



# The Influence of Groupthink on the Values of Middle School Students

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**Abstract.** In social psychology, groupthink is a frequently discussed issue, which refers to a mode of thinking where members of a high-cohesion group cannot make objective and practical evaluations of the solution to the problem. This is primarily due to people's excessive pursuit of group consensus when making decisions and thinking about problems.

For middle school students, one of the largest groups which contain a high level of cohesiveness is in the classroom. In addition, students usually bear the responsibility to be identified as members of this group in order to generate a sense of belonging and security, thus avoiding group conflicts. Therefore, it is imperative to observe the phenomenon of de-individualization of students, which exerts a profound influence on the establishment of the values of middle school students at this stage.

**Keywords:** Groupthink · Middle School Students · Values · Group Decision-making · Group Polarization · Group Norms

## 1 Introduction

The research related to groupthink is frequently explored in social psychology but relatively less discussed in the field of educational psychology. The “Post-00s Research Report” shows that 61% of post-millennials believe that “group interests are more important than individual interests”, and more and more students are also agreeing with this statement. In group life, the emergence of group thinking is very common. So, will the emergence of group thinking affect students' behaviors and decisions and ultimately affect the formation of students' values? If the emergence of groupthink affects student behavior, how can we prevent it? In order to answer the above questions, this paper will discuss and study the influence of various factors on the values of middle school students from the perspective of group thinking.

## 2 Research Design

### 2.1 Research Problem

According to Janis, “Highly cohesive groups tend to demand consensus when making decisions. This trend can lead to a suppression of realistic assessments of other alternatives. The predisposed way of thinking when making group decisions is groupthink” [1].

In this case, as long as there are groups of people embedded in different social relations, a large or small society will be formed. For students, the two social groups to which they belong are the class and the school. Therefore, the first discussion in this study is whether groupthink occurs frequently among students, and if groupthink occurs, it will affect students' behavior and decision-making.

## 2.2 Research Methods and Objects

### 2.2.1 Research Methods

This study mainly adopts the qualitative research method. Through the combination of qualitative research and quantitative research, theoretical and empirical methods are used to conduct research. Specifically, the main research methods of this paper are:

1. Literature research. This paper conducts research on Chinese and foreign literature, especially discusses the relevant theoretical and empirical research on the impact of groupthink on the decision-making and behavior of primary and secondary school students. After referring to the relevant researches on groupthink at home and abroad, the questionnaire and interview questions suitable for this study were formulated.
2. Statistical analysis methods. In this paper, the collected data has been sorted, classified, descriptive statistical analysis has been carried out on the data of the questionnaire items, and the interview questions have been designed on the basis of the statistical results.
3. Observations and interviews. This article mainly through the subjects' subjective elaboration, to understand their behaviors and thoughts in group activities. This study mainly chooses to conduct research through interviews, in order to understand the students' views on group thinking from the root, and why they make some conforming behaviors and decisions. Finally, it is discussed whether groupthink has an impact on the formation of students' values.

### 2.2.2 Research Objects

Because the primary question of this study is to discuss whether there is groupthink among students, this study selects primary and secondary school students from three nine-year-system schools in a district of F city as the survey objects. The reason why these three schools are selected is that the three schools randomly assign students to the S-shaped class according to their grades when they enter the school. The distribution is basically the same. Choosing such a divided class is conducive to examining whether students of different ability levels are affected by group thinking, and avoids deviations due to grades. In order to ensure the rationality of the sample selection, this study adopts the stratified sampling method, and selects two grades from the primary and junior high schools of the three schools, and then randomly selects 2 classes in each grade, with a total of 320 students as the sample. The sample distribution frequencies are shown in Table 1.

In this questionnaire survey, a total of 320 copies were distributed, 311 copies were recovered, and 309 copies were valid. Among the 309 valid questionnaires recovered, 147 were male subjects, accounting for 47.6% of the overall sample; 162 were female

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of demographic variables

Statistical variables	attribute value	Frequency	percentage (%)
Grade	primary school	171	55.340
	junior high school	138	44.660
Gender	female	162	52.427
	male	147	47.573
Total		309	100.000

subjects, accounting for 52.4%. Among the survey subjects, there are 171 primary school students, accounting for 55.3%; 138 junior high school students, accounting for 44.6%. According to the data of the questionnaire, this paper randomly selected 30 subjects from the subjects for further observation and interview.

**2.3 Literature Review**

There is no doubt that Janis’ (1972, 1982) groupthink model was seminal in studying how groups function and make decisions. From the moment the model was proposed, it has been extended beyond its origins to explain the function of policy-making groups and to analyze decisions made by virtually any decision-making group, where among student groups Decisions are also included. This shows that there is a direct relationship between groupthink and decision-making. Most of the current research on groupthink is aimed at college students and adults entering society. And what is the connection between groupthink and decision-making and values? Ethical theory of value (Dewey, 1988) states that people not only consider their immediate needs and desires, but also sometimes reflect on deeper concerns about what is important [2]. He makes clear that values influence how people make decisions. And Hechter (1994) also pointed out in his research that people compare various choices with their own preferences when making decisions [3]. Therefore, we can conclude that values help us to weigh our preferences and choose which one is better based on everything we like.

That is, when we are faced with situations that require trade-offs, values help us make choices. But the concept of “good” is relatively subjective, and everyone’s understanding of “good” is different. Dewey (1988) argues that it is common for values to arise because our preferences conflict in the decision-making process [4]. Based on the above research, Nolan Rajakumar (2019) argues that our values allow us to resolve these conflicts by suggesting which preference is better [4]. As mentioned before, most of the research on this aspect at home and abroad focuses on the adult group, but some studies have shown that 11–12 years old is the developmental stage when attitudes, values and emotional motivation begin to form [5]. This age group is important for learning because it is considered the transition point between childhood and adulthood [6]. This is also an important reason to study group thinking and values among middle school students.

Dewey’s argument on the role of values in decision-making suggests that values are invoked when we reflect on difficult choices, especially those involving trade-offs

between our preferences [2]. Once a decision becomes routine, we may not consciously refer to our values, but are more likely to make novel decisions [7]. Therefore, if students are immersed in group thinking for a long time, it is very likely to affect their decision-making mode and even the formation of values.

### 3 Result

#### 3.1 Conditions for Students to Generate Groupthink

##### 3.1.1 High Cohesion

Festinger defines group cohesion as “the combined force of various factors that act on group members to keep them in the group” [8]. This can be affected by various influencers; to illustrate, the fulfilment of needs, group activities, and leadership are the essential aspects impacting group cohesiveness in student groups. According to Greenaway, Haslam, Cruwys, et al., “a person searches for a sense of belonging no matter when or where” [9]. To investigate whether students perceive the stress of having different opinions in the group, I devised the following questions “If you disagree in a group discussion, how do you decide because you want to achieve the group’s goals? Whether it’s in class or in other activities.” The results are shown in Table 2, where 1 represents voluntarily giving up, and 2 represents forced acceptance.

It can be seen from the data that in order to achieve the group goal, up to 78.641% of the students choose to voluntarily give up their opinions. Based on this data, this study further conducted further interviews with the subjects who conducted the interviews.

Of the 30 interviewers, 13 subjects expressed similar beliefs that the opinions of their group members or friends were very important to them. They will have a lot of pressure because of their different opinions.

Subject No. 7 said, “...If it’s different, I feel like I’ll be targeted in the future. If I’m different from them this time, they won’t listen to me next time...Anyway, if you say the same thing, nothing will happen, but if you say it differently, it’s uncomfortable...”.

Therefore, in order to obtain a sense of belonging, identity, and social support in classes, conformed psychology and behaviour are often generated in the student group. This can be yet considered irrelevant to morality and rules but will exert a profound influence on the formation of middle school students’ values.

##### 3.1.2 A Guiding Leadership

Based on the idea of Janis, “groupthink is more likely to occur in groups led by strong leaders and in very cohesive groups” [1]. According to Table 3, we can see that students

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for Personal Opinion Variables

Statistical variables	attribute value	Frequency	percentage (%)
If you disagree in a group discussion, how do you decide because you want to achieve the group’s goals? Whether it’s in class or in other activities.	1	243	78.641
	2	66	21.359

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics for authoritative factors

Statistical variables	attribute value	Frequency	percentage (%)
The teacher explained a certain question in a certain way, and the students' own way is different from the teacher's	Change it to the same solution as the teacher	257	83.172
	If you are not sure if your solution is correct, ask the teacher after class	31	10.032
	The student thinks that his solution is also correct, and immediately proposes to the teacher	21	6.796
In class, a student with good grades gives an answer to the teacher's question, and most of the students agree, but your answer is different	Discard own answer in favor of majority's answer	221	71.521
	Won't say your answer, wait for the teacher to announce the answer	77	24.919
	Stick to your own answers and present them to the teacher	11	3.560

will be influenced by authoritative factors when their personal opinions are different from others.

The instructors usually take the responsibility of the leadership of the educational group when considering students. Their authoritative roles may frequently lead to an increasing group pressure, which further forces students to choose conformity to gain a sense of belonging and security. In order to avoid conflict with their own cognition, students agree with teachers' perceptions and attitudes by external drives. For example, teachers usually utilize students' external motivation to intrigue their studying interest in daily teaching, the most prevalent form of which is the token incentive or teacher's acknowledgement and appreciation. However, the exclusive application of external stimulus may cause students to become fatigued. 83% of students changed their answers just because they were told by the teacher, without considering whether their answers were correct. For this phenomenon, 30 subjects were further questioned in this study. Among them, 21 subjects expressed their belief in the authority of the teacher and basically expressed the same opinion. They believed that the answers given by the teachers were correct, whether it was about subject knowledge or moral education, and even 5 subjects said they would convey the teachers' words and deeds to their friends and family members.

Therefore, there will be some higher requirements for teachers' words and deeds in the group. If teachers have incorrect values or practices, there is a risk of skewing the direction of information received by students. Such situations can lead students to receive misunderstood information, which can also lead to errors in their perceptions.

So what are the choices for students when there is no teacher or the teacher does not express their opinion? According to Table 3, we can see that when the teacher does not express an opinion, the students will make their own choices based on the opinions of the most outstanding person or the choice of the majority. A whopping 71% of students would give up their choice because they disagreed with the public opinion. Only 3.5% of students stick to their ideas. During the interview, subject No. 11 said, "...Our class leader can be right every time, and it must be right to follow her...".

In the absence of teachers, the student leaders in the group are often those with active thinking and outstanding performance. They are conscious of their words and deeds, which serve as a dominant and directing role for students who are relatively introverted and not independent enough. This may negatively lead passive students to follow the crowd blindly. Even though these students are cognitively conscious that such behaviours are unethical, they may still have no choice but to persuade themselves to gain a sense of identity in the group.

### 3.1.3 No Valid Program

"There is no effective procedure to ensure that all options are considered pros and cons by groups, which is also one of the important influences of groupthink" [1]. This happens mainly when students are the default leaders of the group. It is widely acknowledged that middle school students are in the crucial process of forming their values and worldview, which are not mature and perfect enough. With their limited understanding of good and evil, they often act inappropriately when confronted with several situations where they are required to distinguish right from wrong because they lack the ability to be thoughtful.

### 3.1.4 External Pressure

External pressure is one of the main reasons for changing students' behavior and way of thinking. According to the contact with the students before the survey, this study designed a multiple-choice question in the questionnaire "If you would choose to do the same thing as most people around you, what might be the reason?" The statistical results are as follows:

attribute value	Frequency	percentage (%)
The decision made by the group should be correct	273	88.35
No confidence in yourself, not sure if it's right, fear of making mistakes	110	35.6
I don't understand things clearly, I don't know how to choose	65	21.04
Depends on others and feels that it is more correct to be like most people around you	111	35.92
It is more correct to think that the same as good people	139	44.98
Consider whether your actions will affect the class	38	12.3

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attribute value	Frequency	percentage (%)
Care about the opinions of classmates or friends or other members of the group	47	15.21
It is related to whether the teacher is strict and whether he is afraid of the teacher	39	12.62

When it comes to “pressure”, the subjects are quite confused. In the interview survey, a total of 17 subjects were primary school students, and they understood “pressure” as a “sense of oppression”. They feel that school rules and regulations are also one of the biggest sources of “pressure”.

Subject No. 3 said, “The homeroom teacher will make us do things that we don’t like to do. Sometimes we have to say things that we don’t believe. For example, at first I clearly didn’t like to complete the task of painting before the exam, but I still need to say that I like it because the school wants us to say so...I don’t feel it anymore after talking too much, the teacher asks me to say whatever I want, then I will say it...”.

Teacher demands, school rules and regulations, or group cohesion are common sources of external stress for most students. The thoughts and behaviors of these students are led by herd mentality, not entirely by themselves. Most of the time, their actions and opinions proved to cater to external pressures while easing internal pressures.

## 4 Formal Characteristics of Group Thinking in Student Groups

### 4.1 The Fading Trend of the ‘Consciousness of Authority’

In the context of the new media era, students are unable to perceive the overall situation in the information identification, leading them to express interest in part of the values presented on the Internet. According to the “Post-00 Research Report”, 69% of young individuals are more willing to turn to the Internet for solutions. In the current society, parents and teachers tend to raise children in a democratic manner. In fact, it is beneficial for students to be nurtured with dialectical and critical thinking, but the information they are exposed to in the media era may not necessarily be appropriate for them.

For active-minded students, a diminished sense of authority may lead them to act more aggressively against ideas and attitudes that contradict the norms they established. This sentiment may exert a negative influence on other individuals in the class as the dominant group thinking may weaken students’ independent and innovative thinking and develop a one-sided black or white perspective instead. Therefore, they are more prone to conformity, and the challenges to the traditional authority make it more difficult for teachers and parents to control the development of students’ values in a healthy direction.

### 4.2 The Inertia of Group Norms

In classroom management, teachers frequently employ group norms to restrain students’ behaviour. In this process, most teachers believe in the benefits of empowerment, set a learning model in the class, or endow children with abundant autonomy, so that they

can form a good sense of responsibility. The teachers want to utilize their position to cultivate innovative thinking and behaviour of other individuals in the class, but group norms can occasionally render individuals inert over time.

It is believed that “group norms at some point constrain members’ effort levels, requiring members not to perform too well or too bad, but to maintain a moderate level” [1]. As a result, a student whose grades or performance are at the same level as others may be hindered by other students when he begins to demonstrate innovative or independent thinking. The opposed student may well change himself to abide by the group conformity when perceiving other students’ disagreements as he believes that “the idea of the team must not be wrong”. In the long run, this student’s creative thinking will probably be abandoned by him.

### 4.3 Group Decision-Making

In the process of forming the values of middle school students, group decision-making can also be considered an essential factor interplaying with group thinking. As a non-profit group, students are required to participate in a variety of activities in addition to daily learning. Students can not only distinguish right from wrong, but also cultivate their sense of responsibility and improve their hands-on ability in living environments such as learning and activities. It also develops students’ ability to think independently and work in teams.

Being deeply influenced by group thinking, most middle school students will only follow the crowd mindlessly, thereby lacking leadership ability. From the perspective of teachers, this phenomenon may not be a major issue in middle school. However, this free-riding mentality is reinforced with students’ subconsciousness, and they may take it for granted that they can make a profit without investing in other things over time, which is detrimental to the formation of students’ values.

### 4.4 Group Polarization

In social psychology, group polarization is defined as “the phenomenon in which members’ decision-making tendencies are more extreme through group discussion” [10]. In a positive group that emphasizes freedom, people will pursue openness, while in a relatively passive group, conservation is promoted. I will analyse the phenomenon from my own experience.

The majority of students in class A think positively, upholding a healthy attitude towards life. They reject engaging in harmful behaviours and are also unlikely to be influenced by others’ negatively exhibited actions. Gradually, students with bad behaviour develop a change to socially accepted conduct because they feel excluded.

On the other hand, most of the students in class B demonstrate relatively negative thoughts and behaviours, and they also repel optimistic perceptions. After a few months, the students who were originally more motivated began to behave like everyone else, including their behaviour and attitude. This is obviously unfavourable to students’ abilities to nurture positive values.

Regarding the performance of groupthink, Janis also pointed out that “there is an illusion of unity, and the unity of the group is more important than anything else; direct



pressure on those who have different opinions, stand aside if there are different opinions, and do not hinder the group” [1]. This performance combined with group polarization creates an uncontrollable “snowball” effect, which becomes difficult for teachers to intervene once it occurs evidently in the class.

## **5 Consequences of Groupthink**

Research on groupthink in social psychology indicates that groupthink has negative implications in most circumstances. This conclusion can also be applied to the student population.

### **5.1 Stopping Paying Attention to the Real Reasons for the Behaviour of Others**

When shaping values in the early stages, students often increase their social experience by observing whether the results of other people’s behaviours are recognized based on the observational learning theory. In this case, it also requires students to continuously observe and analyse so as to be equipped with dialectical or critical thinking. However, when students become accustomed to an environment immersed in groupthink, their perspective on events is inhibited. This is because they only want to see what they think is better, recognizable, rather than constantly probing and searching for the true nature of events.

### **5.2 Resulting in a Selection Bias in Processing Information**

Once acquiring groupthink, students will not only develop a narrow perception of the world but also become more insensitive to the guidance of parents and teachers. This is primarily because the parental and schooling instructions are deemed rejected and contrary to the information in their cognition, so it is difficult for them to objectively re-evaluate that information.

Sometimes when a student makes a mistake, the supporters will manage to modify it by presenting facts and reasoning or resorting to stick education, which may actually push him further away from us. It’s not that he doesn’t understand the intention of the educators, but that he’s discarding this reasonable information.

## **6 Interventions in Groupthink**

### **6.1 Teachers’ Intervention with Students’ Collective Thinking**

#### **6.1.1 Teachers Should Be More Responsive**

Teachers should be more sensitive to the state of students’ thinking. It is unavoidable for students to develop group thinking; therefore, instead of being intimidated by its potential threat, teachers should first and foremost guide students to form divergent thinking by strengthening and suppressing it.

Additionally, teachers should encourage students to generate creative ideas and think thoroughly about them by appropriately inducing conjectures and questions during students' thinking process. When identifying that some students have taken on leadership roles in the group, teachers are suggested to guide the students to treat other members of the group fairly and justly and pay greater attention to grasping the holistic class style in order to prevent students from being burned out with group norms.

### **6.1.2 Teachers Should Pay More Attention to Their Own Behaviour**

For authoritative reasons, teachers frequently take the responsibility of leadership in the classroom, thereby requiring them to cautiously notice their own words and deeds. If teachers consistently approach students with a condescending attitude and solve and communicate difficulties in a leading way, students will naturally accept this usual practice from a leader's perspective.

Over time, this domineering and decisive thinking will be solidified so that students may be unwilling to engage in divergent thinking in response to questions raised by teachers, preferring instead to accept direct answers.

Also, it is a common phenomenon in various senior middle schools that students are normally anxious about expressing their opinions when pondering and discussing a specific topic. This is because teachers' intervention might be interpreted as a scolding to the student or a straightforward solution to the discussed problem.

Although teachers may appear to be impatient to enlighten students, they should still endow students with the opportunities to ask questions and take the initiative to solve the problems. In this process, teachers need to switch their dominant roles to stimulate students' thinking and interact by raising questions that are sufficiently controversial, thus avoiding the situation of obeying the authorities in both thinking and attitude. After that, teachers are responsible for presenting reasonable and positive responses to the answers given by students. Rather than being denied or rejected, students should be encouraged to think thoroughly about the problem and explore the answers step by step.

## **7 Conclusion**

Collective thinking is not conducive to the formation of students' values, and it is easy to induce radical, polarized and inert phenomena. However, groupthink is often unavoidable in group assignments. Once thought patterns and preferences are formed, students often make decisions through preferences unconsciously. In order to prevent students from forming a fixed thinking mode and decision-making mode, teachers should not only cultivate students' awareness of independent thinking, guide students to adopt diversified and innovative strategies when encountering difficulties, but also guide students to form positive preferences. Only students who have the courage and are not afraid of making mistakes can achieve great things in the 21st century.

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