Social Conformity in the Middle School:

Peer Pressure on Students

Allison Opp

573 Curriculum & Methods of Middle School

Professor Russ Riehl

December 7, 2012
Middle school is a time for growth and understanding as adolescents are in a crucial period of maturity and the quest for personal identification. Adolescence is a tough and exciting time, with many biological, cognitive, and social/emotional challenges, as well as the potential for many accomplishments (Mandel, 2012). Peer pressure and the constant need to conform to others is a major issue that must be faced as a student in middle school. Conformity does not end with puberty, yet the need to conform carries into high school, college, and the adult way of life. The goal of conformity is to use the social need of acceptance in a positive, influential way at a young age in hopes of creating a social "norm" worth following to enhance student learning.

Everyone participates in social conformity (Rivers, 2012). If there were no social conformity in life; laws, rules, and the social "norm" would be lost. Behavior at public events, such as concerts, malls, and schools, would be uncomfortable and awkward as everyone would be searching for the common way to act and carry themselves. An example of conformity in school can be whether or not the popular or most liked subject is math or science. If math is seen negatively by a group of students, others may choose to lose interest in the subject.

For a middle school student, the social "norm" depends on the social style they are longing to belong in. Students struggle to understand who they are and where they fit in; they start to form their own identity in relation to others - a critical component of healthy social development (Mandel, 2012). Some students search for their identification in groups, whether they would be a part of a sports team, musical performance, or art program in school. Students sense the need to be "cool". If the social "norm" falls in any of the previous categories, young people often will dress alike, talk alike, and listen to similar music, eat similar food and much more (Rivers, 2012). Not all students strive to be a part of a group, some prefer to only have one
or two close friends to trust and confide in. Other students may choose to be alone and do their own thing and be their own type of person away from what others believe to be "cool".

In the search for a social group to belong to many destructive habits are also influenced by peer pressure. Smoking, drinking, overeating, gossiping, shopping and much more can become negative forms of conformity to follow. In the middle school scene, name-calling for young people is the norm, and when done in school, or directed at a certain individual traits, such as a person's color, weight, gender role, social class or differing appearance it causes disruption and suffering (Rivers, 2012). Bullying is not an issue to be taken lightly during the age of adolescence. Research shows that bullying can take an emotional, as well as a physical toll on adolescents (Mandel, 2012).

Bullying and teasing seem to be inevitable in childhood and adolescence. Once started by one individual or student, the issue catches like a wildfire in school and is tough to put out once started. When issues become serious with bullying and negative actions begin to occur, assistance by an adult, teacher, or supervisor needs to be taken. School administrators need to establish early within the school year set initiatives and rules to be followed to counteract the effects of bullying and the harm they can cause to students in school.

Even with precautions and rules set within a school against bullying, the issue can obviously still occur without teacher or an administrators knowledge. A personal example of bullying happened within Hazen Middle School during a time when a system was set against bullying and peer pressure. In middle school, I was the tall, lanky, tom-boy that secretly wished to belong to the popular group of girls in my grade, yet cared more for sneakers and basketball shorts than heart-covered sweatshirts and glitter headbands. I was influenced by peer pressure and conformity everyday during middle school, and the task to be okay with the person I was
became a daily struggle. I knew I was not alone in my search for self worth and acceptance, but my search became even more difficult with the slow and easy build up of bullying. The bullying began by a girl in my grade that would find ways to brush past me in the hallways between classes or by the lockers after recess. Right away I did not find any real worry or care in the issue until the issue gradually built into pushing past me, and tripping me as I would walk. I became very confused and hurt over the issue as I strove to find a reason behind this girls constant need to run into me. I did not want to go to a teacher to alert them of the issue, worried that the teacher would find the issue irrelevant and not serious. I confided with a few close friends at the time, and I formed the conclusion that the best option at the time was to stand up to her once and for all. Another day came, and the girl found another way to push past me, bumping me into the lockers. I stopped and called out the girls name in front of our peers telling her to stop her actions and all of the nonsense. My bullying issue stopped after I stood up for myself, but I know that other bulling issues cannot be so simple solved by a simple "stop it" tactic.

As bullying can be a major negative form of conformity and peer pressure in schools, positive forms of conformity do exist. The view of conforming has been seen as bad, but maybe it's something a lot more profound, that it changes the way you think (Sparks, 2011). To get students to "swim against the tide of social influence" towards the goal of a positive social norm worth following is a hard fight. It was said by Mr. Zaki in the study of academic conformity in "Peer Pressure May Change Students' Brains" that "what you like and are motivated by can be really altered by what people around you like and find motivating to them. It's not just that you want to learn because you want to compete with them or want to fit in, but you will actually perceive the academic work privately as more rewarding."
Cultural norms used in this rewarding perspective of thinking can create positive, and healthy learning environments for students in school. If students can work together to hold each other accountable for completing worksheets on their own, lending a fair hand in a project, or being respectful to teachers in the classroom, the need to fight against negative peer pressures and acts of bullying become easier on teachers and school administrators. When the middle school student finds the higher meaning of education against the current need to wear the "cool" piece of clothing and excreta, student growth and development can occur.
Reference

Mandel, J. Social Life in Middle and High School: Dealing with Cliques and Bullies.
