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BEHAVIOURAL DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY ADOLESCENTS BY DINT OF POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

By

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ABSTRACT

Early adolescence is the period where the transition from child to adult takes place gradually. A major physical and cognitive change during this period is accompanied by social and emotional development. The growth spurt in this period makes them stronger and plays an important role in developing self identities. The journey through this crucial period becomes easier when the entire school community is concerned with adolescents' lives. School climate has a deep and marked impact on the behaviour development of early adolescents. Positive school climate can be viewed as foundation of safety, pride, respect, trust and motivation on which a school can build the structure of real success. Creating a positive school climate takes the work and commitment of the entire school community. Physical, social and academic dimension of school climate influence early adolescent behaviour to a great extent. A suitable positive learning environment fosters youth for a productive, contributive and satisfying life in a democratic society. Researches show that school climate influences adolescent behavioural and emotional problems. Behavioural problems can be externalizing and observable such as aggression, bullying and fighting; and internalizing problems like anxiety, withdrawal and loneliness. Safe, caring, supportive, participatory and responsive school climate tends to promote greater attachment to school as well as provide optimal foundation for social and emotional development. When every school aims at creating such a congenial climate, its impact in early adolescents will manifest in their better learning and responsible behaviour which finally makes them accomplished human beings.

Keywords: Positive School Climate, Early Adolescence, Behavioural Disorders.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is the phase transition from being a child to an adult. During adolescence, developmental transition occurs between childhood and adulthood entailing major physical, cognitive and psychosocial changes. Teenage or adolescence generally extends from 12 to 19 years of age and can be broadly categorized into three stages – early adolescence (12 to 14 years), middle adolescence (14 to 17 years) and late adolescence (17 to 19 years). Early adolescence, the transition out of childhood, offers opportunities for growth not only in physical dimensions but also in physical and cognitive and social competence, autonomy, self esteem and intimacy (Papalia, Diana, Olds, Sally, Feldman & Ruth, 2004). It has been described as a time of high arousability and increased vulnerability to problems in the regulation of affect and behaviour (Stienberg, 2005). The growth spurt in this period makes them stronger and plays an important role in developing self identities. The search for identity is a key element in the famous theory of psychosocial development proposed by Erik Erikson (1968). At this age adolescents make more of their choices about friends, sports, studies and school. They become more independent with their own personality and interests. Early adolescents adopt many different strategies to help them resolve their own personal identity crisis. They try out roles like good boy/ girl, dutiful son/ daughter, group leader and team leader. During this period a strong tendency to participate and share the experiences and conduct of others develop in early adolescents. Participation can be a powerful socializing influence and and important step towards social adjustment (Jayalekshmi & Raja, 2010).

Behaviour Disorders of Early Adolescents

With one foot in childhood and other in adolescence, the

early adolescent faces a set of changes that can be frightening and confusing. The changes they undergo sometimes result in behaviour disorders. Adolescents with behavioural disorders demonstrate a prolonged pattern of behaviour that is considered maladaptive or problematic relative to age, cultural and ethnic norms and across settings and interventions, to an extent that interferes with the ability to function in their environment (Kauffman, 2005). Behaviour disorders can be classified into two major domains namely externalizing and internalizing behaviour (Achenbach, 1991).

Externalizing Behaviours

The externalizing behaviours are marked by aggression, oppositional behaviour and hyperactivity (Achenbach, 1991). Behaviours which show a lack of feeling and concern for the welfare of others are known as antisocial behaviours, and one such behaviour is aggression. Berkowitz (1993) views aggression as always involving behaviour, either physical or symbolic, performed with the intention of harming someone. According to Sigmund Freud's theory (1946) unpleasant feelings which have repressed into unconscious mind may also be released through aggression. An aggressive adolescent argues, brags, destroys own and other things, talks too much, teases, threatens, be disobedient at school and home, defiant, involves in fights and gets easily frustrated (Achenbach, 1991). Rhodes, Jensen and Reaus (1998) describe non compliance as the 'king-pin' behaviour around which other behaviour excesses revolve. In adolescents with oppositional behaviour, there is an ongoing pattern on uncooperative, defiant, and hostile behaviour towards authority figures that seriously interferes with the youngsters day to day functioning (http//www.acap.org). Adolescents with hyperactivity may have a short attention span, mainly because they are very easily distracted and have hard time focusing on things and staying on task.

Internalizing Behaviour

The internalizing behaviour is evidenced by anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Achenbach, 1991). Anxiety is a sort of emotional difficulty and it is one of the broadband internalizing syndromes. Being afraid of the consequences of actions, being worried about daily life experiences, complaining, or displaying physical symptoms in response to school activities and stuttering speech pattern are some of the ways in which anxiety by adolescents (Algozzine & Ysselbyke, 2005). Irritability, less experience of pleasure, withdrawal, lowered self esteem, inability to concentrate, poor school work, alternation of biological functioning are often noted as depressed individuals (Reddy, 2005). Early adolescents who are withdrawn in character are shy, do not take part in classroom activities, avoid social situations and are extremely fearful. They may be less disturbing to teachers, unlike with externalizing behaviour, because of this they are in danger of not being identified (Heward, 2006). School which is considered to be the second home for early adolescents, is a significant element in their behavioural development. The environment of the school supports learning and also focuses on the behaviour of early adolescents.

School Climate

School climate, the quality and character of school life, is based on patterns of school life experiences and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structures (NSSC, 2007). School climate is an orderly environment in which the school family feels valued and able to pursue the school's mission free from concerns about disruptions and safety (Philadelphia project, 2001). School climate by definition reflects students' school personnel's, and parents' experiences of school life socially, emotionally, critically, ethically as well as academically (School climate brief, 2010). It reflects the physical and psychological aspects of the school that are mere susceptible to change and that provide the preconditions necessary for teaching and learning to take place (Tableman, 2004). School climate is defined in terms of educator's perceptions on the leadership behaviour of the principal and interactions among teachers. The school environment varies greatly. Some schools are friendly, inviting and supportive; others feel exclusionary, unwelcoming and even unsafe. The feelings

and attitudes that are elicited by a school environment are referred to as school climate. Patterns of principal and teacher behaviour are then arrayed along a rough continuum, ranging from open to closed school climates. An open school climate is one which teacher and principal behaviour is supportive, genuine and engaged, where as a closed climate is characterized by lack of authenticity, game playing and disengaged behaviour (http://education state university). School climate is a multidimensional construct that includes physical, social and academic dimensions (Loukas, 2007).

School Climate as a Construct

Physical Dimension

Physical Dimension of school climate includes appearance of the school building and its classrooms; school size and ratio of students to teachers in the classroom; order and organization of classrooms in school; availability of sources and safety and control (Loukas, 2005). A physical environment that is welcoming and conducive to learning will comprise school buildings with limited number of students, who feel safe and comfortable everywhere in school property; orderly classrooms with low noise level; and areas of instruction and activities appropriate for their uses. The school's pleasant working conditions seem to have a positive impact on pupil's outcomes. The general cleanliness and proper maintenance of the school buildings and facilities do influence the pupils. The facilities which have a direct bearing on pupils create a good impression and sense of pride about his school in pupils (Ninan, 2005). Student and teacher comfort is indicated as the most important aspect of any school environment. If students are comfortable, then learning becomes much easier. Being comfortable is a combination of several different factors: adequate usable space, noise control, lighting, temperature and climate control, and sanitation (Berry, 2002). Cleaning and maintenance of school is vitally important and is often underemphasized and underperformed. A school environment should be one in which every student feels safe. Environmental variables like classroom layout, activity schedules and student-teacher interactions can influence student behaviour

and feelings of safety (Booren, Handy & Power, 2011). Feeling safe- socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically is a fundamental need. Feeling safe in school powerfully promotes student learning and healthy development (Devin & Cohen, 2007). Another safety related dimension is rules and norms. Research underscores the important of school rules and perceived fairness in regard to students' behaviour. There is evidence that schools in which rules are effectively enforced have lower rates of student victimization and student delinquency (Gottfredson, 2005). Schools with climates of safety and respect are establishing foundations for pro-social behaviour. These climates teach conflict resolution, peer mediation, active listening, and other nonviolent ways to solve problems.

Social Dimension

Social Dimension includes quality of interpersonal relationships between students and teachers; equitable and fair treatment of students by teachers and staff; degree of competition and social comparison between students; and degree to which students, teachers and staff contribute to decision making at school. The process of teaching and learning is fundamentally relational. Safe, caring, participatory and responsive school climate tend to foster a greater attachment to school and provide the optimal foundation for social, emotional and academic learning for early adolescents (Mcneely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). School where adolescents are trusted and given responsibilities tend to have less behavioural problems like vandalism, graffiti etc. Engaging adolescents in useful extra-curricular activities result in better behaviour, attendance and less delinquency (Ninan, 2005). The early adolescents' healthy development is in the hands of the teachers who instruct them and reinforce the culturally demanded skills of literacy and sociability. The five frequently discussed attitudes of teachers include a genuine caring and kindness, willingness to share responsibilities involved in the classroom, a sincere sensitivity to the students' diversity, a motivation to provide meaningful learning experiences for all students and an enthusiasm for stimulating students' creativity (Gourneau, 2005).

Teachers' personality has vital influence on the pupils' learning, manners, behaviour and above all the character and personality (Loomba, 2008). The way teachers treat pupils, the sort of interpersonal relationship among the teachers, the willingness with which teachers sort out adolescent students' problems are all potential influences on pupils. Shared activities inside and outside the classroom involving both teachers and student help in establishing a much closer rapport and enduring relationship. Relation with teachers is very important source of support to early adolescents, because adolescents' relations with their parents often become more distant during this period.

Academic Dimension

Academic Dimension of school climate includes quality of instruction, teacher expectations for student achievement and monitoring student progress and promptly reporting results to students and parents. In an academic environment that promotes learning and self-fulfillment, teachers are confident and knowledgeable. All types of intelligence and competence are respected and supported by teachers. Progress of the adolescents will be monitored regularly, where they are encouraged to succeed. Results of assessment are promptly communicated to students and parents and are used to evaluate redesign teaching procedures and content. The attitude of fostering individualized instruction by teachers discusses the ability to provide meaningful learning opportunities for all students. In this dimension when opportunities are given to adolescents to be creative, they take learning to higher levels and become actively engaged in contributive activities (Woolley, Kol & Bowen, 2009). Academic environment will be effective when teachers capitalize students' intrinsic motivation, cognitive learning and skill levels.

Positive School Climate

A positive school climate is one in which teachers, students and parents build safe and peaceful environment where students feel accepted and respected and where learning is the main focus (Madhavi & Kishan, 2009). A positive climate exists when all students feel comfortable, wanted, valued, accepted, and secure in an environment where they can interact with caring people they trust. A sustainable positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes norms, values, and expectations that support people feel socially, emotionally and physically safe (Graith, 2003). Positive school climate provides co-operative learning, group cohesion, respect and mutual trust among early adolescents. These particular aspects have been shown to directly improve learning environment (Craig & Cleaver, 2004). High quality school climate cultivates a connection to the school and in this way protects youth from negative outcomes. Quality of school climate impacts student feelings if connected to the school, and in turn, the level of connection is directly predictive of how students behave and feel.

Positive school climate powerfully affects student motivation to learn (Jean, Teresa, Clark, Alicia & Carlson 2009). When activities are presented in a supportive and collaborative learning environment, they encourage students to build upon one another's ideas in productive and engaging ways. The experience realistically represents the social situation that they may find themselves part of it in the greater civil society. Students' perceptions of school climate affect academic, motivation and achievement. Perception of school climate also influences students' behavioural and emotional problems (Loukas, 2007). It has been found that a positive school climate can yield positive educational and psychological outcomes for students and school personnel; negative climate can prevent optimal learning and development (Kuperminic, Leadbeater & Blatt, 2001). Research suggests that positive school climate is associated with reduced aggression and violence (Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008). A positive school climate is linked to lower levels of drug use as well as less self reports of psychiatric problems among high school students (LaRusso, Romer & Selman, 2008). In early adolescence, a positive school climate is predictive of better psychological well being (Ruus, Veisson, Leino, &

Ruus, 2007), decreased student absenteeism (Cohen, 2001) and lower rates of student suspension.

Positive School Climate and Behavioural Development

The nature of the school environment has been shown to have a strong influence on the way early adolescents develop and learn. Students will have higher achievement, more positive self concept, improved behaviour, and high aspirations when the climate of the school is positive. Creating a positive school climate takes the work and commitment of the entire school community. Positive school climate needs to be actively created and sustained by members of the student, parent and school personnel groups in school, and supported by the community. When the school community works together to understand and improve school climate, collective action powerfully supports positive early adolescent development and learning. The number of students within the school building, or within each separate unit of the building impacts the social and affective environment (NSCC, 2007). School climate is an alterable variable that can affect various outcomes. Although educators cannot change a student's socioeconomic status, genetic predisposition to mental illness, or ability level, changes in the learning environment can improve a student's chances for success. Improving school climate is a preventive approach, rather than reactive or remedial. When high expectations are in place, order and discipline are clear, rules are consistent and fair, caring and sensitivity characterize relationships between staff and students, reciprocal exchanges of communication with parents occur, then there is a high probability that student behaviour and achievement will improve (Lehr, 2002). A school climate with open, healthy and strong academic emphasis empowers teachers and creates norms that shape the normative environment of schools and influence teacher behaviour. It is important to understand that school climate influences critical teacher behaviour that in turn improves teaching and learning in the classroom. Positive learning environment in school maximizes the learning of every student, help early adolescents become full participating citizens of society and build a sense of community.

Implications

The ingredients for promoting a positive school climate vary from school to school; that is, each recipe must be tailored to meet the needs of the students, staff, parents and community members who are the key stakeholders and participants in the creation of a healthy school environment. Educators should consider the direct and indirect climate measures that can be used to help document and creating a baseline for change. They should identify initial climate changes that can be made with a high level of visibility and within a relatively short period. Educators should take into account the long term changes needed to create a healthy environment for all members of the learning community. Improving and sustaining a positive school climate is a continuous process. Students, parents and community members must be included in projects to address school climate. Schools ought to empower students by involving them in planning, creating and sustaining a school culture of safety and respect. To be good and effective, a school must have a clear organization, characterized by stated missions, goals, values and standards of performance. It has to create a professional environment for teachers that facilitate the accomplishment of their work (Ninan, 2005). Promoting a safe and orderly environment can be done by maintaining buildings in good physical condition, rewarding students for appropriate behaviour and enforcing consequences for inappropriate behaviour.

Educators who work in the schools can play an active role in creating a positive climate, one of the indicators of an effective school. Teachers who listen to behaviour and assist early adolescents in learning and articulate their feelings and experiences, provide adolescents with critical skills that can prevent and reduce violence. Teachers' character, personality and conduct should be of the highest order and exemplary so that the best ideals become personified in him. Teaching subjects by more interesting methods and participatory activities, emphasizing self discipline, synthesizing relation between family and school and providing guidance to adolescents in times of need enhance school

environment. Improving students' perceptions of school connectedness can result in improved student behavioural and emotional functioning, and in turn increase academic motivation and achievement (Loukas, 2005). Students' sense of belonging can be increased by increasing school safety, student, teacher and staff acceptance of diversity, fair treatment of students and promoting students' decision making skills.

Conclusion

A positive school climate can be viewed as the foundation of safety, pride, respect, trust and motivation on which a school, the strongest socialization agent, can build the structure of the overall development of early adolescents. School holds the responsibility to see if adolescents feel safe at school, if school provides emotional health and wellbeing, if school activities discourage other risky behaviour and if there is an appropriate system of pastoral care in place. Schools have to address the psychological needs of early adolescents, so that those needs relate to the educational outcomes for which they are responsible. It is important to foster and maintain an atmosphere of open communication in which every adolescent is valued and decisions are taken collaboratively. A positive school climate affects everyone associated with the school, be it the students, staff, parents and community. Students, parents and educators can work together to develop, live and contribute to a shared school vision. With the support and dedication of the teachers, parents and administration the learning environment can and must be transferred into a positive learning environment. By doing so, not only teaching and learning become more fun and effective, but also early adolescents get molded into well-integrated harmonious personalities on whom lies the future of our country.

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