Factors that are Influencing the Current Status of Children and Adolescents in American Society Today

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There are numerous factors that influence children and adolescents in American society today, and each of these has a direct impact on our schools. Some of these factors include the media, poverty, family structure, obesity and eating disorders, drug and alcohol use, depression, low self-esteem, peer influences, culture, sexual preference, teen pregnancy, and many more. Often times these issues are intertwined and directly influence other issues. Although each of these factors is important, we felt that media influence, peer influence, family structure, and poverty were four important trends for today's youth that directly impact our schools.

Media Influence and Peer Influence

The influence of the media and the influence of peers on adolescents are inextricably linked. Adolescents base their idea of what is popular and "normal" from their observations of peers and the media. The media distorts reality, and teens and their peers attempt to conform to the distorted vision. As they do so, they are reinforcing one another's efforts and creating a vicious cycle. For example, the media shows a very thin ideal of female beauty. Some young women internalize this image, and as they attempt to conform to the ideal, the image of thin as beautiful is legitimized to their peers. As more young women buy in, the media reflects their interest by publishing weight-loss articles and showing fictional characters who are dissatisfied with their own bodies. Due to changes in social norms, adolescents spend more time away from their families and more time exposed to mass media than ever before.

As children move into adolescence, they become more susceptible to peer influence. Preadolescents define friendships and social groups based on common interests and activities, while adolescents define social groups based more on attitudes and values. Younger children

reported enjoying friendships, but did not attach the same feelings of personal worth to popularity as adolescents did. These changes hold true for both genders, although O'Brien and Bierman argue that peers have a greater impact on appearance for girls and antisocial activities for boys (O'Brien and Bierman, 1988).

In a longitudinal study of friendship, Denise Kandel found that homophily (similarity in beliefs and attitudes) increases between people as they become friends, increases in pairs over time, and a lack of homophily will result in the end of a friendship (1978). Interestingly, the characteristic on which homophily is greatest is illegal drug use (ibid). Kandel's research shows that peers can have either a positive or negative impact on one another. If an adolescent uses drugs and his or her peers do not, he or she is likely to either stop using drugs or join another group of friends. There is no evidence showing that groups of teens choose the most extreme or risky behaviors; rather, they choose to conform to what they perceive as the norm for their group. In a more recent study, peer influence was shown to be dependant on popularity (Teens More Vulnerable, 2006). Adolescents internalized the attitudes of popular peers and rejected the attitudes of unpopular peers.

Peer groups and attitudes are one of the most important factors deciding whether or not adolescents will internalize the messages of the mass media. Milkie argues that the significance of the media is that it "may alter ideas of what is normative or ideal or of what one thinks others believe is normative or ideal…" and to have any impact "must be important to the individual to exert influence" (p. 193, emphasis hers). In her study of the impact of reading teen magazines on adolescent girls, she found that rural white girls internalized the messages these magazines were sending to the greatest degree. They aspired to be like the models, and found the attitudes of the magazine to be reflective of their reality. They also believed that their male peers admired the

models in these magazines. Many urban nonwhite girls read teen magazines, but they were much less likely to be influenced by their content. They did not relate to the models, found them unrealistic, and thought that the few black models shown looked too "white" (p. 197). Black girls who were interviewed aspired to be like black performers, not white models (p. 203) and thought their male peers would find the models unattractive. Urban white girls were more influenced than nonwhite girls, but significantly less so than rural white girls, presumably because of their exposure to a more ethnically diverse set of peers with more diverse beauty standards (Milkie, 1999, p. 797).

Exposure to mass media can be a predictor for adolescent behavior; a study shows that teens who watch music videos are much more likely to drink than their classmates who do not watch music videos (Music Videos, 1998), but it seems more likely that the cause of this behavior is peer influence. Many teens indicate that they use alcohol because their friends do, and teenage girls are particularly susceptible because they are likely to date older males who drink (Alcohol Use).

As we can see from Milkie's study, the negative influence of the media can be cancelled out by the influence of the peer group. If adolescents are most likely to try to emulate what they perceive to be normal and popular, the solution is to make desirable behaviors seem normal and popular. Schools and educators can help teens learn to resist peer pressure, become more informed as to the norms of adolescent behavior, and learn to analyze and reject media messages that may be harmful. Students who are aware of the consequences of drug and alcohol use or risky sexual behavior are less likely to do so. Schools need to educate students about real-life issues so they can make informed choices, rather than basing their decisions on what they believe their friends are doing and what is depicted in the media.

Family Structure

Family structure is defined as the make-up of people who live together in a given family unit. The *traditional* family structure is that of a father, a mother, and one or more children (Meece, 2002, p. 481). The structure and stability of families has changed significantly over the last 50 years with changes in marriage, divorce, remarriage, non-marital fertility, and cohabitation (Cavanagh & Huston, 2006). In 1999, only 68% of children lived in two-parent families, compared to 85% in 1970 (Meece, 2002, p. 20). Around half of all first marriages end in divorce, which affects more than one million children each year (Meece, 2002, p. 506).

There are multiple paths to single parenthood, with divorce topping the list. Others include those who are widowed, assume single parenthood because a spouse is out of the house (i.e. active military duty or imprisonment), have out of wedlock pregnancies, artificial insemination, and adoption (Meece, 2002, p. 482). Single parents face many difficulties and additional stresses than do two-parent households. Studies have shown that even a less-involved two-parent family can provide some additional emotional and practical support than a single parent (Meece, 2002, page 482). Around two-thirds of divorced single parents will remarry, creating a blended family situation, where there is a parent and a step-parent (Meece, 2002, p. 506).

Children who experience changes in a parent's marital or romantic situation, such as divorce, remarriage, or cohabitation, often experience major stressors with each successive transition. These changes cause a disruption in a child's sense of security and their family relations (Cavanagh & Huston, 2006). Immediately following a divorce, children become defiant, negative, aggressive, depressed, and angry (Meece, 2002, p. 506). Studies have shown that children from divorced families have lower school performance, are less likely to attend

college, start working in the work force earlier than their peers, are slightly more likely to be depressed, and are more likely to smoke and drink alcohol. Also, girls from divorced families are more likely to have increased conflict with their mother, friends, and in intimate relationships (Bolgar, Zweig-Frank, & Paris, 1995) and show a higher rate of teenage pregnancy (Meece, 2002, p. 487). Boys, on the other hand, show increased conflict with their teachers or superiors. Remarriage of a custodial mother was associated with an increase in behavioral problems with girls and a decrease in behavioral problems with boys (Bolgar, Zweig-Frank, & Paris, 1995).

The long-term affects of a change in family structure are dependent on multiple factors, one being the age at the time of the divorce. Research has shown that children who are preschoolers at the time of the divorce are less likely to display the negative behavioral effects than their school-age siblings. Younger children are also more likely to show positive effects from their custodial parent re-marrying than older children. Over time, some of the differences in behavior between divorced families and traditional families disappear; however, students from divorced families will tend to have more sexual partners and desire more sexual involvement later in life, and are more likely to cohabitate (Bolgar, Zweig-Frank, & Paris, 1995).

For children going through a change in family structure, schools are one of the few places where they can experience a stable and predictable environment, assuming they are not required to relocate as a result of the change. This is important because students in this situation need extra support and attention. As educators, it is important to be sensitive to the changes in a child's circumstances and not view divorce and remarriage as having negative consequences for all children (Meece, 2002, p. 509-511). Teachers should also be careful when discussing families that they use the word "parents" instead of "mother" and "father," and should avoid making generalizations about non-traditional families. Educators also need to be ready to make

special arrangements to accommodate single parents in an effort to get them more involved with their child's schooling (Meece, 2002, p. 488). Finally, teachers need to be aware of school policies regarding contact with custodial and non-custodial parents, as this has many legal ramifications (Meece, 2002, p. 511).

Poverty

People living in poverty have an income below the poverty line established by the federal government and have no discretionary disposable income. The United States Department of Health & Human Services defines the 2006 poverty line for an American family of four as $20,000 or less annually (Wikipedia, 2006). While some studies on the effects of "poverty" on childhood development only use those children whose families fall below the poverty line, others include those who qualify as low-income but are not below the poverty line. The United States' child poverty rate is higher than most other industrialized countries. Thirteen and a half million children were considered to be poor in 1998, and nearly six million of these children lived in families with incomes of less than *half* of the poverty line (Meece, 2002). A final important statistic about childhood poverty is that the majority of poor children are non-Hispanic whites. However, poverty amongst African American and Hispanic populations is disproportionately higher than that of non-Hispanic whites, which means the percentage of African American and Hispanic children living in poverty (36%) is also disproportionately higher than that of non-Hispanic whites (10%) (Meece, 2002).

Income continues to be a reliable indicator for predicting levels of student achievement. Low-income students are more likely to underachieve; these students are more likely to be retained, suspended, and expelled from school; and they are also less likely to complete their education (Taylor, 2005). Income is only one aspect that impacts the development of children

living in poverty. Other important aspects must also be considered when analyzing a low-income child's development, such as the role the child's parents plays in their development, school quality, and their health (Leventhal, 2005) (Meece, 2002).

Poor children's underachievement is apparent in standardized test results (Meece, 2002). In one study that compared the NAEP standardized test results of students eligible for the federal free lunch programs with those students that were ineligible for the program based on family income, eligible students scored lower in all fields (including reading, writing, science, mathematics, and U.S. history) than ineligible students. The correlation between income and results was so strong in this study that those eligible for reduced-price lunches fell between these two groups (Taylor, 2005).

The behavior and health of children living in poverty is also greatly different than that of their peers who are financially secure. Low-income children are more likely to experience malnutrition and have disproportionately higher rates of mental illness and disabilities. "Poor children are twice as likely as other children to have impaired vision, hearing problems, and anemia (Meece, 2002)." These conditions lead children to have shorter attention spans, less motivation, or other behavioral or learning problems (Meece, 2002). Unfortunately, poor children with these problems are less likely to have their conditions or special needs addressed appropriately. As a result of inadequate attention to these problems, children living in poverty are inappropriately retained or entered into special education programs by their schools (Taylor, 2005).

Adolescents from low-income families are more likely to drop out of school before getting their diploma than their middle- and higher-income peers. Dropping out of school greatly increases a child's likelihood of earning less money or ending up in the justice system

(Jozefowicz-Simbeni et al, 2002). Forty percent of prison inmates are high school dropouts (Taylor, 2005). A 1997 study found less than half of the nation's homeless children were even attending school (Meece, 2002).

Children living in poverty are generally exposed to a different, less adequate parentage than their peers (Jozefowicz-Simbeni et al, 2002). Parents of low-income households are less likely to be actively involved in their children's schooling. Low-income parents supervise their children less and use inconsistent and harsher parenting styles, which lead their children to be prone to misbehavior and aggression (Jozefowicz-Simbeni et al, 2002). Because poor families have little discretionary disposable income, poor children are stimulated less by educational tools such as books, toys, and educational experiences like travel (Jozefowicz-Simbeni et al, 2002).

All schools are not created equal. Many students of middle- and high-income families seek better educational opportunities through private schools or can afford to commute to better public or charter schools outside of their school district (Jozefowicz-Simbeni et al, 2002). Seeking a better option than the closest public school is an option very few low-income families enjoy. Public schools in low-income neighborhoods have fewer resources to help its students. "Teachers in poor schools are two to four times more likely to report inadequate supplies of books, learning materials, and audiovisual equipment" (Meece, 2002). "High-poverty schools" are disproportionately attended by African American and Hispanic students. The federal government has enacted some effective legislation to combat the effects of child poverty on education such as the National School Lunch Act of 1946, the Head Start Program established in 1965, and also Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Despite the positive impact federal legislation and programs like the ones listed above have made, the overall responsibility to negate the impact of poverty on the quality of education provided to students

falls on state governments whose responses continue to be varied in extent and effectiveness (Taylor, 2005).

As Secretary of Education Roderick Paige noted, "Today, many dreams are hampered by an achievement gap between…children of poverty and children of privilege." In order to close this gap, advancements must be made to end the impact of poverty on a child's development. A good start would be to further state and federal legislation increasing funding and programs that focus on providing top-quality education for all students regardless of their families' income; encourage 'at-risk' youth to remain in school; and assist low-income families in nurturing their children at an early age to have the skills necessary to succeed academically.

Conclusion

From these discussions, it is easy to see how one factor can influence others. As educators, it is important that we are aware of our students, their family situation, their peer groups, and their interests in general. It is important to support children and adolescents during transitions in their lives, and offer equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their family background or income level. In offering support and encouragement, educators can also be influential in students' lives, and hopefully help children and adolescents steer clear of some of the problems they may face in the future.

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