Adolescent Classroom Peer Interactions and Academic Work: A Case Study of Three Senior Secondary Schools in Cape Coast

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Abstract

The study sought to investigate whether adolescent classroom peer interactions impact on students' academic work either positively or otherwise. This was done through a case study of students' interactions during the teaching and learning process in three senior secondary schools (S.S.S.). The study involved 92 mid and late adolescent boys and girls ranging from 16-20 years, the mean being 18 years for both genders. The results from the case study revealed that the quality of peers' interaction in the classroom impact on students' academic work. The major findings were three in all, namely, a) In single sex schools, both boys and girls were equally supportive of one another academically while in the co-educational schools, girls were more supportive of one another academically, b) Unaccepted and victimized students were often subjected to peers teasing and ridicule which made them withdraw from academic activities) c) Peer tutoring was a regular feature among peers in the classroom as a complementary work to formal classroom instructions.

In Ghana and elsewhere on the continent of Africa, peer influence is usually linked with drug abuse and teenage sexual aberration. Dickson (1991) and Hayibor (1997) are examples of studies on peer influence leading to drug abuse. Other studies have also focused on achievement and other influencing factors. Examples of such studies are [Fobih and Koomson (1992); Amissah (1992); Brown (1996) and Ampadu (1996)]. However, available literature revealed that studies on peer relationships and academic achievement are yet to be undertaken in Ghana.

Shapiro and Cole (1994) share the view that peers can strongly influence academic achievement. They mention strategies such as peer monitoring of self-monitored behaviour or peer tutoring of academic subjects which often helps to facilitate the maintenance and generalization of self-managed behaviours. An example of a more elaborate programme that combines self-management and peer interventions is Reciprocal Peer Tutoring (R.P.T.) (Fantuzzo and Rohrbeck, 1992).

In recent times there have been few studies on peer relationships and their influence on academic achievement such as Wentzel and Caldwell

(1997); and Ladd, Kochenderfer and Coleman (1997). Unfortunately, these are all from outside Africa. The findings of Wentzel and Caldwell (1997) together with those of Ladd et al (1997) for example clearly attest to the fact that peers influence academic achievement in America.

According to Agyeman (1986), the classroom as a social system has a formal structure and an informal structure. The formal structure of the classroom is made up of the pupils and the teachers in the cases of primary schools or students and teachers (who alternate the classrooms according to the subjects they teach) in the case of the secondary and tertiary schools. The teacher is usually aware of this formal structure because he/she is a member of it but may not always be aware of the existence of the informal structure in the classroom because he/she is an outsider to it (Agyeman, 1986).

Agyeman (1986) further stipulates that in addition to the formally organized class as a social unit, there exist in every classroom informal groups (could be said to be synonymous with peer groups) which the learners form spontaneously and members of these informal groups develop subcultures within the classroom culture. Even though the formal organization of the class overshadows these groups, Agyeman (1986) is of the view that their existence and their subcultures are of potent force to reckon with because these various groups have varying effects on the classroom dynamics. Some peer groups may help their members to complement the learning process, thus promoting the achievement of learners; others may lead members to rebel against the classroom norms and authority and thus disrupt the learning process. He concludes that the teacher's awareness of the informal group is very essential for once a teacher detects the network of such peer groups, he can either control them within a reasonable limit or use them for positive purposes.

The following are three techniques suggested by Agyeman (1986) which the teacher could use for the detection of the network of the informal groups:

1. **Observation technique.** The teacher does constant and in-depth observation of the members of his/her class to know who talks to whom, or plays with whom, or works with whom more often and/ or successfully.

2. **Interview technique.**   The teacher may from time to time interview the members of his class about their play mates or work mates.

3. **Sociometry.**   This technique was first used by J. L. Moreno in Austria before 1914 (Rogers, 1972; Agyeman, 1986). According to Rogers (1972), the sociometric test is used to discover groupings and to disclose associations within a group. For example, each learner in a class may be asked with whom he/she would like to be associated in some common group activity in the classroom or on the playground or nominate his/her best friends. Sociogram is a graphic representation of the relationships thus revealed.

The sociogram may be examined for the following points:

i)   Which are pairs, that is, which persons name each other? Who are leaders or stars in the group— that is, which ones are most often preferred as associates? Which are chosen by no one?

ii)   Is the group divided into cliques or subgroups comprising of individuals who name each other, but with few of them naming individuals not within the same sub-groups?

iii) Which individuals or sub-groups are cut off from the main group?

Rogers (1972) states however that the sociogram merely points the relationships; it does not explain them. Adolescents may be asked to explain the reasons for their choices at the time they are made. This enables the teacher to obtain insight into values held by the group.

As Agyeman (1986) puts it, the knowledge of the sociometric picture of the classroom is most valuable to the teacher. For example, where a teacher detects social "isolates" he/she could help them to get integrated into the class group or protect them from becoming the "whipping boys/girls" in the classroom. The teacher can also use the "star" of his/her class to achieve certain useful ends such as controlling discipline in the

classroom. The importance of the sociometry for the purpose of giving guidance and counselling in the classroom cannot be over-emphasized (Agyeman, 1986).

Sprinthall and Sprinthall (1990) suggest that in the school setting in order for educators to help the adolescent peer groups, the variety of school programmes, such as, involving peer and cross-age teaching, peer counselling, community internships is important. This is because such role taking can involve genuine responsibility because Erikson, as cited by Sprinthall and Sprinthall (1990), makes it clear that to assist growth, the adolescents should be provided with increasing amounts of independence and responsibility. In the above-enumerated programmes by Sprinthall and Sprinthall (1990) teenagers learn to teach, counsel, care for younger classmates. Such responsibilities stimulate their own leadership development and psychological maturation.

The adolescent today is confronted with a complex social world in which he/she is largely segregated from adults who might guide him/her. These adults are unable to direct the adolescent due to his/her confinement to the boarding house for the greater part of each year during his/her senior secondary school education. Even during vacations, he/she sees less of his/her parents who are often preoccupied with working to earn a living. In these circumstances the adolescent faces: a) Conformity to the social rules and norms of peers; b) Peer influence on his/her academic achievement either positively or negatively.

A study conducted by Wentzel and Caldwell (1997) in the United States of America for instance has proved that peer relationships in early adolescence are related to academic accomplishments. Is this true for adolescents in Ghana? The purpose of this study was to find out the following;

1. What are the dynamics of peer relationships in the classroom?

2. Do healthy classroom peer interactions promote learning?

3. How do peer relationships enhance or impede classroom academic work?

Method

Participants

The target population is all senior secondary school students in Cape Coast Municipality. However, the accessible population is students from three of the nine senior secondary schools (S.S.S) in the Cape Coast Municipality. Of these three are boys' schools, two girls' schools and four co-educational schools.

The researcher employed both the probability sampling (i.e. simple random technique) and non-probability sampling (i.e. purposive sampling technique) procedures to arrive at the subject for the study. Initially, purposive sampling technique was employed to select one group of students (i.e. SSS 2) from the three groups (i.e. SSS 1, SSS 2, and SSS 3) in the nine senior secondary schools in the Cape Coast Municipality. The reason for the choice of Form 2 instead of all the three stages is that at the time of data collection SS1 students had not been in the schools long enough to have established any meaningful peer relationships. SS3 students being examination candidates were feverishly preparing for their mock examinations and were from all indications not prepared to take part in the data collection.

Secondly, three schools, one boys, one girls and co-educational, were selected using purposive sampling technique for non-participant classroom observation by the researcher because the literature review reveals that peer relationships have different shades and intensity depending on whether the school is all boys, all girls or mixed. Therefore the schools were selected based on the afore-mentioned categories.

According to Cohen and Marion (1994), in purposive sampling, the researcher handpicks the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgement of their typicality. In this way, they build up a sample that is satisfactory to their specific needs. This explains the use of this method of sampling.

Having thus selected the SS2 students using purposive sampling technique, the researcher employed the simple sampling procedure which allows every member or element in the population to have a chance of being chosen in the sample (Ary Jacobs and Ravavieh, 1993) to select the schools for the study. The researcher wrote the names of the two girls' schools on slips of paper and a colleague was asked to select one. The

same procedure was used in the cases of the three boys' schools and the four co-ed institutions. The researcher then in consultation with the Assistant heads for academic affairs identified the number of streams at the SS 2 level in the each of the three selected schools. With the use of the ballot system, the researcher wrote the various streams on pieces of paper and the Assistant head for each of the three schools drew one. Students from one Science Class, Technical Skills class and Business Class emerged as subjects.

A total number of 92 SS2 students, 32 from co-ed and 30 each from boys' and girls' schools respectively were selected for the study. The age range was 16-20 years and the mean was 18 years for both genders.

Instrument

The researcher made use of her own classroom observation guidelines having been guided through the literature review. This instrument is meant for a non-participant classroom observation of peer interactions and behaviour and teachers' reactions to these as teaching progresses. There are two sections. These are Section A and Section B:

i)   Section A requires the researcher to stipulate the school, the programme of the sampled subjects and the subject for observation.

ii)   Section B has guidelines meant to help the researcher make the right remarks about classroom peer interaction during teaching.

Akyeampong (1997) states that relatively little standardized instrumentation is required in a qualitative research since the researcher is essentially the main "measurement device" in the study. However, he agrees with Maykut and Morehouse (1994) that all qualitative researchers share similarities in their sources of data: interviews, field observation as well as documents and regard the researcher as the key instrument in the collection and analysis process therefore in terms of validity only face validity was done through the assistant of experts in Guidance and Counselling, UCC and Psychologist from University of Ghana..

Procedure

The researcher undertook a nine-week regular non-participant classroom observation in three (3) selected schools - one boys' school, one girls' school and one co-educational school. The rationale for the selection as indicated earlier under sub-heading METHOD was to ensure representation of the different types of senior secondary schools in the Cape Coast Municipality. The other reason is that peer relationships are alleged to take on different shades in the three types of secondary education (Kutnick et al, 1997) and of course the researcher could not have covered all the nine schools in the classroom observation. Students were also randomly selected and interviewed during the observation in the three schools.

The researcher used naturalistic field note recording and ethnographic technique of reflection and progressive focusing (Kutnick et al, 1997). The researcher was guided by the literature review to identify broad categories within which the observations could be made and discussed namely:

Student behaviour viz,

      a.   Actions of particular students

      b.   Peer interactions

      c.   Students reflections on their classrooms as a social entity

      d.   Communication among students

Upon agreement with the heads of the three selected senior secondary schools, the researcher observed and recorded events in each class for all teaching sessions, each class was observed over a three week period and she then moved on to the next school/class for observation until observations were made in all three classes/schools. It should be emphasized that the researcher was in each class from the first period to the last period, taking rest only during the breaks.

The case study report covers two important areas. The first is in the form of a summary of the observation transcripts and interview notes identified by school. In the report, the three schools and teachers are renamed for confidentiality. For easy reporting, only the first names of students are used. All indented portions of the report represent either direct

quotations noted by the researcher or reflective summaries of observations made by the researcher. The information collected represents observational and comparative approach using ethnographic techniques such as recording, reflecting to note classroom peer relationships and academic competence.

The findings are reported and analysed based on data pool across all the three case studies of the three senior secondary schools. In other words, it was not restricted to one site but involved a cross-site analysis. Nonetheless, issues peculiar to one school but not to others are noted where relevant and their significance explored and discussed. The key findings are supported for the most part by illustrative quotations which are indented.

Moreover, it was sometimes necessary to edit the interview transcripts and even the issues noted during observations to help to provide clarity and brevity. Thus sections of transcripts were reworded or rephrased and sometimes explanations provided for local jargons or colloquial phrases used by subjects. Often different quotations from different case study schools were used to show variety in the way peers behaved in the classroom or the kind of emphasis interviewees gave to a particular issue. Together, these quotes provided proof of validity for the study adding credibility to the themes that emerged from the analysis. In addition, the role the researcher/observer played in observational process was central to the production of the case study report and analysis.

Results

The findings are reported and analysed based on data pull across all the three cases studies of the three senior secondary schools. Nonetheless, issues peculiar to one school but not to others are noted where relevant and their significance explored and discussed. The key findings are supported for the most part by illustrative quotations which are indented. Often, different quotations from different case study school were used to show variety in the way peers behaved in the classroom or the kind of emphasis interviewees gave to a particular issue.

1.   What are the dynamics of adolescent peer relationships in the
        classroom?

Report on Student Behaviour

Observations covered three different aspects of student behaviour
during classroom interactions. The aspects are:
1. Actions of particular students

2. Peer interactions

3. Students' reflections on their classroom as a social entity

Actions of Particular Students

Observations showed varieties of actions (both acceptable and unacceptable)
of particular students in all the three school/classes.

In School A, the presence of teachers in the classroom did not de
particular students: they acted freely without inhibitions:

> During an English lesson. Jennevive, Baaba and Awo
> were not involved in the reading of the passage but
> were talking at the back of the class. However, they
> were ahead in answering the teacher's questions on
> the passage. The
> mates called them "magicians". They replied, "So we
> are. What of that to you?"

Students were uncommonly bold in expressing their feelings and in t
giving of feedback on the topic of the comprehension passage:

> Tr: What do you expect to find in a casino?
>
> Jennevive: Striptease (wiggles body. Mates laugh)
> Baaba also saw everything in terms of boy-girl
> relationship and contributed boldly to the
> discussion of the passage in terms of that.

Brilliant students often displayed their ability in class. Jennevive was
typical example. Surprisingly mates were never irritated by her action

unlike in the cases of other students. Jenevive and Joycelene were very good in mathematics but Jennevive, the tough one always tried to monopolise that position. The whole class often engaged in a healthy competition with one another.

> Students' favourite math teacher Mr. 'D' was drilling students with a lot of sums. Jennevive carried the day by getting every mathematical problem correct. Mates kept calling on her for help, even Awo the "shark" (i.e. the most brilliant) called on Jennevive for help. To everybody's surprise, Awo shouted, "shit" when she got the answer wrong. Mates reprimanded her, telling her to be a lady.

Students in School A freely spoke their minds to mates whenever the need arose. There were several instances as observations showed:

> The English teacher was absent so the whole class was engaged in a discussion on study pals. Suddenly, Rose rushed to the chalkboard to put mathematical problem on it. The class was furious:

Class: What do you think you are doing?

Rose: I have discovered a mistake with one of the sums Mr. 'D' gave us.

Baaba: Hey girl! You were working mathematics instead of contributing to the discussion. Ambitious criminal! Get involved!

Rose: You all act silly sometimes and someone must look out for you. (The whole class laughs). You see I have discovered the mistake for you all.

Another time that mathematics lesson was in progress; Kathy had a problem understanding how to work a particular problem. She kept calling on the teacher to help her. Mates were bored with her and they started laughing at her. She sharply rebuked them:

Kathy: Hey! What's funny? We are all here to learn.

Baaba: Please don't come and swallow us up, madam whale.

Kathy: Then let me be. (that is leave me alone) With this comment she waited on the teacher to help her get the concept. Teacher asked Mildred to help her.

Miss 'X' was discussing students' test papers with them in an English lesson. Susana got up suddenly and demanded an explanation from teacher as to why she was always given between 21 and 27 over 40 for her exercises:

Susana: As for today Miss 'X', tell me why you always give me between 21 and 27 over 40.

Tr: Damn you! Damn you Susie! (Angrily)

Mates shut Susana down and asked the teacher to go on with her tips on how to answer questions effectively. They teased Susana with "what you sow is what you reap". meaning what she put in her test was what she had got.

Few students in the class appeared to be timid due to mates ridicule. Such students were often quiet and reserved in class.

English lesson was in progress as usual. For once Margaret got up to contribute to the discussion. Mates made fun of her pronunciation:

> *Mirekuwaa*: Listen to her pronunciation of "issue", affectation!

> Class whispered, "Oburoni Pɛtɛ", meaning Margaret was aping whites in their pronunciation even though she is black. Margaret quietly sat down and she was not heard of again for the rest of the day.

In School B, observations showed that there were peculiar actions by particular individuals in the observation class. The school being a co-educational one, the actions of students were either typically girlish or typically boyish. One student, Obidiaba, a notorious attention seeker sought attention from all the teachers, male or female and peers. Rebuking comments did not affect her. She often rebuked them with her nonchalant attitude. On entry into the classroom every morning, she would announce her presence with the usual sentence, "I am in O-O-O! Everybody humoured her but the English teacher.

> The English teacher and the class were engaged in a serious discussion about elements of drama and the different types of drama. Obidiaba tried to get her attention with her usual antics and excessive show of fondness. Teacher ignored her. Obidiaba in order to rebuff peers' ridicule took it on Jessica for using the word "thriller" instead of "trailer" as the teacher corrected her:

> *Obidiaba*: You are fond of using big words you don't understand (class laughs).

> *Jessica*: Who told you I don't understand "thriller".

> *Obidiaba*: I know you don't.

Jessica was embarrassed and started sobbing. Teacher shut Obidiaba down with "Joker, be serious". Teacher then called Agyei to read portions of the story they were discussing. Agyei read well with the right intonation but received mates ridicule that he was being affectatious as was the case of Margaret in School A.

The Integrated Science teacher was faced with the severe trial of not losing his temper with Obidiaba. She changed seats more than four times. Teacher pretended not to notice Obidiaba's truant behaviour. Jessica once again ventured to check Obidiaba:

Jessica: Obidiaba, stop roaming in the classroom!

Obidiaba: You again madam "thriller". You are using "roaming" instead of a simple word (laughs loudly but teacher says nothing).

In School B, "teacher-less" times revealed students in their true colours as observation showed:

The English teacher was not yet in class. Cecilia got up, went to the front and asked mates to open their English books to page 63 and that their teacher had instructed that they read. The assistant class prefect, a girl shouted at her to sit down as their English teacher was not even in school. The rest of the students shouted, "protocol", teasing her that she was trying to campaign to be nominated as the next school protocol. Some of the students decided to leave the classroom for the library. Agyei, nicknamed "controversial boy" closed the door and held on to it to prevent two girls from leaving the classroom. He shouted, "beg me before I will let

you leave". The two girls did and he let go the
door handle.

In School C, observations showed similar actions as reported about student
actions in School A and School B. For example, Baaba in School A and
Obidiaba in School B had their counterpart attention seeker in the person of
Omari who often changed his seat whenever someone was absent. In
addition Omari often threw tantrums whenever mates contradicted him:

> Omari was the first to finish working the
> calculations during mathematics lessons. He
> quickly called out the answer to teacher who
> praised him for being first to finish without first
> ascertaining the validity of the answer. A
> minute later, Annan got up:
>
> Annan: Sir, Omari's calculator as usual is
> faulty. His answer is wrong. The actual
> answer is 0.933.
>
> *Class*: Yes sir, Omari was wrong. He should
> buy a new calculator.
>
> Omari became annoyed with mates and became
> moody for the rest of the period.

Omari's behaviour attracted the attention of the Technical Drawing teacher.
It was becoming a cause of concern even though mates were used to him
and did not allow his attitude to bother them:

> During a lesson in Technical Drawing, Omari
> insisted that a mate's diagram put on the
> chalkboard was inaccurate and his was better so
> teacher should allow him to put his diagram on
> the board. Teacher insisted that Ofosu's diagram
> on the board was perfect. A student sitting
> behind Omari started laughing at him. Omari
> would have slapped him if he hadn't been quick
> to move away. Teacher then threatened Omari
> with thrashing if he didn't behave himself.

Observations in School C showed a very unusual behaviour of studen▬
Majority did not acknowledge the teachers presence whenever they we▬
late to class:

> Social studies lesson was in progress. R. K. and
> Adade walked into the classroom late, failed to
> greet the teacher and sat down and joined in the
> notes-writing. Ten minutes or so later, Annan,
> Amankwa and Afful having missed the first 35
> minutes of the two periods, walked into the
> classroom and sat down without a word to the
> teacher.

Generally, students in School C conferred with one another during cla▬
tests and did not see anything wrong with that. This was not the case i▬
School A even though students were supportive of one another
Observations in School C showed several instances of such cases:

> Technical Drawing test was in progress. Baffoe
> went to a mate to consult him openly without
> being discreet. The teacher gave him a warning.
> The student with whom Baffoe was consulting
> said to the hearing of the teacher, "class test is
> not exams". The teacher warned the two boys but
> the rest of them felt the same way as the two and
> were supportive of them. Several others
> conferred with one another and the teacher could
> do little about the situation.

2.   Do healthy classroom peer interactions promote
learning?

Peer Interactions

Interactions among peers in the three schools/classes were generally cordial
with very few isolated cases of verbal conflict. Peers felt free to interact
with one another on every subject imaginable but of course in the classroom
interaction of peers was mainly on academic matters. Interviews of students
revealed that there was a kind of bond that kept peers in one class together
even outside the classroom in places such as the dining hall, chapel,

assembly hall and all other places where the whole school gathered. This bond was stronger in boarding schools. As observations showed the classes prayed for their members who were athletes or contestants in quizzes for success which would ultimately raise the images of those classes showing that the fellow-feeling at class level was stronger than that of the house level or even school level. The following were thoughts students in School A shared with the observer on peer interactions in their classroom:

a]   Mavis: I feel we are really united because when we meet each other outside the classroom, we quickly identify with one another, especially in the dining hall where we sit according to houses.

b]   Awo: In this class, we are all unique. We all have our weakness which make us bored with one another sometimes but we cope well with each other and we help each other in every way.

Generally, the students in School A displayed solidarity in studying together, in forming cliques and supporting each other academically and socially. Nonetheless, as observations showed four girls, Linda, (class prefect) Margaret (known as "Oburoni pɛtɛ"), Kyerewa and Asantewaa continued to be reserved in class for the rest of the observation period. Could this be attribute to peers' teasing, threats, and naming calling these were students who from all intent and purposes were active and cheerful at the initial stages of the observation.

In School C, students expressed similar sentiments about peer interactions in the classroom as those in School A:

a]   *Amoah*: We make the effort to help each other academically.

b]   *Duku*: Students who sleep in class during prep and lessons are made to stand up.

c]   *Annan*: We share ideas and discuss past questions

d]   *Osei*: We are a very close-knit class. We advise each other and move together even outside the classroom.

In School B, peer interactions were on academic as well as non-academic levels and as observations showed, peer interactions were in three categories namely boys and boys, girls and girls and boys and girls. Teasing was often the most typical of boy-girl interaction. Girls often showed solidarity among themselves and they were more supportive of each other than the boys were of one another. Nonetheless taking the class as a group, there existed among both boys and girls a co-operative spirit for their academic well being. The following were thoughts from boys and girls on peer interactions in their classroom:

a]   *Sule*: We try to have a good relationship with each other. We interact to help each other academically during school hours because we don't see each other often after school.

b]   *Obidiaba*: I know I am troublesome but my mates and friends do not get angry with me. They tolerate me because they all know I am a joker.

A student, who was interviewed about how he felt whenever his mates ridiculed him, had this to say:

Que.: Why do your mates giggle when a teacher calls you to answer a question?

Konadu: They laugh because I often make mistakes so they think *I* will make mistakes again.

Que.: Does it bother you when they start giggling as you attempt to answer teacher's question?

Konadu: No Madam. It doesn't bother me. I am used to that. They always help me by whispering the correct answer to me.

Observations showed there were more peer interactions during "teacher-less" times in all the three schools/classes. Students often grouped to do academic work, resorted to peer teaching and discussion of pertinent social and developmental matters. The following were typical examples of such peer interactions from the three school/classes:

School A

The core mathematics teacher was absent so Baaba, the attention Seeker, took it upon herself to lead the class in a discussion on their study pals programme with a boys school. The study pal programme was to be carried out through the postage system. Baaba explained to the rest that a pal was expected to send a past question to another pal to be worked and posted back to her/him for marking and the cycle continued. One student got bored with Baaba's monopoly of the discussion and reacted:

Jennevive: You are giving too many suggestions. Give others the chance to contribute.

Baaba: Go ahead if you have a point to make.

Baaba was not perturbed at all by Jennevive's rebuke and she took over the leadership again. The students were faced with a problem. They had wanted the boys to write first to invite them for the study pal programme but they had not as yet done so. The girls expressed varied opinion on the issue:

Abena: Men have the responsibility of approaching women for their hand in marriage so the boys should take the initiative to invite us.

Sena: That was the usual practice some years back (she replies). Today women are proposing to men so we should write the boys after one week if we don't hear from them.

There was a general applause for Sena and the students decided to take her advice. Baaba who was still leading in the discussion, suggested they use nicknames in their initial introduction of themselves to the boys in order to maintain anonymity. She therefore asked every student to choose a nickname if they didn't already have one or be given one by her. Examples of nicknames were "Posh", "Mercedes", and "Sheba".

School B

Peer interactions during one "teacher-less" time was most revealing with regard to students' anxiety about their academic work and social life:

The English teacher was still not back in school so Sule, the class prefect prevailed upon the mates for their co-operation in discussing their academic welfare. Pertinent issues raised were:

Sule: Our mathematics teacher has not been regular to classes and this same teacher rushes through lessons whenever we are doing mathematics. We should therefore send a petition to the head for a new teacher.

Koranteng: The school Librarian closes too early and we don't get access to the library when we are free. The library should be closed at the same time that school closes, 3:30pm.

All the students agreed to take up the matter with the school authorities. The class prefect suggested they take peer tutoring seriously because of the rampant absenteeism of teachers.

Others expressed misgivings about mates who often talked or wrote love letters during the peer teaching. The girls in the class appeared to be guilty of this offence so they reacted vehemently. The consensus was that peer teaching should be the temporary solution for teachers' absenteeism until a permanent solution was found. The issue of classroom sweeping was raised. The observation was one girl never swept when it was her turn to do so with others. Again the majority of the boys were not co-operative in that matter. Agyei the "controversial boy" immediately reacted to this:

Agyei: Let me ask you girls. In your houses who sweeps, your fathers or mothers? Don't you know that sweeping is women's job?

Obidiaba: Wait till you get married then you can ask your wife to sweep your house (replies Obidiaba). Here all of us are to sweep. Women have been to Beijing to talk about women's rights so "we no go sit down make you cheat us." (i.e. We will not allow you to cheat us)

There was pandemonium at that point but the class prefect started distributing test papers, which settled everybody.

School C

The absence of the Physics teacher one morning afforded the students the opportunity to have a frank discussion on pertinent issues to be taken for redress at school council meeting scheduled for that week:

The school council representative for the class led the students in the discussion and not the class prefect. At a

point a student suggested that the discussion be deferred to the afternoon so that they do some academic work. The rest felt that what they were discussing would help them progress in their academic work. Students who were disturbing by talking in the course of the discussion were jeered at and they quickly joined in the discussion. The students raised the following points for discussion at the school council meeting:

a]   Certain teachers used insulting words on students, which made them dislike the teachers, and the subjects they taught.

b]   Saturday prep was ineffective without teachers' supervision.

c]   Students often wasted precious time for learning, waiting for their turn to work at the science resource centre. Times for the trips should therefore be adjusted.

d]   School field needed improvement. More games should be introduced.

Students Reflections on their Classroom as a social entity

Observations showed that students in all the three schools/classes felt very much at home in their respective classrooms. Students had a healthy feeling about their classes. For example, in School A, the students of the observation class which was one of the five science classes in the school, felt they were the best science class and the next school prefect was sure to come from their class. Students in School C believed that the whole class would meet at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) for programmes such as Engineering, Architecture, Building Technology and what have you. This feeling of belongingness also led

Students in School A and School C engage in the practice of sharing encouraging thoughts every week. These thoughts were usually written on one corner of the chalkboard. The following were examples:

School A

Food For Thought

a]   "Beware and flee from ungodliness."

b]   "You are one special lady so be yourself."

c]   "Winning is not always winning and so is losing."

d]   "Create new memories by making the best out of every situation."

e]   "The dark continent has a lot to offer the world."

School C

Thought for the Day

a]   "Let your speech be better than silence, otherwise be silent."

b]   "The stone is heavy and the sand weighty but a fool's wrath is heavier than both"

c]   "You were born to be wise so be wise."

3.   **How do peer relationships (e.g. peer victimisation, peer groupings, peer tutoring, peer acceptance and reciprocal friendship) enhance or impede classroom academic work?**

Communication among Students

As observations showed, there was what might be termed a healthy give-and-take type of communication among peers in the selected classes. However, quiet or reserved students were often caught in-between this "see-saw" battle of wits between the opposing sides of active students, especially so in School A:

> The Biology teacher in School A arrived at 11:40 am on time and immediately got down to business. The topic he wrote on the chalkboard was "Useful Microbes". In the course of the discussion, students engaged in verbal wars with one another over the issue as to whether malaria is an infectious disease. What ensued was worthy of note:
>
> *Linda*: Sir, malaria is an infectious disease because mosquitoes bite victims of the disease and carry the parasite to the next person through their bites.
>
> *Sena*: I disagree with you Linda. Malaria is not an infectious disease because the blood each mosquito takes from the individual is not put in another victim.
>
> Sena finally won over both teacher and classmates including Linda. Teacher however resolved the intellectual battle by stating that even though Sena's argument was valid, from the biological definition given, malaria is an infectious disease.

Another scene which generated a healthy communication among students was whether microbes in human beings are a blessing in disguise:

> *Jennevive*: I see mutualism at work here. For example microbes in human intestines act on undigested food to produce vitamins which are useful to humans and humans are also giving shelter to them.

> *Kyerewaa*: Is that so? Jen, what about the lice in
> your hair (jokingly)?

> The teacher plus the whole class including
> Jennevive roared in uncontrollable laughter, even
> the reserved students.

Some students were sometimes mandated by teachers to help mates who had difficulty understanding concepts explained by the teacher. In such cases, there was one-way communication from one student to the rest or the individual student with a problem or the rest of the students if it involves the whole class.

An interesting thing that the observer noted was that students just did not want to communicate on their test scores. Observations also showed isolated cases of unhealthy communication among students in the form of teasing or ridiculing as has been noted earlier in the "Oburoni pɛtɛ" incident.

In School B, observation showed that there was more communication among students during "teacher-less" times. This was in the form of peer tutoring. There were very few intellectual combats and these were usually between boys and girls:

> English lesson was in progress at 9:05am. The
> passage was about a priest. Students vehemently
> argued with one another as to whether the priest
> was brave or a coward. The girls insisted that he
> was a coward and the boys insisted he was brave.
> The teacher looked on for sometime and then
> shouted,

> T: Hey! You are arguing without proof from the
> passage. Go back to the passage to cite
> instances to substantiate your point.

> There was an undertone whispering of "he is
> brave", "he is a coward" until teacher finally
> resolved the conflict with evidence from the
> passage that the priest in question was a coward.
> Even after this resolution, the boys were still not

satisfied and continued arguing undertone that
the teacher being a woman had sided with the
girls.

In School C, observations showed the same healthy communication
among students with very few exceptions. Teachers, especially Mathematics
and Technical Drawing teachers often engaged students in group work
which generated a "give-and-take" or two-way communication among
students. However, one student, Omari, was often in conflict with mates. He
just did not take kindly to mates contradicting him. The following were his
thoughts about the issue when the observer interviewed him:

Que: why are you often in conflict with your
mates over academic issues?

Omari: I feel bad when my answer to a question
is wrong and they laugh or jeer at me.

Que: Are you the "always-win" type of person?

Omari: I don't think so Madam, but I feel they
intentionally pick on me by opposing my
views. Anyway, I am not saying my
answers to teachers' questions are always
right.

Obviously Omari was the sensitive type of person because students laughed
at one another on such academic issues.

Summary of findings

1. Unaccepted and victimized students were often subjected to peer
    teasing and ridicule and were therefore inhibited in their academic
    work through lack of interactions with teachers as well as classmates.
    A student who incurred the displeasure of peers (e.g. Linda, the class
    prefect in school A) could be victimized. Unaccepted students were
    often the notorious ones' (Obidieba in School C) as well as the proud
    and boastful ones (e.g. Omari in School B).

2. Peer tutoring was a regular feature among peers in a classroom as a supplement to teachers' formal instructions; it was most regular during "teacher-less" times.

3. In single sex schools, both boys and girls were equally supportive of one another academically while in the co-educational school, girls were more supportive of one another than boys were of one another academically.

Discussion

Authorities (Roger, 1972; Gage and Berliner, 1984; Agyeman, 1986; Sprinthall and Sprinthall, 1990), on the above-stated subject agree that just as the school in general is a social system so is the classroom. They submit that there are adolescent subcultures in the school in general and in the classroom in particular. For instance, Agyeman (1986) states that teachers must take note of the adolescent subcultures because the different groups have varying effects on the classroom dynamics. The effects may either be beneficial or detrimental to the teaching-learning process.

The case study which sought to examine classroom peer interactions in relation to the teaching-learning process revealed a number of findings which are consistent with other findings. The major findings with respect to the purpose of the study are as follows:

1. In single sex schools, both boys and girls were equally supportive of one another academically while in the co-educational schools, girls were more supportive of one another academically.

This finding is consistent with the finding of Kutnick, Jules and Layne (1997) in their case study, "Gender and School Achievement in the Caribbean". The finding of the present study is indicative that gender plays a role in the classroom peer interactions with respect to academic work in mixed schools. This could be the result of competition between boys and girls but where the school is either for boys or girls, both sexes tend to be supportive of each other.

2. Unaccepted and victimized students were often subjected to peers teasing and ridicule which made them

sometimes withdraw from academic activities (as seen

in the case of "Oburuni pɛtɛ" in school 1).

The finding is consistent with the findings of Ladd and associates (1997). Their study has shown that the harassment or the embarrassment experienced by victimised children lead to pre-occupation with worries and withdrawal from group learning activities which in turn negatively influence academic work.

3.   Peer tutoring was a regular feature among peers in the classroom as a complementary work to formal classroom instructions.

Perhaps subjects resorted to this in order to fill in the gap whenever teachers were absent. This explains the prevalent occurrence of peer tutoring in School B where teachers' absenteeism was rampant. The impact of peer tutoring on academic work in a competitive senior secondary system may be negligible compared to other factors which impact on academic work as earlier indicated.

Implications for the Practice of Guidance and Counselling

The theoretical standpoint that classroom peer interactions can either enhance or impede academic work has been confirmed with the major findings from the case study. The large number of student population in the classrooms now can not be compared to the past. The numbers continue to swell up. Peer influence consequently continues to increase resulting in some negative peer relationships such as peer victimization. Teachers are unable to give the required attention to individual students as in the times passed and the majority of students are at the mercy of peers for academic support. Moreover, teachers are under pressure to prepare students for entry into tertiary institutions and at the same time are faced with the same economic pressures which make them look elsewhere for money to supplement their monthly salary. These and other factors explain the findings of the qualitative data namely popularity of peer tutoring, academic support from peers and the like.

The findings also call for teachers in the classrooms to recognize the value of peer groups (i.e. cliques) and the "stars"/group leaders in the classes and use them for effective academic work.

In the face of mounting pressures on teachers in the senior secondary system, the findings would promote the understanding of policy makers, school authorities, parents the need for organizing structured peer tutoring or even cross-age tutoring.

The present state of making teachers who are non-professionals counsellors need to be rectified by Ghana Education Service in order to have professional counsellors better able to help students handle peer relationships effectively and whose sole responsibilities are to render counselling services in the schools.

The findings call for the need for teachers to liaise with professional guidance and counselling co-ordinators in the schools for effective monitoring of students' peer relations with respect to academic performance.

School authorities would understand and realize the need for peer counselling in their quest for a panacea for the falling academic standards. The university counselling centres will come in handy in the training of students for the practice of peer counselling.

The use of sociometry for the purpose of identifying "isolate" or "victimise" students for counselling in the classrooms is crucial.   For example, a teacher through the knowledge of the sociometric picture of the classroom could detect social "isolates" and thereby help them get integrated into the class group.

Conclusion

In the first place, the findings indicate that peer relationships do exist in the secondary school and they are important phenomena in the academic life of the adolescent. The findings go to conclude that peer relationships have significant link with the academic work of the students of the senior secondary school. These conclusions are in agreement with those of prior studies on both children and early adolescent peer relationships and academic work undertaken in the United States of America.

Thus, the researcher among other things recommends that policy makers, the Ghana Education Service (GES), school authorities, teachers, parents and students take a closer look at the issue of peer influence and redirect it to have positive impact on students' academic work in the quest for solutions for the current falling academic standards in the country's senior secondary schools.

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