Dealing with Disruptive Behaviour of Students through Cooperative Learning Technique in Classrooms

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Abstract

Demographic and socio-economic shifts in nation's population and changes in the family structure have placed increasing demands on the schools. There is a pressing need to understand the factors that give rise to and maintain aggressive behaviours among adolescents and also suggest techniques for dealing with the increased incidence of aggression and violence. Frustration-Aggression theory by Dollard et al. in 1939, pointed out that if the goal directed behaviour is blocked, it leads to frustration which acts as the motive for aggression. Fear of punishment or disapproval may cause the aggressive behaviour to be displaced against some other target, or on oneself. In the classrooms, teachers can structure the learning goals which can promote cooperative, competitive or individualistic efforts. If one compares the cooperative situations with competitive situations,where students work against each other to achieve the goal, only one or few can attain the learning goal, whereas in cooperative situations, all the group members strive to achieve a common goal. 'In the competition, there is negative interdependence among the goal achievements; students perceive that they can obtain the goals if and only if other students in the class fail to obtain their goals' (Deutsch, 1949; Johnson and Johnson, 1989). This paper discusses how the technique of cooperative learning can prove useful to overcome the root cause of conflict, aggression, and intolerance, which develops in the students. By adopting the cooperative learning technique, a teacher can create a positive interdependence among the students for accomplishing any learning goal.

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INTRODUCTION

It cannot be denied that one of the greatest stressors for teachers today is to deal and manage the disruptive behaviour of students in the classroom. The classrooms in which disruptive behaviour occurs frequently, face the problem relating to classroom management and also they get less academic engaged time resulting in low academic achievement. Thus, disruptive behaviour does not only distract the teacher and/or peers to achieve on-task objectives but also restrict the teachers' ability to teach most effectively. It also diverts the energy and resources of teachers and school away from achieving their objectives. Disruptive behaviour as noted by Nelson et al. (1996), includes behaviours such as hitting or pretending to hit, yelling, crying, or engaging in non-academic tasks that are not approved by the teacher.

Research has indicated a relationship between social skills deficits and a number of negative developmental outcomes, including low self-esteem, poor achievement, school dropout, delinquency, teacher and peer rejection, vocational adjustment problems, and interpersonal conflicts (Gresham et al., 1999; Ollendick, Weist, Borden, and Greene, 1992). Thus, it is important for teachers to help the students enhance their social skills.

Hence, it is desirable for both the teachers and schools to prevent aggressive behaviour not only because it is unacceptable, but also because aggression interferes with learning. It is important to intervene early in childhood as the behaviour can easily be changed as this stage. Schools are also in the difficult position of being legally accountable for the behaviour of the students entrusted to them. Thus, for some educators, it has been the fear of liability that has led to identifying violence as a problem in school (Kingery et al., 1998). Also, teachers often suffer from stress while trying to manage aggressive and disruptive students, which can lead to burnout and abandonment of the profession. Teachers frequently express the need for getting more training to successfully handle students' behavioural problems (Boulton, 1997).

WHY ADOLESCENCE IS A PERIOD OF CRISIS?

Adolescence is seen as a period of 'stress and storm' as the most dramatic changes are associated with it. These changes include shifts in the shape and size of the body, increase in hormones and changes in the brain architecture. These biological shifts directly influence the cognitive abilities and physical capacities. There are major changes associated with the expected roles that the adolescents have to play and which are linked to increased social and cognitive maturity.

Apart from these changes in the physical and psychological makeup, it is also the time when individuals make choices and engage in a wide

range of behaviours likely to influence rest of their life;for example, choosing educational and occupational plans, habits and peers. Finally, they also experiment with quite problematic behaviours such as drug, alcohol consumption for which they have to bear long term consequences.

These changes can be classified for better understanding, as follows:

a) Cognitive Changes

The stage of adolescence is associated with an increased ability to have abstract thinking. At this stage, they also start developing the hypothesis, i.e., their thinking becomes much sophisticated and they start using more elaborate information processing strategies. There is a steady increase in learning strategies, in knowledge of a variety of different topics and subject areas, and in the ability to apply knowledge to new learning situations. This kind of changes also affect an individual's self-concept thoughts about one's future and understanding of others.

Between these times, the thinking becomes more abstract, liberal and knowledgeable. Increased ability to deal with abstractions is a function of shift from concrete to formal operational thought. Adelson (1986,as cited in the book Psychology Applied to Teaching)concluded that the most significant changes are— (1) an increase in the ability to deal with such abstractions as freedom of speech and equal justice under law; (2) a decline in authoritarian view; (3) an increase in the ability to imagine the consequences of current actions; and (4) an increased political knowledge.

b) School Transitions

According to person-environment fit theory, stresses that on the interaction between the characteristics of an individual and environment whereby both environment and individual influence each other. This interaction(which is called fix) affects individuals' behaviour, motivation, and mental health.It is seen that often individuals do very well, or remain very motivated, if they are in such social environments that fit their psychological needs. According to this theory, if the social environments in the schools do not accommodate the psychological needs of adolescents, then there is a decline observed in the motivation, interest, performance, and behaviour of the adolescents (Kulka, 1976 and Caplan, 1983).

Adolescence is a period when very strong cognitive and physical changes are experienced by the individuals. This is the time when they may start to view their friends, their peer groups, as more important and influential than their parents or guardians. This happens because of peer pressure, which may sometimes lead to indulgence in activities not deemed socially acceptable. Although, you may find this to be more of a social phenomenon than a psychological one.

c) Urge to Develop Identity

One of the main elements of Erikson's psychosocial stage theory is the development of ego identity. At this stage, individuals develop a conscious sense of self through interacting with others.Which means our ego identity keeps changing constantly due to new experiences and information which we acquire through our interactions with others. In addition to ego identity, Erikson also believed that a sense of competence also motivates behaviour and actions. According to Erikson, if an individual handled this stage well, then a sense of mastery is attained, which he sometimes referred to as ego strength or ego quality. But, if the stage is managed poorly, an individual will emerge with a sense of inadequacy. In each stage, Erikson believed individuals experience a conflict that serve as a turning point in their development. These conflicts,according to him,are centred on either developing a psychological quality otherwise it leads to non-achievement to develop that quality. Therefore, this time is potential for higher personal growth, but at the same time, it is the potential time for failure also. During adolescence, children are exploring their independence and developing a sense of self (Ericson and Joan, 1997).

Hence, at this stage, the individuals receiving proper encouragement and reinforcement through personal exploration,develop a strong sense of self and feeling of independence

and control. Alternatively, those who remain unsure about their beliefs and desires,become insecure and confused about themselves and their future.

The adolescent period initiates the development of a personalised set of beliefs, which many a time, give birth to conflicts with elders and society. The adolescent period shows rapid shift to the self-confidence and insecurity. Identity confusion happens to be the major characteristic of adolescents. The parents, teachers and members are expected to be responsive to the needs of adolescents and help them achieve their goals and aspirations that provide them a meaningful identity.

d) Friendships and Peer Groups

Peer relationships have the most controversial influence on adolescents. One major change in this arena is the general increase in peer focus and involvement in peer related social activities. At this stage, adolescents attach great importance to the activities they do with peers,which is substantially more than the importance given to academic activities.

ANALYSING REASONS FOR DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOUR AMONG ADOLESCENTS

If we look into the various domains of development of the adolescents, then the following factors could lead to violence among adolescents:

a. Biological factors: It is found that the level of violence is highest

among secondary school students. But females have been reported to be less violent than males (Bloomquistand Schnell, 2002). The cause of such difference is due to overactive behavioural system and underactive behavioural inhibition system (both located in the frontal lobe of the brain).

b. Academic Skills and Performance: For various reasons, on an average, girls get higher grades than boys. This arouses the feelings of resentment and anger among them. As a result, their self-esteem also goes down.

c. Interpersonal Cognitive Problem Solving: Children who get along reasonably well with their peers do so because they are able to formulate realistic plans to satisfy their social goals and think of several possible solutions to execute it. Students who are deficient in personal cognitive problem solving skills, have difficulty in making friends, have emotional blow ups and show less sympathy to others and exhibit physical and verbal aggression (Shure ,1999).

d. Psychological Factors: The students, at this stage, as explained by Erikson, are at Identity vs Role Confusion stage. A student who fails to make clear occupational choice, is confused with their roles or if they have not got the acceptance by others, then they may exhibit what Erikson calls 'Negative identity'.

Instead of behaving in a better way, they engage themselves into the opposite form of behaviour.

e. School Environment: So far, the role of biological and psychological factors has been discussed, which are mostly individualistic in nature. Another important factor which leads to violence in schools, is under designed schools which are common in India, where the needs for learning (such as proper furniture, proper reading facilities, etc.) are not fulfilled.

Geddes (2006) highlighted the importance of the value of attachment theory as a psychological framework for understanding what drives disruptive behaviour among students. This theory recognises the importance of relationship between the qualities of early relationships upon an individual's subsequent development. It emphasises the need of providing a safe, calm, protected and nurtured environment to the children by their caregivers. He asserts that when relationships with the caregivers, which include teachers, parents and other family members are damaged, then it can have a detrimental effect on young child's emotional and behavioural development. These insecure attachments with the significant adults may lead to emotional, behavioural and processing difficulties in children. A child with an insecure attachment develops differently from that of a securely

attached child. A securely attached child is able to regulate emotions, reduce fear, have self-understanding and appropriate moral reasoning. These abilities help them to engage in reciprocal relationships.

This implies the need for having a design and system in schools which recognises and supports the particular needs of students.Therefore, the psychological perspective asserts that it is important to understand disruptive behaviour at school because then only as teachers we can support them meaningfully. In addressing how schools can become more effective managers of disruptive behaviour, Greene (2009) highlighted the need for schools to have the following 'three massive shifts':

a. A dramatic improvement in understanding the factors that set the stage for challenging the behaviour in students;

b. Creating mechanisms for helping these students that are predominantly proactive instead of reactive; and

c. Creating processes so that people can work on problems collaboratively.

Gilbert and Procter (2006) viewed disruptive behaviour as student's protective and defensive behaviour, therefore they advocated for a compassionate and collaborative response, rather than a punitive and disciplinarian reaction towards the disruptive behaviour.

Elton Report on Discipline in Schools(1989), also, specifically recommended the importance of teachers developing 'group management skills', to manage disruptive classroom behaviour. These skills help teachers to establish good and positive relationships with students. The report also emphasised the need for adopting good classroom management skills that include creating a positive atmosphere in the classroom by frequently praising and rarely criticising their students. This will enhance the decrease in the likelihood of a major confrontation in class, affecting not only the student concerned, but the whole class.

For managing disruptive behaviour in school, teachers must use a more collaborative, problem-solving approach along with behaviour management strategies. Itwill help in expressing emotional needs by the students themselves and thereby a teacher can provide a more reflective and compassionate proactive response. Also, it does not alienate and fuel the underlying anger and shame in the process.

Out of the various techniques that have been suggested to deal with the disruptive behaviours of the students addressing both the academic and social deficits of their students, is cooperative learning. Let us now discuss how it can help.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING: STRATEGY FOR DEALING WITH DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOUR

According to Vygotsky (1978), the individual mental functioning

develops first at the interpersonal level, where they learn to internalise and transform the content of the interpersonal interactions with others, to the intra-personal level, where it becomes a part of new understanding and skills. For intrapersonal understanding, co-operative learning is well recognised as a pedagogical practice that promotes learning, higher thinking and pro-social behaviour; and greater understanding of children with diverse learning needs, social and adjustment needs. Also, cooperative learning activities provide an ideal means for teachers to structure the environment for successful peer interaction and provide the opportunities to students to develop not only socially and emotionally but also make them responsible for their social environment.

The term 'co-operative learning' and 'collaborative learning' are often used interchangeably but both the terms are different. In comparision to collaborative learning, co-operative learning is considered to be more structured which is imposed by the teacher (Abramiet al., 1995) and designed to achieve a specific goal. Slavin (1992) believed that cooperative learning can be adapted at any level by taking into account student's age, curricular goals and practical matters.

Following are the elements of cooperative learning classrooms:

a. Clearly perceived positive interdependence: In the cooperative learning conditions, all the students have two major responsibilities, one is to learn the assigned learning task givenby the teacher and secondly they have to ensure that all members of the group learn the assigned learning task. Such a dual responsibility undertaken by the students is known as positive interdependence. Positive interdependence helps in promoting a situation where all the group members see that their work benefits is seen as group benefits and they work together to maximise learning by sharing their resources by providing mutual support and encouragement.

b. Considerable promotive interaction: It can be understood as a situation whenall the members of the group encourage and facilitate each other's efforts to achieve and complete the tasks for attaining group goals. This also helps in promoting psychological adjustment and social competence among individuals.

c. Clearly perceived individual accountability and personal responsibility to achieve group goals (i.e. assessing the quality and quantity of each member's contribution and giving results to the groups).

d. Frequent use of relevant interpersonal and small group skills

e. Use of appropriate social skills (i.e. leadership, decision making skills, etc.).

In a classroom, there are two types of social interdependence— positive and negative (Johnson and Johnson, 1989). Positive interdependence (i.e. cooperation) exists when there is a positive correlation between individual goals attainment; individuals perceive that they can attain the goals if and only if the other members of the groups also attain the goals. Negative interdependence (i.e., competition) exists when there is negative correlation among the individuals' goal attainment. Positive interdependence results in promotive interaction (i.e., individuals encouraging and facilitating each others' efforts to achieve the goals which include pro-social behaviours) while negative interdependence results in oppositional interaction (i.e., individuals obstructing each others' efforts to achieve the goals, which may include harm intended aggression).

Also, cooperative learning experiences are significantly related to the individualistic efforts, thus it involves giving one's own interests precedence over the interest of others. It can be seen that with more cooperative learning experiences, the individuals have less chances to become individualistic in nature.

In cooperative learning situations, it is possible to achieve social goals simultaneously with learning achievement goals. In these conditions, goals can be directed towards outcomes for one's own benefit (self-directed), towards others, or for the benefit of the group.

First, co-operative efforts enable an individual to make friends and avoid isolation. The goal of establishing social relationships reveals itself in such motives as desire to be seen as likeable, to fit in, and to conform to the preferences of others (Johnson and Johnson, 2003).

Secondly, according to Farmer et al. (1991), social goals help in increasing the motivation to achieve. Although, in a cooperative learning situation, learners are valued in their own right, the pursuit of social goals can help organise their efforts and empower individuals to achieve more.

Thirdly, an individual generates a motive to maintain membership by being a member of the group. This is also known as group cohesion, thus it can be further elaborated as the mutual understanding among the members of the group that results in a desire to remain a member of the group. Highly cohesive group members are often characterised by their greater ease in setting goals, greater likelihood in achieving the common goals and they display greater susceptibility to get influenced by other group members (Johnson and Johnson, 1983). Increased cohesiveness decreases the absenteeism and turnover of membership, increases individual members' commitment towards group goals, and the feeling of

personal responsibility to the group increases resulting in willingness to take on personal responsibility. It also increases the motivation and persistence, satisfaction moral increases, and also willingness to endure pain and frustration on behalf of the group increases. This helps in defending the group against the external criticism or attack. Cohesive group members are committed to each others' success and growth increases resulting in the increase in group productivity (Johnson and Johnson,1989).

Fourth, being a part of cooperative effort provides alliance and comrades who may help protect a person from being bullied, and who may provide support and assistance during times of adversity and stress (Johnson and Johnson, 1989). Finally, social and academic goals seem to be intimately linked. Cooperative behaviour is positively associated with academic success.

Accuracy of Perspective Taking

The perspective taking ability means to understand how a situation appears to another person and how that person is reacting cognitively and emotionally to the situation. The opposite of the perspective taking is egocentrism, which means being embedded in one's own perspectives. Cooperative learning experiences tend to promote greater cognitive and affective perspective taking, than do the individualistic and competitive learning experience (Johnson and

Johnson, 1989). This ability to understand other's perspective decreases the changes of difference in the opinion which is the root cause of violence and aggression among individuals.

Promotes Creativity

Cooperative learning experience promotes creativity by increasing the number of ideas, quality of ideas, feeling of enjoyment and also brings originality of expression in creative problem solving. It is not surprising that the students are triggered by the ideas of others and that different perspectives cause group members to consider a larger number of alternatives. In cooperative relationship, a context is provided to consider and appreciate other group members' ideas instead of ignoring or trying to come up with a better one.It is also seen that creative manifestations provide a vent for the pent up emotions(both positive and negative), thus developing a balanced personality. This in turn decreases the chances of aggression and conflict.

Increases Self esteem

Cooperative learning produces a higher level of self esteem than any other environment. Since, individuals with low self esteem have low productivity in setting goals and thus they either socially withdraw themselves from feeling awkward or become aggressive to cover their low esteem. But, cooperative situations provide an environment where

interaction among individuals is promoted and the group members form multi-dimensional and realistic impressions of each other's competencies, and give accurate feedback about ways to achieve group goals. Such interaction tends to promote a basic acceptance of oneself as a competent person. According to Harter (1996) the willingness of students to form a consensus around the goals of doing well and helping peers academically depends on their perceptions that teachers care about them both as persons and students. On the other hand, when students perceive teachers failed in providing support, neither do they feel any obligation to behave in socially responsible ways, nor do they enjoy school.

CONCLUSION

Cooperative learning holds the promise, as an instructional technique for dealing with disruptive behaviour of the students, particularly in providing structured opportunities for the students to practice learned communication skills.

Cooperative learning experiences promote positive interdependence through internalisation of positive relationships, direct support, shared intimacy and freedom of expression which gives energy to deal with the stress. Evidences available from researches indicate that the classroom practices are so much oriented toward individualistic and competitive learning and schools are also dominated with competitive and individualistic structure. These situations school promotes conflict which leads to aggression; hence it is important that this discrepancy between what researches indicate about effective teaching and what teachers actually do must be reduced.

More efforts can be given in providing inputs regarding compassionate and nurturing approach to behaviour management in teachers' Continuing Professional Development (CPD). By doing so, there will be a shift to reflect child-focused teaching objectives rather than outcome-focused teaching objectives.

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