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The Clique Conundrum

Imagine walking into school. As you look around, you see groups of friends hanging out. Everyone is laughing and having fun, reminiscing about what they have done together. And in that moment, you feel alone. You feel like you do not fit in, and that no one will like you. Unfortunately, this is the reality of millions of students across the United States. In every school across the country, cliques exist. These social groups allow for many to connect with others who share the same interests, fostering feelings of belonging. However, the exclusivity associated with these groups can be deleterious, potentially leading to isolation and distress. Therefore, it is imperative that we ask ourselves one question: do the benefits of cliques in schools outweigh the disadvantages associated with these social groups? The answer is clear. While cliques may instill feelings of belonging and inclusivity among groups, they also have the power to isolate others and establish a social hierarchy, creating an overall negative impact on the school community.

While members of cliques may feel secure, the experiences of those who are isolated from the rest are vastly different. By definition, a clique is “a narrow, exclusive circle or group of persons, especially one held together by common interests, views, and purposes” (Merriam Webster). Clearly, these groups are formed by people who share commonalities, and so, members feel safe in these groups. It all ties into the “in-group/out-group” phenomenon (Christina). Essentially, we as humans section ourselves off into “social groups” known as “in-groups”. On the contrary, we assign people that we do not know or feel comfortable with into “out-groups”.

And as a result of this compartmentalization, we feel safe around people who are similar to us. Evidently, these groups provide support for many individuals, which is why they are so sought after. Unfortunately, this is not the norm for countless others, isolating them in the process. Cliques have established themselves as exclusive groups where people can come together with shared interests. However, the dark side of cliques begins to show when people who do not share these interests feel less secure about themselves (Black). These insecurities then continue to pile on, as when “outsiders” try to join these cliques, they are rejected instead (Pierce). This isolation continues to fester, and it can even get as bad as induced depression as a result of this separation (Idaho Aging). A study by the National Institute of Health found that the prevalence of depression symptoms among adolescents who were isolated in school was around 31.68%, a concerning number that is only continuing to grow. Isolation has been clearly linked to eventual depression, yet students continue to try to fulfill their needs for belonging, disregarding the mental health of others around them. It is obvious that, while many students feel safe in their cliques, students who are not included feel much worse, leading to feelings of isolation and depression that can have major impacts on the lives of students, whether it is inside or outside the cliques.

Furthermore, while cliques can offer leadership experiences, these positions are often taken too far, leading to more harm than good. In many cliques, there is a power dynamic composed of two parts; the leader and their followers. As a result, for many students, cliques can serve as opportunities to gain valuable leadership experience among their peers. Furthermore, as Volunteer University asserts, cliques can teach others how to be good followers, eventually fostering crucial skills such as empathy and teamwork. Evidently, cliques allow for students to look up to their peers and learn from them, creating a collaborative environment where everyone

thrives. However, this power dynamic is taken advantage of too often, making matters even worse. In many of these social circles, this perceived leader always calls the shots, leading to a major power imbalance, and as a consequence, these leaders force others to act in ways that go against their values and morals. Take, for instance, Mike, a 16 year old boy. Mike was eleven years old when he was forced to smoke a cigarette. Mike “did not want to” smoke a cigarette, but he “did not want to be out of the group”, choosing instead to succumb to the peer pressure (YourLifeCounts). Unfortunately, Mike is not alone. Thousands of students across the country face this same problem. It is clear that the culprit is our need to “fit in”. As a society, we feel inclined to surround ourselves with others who make us feel comfortable. Like Mike, we have let ourselves be peer pressured, choosing “fitting in” rather than staying true to ourselves. Clearly, while cliques and their leaders may provide some benefits, in the long-term, they take our societal need to fit in for granted, causing harm all around.

Finally, cliques have pushed people out rather than providing opportunities to branch out, leading to feelings of school exclusion in the process. As humans, we cannot possibly get to know everyone. It is physically impossible to get to know everyone around us, much less our whole schools. And at that point, cliques become the clear solution. In cliques, you are free to be yourself, and you are always connected with people who share your interests (Black). Furthermore, students are able to build upon these passions, furthering their connections with others. Clearly, cliques provide the benefit of getting to know certain people who share your interests as opposed to getting to know everyone. Nevertheless, while cliques may provide comfort, they also create inequalities due to their exclusivity. As an article by KidsHealth articulates, cliques are tight groups that have been formed through a lot of memories and interests, and many people get excluded since they do not get the “inside jokes”. This makes the

groups even tighter, reinforcing the walls in front of people who may not share these experiences. In fact, this is the major difference between a clique and a group of friends. While groups of friends are made up of friends who just hang out together in a healthy way, cliques are toxic, exclusive groups that only let certain people in (Wordpress). All in all, it is the exclusivity of cliques that increases exclusion in schools, leading to detrimental impacts schoolwide.

It is evident that while it is beneficial to be around others who share our interests, cliques have taken it too far, emphasizing the need for a middle ground. And while there may be many solutions to this issue, one glaringly stands out. In order to transition into a healthier school environment, we need to diversify our friendships in healthy ways (A Brighter Day). By doing this, we will be able to connect with others who are similar to us, while simultaneously meeting others who can broaden our perspectives. In the end, it all boils down to our need to surround ourselves with people who are like us. Even though cliques provide a way to do so, their effects are far from beneficial. However, it is important to note that we should not stray away from similarity. Therefore, by branching out and gaining unique perspectives, we can create a healthy blend of the two, potentially alleviating this issue once and for all.

So, the next time you are watching Mean Girls, ask yourself this: “Are cliques really the way to go?”. Cliques provide a variety of benefits that allow for inclusion. However, these feelings are only exclusive to those inside these groups. For others, the experience is much worse, and many are left feeling alone. Hopefully, by transitioning from the harmful environments of cliques to the security of friend groups, we will be able to find a place where healthy groups of friends can exist in schools, leaving everyone with a happy ever after.

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