

Teenagers Educational Intervention through the Peer's Subculture

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Abstract

In our contemporary societies, from the least developed to the so called "first world" countries, we find now a social environment of great violence and brutality that influences in a negative way the development of the young people, driving them toward an aggressive cruel behavior. In this paper we propose an educational systemic model based on the Complexity Approach to Human Systems, as an ideal construct to identify in the actual school practice the criteria for designing an educational intervention policy for enhancing the social development of the students, taking into account their peer's subculture.¹

Keywords: Peer's groups, educational intervention, school practices

Introduction

The school, as educational institution, is the essential nucleus for the formation of future citizens and social actors (Velazquez-Guzman and Lara-Rosano, 2007). In fact, it is the place of meeting of diverse individualities and social activities where values are affirmed, as well as forms of being and coexisting.

However in our contemporary societies, from the least developed to the so called "first world" countries, we find now a social environment of great violence and brutality that influences in a negative way the development of the young people, driving them toward an aggressive cruel behavior.

Gellert (1961, 1962), Mc Grew (1972), and Strayer and Strayer (1976) have observed in the adolescents a hierarchy of differentiated status based on the dominance and power during playing situations, in which they carried out physical attacks to other children and expressed threatening gestures. They fought for their position subjecting others. Dominant hierarchies operating the structures of interpersonal behavior are found also by other researchers. Studies carried out by Suttles (1968) Trasher (1927) and Whyte (1943) refer clearly to an imposed system of power differentiation and a regular power pattern inside the group.

In fact, the Secretary of Education of Mexico City and the Intercontinental University (2009) published the results of an exploratory study about abuse and intimidation among school partners, carried out to 3,500 students belonging to 29 primary and secondary schools of the Federal District. Of this study the following results correspond to primary level students.

The students indicated to have suffered five kinds of abuse: Verbal 39%, Physical 32%, Psychological 13%, Sexual = 10% and Computer mediated 5%. From the attacked students 40% declared that they got angry when they were mistreated. However another 29% of the attacked students stayed indifferent. Moreover among the causes that the mistreated students attribute to the aggression 16% said "because I am weak". However 39% mentioned "because it was a joke" and 30% believed it was "for amusement". In these results we identify behaviors related with the acquired ability to belong to a peers' group and accept its interaction rules and the socialization processes among peers.

About the aggressors, 13% said to feel themselves powerful when attacking other partners. In these cases power relationships are manifested.

How can we understand these aggressive playing behaviors among peers, as well as the power relationships expressed in the playing, and the reactions of anger in some of the students and the feeling

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of weakness in others? What elements can we find in these processes for a proposal of educational intervention that takes into account the characteristic attributes of this social group?

Organizational power of adolescent peer's groups

In the school adolescents meet having different socialization processes. Muuss (1980) and Rubin (1980) affirm that peer's socialization is influenced by the social environments like family and neighborhood where the individuals live and develop. According to Mead (Mead, 1934) it is in the detailed interaction between people, their ongoing choices and actions in their relating to each other, that their minds and selves arise.

Therefore there is a great diversity of individuals with different behavior patterns, guided by a multiplicity of beliefs, values and customs that give place to misperceptions and frequently are in conflict.

These diverse individualities, nevertheless the differences, have a strong tendency to constitute peer's groups where adults are left out. According to Stacey (Stacey et al, 2000) "organizing is human experience as the living present, that is, continual interaction between humans who are all forming intentions, choosing and acting in relation to each other as they go about their daily work together". Handel (2008), affirms that the peer's groups are complex organizations that perform a socialization function among their members. In these organizations the members establish goals and make agreements directed to certain matters, interests and concerns. These agreements must follow certain procedures.

In the school peer's groups there are some students that have a charismatic leadership over the others because of their physical condition, their strength or ability in the sports, their singular life experiences, their rebelliousness and indiscipline and their opposition to authority's control. The leader becomes the model of behavior to be followed by the others who want to overcome their own limits through him.

In fact Sherif and Sherif (1964), after extensive observations and gathering of data, concludes that because the individuals differ in capacity, abilities, resources and experiences, some individuals consistently arise as exercising more influences and power than others, in solving problems, directing complicated tasks and organizing group activities.

Between jokes and power relationships.

Richard Savin (1976) sustains that from a perspective of the human psychological development, it is important that inside a net of interactions the individual finds a place for itself, a status. In this net there are necessarily a pattern of power relationships based on the different capacities and personal abilities, being this pattern a constant feature in the structure of human relationships.

In fact the adolescents have such a great necessity to belong to a peer's group that they agree to accept the conditions that they must cover in order to be accepted. These conditions depend on the group's identity, its own values, belief and behavior systems and are related to the image that the group wants to express. Among these requirements could be mentioned the physical characteristics, certain specific abilities and a sense of humor toward himself.

The peers derive their standards to think and to judge, their individual references, behaviors and values from their group. According to Corsaro many activities of peer's interaction look for a sense of self and opposition to the adult world (Corsaro, 1985). The peer's group defines types of relationship that are qualitatively different from the relationships with the figures of authority. Some of these new types of relationship are reciprocity (not possible in the relationships with the adults), identity, belonging, solidarity and support. The peers feel that they participate at the same level in decision-making and the establishment of norms for the group. Certainly the group rewards its members, but it also punishes them with distancing, ostracism and other disapproval expressions.

In the school also there coexists the "intermediate group" composed by isolated adolescents that tried once to participate in activities with its class partners, but were rejected and now they don't have friends. Those that want to be included in intermediate groups are children with low popularity and others that don't have any (Adler and Adler, 1998).

Opposing groups interacting in the same context

We have analyzed the characteristic and organizational qualities inside the adolescent peer's groups. Now we will refer to the interaction of different peer's groups in the same school context. The survey mentioned at the beginning of this paper points out the existence of different groups and a conflicting

dynamics between these groups because 16% of students feel themselves weak and 40% get angry when they are mistreated. Also, following groups were identified:

- 1) One or several groups defined by the abilities and strength of its members
- 2) One or several groups clustering failed students
- 3) One or several groups of students distinguished to be weak, rejected and isolated.

These are unbalanced peer's groups that are fiercely competing and opposing one another.

The existence of these kinds of different opposing groups in the school poses the problem about how to arrive to a superior organization of groups that is able to integrate the different peer's groups nevertheless their characteristics and different qualities?

A world's reference frame

It is important to recognize that the adolescents possess natural organizational powers that it is important to guide with the educational intervention for their own social development. Each individual is like an attractor and when individuals come together to form a group, they resonate with each other, producing through their communication a social attractor (Velázquez-Guzman and Lara-Rosano, 2009; Marion, 1995).

The word potency refers to the characteristic quality of the human being to advance toward objectives when the person is endowed with self-reliance and is able to accomplish his/her objective (Fromm, 2006). However, potency is not enough because he/she needs a world's reference frame, as well as a goal in that frame. In fact, the abilities that the adolescent has of having conscience of itself, of reasoning and imagining require a referential framework about the natural and social world, that should be structured and have an internal coherence, where he/she should find his/her place. Without this framework he/she will get confused and will be unable to act upon in a proper way. Savin's (1976) reflection is similar, since he refers to the importance that the individual finds a suitable place inside a net of interactions.

However a reference frame is not enough to guide the adolescent action because the adolescent also needs a goal to know where he/she goes. He/she has a brain that allows him to think about the different options he/she has, but he/she needs a set of objectives as the focal point of their actions and the expression of their effective values. These objectives coordinate his/her energy in a certain direction. They give a meaning to his/her life, elevating him/her above his/her isolated existence, with all his/her doubts and insecurities. The objectives vary in each person. This necessity to have defined objectives responds to an existential primary need that demands satisfaction, without caring the means.

The contributions of Fromm (2006) and Savin (1976) are the base to understand the adolescents' auto-organization, the individual necessity to belong to a peer's group and the origin of the leadership that some of them impose over the organization. However when these necessities are ignored then the adolescents in their social diversity are not properly guided. They end up forming contesting groups mainly with tendencies of untamed dominating power.

Sherif and Sherif (1964) suggests that the individuals must be guided toward humanist and not destructive goals, because their nature is malleable, notwithstanding that by nature they differ in capacity, abilities, resources and experiences. In this way it is important that the different capacities and abilities of adolescents are recognized as resources and not as weaknesses. It is starting from this differentiation that they can contribute to the solution of their problems. The uniformity is not a source of strength in a group.

We consider that there is no problem with the existence of hierarchies in the peer's groups, because they imply an internal division of labor. Neither it is a problem the interpersonal structure with which the group operates, but the learned features of the power and dominance relationships existing in the adult social context.

What we want to emphasize is that in the adolescent peer's groups we can find the organizational potency, the search of goals, the values of reciprocity, solidarity and belonging. However without an educational guide from the school this emerging social organization can take any form.

Organizational elements for an intervention proposal in the school

Adolescent tend to group together in small collectives with common interests. We think that this trend can be developed educationally, putting emphasis in its positive potential (Fromm, 2006).

The school has a functional structure that could be used to guide the suggested peer's group policy. The school has teaching and learning objectives, collective projects and practices, implicit socialization actions in the teacher-student relationships, behavior rules and sanctions. All these organizational elements should be used to implement an integral adolescent socialization program (See Figure).

Examples of these collective projects and practices to implement an integrative socialization of the students are the following.

- 1) The individual contribution of the student to the educational material to work in class.
- 2) The participation of the students in the school cooperative and the distribution of the benefits.
- 3) The distribution of the recess playing space among the different groups.
- 4) The organization of sport teams.
- 5) The organization of the working environment in the classroom.

We may realize how the school projects imply the student's individual participation in community activities like the school cooperative and the distribution of playing spaces. These community activities could be the means for the students to become responsible social actors able to contribute in organizational forms for the social coexistence and collective good. Individuals join groups, motivated by internal values attractors, creating a collective whole that is more than the sum of their individualities. If some of these internal values are related with living together in a heterogeneous community with a balance between the respect to the individuality and the collective good and participating in the definition of the collective principles, rights and responsibilities of the members of the community then this peer's group will affect the way of how their members evolve (Velázquez-Guzman and Lara-Rosano, 2009) improving the coexistence with others peer's groups.

Conclusions

We think that the values that strengthen the community sense like: friendship, respect, participation, solidarity, common good and the feeling of belonging to a community must be encouraged. The peer's community is the first kind of community encountered by the teenager when he/she tries to be independent from his/her family, where he/she shares values, objectives and interests. When individuals come together to form a group, they resonate with each other, producing through their communication a social attractor and a social hierarchy characterized by a leadership structure. In fact, under the surface of the social, individual resonances harmonize in the sense that people develop a shared view, notwithstanding that in this organization there is a hierarchy, rules to be followed and sanctions to be assumed provided that the members are accepted in the group. Moreover in the same school coexist different opposing subgroups that try to differentiate because of its strength, age, experience, abilities and daring. Therefore a strategic policy for educational intervention should aim to transform the rivalry among these subgroups into a cooperative force with common interests at a higher level. This would enhance the values in the peer's subculture toward the development of social attractors that would change the aggressive social pattern toward a cooperative one at a school level.

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