

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring the benefits of joining peer groups for first-year students: A case study of a South African university

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the benefits of peer group support for first-year South African students who live in university residences. A case study design was adopted and data were collected from first-year students via focus group interviews at a selected South African university. Thematic analysis revealed the benefits for first-year students joining peer groups in the residences, such as a sense of belonging, receiving academic support, developing student leadership roles, and involvement in co-curricular activities. In addition, the study highlights the need for implementing student programmes to assist first-year students in transitioning from school to university.

KEYWORDS

First-year students, peer group support, qualitative research, residences, sense of belonging, student affairs

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude qualitative explore les avantages du soutien par les pairs pour les étudiants sud-africains de première année qui vivent dans les résidences universitaires. Une méthodologie d'étude de cas a été adoptée et les données ont été collectées auprès d'*étudiants de première année* d'une université sud-africaine. Les données ont été recueillies par le biais d'entretiens collectifs avec des groupes ciblés. L'analyse thématique a révélé les avantages dont bénéficient les étudiants de première année qui rejoignent des groupes de pairs dans les résidences, notamment le sentiment d'appartenance, le soutien académique, le développement de rôles de leadership étudiant et la participation à des activités parascolaires. En outre, l'étude met en évidence la nécessité de mettre en place des programmes étudiants pour aider les étudiants de première année dans leur transition de l'école à l'université.

MOTS-CLÉS

Étudiants de première année, œuvres estudiantines, recherche qualitative, résidences, sentiment d'appartenance, services étudiants, soutien par les pairs

Background and introduction

The desire for social acceptance is a primary human need and is particularly prevalent when students enter the higher education context (Santor et al., 2002). According to Shepherd et al. (2011), students will engage in various activities to satisfy the need

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for belonging. Lawrence (2005) and Krause (2001) add that the need for belonging is particularly prevalent during the stressful transition from school to university. Seminal work by Tinto (1988) indicates that the transition from school to university is a significant challenge that is influenced by students' diverse backgrounds, experiences and expectations. Bojuwoye (2002) agrees and argues that when students leave their homes and families to become part of the university environment, they are confronted with several challenges and adjustments to virtually all aspects of life, including social, academic, psychological, physical and spiritual aspects.

The transition to university comprises three distinct stages (Tinto, 2009, 2012). First, during the separation stage, students have to disassociate from their familial and communal backgrounds as they enter university. Second, as students begin engaging in the university setting, they must establish new relationships with peers and other stakeholders. Third, during the incorporation stage, students may struggle to adapt to the university setting and experience social and academic challenges (Tinto, 2009, 2012). Many universities offer support and other services to assist students in adequately managing the transition period (Mason, 2019). A growing body of literature also indicates that students can benefit from support-related services and programmes, such as orientation programmes (Chigeza et al., 2018; Keup & Barefoot, 2005). Most orientation programmes aim to facilitate students' successful integration into a new and unfamiliar academic and social setting. The first-year programmes also increase students' understanding of their institutions and higher education culture in general (Chigeza et al., 2018; Krause, 2001; Strayhorn, 2019). Peer groups can also enhance the value of student support programmes by emphasizing active involvement and offering a sense of community (Astin, 1985).

Involvement of first-year students in peer groups

Research suggests that students strongly desire peer group affiliation (Henrich et al. 2001; Johnson, 2017; Olalekan, 2016). Aziz et al. (2011, p. 36) describe a peer group as "a source of affection, sympathy, and understanding; a place for experimentation where an attempt to discover the self can be made because persons are separated and independent from their parents". Thus, peer group support can promote a smooth transition from school to university (Castrogiovanni, 2002; Kulaksızoğlu, 2001).

Peer groups can be classified into formal and informal groups. Formal groups are often more structured and focus on academic goals, whereas informal groups provide opportunities for social interaction in, amongst others, university residence contexts. Examples of informal groups are entertainment and dance groups, while formal groups can be study groups and student organisations. Undergraduate peer groups may be described as formal or informal groups based on personal identity; affiliation and a sense of belonging are formed over time (Kuh, 2008).

More research is needed to explore the benefits that peer groups offer first-year university students staying in university residences. Furthermore, qualitative exploration is needed to understand students' lived experiences of participating in peer groups. Moreover, research exploring the benefits of participating in peer groups is needed.

Subsequently, this study aims to draw on qualitative data to better understand the benefits of participating in peer groups during the first-year experience.

Research aim and question

The study explored the benefits of peer support offered to first-year students who live in residences at a South African university. The study was guided by the following overarching research question: 'What are the benefits of peer support groups for first-year South African university students who live in residences?' The study also explored the following four sub-questions: (1) How have students benefited from joining the peer group? (2) Were students' experiences similar in different peer support groups? (3) How did peer groups benefit students in terms of beliefs, values, behaviours and lifestyle choices? (4) Did students perceive academic benefits from peer group support?

Methodology

Research approach and design

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore students' unique perspectives regarding the benefits of peer group support (Tong et al., 2012; Zohrabi, 2013). Furthermore, a case study design was adopted to explore students' qualitative experiences within a particular university setting (Creswell, 2014).

Study participants

This study included 27 first-year students living in two residences at a selected South African university. Participants were purposively sampled from two residences housed in separate blocks on the university campus. The focus groups were diverse, comprising students younger than 21 years of age, presented as females only (eight members), males only (seven members), and mixed gender (ten members).

Procedure and ethics approval

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Researcher Ethics Committee at the University of the Western Cape (Reference number 13/05/30). The UWC's Department of Student Development and Residential and Catering Services manager granted permission to the researcher to access the residences and meet with the participants. The researcher presented the study's objectives to the participants who provided informed consent. Ethical requirements such as confidentiality, respect for participants, and voluntary participation were strictly adhered to.

Data collection

As a qualitative researcher, I coordinated the focus group sessions. Each of the three focus groups comprised seven to ten participants. I directed the participants to arrange their chairs in a circle and then sit close to one another so that their voices could be audio recorded. The focus group discussions were 30 to 50 minutes in duration, and participants were given the opportunity to ask follow-up questions. The meeting was

scheduled three days in advance. The transcripts were sorted in order to answer the research questions posed by the study.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). First, I familiarised myself with the data by studying the interview transcripts. Next, initial coding was conducted. The coding was done manually by writing notes on the texts, analysing these notes, and using highlighters and coloured pens to indicate potential patterns to identify data segments. Thereafter, I organised the codes into themes. Finally, a qualitative account of the data was presented (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Findings and discussion

Four themes emerged following the qualitative analysis: (1) gaining a sense of belonging, (2) receiving academic support, (3) developing student leadership roles, and (4) involvement in co-curricular activities. The qualitative themes are discussed in the section below. Verbatim quotes are used to substantiate the qualitative interpretation. Thereafter the article is concluded by summarising the main ideas that emerged from the study.

Gaining a sense of belonging

This study found that gaining a sense of belonging could benefit first-year students when they join peer groups at a South African university residence. Peer group support promoted social integration and promoted a sense of belonging among these students. Furthermore, participants reported joining peer groups to feel a sense of belonging and uplifting their self-esteem. They claimed that belonging is essential to joining a peer group because it influences decisions to engage in academic and social activities. The latter is supported in the literature by scholars who described that sense of belonging is crucial to educational success for all students in higher education (Lemley, 2014; Strayhorn, 2019). Against such a backdrop, Mntuyedwa (2020) calls for universities to establish activities and programmes to address their students' needs. It is further argued that greater support to students could enhance student success (Castrogiovanni, 2002; Letseka, 2009; Mason, 2019).

Similarly, scholars highlight that a sense of belonging could be essential to establish whether students felt respected, valued, accepted, cared for, and included (Kuh, 2008; Tinto, 2012; Strayhorn, 2018). Nonetheless, participation in peer-group activities has advantages and potentialities which are often under-reported in popular scholarly discourse. Louw and Louw (2014) found that peer group interaction promotes interpersonal skills, which are vital in adolescent psychosocial development. Hence, a sense of belonging is crucial to the participants because they feel accepted and valued by their peers in university residences.

The following verbatim quotes below support the qualitative interpretation:

I have developed a sense of belonging through daily interactions with my peers in the university student centre where I made many friends ... By interacting with diverse students, this took away my anxiety and fear of being rejected. (Focus Group 1)

I think I got a sense of belonging. Since I am away from home and luckily for my peer group, we are in the same programme. We support each other no matter what. (Focus Group 2)

It is important to interact with our peers in residences. Since we come from different backgrounds and diverse communities, we need to know the values of different cultures and properly communicate with each other. This results in mutual respect, and it helps everybody to feel to belong to the university space. (Focus Group 3)

Receiving academic support

The data indicated that joining peer groups could further benefit first-year residence students in receiving academic support. According to the participants, this academic support consisted of assisting each other during their study meetings through advice, which helped them complete assignments and prepare for assessments. A participant in Focus Group 1 provided the following explanation: *"I joined the study group to attain excellent marks... the assistance you get when you do not understand, and there is someone next to you whom you can ask to assist. It becomes easier to study and know your work"*.

In most cases, participants acknowledged that they joined academic study groups because their peers led the study groups. These participants explained that the different study groups helped them adapt more quickly to the academic demands of the university. Specifically, a participant in Focus Group 2 reported the following: *"For me, my study group or my peer group that I study with. When I am studying with them my marks get up high[er] than studying alone because I can study and ask for help if I do not understand"*.

The qualitative interpretation is supported by literature that suggests students perform better academically when they experience support (Astin, 1985; York et al., 2015). Consequently, peer group support is an important mechanism universities can draw on to enhance academic performance.

Developing student leadership roles

Participants indicated that peer support groups contribute to developing student leadership roles. Specifically, participants indicated that the interactions with other leadership group members helped them develop their leadership roles, make new friends, and build their confidence in public speaking. A participant from Focus Group 3 reported the following:

I learn more about teamwork, how to work with other people, how to handle stressful situations. There were tasks we were allocated to do at some point. It was challenging because we all wanted to do the task, and we could give each other a chance. I have learned more about team building and communication. (Focus Group 3)

The findings further indicate that participants were interested in serving on the house committee to host meetings and assist their fellow students in residence during the transition period. They attended management meetings to debate residence policy planning. Hence, peer support groups assisted students in developing

... leadership skills which ... can play a role in a working environment in future you have to know how to deal with a certain group of people because I think it is a beneficial skill that one can have, to know how to work with a different type of people and problem-solving skills. (Focus Group 3)

These findings align with Astin (1985) and Tinto's (1999) theoretical perspectives, which posit that students learn better when they are socially involved and engaged. Thus, student involvement and engagement are critical focus areas that should be emphasized in university settings (Gilbert et al., 2007).

Involvement in co-curricular activities

The final thematic idea that emerged following the data analysis was that involvement in co-curricular activities could be enhanced via peer group support. In this regard, participants mentioned that they joined peer groups to participate in co-curricular activities to socially integrate during orientation and throughout the year. This interpretation is supported by the following three quotes:

Interacting with peers from a variety of groups extends your social circle by increasing the network of students with whom you can associate and develop relationships. Having friends in one racial group can be very boring, and diversity makes the conversation interesting. (Focus Group 3)

The good part is there are always things that are happening here at the university, like functions especially for first-years. You got people to talk to and stuff so like, I do not think they should have any reason to be like an introvert and not talk and be shy and I like talking you know, I got along well. (Focus Group 1)

I have a religious roommate; he is a kind of influence on me to go to church on Sundays. My family is also religious, and my friends on the first floor are also religious people. I get that influence of going to church, yhaaa... (Focus Group 2)

The qualitative interpretation presented above is consistent with Kuh (2008), who states that co-curricular programmes are widely recognised and promoted as an integral part of the student life experience. The results suggested that co-curricular activities affect joining peer groups. These findings align with Tinto's (1975) student involvement theory, which holds that students should be more involved in campus life activities to adapt quickly to the environment and become more personally developed.

Limitations

The qualitative findings should be read with specific limitations in mind. First, the study was conducted at a specific South African university. Thus, the qualitative findings reflect

the perceptions of a limited cohort of participants. Similar studies at different South African or African universities may elicit diverse qualitative narratives. Second, from the qualitative focus group interviews, it became apparent that some participants were hesitant and shy to express their perspectives.

With respect to these limitations, future research should focus on collecting data from more diverse samples from various university settings. Additionally, researchers could consider utilising in-depth individual interviews to establish a context where participants may be comfortable expressing their opinions freely. This article recommends that a great deal of information and critical skills are needed to ensure that the student affairs office makes appropriate decisions for the effective management of student behaviours. First-year students could benefit from orientation programmes that emphasize peer group interaction.

Conclusion

This study explored positive aspects experienced by first-year students at a South African university when they joined and became part of peer groups. The findings reported in this article suggest that peer groups can offer numerous benefits to first-year students. Consistent with the extant literature, this study affirmed that first-year students join various groups to fulfil unique needs related to social acceptance. Additionally, the study reported that peer groups helped first-year students adjust to university residences. Furthermore, first-year students are more likely to build a support network of peers who may help them in future through cultivating a sense of belonging.

I suggest that first-year students should be informed about the university environment, and participation in extramural activities, which could bring them in contact with social peer support groups, should be encouraged. Finally, I recommend that universities draw on peer support groups as a strategy to enhance a sense of cohesion among first-year university students.

Ethics statement

The researcher followed all ethics protocols in conducting the study.

Potential conflict of interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare as the study is based on research done for her PhD.

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