'Friends and grades': Peer preference and attachment predict academic success among Naskapi youth

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Abstract

The primary findings of this study are preliminary support for the promotive effects of positive peer relations in an educational context with a specific group of First Nations adolescents. Eighty-one students from grades 6–11 who attended the sole school in the Naskapi community of Kawawachikamach in northern Québec, representing virtually all of the youths in the community, completed questionnaires regarding peer preferences, self-report peer and parental attachment, and affiliation with mainstream White and Native culture. Based on a regression analysis with full information maximum likelihood (FIML) analyses to handle missing data, only the measures of peer preference and self-report attachment to peers were found to predict school grades. These findings are inconsistent with the oppositional hypothesis that has been forwarded with other

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minority youths from historically oppressed communities, but rather are evidence for the beneficial effects of 'peer power' in this community.

Keywords

Aboriginal peoples, education, First Nations, indigenous populations, Native American, peer relations, Québec, school performance

Deleterious educational outcomes as indicated by low rates of high school completion, post-secondary enrolment, and successful entry to the job market among Aboriginal peoples in Canada, as well in the United States (Fryberg, Covarrubias, & Burack, 2013) and elsewhere (Laguarda & Woodward, 2013; Little, Akin-Little, & Johansen, 2013; Seyle, Widyatmoko, & Silver, 2013; Yeung, Craven, & Ali, 2013), are widely discussed as a *fait accompli* in both the popular media and in scholarly outlets. This negative status is often portrayed in particularly grim ways, with the emphases on narratives from individual communities with the most at-risk youth or on population statistics for the country, province or state, or region. In these scenarios, the conclusions typically reflect broad brush strokes of failure and inevitably problematic futures for all Aboriginal peoples. However, these approaches ignore the successes and well-being of so many youths across various communities, as well as the positive influences that promote these successes. As Chandler and Lalonde (1998) highlight in their work on suicide rates in the province of British Columbia, the focus on population statistics and findings from a few high-risk communities can skew perceptions of a phenomenon to the extent that the positive adaptation and successes of individuals and communities are ignored. Accordingly, more fine-tuned understandings of the educational processes and outcomes of Aboriginal students must involve a shift in focus toward highlighting the strengths of individuals and specific communities (Fulford, 2007).

The present study represents a commitment to contribute to the growing body of strength-based educational research in collaboration with the Naskapi community of Kawawachikamach, Québec, Canada, with a focus on the relation among self-reported attachment to peers and parents, peer-nominated social preference, cultural identity, and academic achievement among all the youths who attended the community school in grades 6–11 (according to provincial standards, graduation in Québec is after grade 11) in the 1998–1999 academic year. Consistent with the notion that a child's social life is one of the most important aspects of school experience, we examined the relation between school performance, as indicated by grades, and the extent to which they reported attachment to their peers and were socially preferred by their peers. This issue resonates within any community with a history of oppression at the hands of the majority culture and in which antipathy toward mainstream institutions might be reflected in ambivalence toward Western schools and any peers who are successful in that setting (Luthar, 2006; Luthar & Burack, 2000).

Peers and academic outcome in minority groups

The role of peers in academic outcome may not be positive among minority students from historically oppressed groups for whom the quest for academic success may even be in conflict within the specific cultural norms, to the extent that peer pressure may negatively affect academic motivations (Luthar, 1995; Luthar & Burack, 2000; Luthar & McMahon, 1996). In a particularly compelling, albeit controversial, articulation of this issue, Fordham and Ogbu (1986; also, see Ogbu, 1992, 2003) proposed that members of some of the minority groups that entered American society involuntarily, through slavery or conquest, develop oppositional social identities. In order to protect their identities, members of these minority groups reject behaviors, symbols, and activities that they consider mainstream or *White*. Accordingly, the academic achievement of Black students may be hampered by their perceptions of educational success as part of White collective identity, and that engaging in education is harmful for their own identity and that of their group members. This notion was supported by evidence that peer-rated sociability in the beginning of the year predicted a decrease in grades by the end of the year (Luthar, 1995) and that peer isolation as opposed to peer inclusion was related to academic success (Luthar & McMahon, 1996) among inner-city children. Concordantly, African-American children received less social support for academic achievement from their peers (Kennedy, 1995).

The notion of an oppositional hypothesis among African-American students has been challenged with evidence that it may transcend race and be more specific to level of scholastic attainment and socioeconomic status as students of all races and backgrounds may resent school if they struggle academically or view themselves as disadvantaged (Downey & Ainsworth-Darnell, 2002; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). Conversely, the influence of peers can be particularly beneficial for all students who do well in school, including Black and other minority youths, to the extent that the support of peers for successful students in the Black community represents a compelling 'positive power' of Black peer support that facilitates academic success (Horvat & Lewis, 2003).

The discussion about the oppositional hypothesis about Black and other minority students in the USA provides a framework for studying the role of peers in the educational process of Aboriginal students across North America, which is often associated with higher than typical levels of failure and inconsistencies between Aboriginal cultural values and ways of being and the values and ways of being that are promoted by their teachers and school systems (Fryberg & Markus, 2003, 2007; Fryberg et al., 2012; Iarocci, Root, & Burack, 2009). Clearly, North American mainstream educational contexts are not 'neutral' contexts, but rather are culture-laden contexts that foster and promote culture-specific ways of being that are culturally incongruent for non-mainstream students, such as Aboriginal youth. Accordingly, Aboriginal students would be among the likely groups to show an oppositional attitude toward mainstream White education that would be manifested, at least in part, by the ostracization of students who perform well

in such a system. The cost of success for the more successful students might be expected to be that they are less liked by their peers and concordantly less likely to report fewer friendships and attachments, the converse of what is typically seen among mainstream White students.

The link between social and academic well-being

In mainstream North American culture, children who get along better with their classmates perform better in school, as peer acceptance and attachment are linked to academic competence and achievement (Kingery, Erdley, & Marshall, 2011; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997; Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O'Neil, 2001; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). The role of peer acceptance as an important predictor of academic achievement is particularly pronounced within the USA among mainstream White students (Becker & Luthar, 2007). In these studies, peer acceptance is often operationalized as an index of being liked and well-regarded by fellow students and is typically measured with nominations as children are asked to choose a set number of students that they like and with whom they spend time. The positive effect of peer acceptance on academic outcomes is thought to be mediated by the promotion of classroom engagement (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999), positive perceptions of school (Ladd, et al., 1997), and to serve as a motivational enabler for students through support and encouragement (Wentzel & Watkins, 2002). Participating in a wide social network also provides opportunities to engage in collaborative learning, tutoring, and group exploration (Ladd, 2004; Wentzel, 2009), whereas students who are rejected by their peers disengage from school, display internalizing symptoms, and often fall victim to bullying and victimization, thereby leading to lower academic outcomes (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006; Flook, Repetti, & Ullman, 2005).

In addition to the higher ratings of social preference by others in academic achievement, children's own perspectives of their attachment to their peers emerge as a key indicator. As adolescents gradually establish their independence from their parents and learn how to seek out and maintain new relationships, their attachment needs are increasingly met by their peers (Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, & Haggart, 2006). Positive peer relations and acceptance are related to more prosocial behaviors, emotional competence, global self-esteem, perceived social support, less depression, aggression, and anxiety, and ultimately to higher retention rates and higher grades in school (Laible, 2007; Laible, Carlo, & Raffaelli, 2000; Ma & Huebner, 2008, Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001; Schwartz, Gorman, Duong, & Nakamoto, 2008). Peer attachment is linked to academic outcomes because close relationships with peers provide 'secure bases' from which they can explore the school environment (Birch & Ladd, 1996; Meeus, Oosterwegel, & Vollebergh, 2002). In adolescence, peer attachment may even be more crucial for school adjustment than parental attachment (Laible, Carlo, & Raffaelli, 2000).

The present study

In initiating this study, the principal of the Jimmy Sandy Memorial School expressed the goal of identifying barriers and contributors to the educational success of the youths of the Naskapi community of Kawawachikamach. The Naskapi live in a remote region of northern Québec that is accessible only by daily airplane flights (Monday through Friday) and a train that enter and leaves once a week. The Naskapi are unique in that that are relatively new to mainstream Western education as they maintained aspects of their nomadic lifestyle until as late as 1956, when they were relocated for permanent residence to the mining town of Schefferville, which is approximately 15-kilometers from Kawawachikamach. Based on negotiations with the Canadian federal government, the signing of the Northeastern Québec Agreement (NEQA) provided the Naskapi self-governance on the territories reserved for their exclusive use and led to the founding of Kawawachikamach and the establishment of a Naskapi school under the administration of a public school board.

Given the principal's mandate, we examined academic performance and outcome in relation to a range of considerations including cultural identity, cognitive ability, social competence, emotional well-being, behavioral appropriateness, and teacher and peer perceptions. In this report, we focused on the notion of the relevance of the oppositional hypothesis among the youths in Kawawachikamach, and examined the association between academic performance and the extent to which a student is preferred by their peers and reports attachment to their peers. If the oppositional hypothesis was to supported, success in school for students would be associated with fewer reports of being socially preferred by peers and diminished sense of attachment to peers. Rather, the successful students might be expected to be report greater attachment to their parents, and accordingly self-report measures of attachment to mothers and fathers were also administered. Successful students would be expected to report greater involvement with mainstream White culture rather than with their Native culture and, as a result, measures of affiliation with both mainstream White and Naskapi cultures were included. Virtually all of the youths in Kawawachikamach participated in the study, thereby providing data from almost an entire cohort of adolescents in a single community.

Method

Participants

Eighty-one elementary and secondary school students, with the mean age of approximately 14 years were recruited for this study from the Jimmy Sandy Memorial School (JSMS), the only school in Kawawachikamach, Québec. The students were enrolled in grades 6 through secondary 5 at the time of the study. Assent to participate in the study was provided by all the students and, at the request of the school principal and the Naskapi community, consent was obtained

from the students' parents or guardians. Only two students did not participate because of the lack of assent or consent.

The demographic questionnaire and confirmation from the school principal indicated that 77 participants had two First Nations parents and four participants had one First Nations parent and one White parent. JSMS is administered by the Central Québec School Board, an English public school board that services Québec City, its surrounding regions, and more remote areas in the province. Naskapi is the sole language of instruction until grade 2. English instruction is introduced in grade 3 when approximately two thirds of the curriculum is then taught in English. Beginning in grade 4, the Naskapi language is offered as a separate course up until secondary 1, after which no instruction is available in Naskapi language.

Measures

Peer acceptance. Individual levels of peer acceptance were assessed using the method of peer nominations (Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982) an approach that has been widely used internationally in the study of children's social status (e.g., Chen, 2011 [China]; Greenman, Schneider, & Tomada, 2009 [Italy]; Jimerson, Durbrow, & Wagstaff, 2009 [St. Vincents, West Indies]; Shin, 2010 [Korea]; Tinoco, Lagares, Moreno, Tessier, & Schneider, 2009 [Spain]; Wei & Jonson-Reid, 2011 [Taiwan]).

Participants were given a list of their classmates and were asked to identify three children they 'like the most' and three they 'like the least'. The social preference scores were computed by standardizing the number of *liked most* and *liked least* nominations received by class. The standardized *liked least* scores were then subtracted from the standardized *liked most* scores. These scores were then re-standardized within each class.

Parent and peer attachment. The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) was used to assess the quality of parent-adolescent relatedness and peer-adolescent relatedness. The *IPPA* items were combined to create three broad cognitive-affective dimensions of the parent-adolescent and peer-adolescent relationships that include the degree of mutuality, quality of communication, and extent of anger and alienation between the adolescent and their parents or peers.

The Parent scale consists of 25 items that were answered individually for each parent using a five-point Likert scale. The Peer scale includes 21 items that were scored on a five-point Likert scale. Negative items were also included on the peer scale and were reverse coded for scoring. The IPPA has been found to be a reliable (test–retest correlations of $r = 0.86$ or greater) and valid measure of the perceived quality of close relationships (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Armsden, McCauley, Greenberg, Burke, & Mitchell, 1990; Nada-Raja, McGee, & Stanton, 1992).

Cultural orientation. Identification with First Nations and White cultures was assessed with two measures. The McGill Youth Study Team (MYST) Culture and Heritage Scale was developed by McGill researchers in collaboration with an educator and a leader from Kawawachikamach to measure the levels of identification to Native culture for the students in this particular community. The protocol includes 11-items on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The MYST scale included items that asked directly about identification with a First Nations or non-First Nations way of life. The Biculturalism Involvement Questionnaire (BIQ; Szapocznik, Kurtines, & Fernandez, 1980) was designed to assess how comfortable individuals feel in both their culture and the majority culture and how much they enjoy White and Aboriginal activities. For the purposes of this study, the original BIQ was adapted to assess attitudes about this group of First Nations adolescents and White culture. Several activities included on the original BIQ were, therefore, modified to reflect the appropriate cultures in question. Attitudes about each culture were assessed independently, and thus separate indices were derived for comfort in, and enjoyment of, White culture and comfort in, and enjoyment of, Naskapi culture. For items assessing comfort in White or Aboriginal culture, the youths responded using a five-point scale from 1 (Not at all Comfortable) to 5 (Very Comfortable). For items assessing enjoyment of White and Aboriginal culture, the youths responded on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very Much).

In order to create a comprehensive composite measure of identification with aboriginal culture, scores on the nine items from the MYST which assessed orientation toward aboriginal culture and on nine items assessing comfort in, and enjoyment of, Aboriginal culture from the BIQ were averaged ($\alpha = 0.76$). Identification with white culture was measured by averaging ratings from two items from the MYST that assessed identification with White culture and nine items from the BIQ that assessed comfort in, and enjoyment of, Aboriginal culture ($\alpha = 0.71$).

Final grades. The grades were obtained from participants' school transcripts for the fall of the school year. Composite grades were calculated by averaging the marks for all courses a given student attended.

Procedure

Data collection took place over a one-week visit to Kawawachikamach, Québec by the research team, which was comprised of one faculty member and several graduate student researchers. The participants completed the questionnaires in their classrooms. Research assistants visited each classroom two to three times over the course of the week and read the questionnaires aloud in order to avoid confounds associated with reading level. In accordance with a community-based research approach, local educators provided input throughout to ensure that the project met the community's specific research needs and to delineate developmentally and culturally appropriate considerations.

Results

Missing data analyses

Due to student absences from school during the testing week, individual decisions to omit certain questions or questionnaires, and differences in completion rates of the questionnaires across the grades, complete data sets were obtained for only 41 (48.8%) of the participating youth, and missing data ranged from 7.14 to 36.9% across the study variables. *T*-tests and chi-square tests revealed two significant differences between participants with complete data and those with missing data. Students with complete data had higher grades ($M = 65.01$, SD = 11.76) than students without complete data ($M = 50.61$, SD = 15.18), $t(53) = -3.67$, $p < 0.001$. The students with complete data also reported better relationships with friends ($M = 3.83$, SD = 0.58) than those with missing data ($M = 3.31$, SD = 0.44), $t(56) = -3.35$, $p < 0.001$. All analyses were conducted using Mplus Software (Muthén & Muthén, 2007) which uses full information maximum likelihood (FIML) to handle missing data. FIML is generally regarded as a preferred method for handling missing data as it produces accurate estimates of standard errors, unbiased parameter estimates, and results similar to those obtained using multiple imputation or expectation maximization (Enders & Bandalos, 2001; Schlomer, Bauman, & Card, 2010). By using FIML, the analyses were conducted using all available data from all participants.

Bivariate correlations

The bivariate correlations among all the variables are presented in Table 1. Grades were positively associated with peer preference and children's relationships with their friends. No other significant correlations with grades emerged. A significant, positive correlation did emerge between age and relationships with friends. Moreover, orientation toward Aboriginal culture was positively associated with the quality of students' relationships with their mother and friends. Orientation toward White culture was not related to the quality of students' relationships. Furthermore, having a more positive relationship with one's mother was positively correlated with having a more positive relationship with one's father and friends. However, the association between relationship quality with father and friends was non-significant.

Predicting grades

A regression analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which social preference, cultural orientation, and quality of relationships predict students' grades. The results from this analysis are presented in Table 2. As can be seen, only social preference and quality of relationship with friends positively predicted grades. Together, these predictors accounted for 34% of the variance in grades.

Table 1. Bivariate correlations

Variable	Grades	Age	Social preference	Aboriginal culture	White culture	Relationship with mother	Relationship with father
Grades	–						
Age	−0.04	–					
Social preference	0.37**	−0.11	–				
Aboriginal culture	0.20	0.19	0.02	–			
White culture	−0.04	0.05	0.03	−0.21	–		
Relationship with mother	0.12	0.08	0.06	0.35*	0.16	–	
Relationship with father	−0.01	0.11	0.04	−0.01	0.14	0.49**	–
Relationships with friends	0.47**	0.29*	0.14	0.49**	−0.10	0.34*	0.16

$*p < 0.01$; $**p < 0.001$.

Table 2. Regression predicting grades from age, social preference, cultural orientation, and relationship quality with mother, father, and peers

Predictor	β	b	SE	t-value	p
Age	−0.14	−0.95	0.98	−0.97	ns
Social preference	0.29	4.04	1.62	2.49	0.013
Aboriginal culture	−0.02	−0.47	6.34	−0.07	ns
White culture	0.02	0.39	3.01	0.13	ns
Relationship with mother	−0.01	−0.19	3.87	−0.05	ns
Relationship with father	−0.08	−1.39	2.35	−0.59	ns
Relationships with friends	0.49	10.97	3.31	3.32	$p < 0.001$

Discussion

The primary findings of this study are preliminary support for the promotive effects of positive peer relations in an educational context with a specific group of First Nations adolescents. In our study of the youths of the Naskapi community in Kawawachikamach, measures of peer acceptance and self-report attachment to peers predicted school grades. These findings are inconsistent with the oppositional hypothesis that has been forwarded with other minority youths from historically oppressed communities, but rather are evidence for the beneficial effects of 'peer power' in this community.

The premise of the oppositional hypothesis is that disadvantaged and oppressed minority groups can develop identities that emphasize the differences between them

and the dominant culture which hinders full participation in mainstream institutions, such as schools. As the First Nations people in Canada have been subjected to colonization, forced assimilation, discrimination, and reduced educational resources, this type of opposition to mainstream White institutional education might be expected. Yet, the findings from this cohort of Naskapi youths do not support the oppositional hypothesis, suggesting instead that academic success is viewed favorably, and even promoted, by these students. Both peer acceptance and friend attachment were significantly correlated with academic outcomes and, as these measures were not related to each other, each appears to have contributed uniquely to positive academic outcomes. The extent of the power of these peer related variables in predicting school success is highlighted by the finding that only they, and neither attachment to either parent nor cultural affiliation with white mainstream or Native culture, predicted school grades when all these variables were considered.

The significance of this study results from the community's extensive participation in the program of research. One, as the initiative came from the school principal who, along with the school psychologist and a prominent member of the community, contributed to the selection and adaptation of measures, the focus was on issues of direct relevance to the education of the Naskapi youth in Kawawachikamach. Two, virtually the entire cohort of youths in grades 6–11 (high school ends in grade 11 in Québec) participated since the Jimmy Sandy Memorial School is the only school in the Kwawachikamach and none of the community members attended school elsewhere.

Although these data provide a relatively comprehensive assessment of the relevant issues among the Naskapi adolescents of Kawawachikamach, the findings may not necessarily generalize to other Aboriginal communities in Canada, as each community is unique with regard to history, culture, language, educational system, and ways of living. Thus, the goal is to examine the extent to which the findings are common across many communities or that differ in relation to specific communal or other factors. Within this mosaic approach to research, the findings presented here are intended to both provide information of specific relevance to the Naskapi youths of Kawawachikamach but also to raise issues that may be relevant to other communities as well.

In sum, our findings indicate that, in contrast to the oppositional identity hypothesis, academic success seems to be valued, and even promoted, by peers among the youths of this specific community of Kawawachikamach. By focusing on a specific community, we identified positive attitudes for educational outcomes that are typically overlooked in the grim reporting of negative group statistics or tragic individual narratives. The goal for our society is to further develop curricula and schools that will promote academic success and thereby capitalize on the positive peer power that was evidenced among the Naskapi youths and may be found among other groups of First Nations youths, despite their histories of forced colonization and oppression by the mainstream society.

Note

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