

Original Paper

The Influence of Peer Groups on Adolescent Ideological and Political Education and the Corresponding Approaches

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Abstract

Peer groups constitute a ubiquitous interpersonal environment that exists extensively among adolescents. They shape the values and behavioral patterns of young people, play a unique and irreplaceable role in adolescent ideological and political education, and serve as an important avenue for adolescent socialization. To carry out ideological and political education work among adolescent peer groups, educators must respect and attach due importance to the influence of these groups on such education; reduce the coercive elements present in the educational process; provide differentiated guidance and education tailored to different types of peer groups; strengthen education in core socialist values; and embed ideological and political education within group activities.

Keywords

peer group, adolescent peer group, ideological and political education

Introduction

On May 2, 2018, Xi, General Secretary of the Party of China, stated in his speech at the Symposium with Teachers and Students of Peking University: “Let me give a definite answer at the outset: our education must cultivate socialist builders and successors who achieve all-round development in moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor education” (Xi, 2018). Peer groups represent an important microenvironment for the ideological and political education of adolescents, and exploring the educational functions of peer groups helps to promote the all-round development of young people. Surveys indicate that the factors influencing the moral development of adolescents have been reordered from “family, school, peer group, mass media” to “mass media, peer group, family, school.” (Zhan Wansheng, 2001). Compared with the family and the school, which are dominated by adults, peer groups—dominated by adolescents themselves—play an even more important role in adolescent

development. At present, ideological and political education operates under a model that takes school education as the principal channel supplemented by family and social education; the development and utilization of adolescent peer groups remain limited, and both research and practical experience in this regard are insufficient. Educators engaged in ideological and political education should therefore proceed from the common characteristics of peer groups as well as from their positive and negative effects, explore ways of bringing the positive functions of peer groups into full play, conduct ideological and political education among adolescent groups, and help them establish correct values.

Peer Groups and Their Basic Characteristics

1. Definition of the Concept

In sociological terms, a peer group is defined as “a group of people of roughly equivalent social status who are usually of similar age” (Popenoe D. Sociology, 1999). More specifically, a peer group, also known as an age-mate group, refers to an informal primary group that is freely formed by individuals who are relatively close in age, interests, hobbies, values, and social status and who interact with one another on a regular basis (Chen Wanbai & Zhang Yaocan, 2007). Peer groups exist extensively among young people and constitute an important microenvironment through which young people make the transition from the family and the school to society at large.

2. Basic Characteristics

Adolescents grow up in the company of peer groups, and peer groups play a distinctive role in the process of adolescent socialization. Apart from their individual specificities, peer groups also share common characteristics, and an in-depth understanding of these common characteristics is essential to the effective delivery of ideological and political education.

(1) Equal Status Among Members

A peer group is an informal group that adolescents freely choose and voluntarily join. Compared with formal groups characterized by rigid hierarchies, members of a peer group enjoy equal status, and both leadership and obedience within the group arise from the free will of its members. Generally speaking, the equal status of members is manifested in the following ways: members have the right to join and to withdraw freely, and there is little coercive power within the group (Chen Yisong, 2006); the relationships among members are egalitarian, and such equality does not change on account of differences in the roles that members play or the influence they exert; the core figure of a peer group enjoys no privileges, and his or her leadership rests upon the admiration of the members—once the norms of the group are violated, the core figure loses authority and appeal.

(2) Strong Group Cohesion

Group cohesion refers to the mutual attraction between a peer group and its members. It can also be understood as the alignment of group members' emotional needs and value orientations. Peer groups are not formed under the coercion of parents or teachers; instead, they emerge from voluntary association among adolescents. Adolescents form peer groups because they share common interests, hobbies, ideals

and aspirations. These commonalities bring them a strong sense of psychological identity and belonging. When a group meets individual needs, group cohesion develops. Peer groups with strong cohesion demonstrate the following feature: every member takes practical actions to sustain group unity and growth, and hopes the group will endure.

(3) Dominant Core Figure

The core figure in a peer group is a member who exerts major influence, guides peers in daily activities, and holds substantial decision-making power over major group affairs. To become a core figure, one generally needs outstanding capabilities, a willingness to safeguard group interests, and skill in moderating group dynamics. Admired by other members, the core figure acts as a leader and exerts a decisive influence on group members' thoughts and behaviors, as well as the future development of the group.

(4) The Presence of a Group Subculture

Subculture, also known as collective culture or secondary culture, refers to a non-mainstream, localized cultural phenomenon relative to dominant culture. The subculture of a peer group is a localized system of cultural values generated within the group, embraced and practiced by its members. It has both internal and external manifestations. Internally, it is reflected in values, social interaction patterns and behavioral norms for group members. Externally, it may be shown through hairstyles, clothing and other forms (Zhu Peixia, 2012). Similarly, adolescent peer group subculture can be positive or negative. Positive peer subculture does not oppose mainstream culture and facilitates the all-round development of members. By contrast, negative peer subculture runs counter to mainstream culture. Coupled with the strong rebellious mentality of some members, it may lead adolescents into apathy and negativity, and in severe cases, even delinquency and crime.

(5) Exclusivity and Closure

Peer groups are formed by members on the basis of shared interests, hobbies, habits of behavior, and ideas. Members develop a strong sense of psychological identification with, and belonging to, the group; interaction is confined to the interior of the group, and over time the peer group becomes separated from other social groups. For example, the distinctive in-group language, styles of dress, and values of the group apply only to its own members, which demonstrates the exclusivity of the group and its refusal to admit adolescents from outside the circle; group activities are open only to group members. At the same time, once a peer group is formed, its members interact less and less with adolescents outside the group, their social circles narrow, and their opportunities to learn from the experience of outsiders diminish, so that their personal interactions become simplistic and one-sided. In the long run, this closure undermines the healthy development of the group.

The Influence of Peer Groups on Adolescent Ideological and Political Education

Every social group exists for good reason and performs corresponding social functions. As an objective reality, peer groups play a role in the growth and progress of adolescents that is as important as that of

the family, the school, and society. Although formal groups occupy the principal position in educational guidance, adolescent peer groups nevertheless exert a significant influence upon young people, and this influence is twofold.

1. Positive Functions

(1) Group activities enrich adolescents' after-school life and facilitate their all-round and coordinated development

Cultural activities organized by adolescent peer groups supplement the second classroom and enrich campus culture. Members communicate and cooperate freely based on shared interests and hobbies, and offer mutual assistance in study and daily life. Such interactions help individuals cultivate a sense of cooperation and independence, tap their potential, strengthen practical skills, boost social confidence, and form a correct self-perception and self-evaluation, thereby promoting their all-round development. Participation in peer groups not only enriches adolescents' spare time and fosters the development of their personality and abilities, but also creates a new platform for ideological and political education in schools.

(2) Members are more receptive to suggestions and criticism within the group, which helps ease conflicts between individuals and educational authorities

Adolescents are in a rebellious phase of life and display a strong propensity for defiance. Moreover, having long been situated in asymmetrical relationships with the family, the school, and the self, they exhibit a pronounced anti-authority tendency. As a result, adolescents are unwilling to accept criticism and advice from teachers and parents, and may even prefer to act in precisely the opposite way and to oppose them (Xuan Ge, 2014). By contrast, within a peer group the adolescent's desire to be treated as an equal is satisfied to a large extent; members respect, support, and care for one another, which gives adolescents a sense of psychological identification and belonging. Consequently, they are more willing to accept advice and criticism from within the group, learn to put themselves in the position of others, to cooperate and collaborate with others, and to consciously abide by various rules and regulations. Such in-group preference among peers helps to mitigate out-group prejudice and to ease group conflict between the individual and educational agents.

(3) Peer Groups Constitute an Important Avenue for Adolescent Socialization and Help Adolescents Accomplish the Transition to Adulthood

Adolescent socialization refers to the process by which adolescents, under the influence of society, acquire social knowledge, skills, and experience, and select and construct the psychological and behavioral patterns recognized by society, thereby becoming members of society. The socialization of adolescents is a gradual process, and adolescent peer groups provide an excellent rehearsal "stage" for entry into adult society; this both helps adolescents to make a gradual transition into adult society and eases the pressure generated by the transition from youth to adulthood. Peer groups perform regulatory, stress-relieving, and constraining functions. The strong emotional identification and behavioral commonality that adolescents acquire within peer groups facilitate more effective ideological guidance

and behavioral regulation; the pressure from school and the family is well released in the relaxed and comfortable environment of the group, which benefits the healthy development of adolescents both physically and mentally; and although peer groups are informal, they are neither laissez-faire nor entirely unconstrained—the binding force exerted by companions who are at the same time friends prompts adolescents to abide by common social moral norms. All of these help adolescents to grow into mature members of society.

(4) Egalitarian Relationships Among Members and Opportunities for Role Experimentation Help to Stimulate the Subjective Initiative of the Educated

Peer groups are the product of free individual choice, and members interact with one another on an equal footing, which is manifested in participation in activities according to one's own wishes, leadership and obedience premised upon voluntariness, and freedom to join and to withdraw from the group. In peer group interactions, adolescents are free to choose roles and to experience the diversity of roles. Compared with the suppression of adolescent subjective initiative by the family and society, the mutual influence among peers and the informal, spontaneous character of peer groups mean that the value choices adolescents make within peer groups are more likely to express individual agency. Peer groups therefore provide a viable space for the exercise of adolescent subjective initiative; they are a source of adolescent creativity as well as a medium through which adolescents give full play to their subjective initiative. In the egalitarian, democratic, and relaxed atmosphere of a peer group, the capacity of adolescents for independent judgment is trained and developed, which helps to bring about their transition from heteronomy to autonomy and enhances their capacity for moral practice.

(5) Communication and Dissemination of Useful Information Within the Group Facilitate the Delivery of Ideological and Political Education

The influence of peer groups on adolescents may surpass that of families and schools. Formed around shared interests, peer groups feature frequent interactions among members. Adolescents can more readily gain a sense of psychological identity and personal belonging within such groups. Accordingly, they exchange information channels with one another, greatly improving their capacity to acquire information. A large volume of information circulates among members, helping them access useful knowledge and information in a timely manner, broaden their scope of knowledge, and sharpen their ability to judge information. Through information exchange among peers, the moral expectations imposed on adolescents by the outside world are more easily internalized into personal convictions. These convictions can further develop into inner qualities, practical conduct and conscious habits, thereby enhancing adolescents' initiative and enthusiasm for ideological and political education. In the educational process, adolescents shift from objects to subjects, from passivity to activeness, and from one-way reception to two-way interaction, which facilitates the smooth implementation of ideological and political education.

2. Negative Effects

(1) The Informal Character of Group Norms of Thought and Behavior Causes Many Adolescents to

Conform Blindly

As an informal group, a peer group tends to develop unwritten norms on the basis of the psychological identification and sense of belonging of its members. These unwritten norms require no approval from any competent authority and entail no clearly prescribed obligations or responsibilities. Because the formation of adolescent peer groups is grounded in the similar life experiences, interests, hobbies, habits of behavior, and ideals and beliefs of their members, matters that are not approved by teachers or understood by parents are often precisely the significant events closely related to adolescent development. Peer groups offer adolescents a relaxed space in which to talk freely; adolescents find a sense of belonging within the group and become highly dependent upon it. As a result, group members are easily influenced by the overall atmosphere of the group, and their thinking and behavior converge. Conformity mentality refers to the psychology whereby an individual, under group pressure, aligns his or her cognition and judgment with public opinion and behaves in the manner of the majority. A conformity mentality is very easily generated within peer groups; if notions contrary to the mainstream culture become popular within the group, they will exert a negative influence upon the thinking, behavior, and development of adolescents (Zhang Yanxia, 2016).

(2) The Exclusivity and Closure of Group Interaction Limit the Social Space of Adolescents

Peer groups are composed of adolescents who share common or similar characteristics, and group activities are organized around the common interests and hobbies of their members. An invisible barrier is thus erected between the inside and the outside of the group, separating its members from those of other groups. In short, adolescent peer groups have their own circles and are relatively stable; once a group is formed, the adolescents inside it have fewer and fewer opportunities to come into contact with adolescents outside it. Moreover, members generally accept the unwritten norms of the group, and living, studying, and interacting over a long period in accordance with such a paradigm gives rise to a relatively fixed pattern of behavior—namely, aversion toward adolescents outside the group and refusal to associate with peers from outside. This deprives group members of opportunities for mutual criticism, correction, learning, and exchange with others, and thereby limits the social space of these adolescents. Likewise, the sense of identification that group members feel toward school education and toward the education and guidance provided by ideological and political educators is also weakened, which creates difficulties for ideological and political education.

(3) A Negative Group Subculture Misleads the Value Orientation of Adolescents

Once a peer group is formed, a group subculture emerges along with it, and this subculture may be either positive or harmful. On the one hand, a harmful group subculture may cause adolescents to develop a misplaced value orientation, a negative attitude toward life, and a loss of ideals and beliefs. On the other hand, the curiosity and sensitivity peculiar to adolescents make their behavior extreme and impulsive and their thinking irrational; combined with the constraints of their age, knowledge, and experience, these traits leave their values relatively vague, and without the guidance of correct values they are liable to suffer a loss of conviction and a misplacement of value orientation. In short, the existence of a harmful

subculture within a peer group, the vagueness of adolescents' own values, and the strong sense of identification and imitative behavior within peer groups all contribute to the prevalence of a harmful group subculture within the group, resulting in a collective misplacement of value orientation and allowing behavior harmful to society to spread and proliferate.

Pathways for Adolescent Ideological and Political Education Under the Influence of Peer Groups

The American sociologist Margaret Mead observed: "In modern society the influence of peer groups has grown so great that it has even altered the traditional mode of cultural transmission" (Mead M., 1987). Peer groups are an informal social group that exists extensively among adolescents; they constitute an important link in the ideological and political education of young people as well as an important avenue for adolescent socialization. The ideological and political education of adolescents must be aligned with their needs and realities, attend to their lives, and stay close to their actual circumstances; it must strengthen the effectiveness of such education by enhancing its appeal, rallying power, relevance, and practical efficacy. This requires educators engaged in ideological and political education to proceed from the common characteristics of adolescent peer groups, to effectively circumvent the negative effects of such groups, and, through active guidance, to give full play to their positive functions—pursuing advantages and avoiding disadvantages so as to ensure the healthy development of adolescents. The specific measures are as follows.

1. Attach Importance to the Influence of Peer Groups on Adolescent Ideological and Political Education

Peer groups exist extensively among adolescents, who join them through independent choice, and peer groups provide their members with a relaxed and comfortable environment for learning and interaction. Equal status among members, strong cohesion, and a group subculture that suits the interests and hobbies of adolescents—all of these are self-evidently attractive to adolescents who are in a rebellious phase and display a clear anti-authority tendency. Peer groups therefore occupy an important place in the hearts of adolescents, who may even be willing to sacrifice their own interests for those of the group. In the process of adolescent socialization, on the one hand, they improve themselves through the conformity and comparison functions of the group—for example, by mastering a certain skill, improving academic performance, and developing a stronger desire for knowledge; on the other hand, under the influence of the group subculture, they are also prone to blind conformity and to acquiring bad habits, which directly affects the effectiveness of ideological and political education in schools. An important reason why adolescents join peer groups is their desire to gain respect from others and support from society; they are eager to free themselves from the control of the family and the school. Schools must therefore take into account the principle that guidance counts for more than control, and must not negate or ignore peer groups simply because they are small cliques. On the contrary, respecting adolescent peer groups and valuing their role in ideological and political education is the correct choice.

Attaching importance to the influence of adolescent peer groups in ideological and political education is manifested concretely in the following ways: on the basis of respecting adolescent peer groups, educators

should take the initiative to learn about the group and to grasp its goals, its membership composition, its patterns of activity, and its ideological trends; in addition, they should provide assistance for peer group activities—for example, by inviting professional teachers to offer advice on group activities, by helping to secure activity venues or to designate areas reserved for the group, and by giving timely and full recognition and rewards for the achievements of the group. Valuing adolescent peer groups is an important first step for educators in building trust with such groups; it creates conditions for communication between the two sides and constitutes an important measure whereby schools can make use of adolescent peer groups to carry out ideological and political education and bring into play the distinctive educational function of these groups.

2. Reduce Coercive Elements and Enable Group Members to Participate Actively in Ideological and Political Education

Peer groups are the “eternal society” of adolescent students; they are unique and irreplaceable. Adolescent peer groups come into being because of the adolescent quest for equality. In the family, adolescent students are wards; in the school, they are the educated. Their need for equality cannot be satisfied in either the family or the school, and it is impossible for adolescents to stand “on an equal footing” with their families or their teachers. Under such circumstances, adolescents and schools cannot engage in equal consultation, democratic decision-making, and free choice; even in a so-called “democratic” environment this unequal character remains unchanged, for what exists there is merely equality among citizens and equality among human beings—an equality that cannot compensate for the difference in social status between adolescents and their families and schools. The persistence of this difference leaves the adolescent need for equality unsatisfied, and adolescents then seek out a world of genuine equality and freedom, which is precisely how adolescent peer groups come into being (Cao Rui & Wu Yuxiao, 2019).

Fundamentally, the school is a normative world dominated by the orientations of adults as institutional authorities. Compounded by the inequality of teacher-student relations, adolescents are highly vulnerable to being hurt in the course of receiving school education. Generally speaking, the more egalitarian the interpersonal interaction, the greater the possibility and the stronger the initiative with which adolescents engage in self-education. Therefore, in conducting ideological and political education among adolescents, whether viewed from the educational expectations of the school or from the common characteristics of adolescent peer groups, educators should draw upon the formation mechanism of peer groups, minimize the coercive elements present in the learning process of peer group members, enable group members to participate actively in ideological and political education, and turn such education into a process of active expression (Wu Kangning, 1997).

3. Provide Differentiated Guidance to Adolescent Peer Groups and Help Adolescents Develop a Sound Group Consciousness

When ideological and political educators conduct ideological and political education targeting adolescent peer groups, they need to take the following factors into account: the formation mechanism of peer groups,

their common characteristics, and the mechanism through which peer groups exert influences on adolescents' ideological and political education. Different types of groups transmit distinct cultural traits and play varied roles in the process of ideological and political education. Accordingly, educators should adopt differentiated educational approaches for different types of adolescent peer groups and implement categorized guidance and education. Adolescents continuously broaden their social circles at school and prefer to associate with like-minded peers. Nevertheless, the strong sense of dependence and belonging that members feel toward their group, coupled with the existence of undesirable subculture within the group, may drive adolescents to follow the crowd blindly and parrot others' opinions. Consequently, they may lose their individuality and independent personality, and even develop bad living habits and distorted values. Therefore, while providing categorized guidance and education for adolescents, ideological and political educators should also help them establish a sound awareness of groups and support their psychological and behavioral maturation.

According to their composition and influence, adolescent peer groups can be classified into positive peer groups, negative peer groups, and intermediate peer groups. Different groups embody different group characteristics and produce different effects upon ideological and political education; different types of peer groups must therefore be treated differently. For positive groups that endorse the mainstream culture of society, educators should select group representatives to disseminate the culture and values of the group outward, and make use of school radio broadcasts and official school accounts to publicize the positive energy of the group; the needs arising in the course of the group's development should be satisfied as far as possible so as to help the group continue to make the most of its strengths. For intermediate groups that are compatible to some extent with the mainstream culture, educators should not neglect them, but should provide regular encouragement and guidance to help them transform into positive groups; in addition, educators should guard against the possibility that such groups will turn into negative ones and should take precautionary measures. For negative groups that run counter to the mainstream culture, care must be taken not to use coercive means to punish them; instead, educators should enhance their own credibility, build trust with group members, and adopt patient guidance and moral persuasion to awaken in them the pursuit of an independent personality and observance of organizational rules. Regardless of the type of group, sound group consciousness is needed as a guide. Educators can instill a sound group consciousness by means of case analysis and similar methods, and guide adolescents to learn to distinguish right from wrong and to think with critical thinking.

4. Strengthen Education in Core Socialist Values and Assist Groups in Building a Positive Group Subculture

The group subculture of peer groups shapes the values of adolescents and influences their patterns of behavior. The guiding role of core socialist values with respect to adolescent peer groups is beyond doubt. Work in ideological and political education can strengthen education in core socialist values among adolescent peer groups, assist groups in building a positive group subculture, help adolescents to establish correct values, and encourage them to strive for the cause of socialism. At the same time, guiding

adolescent peer groups to build a positive group subculture can help adolescents to acquire a vision that transcends the group, thereby leading them in a positive and rational direction.

To strengthen education on core socialist values and foster positive group culture, ideological and political educators need to integrate themselves into peer groups to understand members' values. They should embed education on core socialist values throughout the whole process of adolescents' ideological and political education, so as to build an all-staff, whole-process and all-round education framework. It is necessary to encourage interaction and integration between core socialist values and group subculture, guiding the subculture to take core socialist values as the benchmark for self-improvement and revision. Ideological and political educators must abide by the general laws of ideological and moral development, and respect the physical and mental development rules of adolescents. Instead of merely criticizing them, educators should be good at listening to adolescents' true thoughts and needs, focus on issues they care about most, and guide them with exemplary figures and advanced deeds in society. Value education shall be delivered in forms that adolescents find appealing. Meanwhile, educators should cultivate adolescents' ability to filter information and distinguish group culture, encouraging them to embrace positive and healthy culture and reject undesirable and negative culture.

5. Attend to the Cultivation of the Moral Character of Group Members and Embed Ideological and Political Education in Group Activities

Peer groups serve as an important channel for adolescent socialization. The socialization of adolescents can be interpreted both as a process through which they acquire social competence and as a process in which they develop moral qualities. When adolescents take part in regular group activities, certain moral attainments are required, including the capacity for mutual communication, equal competition and cooperation, as well as the ability to help and tolerate others. Interpersonal interaction constitutes a vital way to develop such capabilities, and the role of ideological and political education cannot be overlooked. The integration of peer groups and ideological and political education helps adolescents learn to fit into groups, such as learning how to get along with peers and how to fulfill their social roles properly. Once formed, peer groups tend to be closed and exclusive, with communications confined exclusively to internal members. This creates obstacles for the intervention of ideological and political education. Closure and exclusiveness often lead to collective parochialism and extremism. Under the impact of diverse cultures, adolescents are prone to developing undesirable culture that deviates from core socialist values, which may undermine the future development of the group.

The culture of a peer group helps to shape the values and behavioral patterns of adolescents; if it joins forces with ideological and political education, sound results will be achieved. Educators can therefore start from the group culture and support the cultivation of the moral character of group members. On the one hand, the members' own cultural styles and value claims can be preserved, and there is no need to require them to measure themselves against adult standards; on the other hand, educators can selectively bring the ideological and political education functions of the group into play in the light of the characteristics of the adolescents within it, guiding them to be united, cooperative, honest, and

trustworthy, and helping them to develop a collective outlook.

Conclusion

Peer groups are of great significance to the growth and development of adolescents. The ideological and political education of adolescents cannot be confined to the classroom and to formal groups such as Party organizations, Communist Youth League organizations, and collectives. Educators engaged in ideological and political education must also strengthen research into the causes of formation, the common characteristics, and the operating mechanisms of adolescent peer groups, give full play to the positive functions of peer groups in ideological and political education, form an educational pattern involving all personnel, the entire process, and all dimensions, and open up broader space for ideological and political education.

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