

# **Dealing with Conflict and Aggression in Classrooms through Cooperative Learning Technique**

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Demographic and socioeconomic 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 across adolescence and also suggest techniques for dealing with the increased incidence of aggression and violence. As suggested by the frustration-aggression theory (1939), the blocking of the goal directed behaviour leads to frustration which created the motive for aggression. Fear of punishment or disapproval may cause the aggressive behaviour to be displaced against some other target, or oneself. In the classrooms, the learning goals are structured to promote cooperative, competitive or individualistic efforts. In contrast to the cooperative situations, competitive situations are one in which students work against each other to achieve the goal that only one or few can attain. In the competition there is negative interdependence among the goal achievements; students perceive that they can obtain the goals if and only if the other students in the class fail to obtain their goals (Deutsch, 1962; Johnson & Johnson, 1989). This paper will discuss how the technique of cooperative learning can prove useful to overcome the root cause of conflict, aggression, intolerance which develops in the students. Through this technique, a positive interdependence could be developed among the group members for accomplishing the goal.

## **Adolescence: 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 adolescents have to play by all around

them. Finally, there are major psychological changes linked to increasing 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 wide range of behaviours likely to influence rest of the life. For example, choosing educational and occupational plans, habits and peers. Finally, some 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*

Adolescence is accompanied by an increased ability to think abstractly, consider the hypothetical as well as the real in more sophisticated and elaborate information processing strategies. There is a steady increase in learning strategies, in knowledge of a variety of different topics and subject areas, in ability to apply knowledge to new learning situations. These kinds of changes also affect individual's self concept thoughts about their 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 concluded that the most significant changes are 1) an increase in the ability to deal with such abstractions as freedom speech, equal justice under law; 2) a decline 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 theory, individuals' behaviour, motivation, and mental health are influenced by the fit between the characteristics individual to bring their social environment and the characteristics of these social environment. Individuals are not likely to do very well, or be very motivated, if they are in social environments that do not fit their psychological needs. If the social environments in the typical junior and senior high schools do not fit very well with the psychological

needs of adolescents, the person- environment fit theory predicts a decline in the motivation, interest, performance, and behaviour of adolescents as they enter this environment.

Because the adolescents are experiencing various very strong cognitive and physical changes, for the first in their lives they may start to view their friends, their peer groups, as more important and influential than their parents/guardians. Because of peer pressure, they may sometimes indulge in activities not deemed socially acceptable, although this may be more of a social phenomenon than a psychological one.

c) *Urge to Develop Identity*: One of the main elements of Erikson's psychological stage theory is the development of ego identity. Ego identity is the conscious sense of self that we develop through social interaction. According to Erikson, our ego identity is constantly changing due to new experience and information we acquire in our interactions with others. In addition to ego identity, Erikson also believed that a sense of competence also motivates behaviours and actions. Each stage in Erikson's theory is concerned with becoming competent in an area of life. If the stage is handled well, the person will feel a sense of mastery, which he sometimes referred to as ego strength or ego quality. If the stage is managed poorly, the person will emerge with a sense of inadequacy. In each stage, Erikson believed people experience a conflict that serves as a turning point in development. In Erikson's view, these conflicts are centered on either developing a psychological quality or failing to develop that quality. During these times, potential for personal growth is high, but so is the potential for failure. During adolescence, children are exploring their independence and developing a sense of self.

Those who receive proper encouragement and reinforcement through personal exploration will emerge from this stage with a strong sense of self and feeling of independence and control. Those who remain unsure of their beliefs and desires will be insecure and confused about themselves and the future.

The adolescent period initiates the development of a personalized set of beliefs which many a time give birth to conflicts with elders and society. The adolescent period shows a shift to the self confidence and insecurity. Identity confusion happens to be the major characteristics 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:* probably the most controversial changes during adolescence are those linked to peer relationships. 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- substantially more importance than they attach to academic activities.

### **Analysing Reasons for Violence**

If we look into the various domains of the development of the adolescents, then depending upon those 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 (Bloomquist & Schnell, 2002). The cause of such difference is due to overactive behavioural system and under active behavioural inhibition system (both located in the frontal lobe of the brain).
- b) *Academic Skills and Performance:* for various reasons girls earn on average higher grades than boys. This arouses feelings of resentment and anger among them. As a result their self esteem too goes down.
- c) *Interpersonal Cognitive Problem Solving:* Children who get along reasonably well with their peers do so in part because they are able to formulate realistic plans to satisfy their social goals and think of several possible solutions to interpret 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 Erickson are at Identity vs Role Confusion stage. A student who fails to make clear occupational choice, is confused with his/her roles or doesn't have experienced the acceptance by others may exhibit what Erickson calls 'Negative identity'. Instead of behaving in a better way they engage themselves into opposite form of behaviour. Those with diffused identity status exhibit both conduct disorder and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (Adams et al., 2001).
  
- 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.

### **Cooperative Learning: Strategy for Reducing School Violence And Aggression**

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 prosocial behaviour, and greater understanding of children with diverse learning needs, social and adjustment needs (Cohen, 1994). Also cooperative learning activities provide ideal vehicle for teachers to structure the environment for successful peer interactions and provide students opportunities to develop not only social and emotional needs but also responsible for their social environment.

The term 'co-operative learning' and 'collaborative learning' are often used interchangeably but both the terms are different. Co-operative learning is considered to be more structured as compared to collaborative learning. In co-operative learning, the structure is imposed by the teacher (Abrami et al. 1995) and designed to achieve a specific goal. Collaborative learning represents a different philosophy of interaction whereby students are given more power over their learning than in traditional instruction. . Slavin (1993) 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 the cooperative learning classrooms:

- a) Clearly perceived positive interdependence: Within cooperative learning situations, students have two responsibilities: 1) learn the assigned material 2) ensure that all members of the group learn the assigned material. The technical term for such dual responsibility is positive interdependence. Positive interdependence promotes a situation where : 1) see that their work benefits group mates and 2) work together in small groups to maximise learning by sharing their resources to provide mutual support and encouragement.
- b) Considerable promotive interaction: it may be defined as individuals encouraging and facilitating each others efforts to achieve, complete tasks and produce in order to reach group goals. It also helps in psychological adjustment and social competence.
- 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)

In a classrooms, 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 individual's goals attainment. The positive interdependence results in promotive interaction (i.e. individual encouraging and facilitating each other's efforts to achieve the goals which include prosocial behaviours) while negative interdependence results in oppositional interaction (i.e. individuals obstructing each other's effort to achieve goals, which may include harm intended aggression).

Also, cooperative learning experiences, are significantly related to the individualistic efforts, thus 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.

Social goals may be accomplished simultaneously with achievement goals. There are wide varieties of social goals that may be achieved simultaneously as part of a co-operative efforts.

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 likable, to fit in, to conform to the preferences of others (Johnson and Juhnson, 2003).

Second, social goals can increase motivation to achieve. Although they are valued in their own right, the pursuit of social goals can help organise direct and empower individuals to achieve more fully (Farmer et al. 1991).

Third, being part of the group generates a motive to maintain membership. Group cohesion may be defined as the mutual attraction among the members of the group and the resulting desire to remain in the group. Highly, cohesive groups where members like each other are characterised by greater ease in setting goals, greater

likelihood in achieving those goals and greater susceptibility to influence by the group mates (Johnson and Johnson, 1983). As cohesiveness increases, absenteeism and turnover of membership decreases, member commitment to group goals increases, feelings of personal responsibilities to the group increases, willingness to take on ings of personal responsibility to the group increases, motivation and persistence increases, satisfaction moral increases, willingness to endure pain and frustration on behalf of the group increases, willing to defend the group against the external criticism or attack increases, willingness to listen to others increases, commitment to each other's success and growth increases and hence the productivity increases (Johnson and Johnson ,1989).

Fourth, being part of a co-operative 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 associated positively with academic success.

*Accuracy Of Perspective Taking:* social perspective taking ability to understand how a situation appears to other person and how that person is reacting cognitively and emotionally to the situation. The opposite of the perspective taking egocentrism, the embedded ness in one's own perspectives. Cooperative learning experiences tend to promote greater cognitive and affective perspective taking then do the individualistic and competitive learning experience (Johnson and Johnson, 1989). This ability to understand other's perspective decreases the changes of the differences in the opinion which is the root cause of violence and aggression among the individuals.

*Promotes Creativity:* Cooperative learning experiences promotes creative thing by increasing the number of ideas, quality of ideas, feelings of simulation and enjoyment, and originality of expression in creative problem solving (Bahn &thrrance, 1976) 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. The cooperative relationship also provided a context to consider and appreciate other group member's ideas instead of ignoring or trying to come up with the better one. It is also seen that the creative manifestations provide the vent for the pent up emotions



both positive and negative, thus developing the balanced personality. This in turn decreases the chances of aggression and conflict.

*Increases Self Esteem:* The cooperative learning produces the higher level of self esteem than other environments. Since, individuals with low self esteem have low productivity in setting goals and thus either socially withdraw themselves socially from feeling awkward or become aggressive to cover their low esteem. Within cooperative situations, individuals tend to interact, promote each other's success form multidimensional and realistic impressions of each other's competencies, and give accurate feedback. Such interaction tends to promote a basic acceptance of oneself as competent person.

Teachers may be the key linking social and academic goals. Willingness to students to form a consensus around the goals of doing well academically depends on their perceptions that teachers care about them both as persons and students (Harter 1996 ). On the other hand, when students perceive teachers as having failed to provide support, they feel no obligation to behave in socially responsible ways, nor do they particularly enjoy school (Dray et al. 1999).

## Conclusion

The cooperative learning experiences promoted positive interdependence through internalisation of positive relationships; direct support, shared intimacy and freedom of expressions which gives energy do deal with the stress. With the amount of research available, it is surprising that a classroom practice is so oriented toward individualistic and competitive learning and schools are so dominated with competitive and individualistic structure. All these situations school promotes a situation where there is place for conflict leading to aggression; hence it is the time for the discrepancy to be reduced between what researches indicated is effective in teaching and what teachers actually do.

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