Chapter 5: Peer Cultures and Their Challenge for Teaching

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In recent years, the term peer group has increasingly been replaced by the term peer culture. This chapter begins with a discussion of these two terms and the likely reasons for this change. Next, a typology of peer cultures is presented based on three different ways in which these culture can be created. The presentation of this typology is followed by a discussion of the diversity among peer cultures generated by background characteristics of peers such as social class, gender, age, and race-ethnicity. The chapter then assesses the claims that peer cultures of children and adolescents frequently conflict with teachers’ goals and the official school culture that encompasses these goals. While not rejecting these claims, I argue that they are based on simplifying assumptions that ignore tensions and contradictions within official school cultures. In particular, I argue that it is useful to separate three strands of official school culture — academic goals, extracurricular activities, and school rules about deportment — and to show how each affects and is affected by the peer cultures students construct for themselves. Next, the influence of peer cultures on students’ opinions and behaviours is assessed directly in a section of the chapter that reviews the literature concerned with the nature and strength of peer influence. The final section of the chapter assesses the implications of peer cultures for teaching by examining what school staffs have done and might do to affect peer group processes at different levels of schooling.

PEER GROUPS AND PEER CULTURES

The term peers is generally used to refer to persons who occupy equivalent positions in an organization or social network. These positions are usually designated by identity labels, and those with legitimate claims to the same label are said to be peers. Thus, students in a school are peers, as are teachers in a school, but students and teachers hold different positions and are not peers. Students in different schools may also be regarded as peers, especially when the students are at the same grade level. Students may also be regarded as the peers of those who drop out of school, but in such cases, a label other than student (e.g., adolescents, gang members, 16 year olds) will be used to identify the basis of their
peer status. Although teachers or principals or school bus drivers or academics who judge one another’s scholarship meet the definition of peers just as much as students do, the term is used in this chapter to refer to young people, especially children and adolescents.

Peer groups consist of two or more peers who are linked together by more than their common identity label. These linkages usually include contact, interaction, and positive, sociometric choices (who are your friends? whom do you like?). Peer groups vary in size and in closeness. Closeness is difficult to define precisely because it is based on multiple linkages, but increases in number of contacts, duration and variety of interactions, and reciprocated sociometric choices should all produce increased closeness in peer groups. Network theorists (Boissevain, 1974; Fischer, 1982) have also stressed the importance of density by which they mean the extent to which the members of a group are interconnected. The more of a person’s friends who are friends of one another, the more dense his or her friendship network. Similarly, the higher the proportion of peers who identify themselves and one another as members of the same group, the more dense that group. Dense peer groups are likely to be perceived as not only closer but also more exclusive than peer groups that are less dense.

Peer groups may be important to their members even when the groups are not dense or particularly close (Granovetter, 1973). Peer groups may also serve as reference groups for people who do not belong to them. In such cases, people may identify with a group, seek to emulate it, and wish to join it, but they may have little, if any, contact and interaction with group members. Nor would such people be the target of positive, sociometric choices by group members. Indeed, group members may not even be aware of the people who use them as a reference group. This lack of awareness might be interpreted by others as snobbishness, and this interpretation might produce a ‘cycle of popularity’ like the one described by Eder (1985) in which a popular peer group is transformed from a positive reference group to the most disliked group in the school.

The behaviours of peer group members are interpreted not only by outsiders, but also by the members themselves. These interpretations give rise to a peer culture which consists of the descriptive and evaluative meanings that peer groups assign to behaviours and relationships. These meanings are never static, and the interactions among peer group members consist of talk and behaviours that construct, maintain, consolidate, challenge, or change these meanings. The interpretations peer groups construct for themselves and their own experiences are usually part of a broader process in which meanings are also assigned to other groups and individuals. This seems to be particularly true in school settings where peer groups often construct their identities in contrast to those of ‘outsiders.’ A classic example of this process is provided by ‘the lads,’ the group of rebellious, English, working class students studied by Willis (1977), whose conversations make abundantly clear that they define themselves and their ex-
periences in opposition to attitudes and behaviours attributed to the conformist students they call ‘the ear’oles.’ The lads also construct their own efficacy and superiority through processes of interaction in which limited, sexualized identities are assigned to girls, and ethnic minorities are treated as ‘smelly’ interlopers.

Although peer cultures are constructed in interactions among peer group members, the descriptive and evaluative meanings that constitute these cultures do not necessarily originate in the peer group. It is more likely that the peer group will construct their meanings out of the beliefs, norms, preferences, and values they have learned at home, from the mass media, from teachers, and from the many other persons and groups to whose ideas they have been exposed. For example, Willis’s analysis of racism in the English secondary school ‘the lads’ attended leads him to conclude that ‘(b)oth the lads and (teaching) staff do share, therefore, a sense in their different ways of resentment for the disconcerting intruder’ (Willis, 1977, p. 49). What sets the lads and the teachers apart is not the core set of beliefs and feelings they direct toward minority groups, but the ways in which they express those beliefs and feelings. Unlike the teachers, the lads frequently use verbal violence, and sometimes use physical violence, to show their rejection of ‘the wogs’ and ‘bastard Pakis.’

As this example suggests, what differentiates peer cultures from one another is not so much their unique beliefs, preferences, norms, or values, but the meanings and emphases given to these cultural elements in the behaviours of the peer group. It is also common for the same behaviours to be given different meanings in different peer cultures. A good example is alcohol use among adolescents. Several researchers (e.g., Everhart, 1983; Gordon, 1957; Hartup, 1983, p. 146; Wooden, 1995) have found that student athletes in junior and senior high schools in the United States frequently use and abuse alcohol and sometimes use illegal drugs as well. Despite their behaviours, these students tend to be defined by themselves and others as ‘jocks,’ ‘the athletic crowd,’ or ‘sporties,’ names that emphasize their interests and participation in sports and mask their substance abuse. In contrast to these peer cultures are those in which the core identity of both the group and its members is constructed around alcohol and drug abuse. Known around school as ‘a group … whose thing it is to go out and get drunk’ (Cusick, 1973, p. 70), they tend to be called by such names as ‘drug-gies’ or ‘burnouts.’ Despite the sharp difference in nomenclature between these two peer cultures, it seems entirely possible that some of the ‘burnouts’ may actually engage in less substance abuse than some of the ‘jocks.’ What sets these peer cultures apart is the complex set of interpretations that surround specific behaviours. To jocks, drinking lots of beer may just be something everyone in their crowd does on week-ends, but to burnouts the same behaviour may signify maturity, or financial independence, or risk-taking, or rebellion against adult authority.
As this contrast between jocks and burnouts indicates, the term culture draws attention to the particular views that people develop about themselves, their behaviours, and the world around them. To analyze a culture it is necessary to ask not only what people are saying and doing, but what those activities mean to them. This concern with the ways in which people construct meaningful lives for themselves has a long history in social and behavioural sciences, and those who study children and adolescents have long been interested in the ways in which the beliefs, norms and values of these young people differ from, overlap, or are influenced by those of their teachers, parents, and other adults. Given these concerns, it is not surprising that the term peer culture has been a useful tool.

One reason this has become increasingly true is because the term group no longer seems to carry a strong cultural connotation. Of the eight definitions of this term with which Forsyth (1990) begins his text in group dynamics, only two incorporate cultural elements (e.g., 'a set of values and norms'). The rest of the definitions, all by famous group theorists, ignore culture in favour of an emphasis on interaction or interrelationships. Thus, the term group draws our attention to the ways in which people are linked to one another, but does not compel a search for the meanings and significance of those links. Perhaps this tendency to divorce group from culture reflects the laboratory-based, small-groups research tradition in which strangers whose beliefs or behaviours have been manipulated by experimenters are given little chance or encouragement to develop a group culture of their own.

The increased use of the term peer culture probably reflects not only the reduced utility of the group concept but also the popularity of two related terms, namely, subculture and youth culture. The former term is embedded in a long tradition of research and theory concerned with deviance and delinquency. The specific subcultures that have been studied range from gangs of youthful criminals in the United States (Cohen, 1955; Monti, 1994) to aggregates of young people in Britain, such as Punks or Skinheads, whose identities are based on such elements of style as appearance, demeanour, and argot (Brake, 1985; Hegde, 1979). The term subculture draws attention to both the acceptance of some values from the dominant culture and to the development of oppositional norms and rebellious behaviours. Brake (1985, p. 8) suggests that the latter reflect the subordinate status of those who participate in the subculture:

... subcultures (are) meaning systems, modes of expressions or life styles developed by groups in subordinate structural positions in response to dominant meaning systems ... (A)n essential aspect of (a subculture's) existence is that it forms a constellation of behaviour, action, and values which have meaningful symbolism for the actors involved.
The parallels between this definition of subculture and the definition of peer culture presented earlier are obvious, and it is certainly the case that children and adolescents hold subordinate structural positions. Nevertheless, the term subculture is rarely, if ever, used in the literature concerned with peers in schools. Perhaps, the term is too closely linked to extremely deviant behaviours to be considered a useful tool for analyses of most student behaviours in most school contexts. The term peer culture may be a better conceptual tool for calling attention to the possibility that peer groups may evolve interpretations and meaning systems that foster (some of) the official goals of the school. Whereas the term peer subculture implies rebellion, the term peer culture leaves open the possibilities of compliance as well as resistance.

Unlike the term subculture, the term youth culture owes its existence and popularity as much to the mass media as to scholarly endeavours. It was most popular in the period from 1964 to about 1975 when it was thought that young people, particularly in Western countries, were developing a counter-cultural life style that both rejected and threatened the dominant culture. Cultural elements such as beliefs, preference, norms, and values were at the heart of the debates about the significance of the youth culture, and the established authorities felt strongly that they were battling against the youth culture to retain control of the hearts and minds of their constituents. In addition, the discussions of the youth culture called attention to the powerful effects of the mass media and of consumer goods aimed at the ‘youth market.’ Although some argued that media messages and consumer goods had simple, direct effects on the behaviours of youth, most recognized that youth often made unexpected uses and interpretations of what their society offered. Much was made of the fact that some clothing styles that originated in youth groups later came to be commercially produced and internationally marketed. Thus, youth were seen to be developing not only their own symbolic culture, but their own material culture as well.

Whereas the term subculture often references the culture of specific groups with specific identities, the term youth culture was loosely applied. Age seemed to be the major criterion for eligibility, and the slogan ‘don’t trust anyone over thirty’ seemed to establish the upper limit. Following Keniston (1970), some argued that the youngest members of the youth culture should be older adolescents of high school age, a suggestion that makes the term unusable for students in junior high schools or below. Regardless of age limits, no one assumed that every member of the youth culture knew or had interacted with every other member, a fact that made it extremely unlikely that anyone would talk or write about ‘the youth group.’ Nevertheless, specific youth groups and networks often overlapped, and ritual gatherings, such as rock concerts or anti-war protests, provided opportunities for members of the youth culture from different regions and countries to affirm their cultural identity and to influence one another. As we shall see in the following section of this chapter, all of these characteristics
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