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# 'The Peer Effect' Review: Trying to Find a Key to Success

Because their fellow students work so hard, even the slackers at Stuyvesant High School know they have to get their schoolwork done.

*By Naomi Schaefer Riley*

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Students at Stuyvesant High School leave after class. PHOTO: BEBETO MATTHEWS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

New York's competitive public high schools—where admission requires high test scores—are one of the city's few continuous success stories. For dozens of years they have turned out impressive graduates of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds, many of whom go on to elite colleges and admirable careers. Former Mayor Bill de Blasio was a vocal critic of the schools, judging them insufficiently egalitarian. But so far they have managed to sustain their high admission standards.

Among the best known of the schools is Stuyvesant High School, located along the Hudson River in Lower Manhattan—one of the best schools in the country, not to mention among the hardest to get into (the admission rate is around 4%).

As it happens, the authors of “The Peer Effect,” Syed Ali and Margaret Chin, are proud Stuyvesant graduates, and they make the school the focus of their study.

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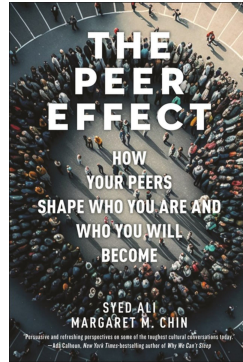
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### The Peer Effect: How Your Peers Shape Who You Are and Who You Will Become

By Syed Ali

NYU Press

240 pages



Why is Stuyvesant such a success? One might point to conscientious parents, no-nonsense teachers and orderly classrooms, not to mention the smarts of the students themselves. But Mr. Ali and Ms. Chin—sociology professors at Long Island University Brooklyn and CUNY Hunter College, respectively—argue that the key to student success is . . . other students.

How do the authors know this? Well, they conducted interviews with Stuyvesant graduates who told them so. One graduate says she felt the “pressure or feeling that literally everyone else around you is doing so well” and had to “step up” her game. Another says that he couldn’t just “hang out” but had to study all the time, even “on the train.” As for the slackers, kids who smoked pot or drank on school days, they “still know they need to get their schoolwork done—not to make teachers and parents happy, but because they do not want to look like schmucks in front of their peers.”

The peer effect can also work against studiousness. A number of students said they started out studying 4-5 hours after school but, with other students, discovered “sex, drugs, rock ’n’ roll, and football” and still managed to do well. One reason may be the intelligence the test scores point to. Mr. Ali and Ms. Chin quote a fellow graduate from their own school days: “I got into Harvard and couldn’t believe how many stupid people I met. I had never met stupid people at Stuyvesant.”

No doubt peers do have an effect—at Stuyvesant and elsewhere. The question is how much of an effect, given other variables. Is it not possible that Stuyvesant’s “slackers” would have performed well at other schools as well? Yes, they might have been pulled down by lower-performing peers at another school, but they might also have done well while putting in even less work. And it’s possible their

parents would have forced them to perform at a certain level regardless of where they went to school. A more rigorous pair of sociologists—guided by empirical studies as well as interviews—might have paused to consider a problem at the center of their thesis: How is it possible to separate the influence of peers from the fact that Stuyvesant is attended by thousands of kids who already had a combination of natural intelligence and highly involved parents?

Claims about the key role of parents seem to bother the authors. They observe that, though we all “love our parents,” we “live our own lives and ultimately make our own choices.” Mr. Ali insists that, when he was in school, he “did things independently of my parents. I was not an automaton!” Of course he wasn’t. But there is a large body of research—including the National Study of Youth and Religion, which surveyed thousands of young adults—showing the outsize influence of parents on teen and young-adult decisions. Mr. Ali and Ms. Chin, by contrast, interviewed 70 graduates of their alma mater and feel prepared to conclude that parental influence is overrated.

A school’s culture can of course affect student performance. Many high-performing charter schools credit their success to creating an atmosphere in which teachers, students and families have high expectations for conduct and academic work. But Mr. Ali and Ms. Chin disapprove of charter schools, referring to them as “apartheid schools” because they overwhelmingly draw children from one race. (On similar grounds, they deplore “gifted and talented” programs and “tracking.”) The phrase is badly chosen and reveals a mind-set that guides other comments in “The Peer Effect” that go beyond the book’s ostensible subject. If kids at a predominantly black charter school in, say, Scarsdale, N.Y., outperform white kids at a noncharter school (and they do), are we required to dismiss the institution that fostered their achievement?

The authors state that the stigma of “acting white”—that is, the claim that black students don’t strive to achieve academically because they would be shamed by their racial cohort—has been “debunked.” Rather they say that there just happen to be “some Black students in some places [whose] identity is culturally defined in a way that requires sanctioning members . . . for violating norms and therefore weakening the group boundaries”—which sounds like a hedged way of saying that, yes, “acting white” remains a problem.

Mr. Ali and Ms. Chin are generally keen on affirmative action, declaring that it “works.” It is said of Ms. Chin, whose parents were Chinese immigrants, that “including race on her application” is one of the factors that she “credits with nabbing her a spot at Harvard,” and she is grateful for it. (The Harvard admissions data unearthed in the recent high-profile lawsuit suggest that her race may have been an obstacle rather than a help.) Ranging beyond schools and into workplaces, the authors recommend hiring for diversity at all levels. The more diversity hires, they say, the better.

Yet Stuyvesant pointedly doesn’t take race or sex into account when admitting kids. One female graduate explained: “As a Black Ivy Leaguer, folks act like they lowered the bar for you. Once they learn you went to Stuyvesant, they realize you raised that s---.” Such graduates, the authors say, have found that the “suspicions of being undeserving melted away” when potential employers learned they had attended Stuyvesant.

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