Social Change and Adolescent Development

First and Last Name

School Affiliation

Methodology

This study was designed to investigate how social change affects adolescent development. The significance of this study is that it may help inform both practitioners and parents on the negative effects of social change on adolescent development. The methodology employed for this study was qualitative in nature (Merriam, 1998). Responses to a survey were used for gathering data. Additionally, recurrent themes were identified through use of interviews.

Participants

Participants for the study included adolescents, ages 13 through 17, and their parents. The adolescents were students from five high schools located within a large metropolitan area located in the north-eastern region of the country. Adolescents were referred to the lead researcher by guidance counselors who were provided with a list of criteria for selection in the study. Student and parent demographics varied, but all had in common the factor that each family had within the past two years experienced a significant change in social conditions.

Instruments

Participants were provided with a questionnaire. The first section was designed to gather demographic information such as gender, age, level of education, and economic levels. The second section was to illicit responses that indicated kinds and levels of experiences, as well as attitudes towards those experiences. Interviews were used as a second instrument to gather data. A few semi-structured questions began the interview process, leading to more open-ended questions as participants shared their thoughts and experiences. The questions were designed to probe into adolescent behavior and tendencies involving illicit use of drugs and alcohol, truancy,

promiscuity, planned and unplanned pregnancies, and suicidal thoughts or tendencies. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, using the line-numbering feature of Microsoft Word. Recurring themes were identified and categorized utilizing Excel.

Procedure

Participants were invited with a letter to parents, first. Once parents agree and gave their consent in writing, students were then invited through a letter, as well. Participants were mailed the questionnaire and asked to return it in person at the time of the interviews. Parents were interviewed by one pair of interviewers while their adolescents were simultaneously interviewed in a separate room by a different pair of interviewers. Once the interviews had been completed and transcribed, the transcription was provided to the participants to validate that no errors were made during the transcription.

Results

Recurrent themes included issues of feeling isolated from peers when having to move from one neighborhood to another or from one city to another, especially when changing schools was involved. Similarity in problems existed, regardless of whether a family perceived that it was moving up or down in socio-economic status. Common reactions included more time in playing electronic games, more time spent on the computer in social networking environments, and an increase in rebellion. Acting-out included increase in alcoholic consumption, experimentation with illegal drugs, and increase in risky behaviors, including promiscuity. The participants were in agreement that an overall reason for such behavior was a sense of loss in connection with previous friends, fear of entering a new school, and an overall sense of depression and withdrawal. Some behavior was attributed to trying to fit in with a new set of

peers (Susman, Dorn, & Schiefelbein, 2003). Adolescents who had previously displayed poor social skills were especially at risk for deviant behavior (Scales & Leffert, 1999). Parents indicated that they were aware of some of the feelings and issues their adolescents were experiencing but felt that their teenagers did not tell them everything that was going on with them. Parents expressed a desire for resources in helping their adolescents to adjust to new socio-economic conditions brought on by changes in the family.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that regardless of why social change takes place in a family, and regardless of whether those changes appear to be overall positive or negative, adolescents feel a sense of loss. Loss is largely based on peer relationships. Old friendships are often lost. Even those that are maintained are restricted in that adolescents typically have few resources available to them to visit old neighborhoods or to socialize with established friends. Added to that is that many adolescents lack the experience or confidence to readily walk into a new school and make a friend. They feel vulnerable to being attacked or laughed at or otherwise ridiculed. In this state of loneliness, many begin to withdraw, which leads them to seek solitary activities, such as playing electronic games or chatting online in social networks. Loneliness can lead to boredom. In that state, some adolescents begin to drink. They may also connect to adolescents at their new school by willingness to drink, experiment with drugs, or engage in risky sex (Lerner, 1995). Complicating these issues is that most adolescents are unwilling to admit that they are having difficulty adjusting to changes in the family's status (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999). For that reason, parents are often at a loss in knowing what their adolescents are experiencing and how best to help them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study indicate that adolescents are adversely affected by changes in their family's social status, regardless of whether that status is viewed as upward or downward. A change in family status often means a move from one neighborhood to another neighborhood or perhaps from one city or state to another. The adolescent immediately experiences a loss of friendship while at the same time a feeling of disorientation. Schools have their own culture, their own personality. New rules of conduct, mostly unspoken, must be learned. Some adolescents are naturally more socially adept than others, but most experience a feeling of insecurity and caution as they enter as a new student. Complicating the matter is that adolescents tend not to share all of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with their parents for a variety of reasons. This lack of communication, though, leaves parents guessing as to what difficulties their adolescents may be experiencing. Added to this is a lack of resources for parents in addressing potential problems and in helping their adolescents make the needed adjustments to their new family situation.

References

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