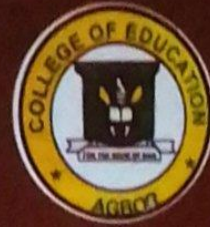


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**A PANACEA FOR CURBING VIOLENT BEHAVIOURS AMONG
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A PANACEA FOR CURBING VIOLENT BEHAVIOURS AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS THROUGH EMPATHIC TRAINING

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Abstract

This paper looks at empathic responding and perception as a panacea for the reduction of violent behaviors among adolescents, the development and correlates of empathy and the general causes of violent behaviors. Violent behaviors involve a physical attack on another person and activities that may involve violence include hunting, law enforcement and sports. But it needs to be managed constructively. Violent behaviour involve few problems, create many and breed more violence. Empathic responding and perception, however, is a vehicle for understanding one another in a meaningful way. It covers a broad spectrum, ranging from a feeling of concern for other people that creates a desire to help them, experiencing an emotion that matches another person's emotions, knowing that other person is thinking or feeling, to shaping the line between self and other. The paper also recommends that empathic training should be built into the curriculum and schools' programme

Introduction

Interpersonal violence among young people aged eleven to nineteen is a significant public health concern. Adolescent violence involves behaviours ranging from physical fighting to more severe forms of physical assault that can result in serious injury or death. Today, violence is one of the major causes of death for Nigerian adolescents. No community in the nation, rural or urban, rich or poor is immune to the incidence and tragedies of youth violence. Young people are involved in various forms of violence such as peer cruelty, robbery, rape, assault of both students and teachers, destruction of property and even murder (Kemjia and Woruka, 1998 & Minchapku, 2003).

Disrespect for authority figures in schools, incivility, widespread dishonesty and cheating among adolescents are growing (Okonkwo, 1995; Nwachukwu 2000 & Calgo, 2001). The result of these acts of violence is that students miss school and participate less in class. Educators agreed that such a situation is hardly conducive to meaningful learning and academic success.

Adolescents' violence has been associated with a variety of factors, which include difficulty in controlling anger. Young people injure and kill themselves over incidents that could be considered trivial- an insult, a dispute over a girlfriend, or a rumour. For many of these young people, face-saving is all-important. They know of only one way to resolve their anger, and that is by striking out, often with grave consequences.

That violent behaviours exist in our institution of learning is not an aberration since the individuals (staff and students) who make up the system are from different backgrounds and have different opinions and values about life. This, on the part of the students, might be a result of the developmental changes that occur at every stage of growth. Precisely, the majority of these students are either in the early or late adolescence period, which most psychologists have described as a period of turbulence, storm and stress. These students, therefore, are even at violent behaviour within themselves; hence, transferring such tendencies into whichever system they find themselves in might not be a surprise. According

to Anokam (2002), the prevalence of violent behaviours among Nigerian adolescence has increased in the last three years in terms of frequency of recorded clashes and the number of adolescents involved. In the same vein, Udochukwu (2001) reported that 60% of persons arrested in Nigeria over disagreements and spars were juveniles.

Adolescents have always become involved in violent behaviours. But today, young people disagree with each other more often over issues of less real consequence than in the past. Students are quick to resort to violence to get what they want. Physical and sometimes fatal fights can start at the slightest remark, a sideways glance, or an inadvertent bump (Cohen 1995).

The impact that adolescent violent behaviour has upon the educational process - from time on task to academic achievement to staff morale - is undeniable. This is evidenced in the incessant breakdown of law and order, cancellation of internal and external examination results and disruption of the academic calendar. Interpersonal violence - hitting, kicking, yelling, threatening, teasing and shooting among others is very tangible and disturbing. Violent behaviours occur within individuals, such as when self-esteem is low and they criticize and withhold themselves and violent behaviour occurs outside of discrete interpersonal interaction altogether. The latter, so-called structural violent behaviour equally has disastrous effects upon its victim ranging from lateness, absenteeism, truancy, examination malpractice, dishonesty, cultism, suspension, rustication and outright expulsion from the school (Lockwood, 1997).

According to Barns and Thagard (1997), the regulation of egoistic behaviour springs from internal sources, which are limits that individuals place on themselves. These limits according to him are controlled by what he calls sympathy. He added that this is the shared feeling that results when we observe other people in emotional states, the compassion that we feel for their sorrow, the resentment when they are slighted, and the joy that is felt when they triumph. Collectively, these feelings are called empathy. It would appear then that adolescents in secondary schools who always want to stricke the other in any way lack a measure of empathy that will enable them to see others from the same emotional state of being.

Empathy has been described by Decety and Meyer (2008), as a sense of similarity in feelings experienced by the self and the other, without confusion between the two individuals. Lampart (2005) however asserted that empathy is what happens to us when we leave our own bodies and find ourselves either momentarily or for a longer period of time in the mind of the other. The individual observes reality through his or her eyes, feels his or her emotions and shares in his or her pain. People also seem to make the same immediate connection between the tone of voice and other vocal expressions and inner feelings (lampart, 2005).

The human capacity to recognize the bodily feelings of another is related to one's imitative capacities and seems to be grounded in the innate capacity to associate the bodily movements and facial expressions one sees in another with the provocative feelings of producing those corresponding movements or expressions oneself (cohen,2003). Proper empathic engagement is supposed to help to understand and anticipate the behaviour of the other. Apart from the automatic tendency to recognize the emotions of others, one may also deliberately engage in empathic reasoning (Gordon, 2004). A person may simulate 'pretend' versions of the beliefs, desires, character traits and context of the other and see what emotional feelings this leads to, or, a person may simulate the emotional feeling and then look around for a suitable reason for this to fit.

Empathy is not sympathy; it does not involve identification with a client. This is clear in Roger's definition. Empathy according to Rogers (1961), is an accurate, empathic understanding of the client's world as seen from the inside. To sense the clients' private world as if it were your own, but without losing the 'as if' quality. Colloquially, it is expressed, at least in part by the phrase 'I know where you're coming from'. Empathy however is the inner experience of sharing in and comprehending the momentary

psychological state of another person. In the context of the work, empathy is to be seen as an ability to understand the situation of another or an ability to feel for the situation of others. The ability to understand another person's situation can communicate acceptance, respect and interest for them. Understanding another person's situation can help reduce to the barest minimum the tendency to disagree and foster a peaceful coexistence of such individuals within a system.

Research as stated by Cotton (2001) have consistently shown that youths who are prone to violent behaviour lag behind their peers in empathy, emotional reason and ability to accept others the way they are. Meredith (2002) revealed that such individuals rather use cognitive distortions to rationalize their behaviour. This tendency to distort, prevents them from experiencing empathy for their victims. Gibbs (1991) describes violent behaviour adolescents are prone to as being characterized by self-centeredness, externalization of blame and minimization of consequences.

Lack of empathy according to Beland (2000) is one of the main factors that allow these adolescents to abuse their victims in diverse forms. Their inability to feel their victims' pain and accept their victims the way they are allows them to tell themselves lies that sustain their behaviour.

However, the basic capacity to recognize emotion is probably innate and may be achieved unconsciously for some, yet it can be trained and achieved with various degrees of intensity or accuracy. Since the lack of empathy has been blamed for the many violent behaviours that adolescents in secondary schools engage in, Cary, (2004), opined that there is the need to reduce the damaging effects of these violent behaviours by increasing the amount of empathy that students possess. Since adolescents is sanguine to solve hard-hitting mathematical problems, carry out snooping science experiments and learn about diverse cultures and languages, they can also be encouraged to become individuals who can identify with the feelings and experiences of family members, teachers, classmates, and acquaintances. Therefore, it is possible to reduce their cruelty and violence and keep civility alive in society through training. The training aims at equipping the adolescent with violent behaviour reduction skills through empathic understandings.

The provision of empathy training according to Cotton (2001) can be used to reduce violent behaviour in both adolescents and adults. One of the specific components of the empathy training approach is lessons in interpersonal perception and empathic responding. Lessons in Empathic Responding and Perception, (LERP) is an empathy training programme involving traditional lessons on issues related to empathy such as what empathy is, how it develops and how to recognize and respond to other's emotive states. Cotton (2001) in a review of empathy training programmes found studies that concluded that LERP caused an increase in empathy scores of the participants. Programmes such as micro training; the interpersonal living laboratory; and Relationship Enhancement are an example of LERP which are effective in increasing empathy levels in young people. (Cotton 2001, Gordon, 2004, & Guerny, 1990).

Development and Correlates of Empathy

Cooper's review of the literature in Hatcher, Nadeau, Walsh, Lisa and Reynolds, (1994) on empathy suggested a developmental model, relating empathy to other affective and cognitive skills, which evolve throughout the life span. This approach is similar to that proposed by Hatcher, Berlin, Okla, and Richards (1990) in which the intra-psychic functions of empathy, self-understanding, and psychological mindedness were discussed as developing in parallel fashion to cognition and moral reasoning as proposed by Piaget and Kohlber (1991) respectively. Such theories suggest that there is a natural potential for empathy, which may be elicited by the environment. Similarly, Emede (1989) suggests that a capacity for empathy ripens over time. He noted that the most mature form, which he calls "developmental empathy", requires the cognitive component of perspective taking" in addition to the earlier unconscious and effective antecedents of empathy.

Meharabian (2000) reviewing validity evidence for his Emotional Empathic Tendency Scale (EETS) summarized as follows: persons with higher scores on the EETS compared with those with lower scores, are more likely to:

- be emotional, as evidenced by their tendency to weep;
- display more affection, and are more explicitly verbal about their feelings;
- be altruistic in their behaviour toward others and volunteer to help;
- be affiliative, be non-aggressive,
- rate positive social traits as important;
- score higher on measures of moral judgement;
- have arousable and pleasant temperaments.

Empathy is also said to correlate with violence, altruistic behaviour, cognition and academic outcomes, gender, age, social power and intercultural communication. This session addresses some of these correlates.

Empathy and violence

When you consider what a diverse society we live in, with so many different backgrounds, perspectives and approaches to life, it is not surprising that conflict which may lead to many kinds of behaviour (violent ones inclusive) is established as part and parcel of our everyday life. This is because people will have competing interests and perspectives with the same issues, and so we should not be surprised when tensions exist between individuals and groups. The idea of ever achieving a society with conflict is clearly a delusion. The important question, then, is not so much: "How do we create a world without violence?"

If we were all the same, then there would be little or no violent behaviour. However, we are not all the same, and so part of the price that pays for the richness of diversity is that conflicts will arise at certain times giving rise to violence. Frey (2000) observed that bringing people together in social interaction like the school necessarily involves a set of interpersonal dynamics which sooner or later will lead to differences to avoid violent behaviour by fostering acceptance of others. The time and effort involved in learning how to deal with conflict positively and constructively are therefore an important and worthwhile investment of our personal and school resources.

There may be some unresolved disagreement that has escalated to an emotional level. When they are left unresolved, however, the associated feelings and emotions will remain in force, at least at some level. When another situation brings this disagreement back to the forefront, these suppressed emotions can erupt with force, usually far more than those associated with the original disagreement. Therefore, it is critically important to resolve disagreements as soon as possible and not let them fester.

There is miscommunication leading to unclear expectations; often give instructions to someone, only to have those instructions misinterpreted?. The ability to communicate is one of our most commonly used skills. As such, we sometimes take it for granted so that the words we use to communicate don't always clearly state the picture in our minds. When this occurs, errors often result that lead to frustration. Depending on a multitude of factors (stress level of one), the error sometimes results in conflict if neither person is willing to accept responsibility for it.

We are all different. Experts say that our personalities are genetically determined resulting in different sets of preferred behaviours. These natural sets of differences are some of our greatest strengths as individuals and teams; however, they are also sources of violent behaviour. If I, for example, prefer to look at only the "big picture," then I may become frustrated by your attempts to discuss details. You, on the other hand, may see me as irresponsible for not doing the analysis which results in potential differences.

There are differences in acquired values. From the moment we are born, we begin acquiring our value system. Our values are the belief we hold that help us to make a decision about what is right or wrong, good or bad, and normal or not normal. Our values come from parents, siblings, friends, mentors, coaches, teachers, books, churches, movies, television,

music and life in general. No two people ever have the same life experience, so we ultimately have different sets of values and beliefs that guide our decision and behaviour. People struggle over religion, politics, race, humanitarian issues, ethics and morals, abortion, sex and more. In extreme cases, some people will literally, die for their beliefs. So this "got level" value system is a strong driver of behaviours or a frequent source of conflict in our lives and in our schools. There is underlying stress and tension; our lives today place enormous demands on our time and energy. But frequently those demands exceed our capacity to deal with them. Nevertheless, we come to work and attempt to function normally with our team members.

Too often, however, this underlying stress surfaces at the slightest provocation, and we find ourselves in conflict. Dyer (1996) uses the analogy of orange to describe this: When you squeeze an orange, you get orange juice. Why? Because that's what is inside. When you squeeze (metaphorically) a person, you also get what the person holding inside.

One of our greatest lessons is to understand that a person's angered response to us may have nothing to do with us at all. They may simply be reflecting on other stresses in their lives. Knowing this makes it easier to respond in a more tempered, appropriate, and responsible manner. If we don't understand this important principle, we may react to their anger negatively, elevating the situation to one of conflict.

There is also the Ego problem. Ego is another strong driver of our behaviour and decisions. Ego wants us to be "right" and moves us into our defending our position, sometimes unreasonably. This is one of the reasons many students go out of character to pass threats which often than not has resulted in conflict. One of the quickest ways to diffuse an argument or conflict is to admit one's mistakes. At a minimum, move out of ego and attempt to see the situation from the other person's point of view. There is a saying that it takes a big person to admit his mistakes. Consider this the next time you are defending yourself, and not sure why.

Violent situations are rarely clear-cut, single-source events. Usually, they are a combination of the factors listed among others. This is why it is critically important for an adolescent to understand the most basic elements of human behaviour so that they can deal more effectively with these potential violent situations. Most violent behaviours can be avoided with knowledge.

Pecuknonis (1990) examine the relationship between ego development and empathy in violent prone adolescent girls and then reports the effect of an empathy-training program on these girls' level of empathy. She opined that adolescents who possesses a degree of empathy reasonable avoid violence. Also, Ellis, (1982) compared three sub-categories of delinquent male teenagers with each other and a control group to identify relationships among delinquency, non-delinquency, and empathy. Several correlations were identified among which is conflict.

In addition, Kaplan and Arbuthnot, (1982) compared adolescent aggressive boys and girls with non-aggressive boys and girls in terms of their scores on three empathy measures. Non-aggressive outscored aggressive on one of the measures; no differences were noted on the other two.

Hinchey and Gavelek, (1982) compare the empathic responses of preschoolers whose fathers physically abused their mothers with the responses of children from non-conflicting homes found that children of non-conflicting fathers exhibited greater empathy on three of four measures.

However, Borden, Karr and Caldwell-Colbert, (1988) studies the relationship between pre and post-participation in a rape prevention programme on the attitudes toward rape and levels of empathy toward rapists and victims held by male and female students. They observed that female students had significantly higher empathy for rape victims' males.

CAUSE OF ADOLESCENT VIOLENCE

Elliott, Hamburg and Williams, (1998) noted that there is no single cause of violence among adolescents. Many risk factors have been found to increase the likelihood of violence during adolescence. Important influences include a history of early aggression in

childhood, being exposed to family or neighbourhood violence, poor relations with parents, during alcohol use, having delinquent peers, gang membership, poor school performance, and residing in a poor community with diminished economic opportunities. Some factors, termed "protective factors," help to reduce the chances of violence during adolescence. These include personal intolerance toward violent behaviour and commitment to the school. Other possible protective factors include a supportive relationship with parents (or other adults) and having a friend who disapproves of violence. Individuals characteristics (e.g., being male), as well as family (e.g. poor parent-child relations), school (e.g., academic failure), and peer group (e.g., gang membership) influences interact in complex ways with environmental conditions (e.g., neighbourhood crime) to produce violent behaviour. Family influences are most important before age twelve, whereas peer influences are important during late adolescence.

Thornton, Craft, Dahlberg, Lynch, and Bear, (2000) on their part opine that violent behaviour in adolescents can include a wide range of behaviours: explosive temper tantrums, physical aggression, fighting, threats or attempts to hurt others (including homicidal thoughts), use of weapons, cruelty toward animals, fire setting, intentional destruction of property and vandalism. According to the factors which increase the risk of violent behaviour include Previous aggressive or violent behaviour; being the victim of physical abuse and/or sexual abuse; exposure to violence in the home and/or community; genetic (family heredity) factors; exposure to violence in media (TV, movies, etc); use of drugs and/or alcohol; the presence of firearms in the home; a combination of stressful family socioeconomic factors (poverty, severe deprivation, marital breakup, single parenting, unemployment, loss of support from extended family) and brain damage from a head injury.

CONCLUSION

Many contemporary scholars and practitioners have posited diverse definitions of empathy. Empathy has therefore been defined as accuracy in predicting another's internal state; as emotional identification with another individual; as inference by analogy to one's own experiences; as the process of cognitive role-taking; and as communicating a sense of understanding another

Children who have several risk factors and show the following behaviours should be carefully evaluated: intense anger: frequent loss of temper or blow-ups, extreme irritability, extreme impulsiveness and becoming easily frustrated this is because they are prone to violence. Since adolescents are sanguine to solve hard-hitting mathematical problems, carry out snooping science experiments, learn about diverse cultures and languages, they should also be encouraged to become individuals who can identify with and the feelings and experiences of family members, teachers, classmates, and acquaintances. Therefore, it is possible to reduce their cruelty and violence and keep civility alive in our schools and society at large.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the foregoing, the following recommendations are put forward:

1. Empathic training could be built-in into the curriculum and school programme since it provides adolescents and even children with necessary dexterities that will enable them shrink from violence, restiveness and intolerance which are some of the social ills beleaguering the nation today.
2. Since the majority of Nigerian school children fall within the early and late adolescent stages (12-22 years) which are often characterized by psychological stress. Guidance counsellors should be employed and posted to schools at all levels to cater for the academic, vocational and socio-personal needs of these teeming adolescents.
3. Adequate awareness should be created among teachers, parents and the entire nation on the need for early exposure of children to an empathic environment through various means of mass enlightenment and mobilization
4. The community also has a tremendous impact on youth development. Empathic understanding could be integrated into community-based- youth development

Intervention in settings such as community centres, churches, youth clubs and service agencies.

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