools over the course of three academic years. Data were analyzed using the constant comparison method. Findings suggest that there are six characteristics of peer bonds: investment in peer success, shared identity, shared values, pedagogical caring, shared success, and shared failure. The scholarly significance of this study is the expansion of theoretical conceptualizations of peer associations in learning communities while the practical significance is the potential use of a largely underutilized source for academic interventions, peers, by creating school community.

Keywords: school community, peers, urban

Vínculos entre Compañeros en Comunidades Escolares Urbanas: Un Estudio Exploratorio

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*(Recibido: 31 de octubre de 2017; Aceptado: 09 de febrero de 2018;
Publicado: 28 de febrero de 2018)*

Resumen

Cuando las escuelas crean comunidades de aprendizaje, puede surgir un tipo adicional de asociaciones entre compañeros que no se basa en interacciones, sino que se basa en la afiliación en una comunidad compartida. El objetivo de este estudio es explorar cualitativamente la naturaleza y las características de esta asociación, etiquetados como vínculo de compañeros. Los datos de observación ($n = 432$) y las entrevistas semiestructuradas ($n = 23$) se recolectaron en dos escuelas secundarias urbanas en el transcurso de tres años académicos. Los datos fueron analizados usando el método de comparación constante. Los hallazgos sugieren que hay seis características de los enlaces entre pares: la inversión en el éxito entre pares, la identidad compartida, los valores compartidos, el cuidado pedagógico, el éxito compartido y el fracaso compartido. La importancia académica de este estudio es la expansión de las conceptualizaciones teóricas de las asociaciones de pares en las comunidades de aprendizaje, mientras que la importancia práctica es el uso potencial de una fuente en gran medida infrautilizada para las intervenciones académicas, semejantes, mediante la creación de una comunidad escolar.

Palabras clave: Comunidad escolar, pares, urbano

Education is a social process (Ladd, Herald-Brown, & Kochel, 2009) and the role of peers in this social process is vital, particularly in adolescence when peers have considerable influence on students (Bukowski, Brendgen, & Vitaro, 2007; Ladd et al., 2009). Peers are important for students' academic success (Wentzel & Looney, 2007; Wentzel, 2005). While there is extensive literature on the nature of peer associations in various learning environments, there is little information on such associations in school communities.

Since the Industrial Age, American education has consisted of school organizations that emphasize control, monitoring, and evaluation to meet the demands of a factory-based workforce that necessitated efficiency and hierarchal managerial power structures (Furman, 2002a). Controlling school environments suppress personal growth, intrinsic motivation, and psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002). An alternative approach to school organizations is school community (Kindermann & Gest, 2009). Sergiovanni (1994) defines school organizations as schools that function using contract structures while school communities function using social structures and interpersonal bonds. While school organizations control members using systems of surveillance, supervision, evaluation, and structured coordination, school communities rely on shared vision, mutual obligations, social ties and interdependence to guide members' behavior. In other words, the difference between organization and community is the nature of authority; school community members are bound by social ties and school organization members are bound by utilitarian ties (Oxley, 1997). As school community trades surveillance and control for democratic governance and mutual obligations, peers play a crucial role in developing school community norms.

Social interactions are present in all school types, but differ in school organizations and school communities. The quality of interactions can be assessed along 5 dimensions (see Fig. 1) (Sergiovanni, 1994a).

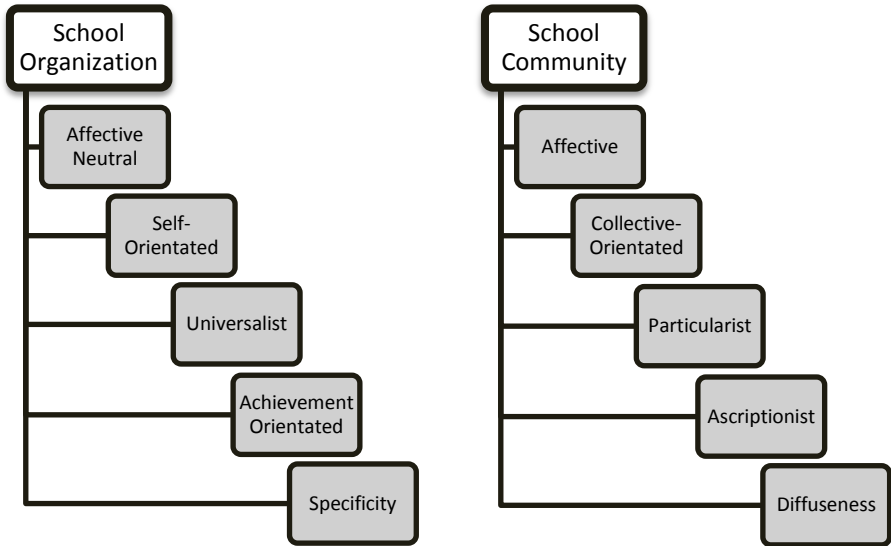


Figure 1. Five Dimensions of Interactions Across School Type

First, interactions in school communities are affective in that they are close and intimate; this is different from school organizations which are affective neutral where interactions are emotionally distant in nature. Second, interactions in school communities are collective orientated in that actions are often motivated by promoting a common good; this is different from school organizations which are self-orientated where actions are motivated by self-interest. Third, interactions in school communities are particularistic in that decisions are made based on the specifics of a given situation; this contrasts with school organizations which are universalist where decisions are made based on protocol and rules. Fourth, school communities are ascriptionist in that individuals are valued for themselves; this is different from school organizations which are achievement-orientated in that individuals are valued for what they accomplish. Finally, interactions in school communities can be characterized in terms of diffuseness where individuals are not categorized or stereotyped; this is different from school organizations which can be characterized in terms of specificity in that individuals are narrowly defined by roles and

expectations. This study examines the role peer social interactions play in school communities.

Type and Nature of Peer Associations

The literature identifies two categories of peer associations: relational ties and ideational ties (Kindermann & Gest, 2009). Relational ties are close, emotional and intimate associations; friendships and cliques are two types of relational ties. Ideational ties are social associations; crowds is considered to be an ideational tie. Friendships, cliques, and crowds will be explored in turn.

Friendships. Friendships are consistently defined in the literature as dyadic, mutual relationships (Berndt & McCandless, 2009; Birch & Ladd, 1996; Bukowski et al., 2007; Ladd et al., 2009; Wentzel & Looney, 2007). Researchers have focused on conceptualizing friendships based on emotional properties of affection and intimacy (Bukowski et al., 2007), social properties of reciprocity and egalitarianism (Bukowski et al., 2007; Bukowski, Motzoi, & Meyer, 2009; Wentzel, 2005), or utilitarian properties such as material support and rivalry (Birch & Ladd, 1996; Ladd et al., 2009). Friendships satisfy socio-emotional goals (Bukowski et al., 2009) and are usually formed when students find commonalities with a peer (Wentzel & Looney, 2007). Friendships begin as a preference for a particular peer and increased socialization with this preferred peer can result in the development of a friendship (Ladd et al., 2009). The degree of closeness between friends has been characterized as a continuum with the extreme left being *strangers*, the extreme right being *best friends*, and with *acquaintances*, *just friends*, *good friends*, and *close friends* sequentially lying between the extremes (Ladd et al., 2009).

Friends play an important role on students' academic success. Positive friendships may result in the modeling of prosocial goals such as helping, sharing, and reciprocity (Bukowski et al., 2009; Ladd et al., 2009; Wentzel, 2009). Moreover, positive friendships have been linked to academic outcomes such as increased engagement (Li, Lynch, Calvin, Liu, & Lerner, 2011), higher sense of enjoyment and importance for academic tasks (Wentzel, 2005) higher grades, higher test scores, and increased motivation (Wentzel, 2009). Negative friendships that are competitive, antagonistic, and not academically supportive have not been as widely investigated,

however, some studies have found negative friendships to affect maladjustment to school due to negative school attitudes, disaffection, (Ladd et al., 2009) and disruptiveness (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Ladd et al., 2009).

Crowds and cliques. While friendships are dyadic and close interactions, crowds are ideational ties characterized as large collectives based on stereotypes and reputations (Brown, 2004; Hartup, 2009) and cliques are relational ties characterized as small groups of friends with personal relationships (Brown, 2004; Bukowski et al., 2007). Crowds and cliques are not stable and exclusive groupings; instead, students form complex and dynamic peer networks. In this interlocking peer network, dyadic friendships exist within and outside crowds and cliques, and cliques may exist within, outside, and between crowds (Brown, 2004). Nearly all schools have cliques, but crowds may not exist in small schools as small size brings an intimacy among the student body that hinders the development of stereotype-based groupings (Wentzel & Wigfield, 2007).

Crowds are important developmentally because crowds provide a sense of identity and a structure for social interaction (Hartup, 2009). Membership in a crowd is not necessarily voluntary as membership is based on peer perception of an individual, not an individual student's desire to be associated with a particular stereotype (Brown, 2004; Hartup, 2009; Kindermann & Gest, 2009; Wentzel, 2005). Crowd stereotypes are usually based on school activities, abilities, behaviors, race, and socio-economic status (Brown & Dietz, 2009). Crowds can include hundreds of students while cliques are much smaller with approximately three to 10 students. Cliques have a hierarchical structure and are exclusionary in nature; moreover, the nature of cliques is inconsistent, ranging from small collectives of dyadic friendships to friendship circles where all members of the clique have close relationships with every other member (Adler & Adler, 1998).

Crowd membership has been found to be associated with academic and developmental outcomes as these stereotypes are accompanied with expectations in behavior (Wentzel, 2005). Moreover, there is a development trajectory that each crowd may follow in relation to students' academic attitudes and behaviors. For instance, the social status of students stereotyped as smart tends to be highest in middle school and lowest at the beginning of high school (Hartup, 2009). This developmental trajectory

may lead to students moving away from behaviors that lead to academic success as the stereotype of being smart becomes less popular in the transition to high school. Cliques are less studied than crowds, but cliques have been found to effect intrinsic value and academic achievement (Ryan, 2001). Thus, peer associations such as cliques, crowds, and dyadic friendships both positively and negatively affect students' developmental and academic outcomes.

The Present Study

The original objective of this study was to examine friendships, cliques, and crowds in school community learning environments; however, early data revealed a type of peer association that could not be classified as friendships, cliques, or crowds because it was not based on relational ties (i.e. friendships and cliques), nor was it the type of ideational ties based on social reputations or stereotypes (i.e. crowds), but instead seemed to be an ideational tie based on shared membership in the school community. In preliminary observation, students in identified school communities formed peer associations that were affective, collectivist, particularist, ascriptionist, and diffusive, which seemed to guide how peers related to one another. The type of peer associations that may result from social ties to a shared school community has been under-explored. Thus, the objective evolved to become a qualitative exploration into the qualities and characteristics of ideational ties that emerged as a result of membership in school communities – an association this paper terms peer bonds. Thus, this study asked the research question, “What are the qualities and characteristics of peer bonds in school communities?”

Method

The Sites

Sites for data collection were selected using a two-step process. First, a list of all high schools in an urban, Midwestern city was created and the mission statement of each school was analyzed for school governance structures. Schools that created governance structures that relied on shared vision, mutual obligations, social ties, and interdependence were marked as

potential school communities and schools that governed using control and surveillance were marked as potential school organizations. In step two, informal interviews and observations were conducted in all potential school communities in addition to three matching school organizations with similar school characteristics and student body demographics. Informal interviews and observations at the six schools were conducted during lunch by two researchers who gathered data independently in each site. Schools with social interactions that could be characterized as diffuse, ascriptionist, particularist, collectivist, and affective were marked as school communities. Assessments from the two researchers were compared and the schools both researchers assessed as school communities (i.e. Franklin High School and Central High School) were included as data collection sites in this study.

Franklin High School (a pseudonym) is an urban Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) focused, early college school in a large Midwestern city with a mission of creating a school community that combines caring, democratic, and inquiry community features. Franklin is racially diverse: 55% White, 26.5% Black, 5% Asian, and 3.5% Latino. A third of Franklin students qualified for free or reduced lunch. Franklin was selected as a site for data collection based on its' mission statement of developing an inquiring and democratic school community based on shared decision-making, holistic development of students, and independent learning.

Lincoln High School (a pseudonym) is an urban, predominately Black school in a large Midwestern city with a long tradition within the city's Black community. Lincoln is 93.5% Black with nearly two-thirds of the student body qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Lincoln is classified as a school community based on its application of its shared mission to emphasize the cultural traditions of the predominately-Black student body in curricular materials, extra-curricular activities, and school norms, values, and expectations using an Afrocentric pedagogical approach.

Participants

The observation sample for this study included 231 Franklin students (68% female) and 201 Lincoln students (49% female). The sample represented the racial demographics of each school. Periods of Social Studies and English classes in both schools were randomly selected for observation.

A purposive selection technique (Creswell, 2003) was used to create a subsample of 20 Franklin and 20 Lincoln students to be interviewed. Students were selected in a manner that produced a sample representative of each school's demographics according to grade level, gender, and GPA. Of the 40 students asked to participate in interviews, 16 Franklin and 17 Lincoln students consented and were interviewed.

Procedures

Observations and semi-structured, individual interviews with students were conducted to understand peer bonds in school communities. Observations occurred in Franklin during homeroom classes and in Lincoln during social studies classes twice a week throughout six semesters. Observations focused on examining peer interactions, teacher strategies in influencing peer interactions and school community culture, and student perceptions and responses to these teacher efforts. As such, observations focused on teacher behaviors that contributed to school community and learning environment culture such as the endorsement of specific values, morals, expectations, school identity, and school mission that influences peer associations (Allender, 2001; Aspy, 1977; Ulucci, 2009).

Semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted with students to understand the qualities and characteristics of peer bonds. Broad questions and statements such as “describe your level of involvement with peers you don't know personally” were asked in interviews and probing were used to extract details of peer associations in school community and to direct conversation toward the research question. The nature of all interview and probing questions were directed toward understanding how students related, interacted, and felt connected to peers they did not know personally. This focus on non-friend peers participants didn't know personally was used to specifically distinguish peer bonds (constructed through shared membership in a school community) from dyadic friendships, cliques and crowds (constructed through interpersonal relationships and stereotypic reputations). Interviews lasted approximately 35 minutes and were conducted with each participant at the end of each semester.

Validity

Data were analyzed using the constant comparison method. All conclusions drawn across all themes and sub-themes met two conditions: (1) observation data and student interview data confirmed each other, (2) expert review by peer relationship scholars ensured the fit of the data to previous literature, and (3) data were confirmed in all research sites.

Whittmore, Chase and Mandle (2001) identified four primary criteria for establishing validity in qualitative research: authenticity, credibility, criticality, and integrity. Authenticity, the assurance that data reflect the lived experiences of the participants and demonstrate multiple realities, and credibility, the assurance that data are interpreted accurately and the conclusions drawn by the researcher reflect the data, were addressed in this study using triangulation, exploring differences of opinion between participants, and member-checking. To establish triangulation, multiple researchers analyzed all interview and observation data; intercoder reliability using three coders was assessed using Krippendorff's alpha and strong reliability was demonstrated ($\alpha=.91$). Additionally, member-checking was conducted with students where an illustration of the results was constructed and given to 10 student participants for them to analyze verbally while the researcher wrote memos on the participants' comments. As a result of these member-checks, two codes were split into 4 and the data were re-analyzed for these additional codes, and one category was reorganized.

Criticality, the requirement to critically appraise findings, was satisfied using member-checking and the purposeful exploration of experiences counter to expectations. Finally, integrity requires that researchers attend to ethical issues (Fade, 2003). This study attended to ethical issues by obtaining Institutional Review Board approval and obtaining informed assent and parental permission for each participant.

Findings

Shared Values

When discussing the nature of peer associations in their school, Franklin students discussed having shared values in terms of having specific values

that they believed generically described what their student body endorsed. They also discussed the application of those values to themselves personally and the usefulness of these values in school and in life. Franklin students generally spoke about the school's principles, which were a set of values intentionally engrained in the school culture by teachers and administrators that promoted critical thinking, responsible decision-making, communication, and engaged and inquiring learning. Students viewed these principles as "useful in my everyday life. Not just in school, but in the future, to learn these values and use them" (Brent, Franklin). Students articulated a belief that these principles were embraced by the whole school and that believing these values personally will lead them to be "very successful in the future" (Bryan, Franklin). Additionally, students cited open-mindedness as a value that is common to Franklin students and a value the students endorsed personally, "so you are more open-minded here at [Franklin] and more thoughtful of each other. I'm that way now" (Hillary, Franklin).

Lincoln students similarly believed their school had a unique set of values that were common to all students and that those values were important both in school and in life. Lincoln students derived their school values largely from their cultural community and articulated a belief in the common school values of "lift as you climb" (Desiree, Lincoln), "set a good example for [your] people" (Jamal, Lincoln), and "do stuff for others" (Patrick, Lincoln). All students mentioned the first two values and all but three students mentioned the last value. There were two additional values that were not mentioned by a large number of students, but were mentioned by at least three students, which were "be prayerful" (Krystal, Lincoln) and "do your best at school" (Mica, Lincoln).

Shared Identity

When discussing the nature of non-friend peer associations in their school, students discussed having a shared identity in terms of having specific labels that they believed generically described the student body and believed that they shared in this identity and liked being associated with their school. In terms of hard work, Franklin students specifically stated that their school was more hardworking than other schools; "my home school is [South High School]. I toured [South High School] a little bit, and

from what it sounds like, they don't work hard and they don't have that community (Callie, Franklin). Moreover, most students confirmed that these identity labels arose in conversation with their peers, "we [students at Franklin] talk all the time about how hard we're working" (Bryan, Franklin). Additionally, maturity was a common label nearly all interviewed Franklin students used to describe the identity of their school, "going to [Franklin], you are just more mature. You mature quicker than you would at a normal school" (Carly). Lastly, Franklin students spoke about Franklin being a school of outcasts, "we are all individuals and a bit of misfits. That's kinda what it means to be a [Franklin] student. We are all unique" (James, Franklin). These sentiments were echoed in nearly all of the interviews with students using the terms outcasts, misfits, loners, unique individuals, and quirky kids.

Lincoln students described their school as having a unique identity and labeled that identity as prideful and courageous. Lincoln students spoke of pride in relation to their extra-curricular activities and the history of their Black culture; "I like people knowing I go here cause we have a lot of pride, like, more than most schools. We do real good in like all the sport. I mean, we dominate" (Eric, Lincoln). Students also spoke of courage in terms of sports and Black culture; "Our people survived some serious stuff. Like, that's in the blood. We got courage in the blood" (Jay, Lincoln).

It must be noted that there are some identity labels that were mentioned by individual students, but not reiterated widely in other student interviews. Specifically, five Franklin students spoke about commonalities in a STEM interest, three Franklin students spoke of respect for diversity, and four Lincoln students spoke of being social. This lack of consistency may be due to the nature of the interview question, which was broad, open-ended, and asked students to generate identity labels rather than asking students to comment on a list of researcher-generated identity labels.

Shared Success

As students perceived their school as a community, they responded by creating special bonds with their non-friend peers that can be characterized as a sense of shared academic and life success with their peers, "we all work together. We are all friends in a way, even if we don't know each other personally, because we share [Franklin]" (Charles, Franklin). First,

students recognized that peer success affected their success directly, “I help out [my peers] because they can help me out if I don’t know something” (Mica, Lincoln). Students at Franklin similarly saw school community as an opportunity to engage in reciprocity, describing it as “like paying it forward” (Amy). Moreover, students understood that peer success affected the school reputation, and the school reputation affected them personally both in terms of access to resources, “if word got out that the school is doing very well, it will get funded, and then that will go back to me being able to do more activities and do better” (Hannah, Franklin), and in terms of learning; “When everybody is working harder and learning more, then we can all get a better education because people outside the school notice and they give us more opportunities for our learning” (Chris, Lincoln). This understanding that peer success is related to their success led students to feel responsible for their peers’ success, “it makes the school look better. If they do good, they will pass the class, if they pass the class, they will graduate. Overall, it’s just better for the school if the students are doing good, so I do what I can to help people out” (Lyric, Lincoln).

Shared Failure

Conceptually the opposite of shared success, shared failure is the sense of shared failure in that peer failure has some effect on the student themselves. Franklin students agreed that students “need support when you’re in this school to keep from making the school look bad” (Allison, Franklin) and to keep from “holding the class back when you’re failing and can’t keep up” (Michael, Lincoln). Students indicated that they believed their peers’ failure would reflect poorly on the student themselves to an outsider; “I would rather help somebody in my school from failing than in another school because they can find a tutor, but we are all here at [Franklin] for a common purpose and are bonded and their failure means something for me” (Helen, Franklin). Aaliyah (Lincoln) made a similar statement that community was important because “it’s possible to get things done by yourself...but I wouldn’t want [my peers] to fail or fall into the shadows so I help even if they don’t ask first ‘cause them failing would make us all look bad”.

Investment in Peer Success

When discussing the nature of associations in their school between themselves and peers they did not know personally, students discussed being invested in the success of their peers. Specifically, they discussed helping peers in terms of understanding concepts and improving grades. This concept of investment in peers is the intention to help peers, which is related, but different from the theme shared success, which is the belief that a peer's success reflects on the individual. In terms of aiding peers, Franklin students would often tutor one another, "I was very good at [the engineering course] because that is what I want to do, I want to be an engineer. There are a lot of other kids who have to take it and it isn't their thing...I really love to help them" (Brent, Franklin). Lincoln students also spoke of wanting to aid peers, but usually in terms of providing answers to peers; "I give answers and stuff, cause we're all here to try and pass this stuff and so might as well help out" (Michelle, Lincoln). This is in contrast to Franklin students who were sometimes clear that they only provided help in improving grades when their peers were still learning content; "I like to aid my peers in succeeding, it just depends on the way they succeed. I want them to succeed in a way where they are still learning it and they are still getting what they are supposed to get" (Darryl, Franklin).

Two students did provide an alternative opinion and stated that they "never really approach [their] peers because [they] felt like it's just awkward" (Callie, Franklin), and that they didn't engage in peer aid due to a belief that "they would probably never be on task and no one would get what they needed" (Carly, Franklin). These two opinions came from 9th grade black, female students in Franklin – one Somali and one African American.

Caring for Peers

When discussing the nature of peer bonds, students discussed caring for peers – particularly peers who were not their close friends or within their crowds or cliques – in terms of emotional, social, and academic caring for peers. Students at both schools perceived a sense of social inclusion among peers; "Here, there are certain cliques that kind of hang out with each other, but even within those cliques, people branch out and talk to those who don't

have a clique. You just want to make people feel like somebody’s got their back” (Elliot, Franklin). Hillary explained how this social support was a form of academic support; “You want to support one another. It’s not written, but we just know it to be nice, but that’s really about being encouraging to get through the work. You see it and you do it.” (Jana, Franklin).

Students cared that their peers learned the course material and achieved a high grade; “getting good grades is important, definitely, and I help my peers to do that, even the ones that you are asking about, you know, the ones I don’t have personal relationships with.” (Derek, Franklin). Patrick (Lincoln) expressed a similar sentiment; “you get into college with good grades, but you succeed in life by actually learning the stuff in the book, so both are important and I do stuff to make sure the people in my school get both...It matter ‘cause we’re all [Lincoln] students”.

Discussion

Kindermann and Gest (2009) categorized peer associations as either relational ties where interactions are close, emotional attachments or ideational ties where associations are based on social ties. Friendships and cliques are relational ties and crowds is an ideational tie. This study explores how another type of ideational tie – peer bonds - forms in learning environments that construct themselves as school communities. Peer bonds are peer associations based on shared membership in a school community, unlike crowds (based on shared stereotypes), cliques (based on shared close relationships in a small group), or friendships (based on shared and close dyadic relationships). This study found six main characteristics of peer bonds: investment in peers, shared success, shared failure, shared identity, shared values, and pedagogical caring.

Finding investment in peers, shared success, and shared failure to be components of peer bonds are not surprising given the research conducted by achievement goal theorists. Specifically, the work conducted on social goals helps explain these findings. There are three social goals that may partially relate to the peer investment, shared success, and shared failure components of peer bonds. The social goals of *resource acquisition* and *resource provision* are an attempt by students to accomplish the general goals of obtaining or giving approval, support, assistance, advice, or

validation through others (Ford, 1992; Wentzel, 1999). The investment, shared success, and shared failure themes were crafted largely around participants' perspectives that their associations with peers are based on shared outcomes and a need to use one another as a resource for that shared outcome to be academic success. There is an expectation of academic reciprocity and the use of peers as a resource when engaging in academic work. Thus, shared success and shared failure partially describe what students are attempting to accomplish, which is resource acquisition and resource provision.

Additionally, a third social goal of *social solidarity* describes student attempts to succeed because they desire to raise the status of their in-group, or school (Ford, 1992; Urdan & Maehr, 1995). The investment in peers, shared success, and shared failure themes capture participants' perspectives that their school community's reputation is of importance and engaging in academic work bolsters that reputation. This perspective was present in Franklin, but especially pronounced in Lincoln. This may be because Franklin students believed their school's academic reputation to be positive, thus may engage in maintaining that reputation; whereas Lincoln students believed their school's academic reputation was poor, thus may engage in elevating their school's status. In both situations, shared success and shared failure partially described *why* students attempted to succeed. Thus, both perspectives regarding the *what* and *why* of social goals may be related to peer bonds. Future research should examine the exact nature of the relations between peer bonds and specific social goals.

Shared identity and shared values are the belief among students within a school community that the student body shares common identity labels and common values. Although Franklin and Lincoln students had very different shared identity labels, there was little within-school differentiation. These identity labels mostly align with stated shared values. Nearly all Franklin students described their school as students who were hard-working, mature, and misfits while nearly all Lincoln students described their school as respectful, proud, spirited, and athletic. A sense of shared identity in a community is a vital component of peer bonds. Students must feel that they are more than a collection of adolescents in a school, but are a distinct communion of individuals with commonalities that distinguish them from other schools (Furman, 2002; Sergiovanni, 1994).

Caring for peers measured the concept that students have pedagogical caring for peers in school communities. Many previous studies have examined caring in relational ties (Bukowski et al., 2007; Ladd et al., 2009; Vitaro, Boivin, & Bukowski, 2009; Wentzel, 2009), finding that peer pedagogical care is important for many academic processes such as help, resources, support (Wentzel, 2005), and expectations for success (Wentzel & Looney, 2007; Wentzel, 2005). While relational ties were present in both schools, the specific aim was to measure caring for non-friend peers to understand associations based on membership in a shared community rather than measuring friendships, cliques, or crowds. Future research should examine whether peer bonds, in a school community, will lead to similar academic processes as relational ties such as academic help, resources, support, and expectations for success.

Limitations

One theoretical gap in the conceptualization of peer bonds is the role of school culture. Peer bonds were conceptualized here as an outgrowth of school community in that the construction of a school community (characterized as interdependence, mutual obligations and social ties) results in the growth of ideational ties characterized by a sense of obligation, intertwined outcomes, and shared school identity. Each school community is different as each has their own norms, visions, and values – or school culture (Shields, 2002). The effects of school culture on the nature of peer bonds remain unclear. Theoretically, it can be argued that school culture defines the nature of the community, and thus, defines the nature of peer bonds. Alternatively, peer bonds may not be affected by school culture in that the existence of peer bonds are constructed around membership in a school community and shared identity, shared values, shared success and failure, investment in peers, and pedagogical caring for peers are constant across all school communities regardless of specific school cultural values, norms, vision, and climate.

A second direction for future research is the role of gender on peer bonds. Gender differences in peer bonds deserve better examination, given the vast literature on the role of gender on peer relationships. Many studies have demonstrated gender differences in relatedness (Freeman & Anderman, 2005; Voelkl, 1997) pursuing peer relationships (Richard &

Schneider, 2005), quality of friendships, use of peers for socio-emotional support (Osterman, 2000), and the importance of social relations in peer preference (Richard & Schneider, 2005).

Additionally, this study did not examine peer bonds in relation to belonging and peer non- acceptance. Theoretically, peer bonds is based on shared membership in a school community. Thus, belonging to a school community (feeling that one fits in the school) is likely a pre-requisite to adopting peer bonds (investment in peers, shared failure, shared success, shared identity, shared values, and pedagogical caring). Moreover, students that are rejected by peers or are withdrawn are not likely to adopt peer bonds. Peer rejection is a student being disliked by their peers (Ladd et al., 2009) and is measured through information obtained from that individual's peer group (Wentzel, 2005) because it is the peer group that determines ideational ties, not the individual themselves. Measured in a similar manner, withdrawn students are defined as antisocial or aggressive students who move away or against their peers (Rubin, Bowker, & Kennedy, 2009). Peer bonds are assumed to encompass most students because ideational ties, as opposed to relational ties, are memberships in a group that students do not ascribe themselves to (Kindermann & Gest, 2009). Being labeled with a stereotype (for crowds) or attending a school community (for peer bonds) places students within an ideational ties group. Rejection and withdrawal could isolate students from the school's social network (Birch & Ladd, 1996), thus rejected and withdrawn students may be isolated from the school community and may not experience peer bonds. A study that examines the role of belonging, peer rejection, and withdrawn students in peer bonds is currently underway.

Significance

Peers have incredible influence on adolescents' behaviors and attitudes regarding school success (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Ryan, 2001; Vitaro et al., 2009), yet adolescent interactions and relations in terms of friendships, cliques, and crowds are not easily constructed, dissolved, or altered by researchers, school leadership, or teachers because these peer associations are created in youth culture largely absent adult influence. Despite the significant influence peers have on students' academic behaviors and attitudes, few interventions to affect friendships, cliques, and crowds are

possible. However, peer bonds are based on membership in school community and all stakeholders of a school community play a role in setting the norms, values, mission, and social structures of a school community. In fact, many interventions exist to construct, maintain, and affect the characteristics of school communities (see Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Blacker, 2007; Reitzug & O’Hair, 2002; Watson & Battistich, 2006). With further scholarly investigation, peer bonds may have the potential to be an avenue for intervention to access the largely untapped source of peer influence to positively affect adolescent academic behaviors and attitudes.

Additionally, the theoretical implications of these findings have potential for researchers seeking to understand the effects of creating school community on peer dynamics. Broadening the understanding of peer association types provides an opportunity to empirically examine influences that peers can have on students’ academic success and holistic development in school communities.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Lynley Anderman, Eric Anderman, Dorinda Gallant, and Beverly Gordon for providing expertise and comments that greatly improved this manuscript. This work was supported by The Metro Fellowship provided by The College of Education and Human Ecology at The Ohio State University.

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