A Qualitative Data Analysis: The Effects Of Loneliness On Social Interactions Among Middle School Students

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Abstract: This article attempts to identify and describe core characteristics of lonely middle school students, regarding how these students socially interact around their peers in classes. Findings reveal that lonely students often keep to themselves. Often, they distance themselves and select another activity, such as walking or reading. In some circumstances, they will not even speak a word unless someone asks them a question. Lonely students will choose to remain alone for various reasons: 1) They lack interest in the activity 2) They fear ridicule by their classmates and/or 3) They perceive that their peer do not want them to participate. If lonely students are forced to participate, they often remain on the outskirts of the activity; in essence, they will participate as little as possible. In summary, lonely students report that they choose to remain alone and distance themselves from their classmates. Strategies that can be implemented to encourage participation include creating small groups that are less competitive, incorporating peer assistance with activity skills, and/or encouraging lonely students to attend other activities after school that appeal to their interests.
Review Of Literature

The idea of loneliness is broad and sometimes vague (Duncan-Andrade, 2007). In regards to the educational environment (and in this case, the middle school setting), loneliness is also operationally defined as a lack of participation and social interaction by a student or students who choose not to participate in class or other school activities. There has been a limited amount of research, which correlates the impact of loneliness on middle school students’ social interactions with their classmates. This is in part because previous federal legislation has concentrated on the bottom line for academic achievement; an acceptable percentage of students who pass certain core subjects in middle school and high school (NCLB, 2001). Unfortunately, teachers often focus their efforts and energy on teaching to academic tests, and spend less time on the social aspects of education that can impact a student’s academic achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Valdes, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). In particular, one such social aspect is that of loneliness, and its impact on a student developing appropriate social interaction with his/her peers.

“Loneliness is a discrepancy between desired and achieved levels of social contact” (Bucholz & Catton, 1999, p. 2). Lonely kids tend to be less accepted by their peers and/or feel rejected. As they have fewer friends than popular kids, they often feel more isolated in the school climate (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004). Isolated kids tend to lack the warm social interactions among their peers, and the social interactive process is hindered as these kids are often experiencing negative feelings. In essence, negative feelings further exacerbate the process of forming healthy friendships. Ulrich Beck (1999) reports how social interaction satisfies social needs, gives a person feedback regarding his/her behavior, and satisfies his/her love and belonging needs. In addition, belonging to a group is important for most kids, for groups enable kids to participate in social activities (Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005) and understand themselves (Reiss, 2000). Overall, kids who have reported lower levels of loneliness demonstrate more optimism and stronger social interaction skills with others compared to students who have demonstrated higher levels of loneliness. Many lonely kids resort to other avenues of entertainment such as the Internet, shopping, and/or watching television (Nevid, Rathus, & Green, 2003.). Coincidentally, internet use among kids has been correlated with loneliness (Lindsay & Gant, 2002).

“Loneliness is attributed to internal influences such as interests, feelings, personalities, deficits, and strengths of a student.” (p. 550) Bernard Weiner’s attributional theory (1974) reports that loneliness is attributed to poor ability and a deficient personality, culminating in depression and/or hopelessness. The students who distance themselves from their classmates either possess or lack some personality attribute or ability that demotivates them from wanting to participate in the activities. James Gee’s theory states, Loneliness is also attributed to external influences such as lack of encouragement by coaches, peers, and forcing students to participate. (Gee, 2004) Robert Weiss’s theory of loneliness (1973) corresponds with this statement. Social isolation refers to a lack of social integration between or among people (Weiss, 1973). Theoretically, symbolic interaction emphasizes the importance of daily social interactions and symbols that enable people to evaluate themselves from other peoples’ perspectives. Known as the “looking glass self” (Cooley, 1902, p. 22), people envision how they appear and are evaluated by others. These feelings may be positive and uplifting or dejecting. An individual’s identity is shaped by these social interactions, for these socially interactive experiences provide the social landscape or structure for a person’s individual identity development (Cooley, 1902; Cottrell, 1969; Goffman, 1959; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1980). In addition, Hollingshead (1949), Larkin (1979), Lesko (1988), Schwartz & Merten (1967). Elizabeth Douvan & Joseph Adelson (1966) and Eric Erikson (1963) report that teenagers sometimes socially label their peers as they explore and seek a personal identity themselves. Moreover, these social labels are also placed onto students in their respective peer groups. Here, teens in their groups are able to decipher as they socially interact within and among other peer groups a sense of their personal and social identity (Brown & Lohr, 1987; Cohen, 1979; Coleman, 1961; Cusick, 1973; Eckert, 1989; Eder, 1985; Foley, 1990; C. Wayne Gordon, 1957; Chad Gordon, 1971; Hollingshead, 1949; Ianni, 1989; Larkin, 1979; Lesko, 1988; Lightfoot, 1983; Schwartz, 1987; Schwartz & Merten, 1999; Pianta, 1990).
Examples of social labels include “geek” and/or “nerd” (Kinney, 1990, p.27). According to Susan Harter (1990), adolescents have difficulty distinguishing their own personal and social identities from others’ perceptions of them. Therefore, social labels such as “geek” or “nerd” can negatively affect their personal and/or social identity. While succeeding academically and/or displaying poor social skills, students labeled as “nerds” are often isolated as they internalize these social labels (Kinney, 1993; Harter, 1990). “Nerds,” in addition, often do not attend social functions or date. As a result, these students are less likely to develop appropriate social skills like the popular kids who are present in these social arenas. Often, they do not make many friends, and as a result, they are subject to feeling lonely (Kinney, 1993).

Teachers, parents, and administrators can train students to utilize more appropriate social and emotional skills; these skills have demonstrated to increase students’ feelings of belonging, and, in turn, reduce feelings of loneliness. In particular, one effective social skill is training students to develop social competence through appropriate assertiveness training among classmates. In addition, lonely students can learn how to participate appropriately in the classroom (Stoeckli, 2009; Paulsen, Bru, & Murberg, 2006). Moreover, lonely kids need to learn how to express their feelings openly with someone they trust, for hidden emotions are often indicative of lonely students. Most importantly, kids need to learn to accept other peers for who they are, regarding their culture, values, and habits (Ceyhan, 2008; Rezan & Cecen, 2008).

On an individual basis, middle school students can pursue other school-sponsored activities where they become exposed to upper classmen such as juniors or seniors. For example, juniors and seniors often provide a supportive social environment for middle school kids. Many upper classmen or women express the attitude that middle school kids should just go for it, regarding their participation in some minor activity such as a journalist on the yearbook staff. As reported by middle school students, juniors and seniors were encouraging to them. These upper classmen provided a supportive and a new reference group, serving as a protective venue from expectations and values of popular kids. In addition, middle school kids reported that upper classmen and women were often nicer to them as they offered them mature advice (Kinney, 1993).

Another avenue for lonely middle school kids to utilize is to gain knowledge of a sport such as baseball. By sharing this knowledge with some of the more popular peers, these middle school kids can somewhat distance themselves from the labels of being a “nerd”. In addition, knowledge of sports enables one to develop self-confidence, another feature that aids lonely students in social interactions (Kinney, 1993).

Finally, lonely students who free themselves from popular peer expectations can listen to the advice of other peers. These peers can encourage a lonely kid to avoid worrying about the comments of other students. In addition, as previously mentioned above, lonely kids can join extracurricular activities and meet new friends who have the same interests as them. In essence, instead of trying to fit into the popular peer group, he or she can join other groups who have similar interests (Kinney, 1993).

Methods

The invitation to conduct this study was extended to me, in part, because of my relationship with a classmate who was a teacher at the particular middle school where this research occurred. My background as a counseling psychologist and often a lonely student myself peaked my curiosity. I mentioned this topic because teachers and administrators focus so much time and energy on academic progress that they often overlook social issues, which can adversely affect student academic achievement. It is important that teachers and administrators consider the effects of loneliness among middle school students as a significant contributing factor, correlated with student academic achievement.

I gained IRB permission to implement a qualitative study that would allow me to observe middle school students during their classes. This research lasted 3.5 months, during the spring semester of the school year. Throughout the entire period of this study, I observed both as a participant observer and as a non-participant observer.
Data Sources
The participants consisted of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade middle school students at a Southwest middle school. Data sources for this study were interviews and field notes. Informal interviews allowed the researcher to answer the ‘why’ questions involving lonely students; why do lonely students choose not to interact with their peers? While passive participant observation allows broader views of observing all lonely students, active participant observation enables researchers to focus more on certain loners. Transcriptions of interviews were taken from digital recordings. Transcribing an interview from a tape recorder is extremely important because it enables the researcher to play repeatedly the exact words that are spoken in an interview. Moreover, transcribing also allows the researcher to observe the nonverbal cues of an interviewee since he or she does not have to copy every word that is spoken.

Data Analysis
The process for analyzing data in a study such as this is by using grounded theory and discourse analysis. Grounded theory is utilized initially by openly coding various demographical data, locations of activities, grade levels, and comments expressed by students. These open codes are then combined into larger categorical codes which consist of locations such as inside the classroom and outside on the playground. Other categories are taken from the open codes such as demographics.

Further categories consist of status in the peer groups along with the dynamics of the groups of students who are interacting. From the categorical level, the themes are devised which entail feelings of loneliness exhibited by students, personalities of students, deficits identified by students, and interests of students. After the themes are established, axial codes are created which sum up external influences from coaches and peers, coupled with internal influences of students. The final coding step is the incorporation of loneliness theories. From the axial codes, the main theories concerning lonely students are reported. In addition, discourse analysis is implemented to gather information stated by the school counselor as well as identify patterns of language that reveal characteristics and reasons for ‘what’, ‘why’, and ‘how’ lonely students behave (Gee, 2004).

Results
I discovered from interviewing lonely students that they do not like to participate in certain activities because they perform poorly in the event. For example, one student commented, “I do not like to participate because I am not good at it.” Another student stated, “My friends do not want me to play.” Lonely students sometimes have friends, but some report that their classmates do not want them to participate in an event.

When students were given free time, the lonely students that I observed often sat by themselves watching their peers play or kept to themselves. Even if some of the loners were forced to participate, they did, but most often, they would distance themselves within the required activities from the rest of their peers. In this study, I recorded several pages of field notes, which described the behavior of the students who appeared to isolate themselves from other peers. From several observations, I noticed that some of the loners in the school activities were actually loafing on the periphery. Some sat and read books while others remained alone and appeared to almost hibernate. They did not participate but sat quietly, waiting for the bell to ring as the class ended.

Some students were just plain shy, and they lacked the assertiveness to either make friends or the
social skills to bond with their peers. Many times, these students were withdrawn and suffered, but they went unrecognized by their teachers since they tend to remain quiet and not disruptive. The school counselor commented that this is unfortunate, because these students often are unnoticed by teachers since they are not disruptive in class and are not disciplinary problems. However, on a more positive note, the counselor mentioned programs that are being utilized such as after school activities, which offer an opportunity for lonely students as well as all students to socialize with other peers in a non-competitive environment.

The counselor specifically confirmed that some students do not want to participate in certain activities because they feel that they will perform poorly. As a result, they are sometimes teased, and they want to avoid this, or being mocked in any way. The counselor also mentioned factors such as problems at home, which may contribute to the student feeling lonely. In essence, many students will bring their domestic problems to school and bottle those feelings. Moreover, some students will misbehave in order to obtain attention, which is really an attempt to alleviate their lonely feelings as mentioned by the school counselor.

Discussion/Conclusion

I conclude that I have found nothing particularly unusual regarding reasons that lonely students distance themselves from their classmates in activities. There will probably never be any ideal formula or plan to curtail and/or encourage students to participate in all activities, nor will there be any set method that applies to any and/or all students. However, “Great teaching will always be about relationships and programs; schools do not build relationships, people do” (Duncan-Andrade, 2007, p. 636). Theoretically, Janna Juvonen’s model (1996) highlights the importance of teacher and student behaviors along with environmental factors that interplay between and among students and teachers. These behaviors, in turn, impact a student’s sense of belonging in a scholastic environment. A student’s sense of belonging, in turn, impacts his or her behaviors. Students who do not feel a sense of belonging are less likely to develop healthy friendships and relationships with other students and/or teachers (Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005; Juvonen, 1996).

When I began this research, I was a doctoral student. Initially, I was somewhat discouraged that so many students appear alone, and often remain alone. I am tentatively encouraged after conducting this research because I realize that a teacher by himself/herself can actually tackle loneliness if he or she will notice it, model his/her care/concern for the pupil, and attempt to include each and every student in as many activities as possible. If a teacher will demonstrate care and concern for any and all students, then he or she will probably notice that many students will respond positively and interact not only with the teacher but may attempt to interact on a more consistent basis with other students as well (Duncan-Andrade, 2007). If a teacher does not demonstrate that he or she cares for another student, then a student will often notice and detect a teacher’s lack of concern. Furthermore, a teacher who really cares for a student often finds that the student reciprocates in the learning process; the student becomes more motivated to learn (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Juvonen, 1996; Reiss, 2000).

One of the strengths of using middle school kids is that these individuals are beginning puberty, and friendships along with peer acceptance are very important during this phase of life. Puberty is a time of discovery of who a person is and what their talents and abilities are, as well as forming friendships (Erikson, 1950). Many adolescents who feel uncomfortable or disinterested in certain activities will refuse to participate if they feel that they will be teased or ridiculed (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). As they are teased, this often lowers students’ self-efficacies if they cannot perform successfully in an activity. Albert Bandura’s research (1977) emphasizes how a student’s self-efficacy is very instrumental in his or her ability to successfully perform. A student’s self-efficacy can even determine if he or she will even attempt to participate in an event (Axtell & Parker, 2003).

The teasing or ridicule is often punishing to peers, as many students become aggressive. Rejected boys often respond more aggressively without justification (Coie, Dodge, Terry, & Wright, 1990). As a rejected adolescent is teased, he or she often intensifies his/her aggression and is less likely to submit than a non-rejected adolescent (Coie et al, 199). Research reveals a positive correlation between peer
rejection and aggressive behavior (Kupersmidt, Burchinal, & Patterson, 1995).

On the other hand, many of the loners in middle school are actually choosing to remain alone, and thus, they are ignored by their peers. While some of the students remain alone because they fear being ridicule, others are actually disinterested in the some educational activities. Since these individuals are not interested, they are ignored. While some of them may actually be shy, others may possess undesirable social qualities. An unfortunate example of this was the shooters at Columbine High School, who probably had undesirable social qualities since they were ostracized by their peers (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). This, and other similar school tragedies leads one to question if it’s prudent for our education system to focus less on social aspects [such as loneliness], in favor of academic achievement.

References


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