Peer Group Influences on High School Girls' Interest in STEM

Gresham, Percy (School: Alabama School of Fine Arts)

This study investigates the role of peer group influences on female high school students' interest in STEM fields. Sixty-nine female 9th-10th graders participated in a survey that asked about career interests in addition to questions related to group belonging and perceived group gender stereotypes across three groups: Most Important Group (MIG, a group chosen by the subject), science class, and a primary friend group. It was hypothesized that the less gender stereotypical and more accepting the science class, the more interested the girl would be in a STEM career. In addition, it was expected that STEM career interest would be greater when girls perceived their friends and MIG as less stereotypical. Results only partially supported the hypothesis. Intention to pursue a STEM career was not associated with ratings about science classes, although science classes were described as more stereotypical with lower rates of belonging compared to their friend group, and was most heavily associated with a high sense of belonging and perceived non-traditional gender stereotypes in the primary friend group. The findings supported the hypothesis that perceived stereotypicality and acceptance by friend group is associated with a STEM career interest, but did not support the hypothesis that the less stereotypical and more belonging in science class is associated with an intention to pursue a STEM career. Possible limitations are that the study was restricted to public high schools in Alabama, used a small sample size, and it did not account for family influences.

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