



SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE CLASSROOM: BEING SENSITIVE TO INTROVERSION AND SHYNESS

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Abstract

Social support in classrooms is highly essential for proper learning and healthy development of students. The purpose of this paper is to focus on the underlying issues regarding the methods used to enhance social support in classrooms, in the light of research evidences. Two widely used ways of enhancing social support are having a sociopetal arrangement (seating arrangement in which students sit facing each other) and involving students in group tasks. The paper discusses how these methods, even though being effective, due to being highly socially stimulating cause discomfort for introverts (because of high brain arousal) and shy individuals (because of having a highly sensitive amygdala). The paper further discusses how group activities themselves can inhibit productivity and creativity, and can violate the personal space of students. Additionally, group processes such as social loafing, social inhibition, conformity, and evaluation apprehension may also affect performance in a negative manner. Finally, the paper gives suggestions in how these issues can be dealt with, such as making students sit in pairs and making students of similar personality traits interact, for an initial period of time.

Keywords: social support; sociopetal arrangement; group tasks; introversion; shyness

Introduction

In the past decade and a half, there has been a lot of emphasis on social-emotional learning in schools. Social and emotional learning is the process through which children and adults develop the skills, attitudes, and values necessary to

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acquire social and emotional competence (Elias et al., 1997). Social-emotional learning has a positive influence on the mental health of students.

Having a sense of social support is an integral aspect of social-emotional learning. Social support refers to the feeling or experience of being cared for, helped, esteemed, and valued by others, and that one belongs to a supportive social network (Gifford, 2012). It has also been found beneficial for the physical health of individuals (Umerson et al., 2010; Uchino, 2009).

Thus, enhancing social support in the classroom can prove to be very beneficial for students. However, the question arises: are the methods that are used to enhance social support, really sensitive for all students? The idea of social support and enhancing it will have to involve social and interpersonal interactions. Students who are introverts or shy are not going to feel very comfortable in such a scenario. Therefore, methods used to enhance social support in the classroom should be sensitive to such students. The methods used to enhance social support should keep in view the discomfort that such students might face in social situations.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold:

1. To emphasize how the methods used to enhance social support in classrooms, despite being effective, may not be suitable for students who are introverts and shy, in light of previous researches; and
2. To suggest ways of enhancing social support in the classroom that are sensitive to introversion and shyness.

The paper begins with a description of the existing methods used to enhance social support in the classroom. The paper, then, discusses how these methods are not suitable for students who are introverts and shy. Then, finally the paper suggests ways of enhancing social support in the classroom that are suitable for introversion and shyness.

Methods of enhancing social support in the classroom

A widely used method to enhance social support in the classroom is to have a *sociopetal arrangement*. Encouraging proper social interactions among students is a good way to improve social support in the classroom. For this, many classrooms have a sociopetal arrangement, that is, the seats are arranged in such a manner that students are facing each other (Gifford, 2012; Mehrabian & Diamond, 1971). This is usually done by placing seats in a circle/oval or in a semi-circle. In sociopetal arrangements, students get more opportunities to interact with each

other. It allows for appropriate classroom discussions and aids in making the class highly interactive, resulting in a more comforting atmosphere.

Apart from having a sociopetal arrangement, another widely used method of enhancing social support in a classroom is to give students *group tasks or group assignments*. Group activities enable students to engage with one another more frequently and aid in the development of skills such as collaboration and cooperation.

A great emphasis on group activities also goes in line with the concept of group emotional intelligence. The capacity of a group to create a common set of norms that control the emotional process in a way that creates a feeling of trust, group identity, and group efficacy is referred to as *group emotional intelligence*. (Wolff et al., 2006; Druskat & Wolff, 2001). A group with high emotional intelligence creates a positive cycle through the norms it develops to influence the emotional process (Druskat & Wolff, 2001). Thus, group interactions not only improve social support but also group emotional intelligence. The higher the group's emotional intelligence, the better for the individuals (students) within that group.

The aforementioned methods for enhancing social support in the classroom are very widely used. However, these methods encourage social interaction and therefore, they are situations that are highly socially stimulating, and are discomforting for introverts and shy individuals. Due to their physiological structure, introverts and shy individuals feel uncomfortable in situations that are socially stimulating. Additionally, group tasks themselves have been found to be inappropriate in many ways.

Introversion

Introversion is a tendency to turn inwards and explore one's feelings and experiences (Jung, 1927). Introverts like to keep to themselves; they tend to be quiet (McCrae & Costa, 1985). They prefer solitary pursuits and only a few social interactions.

Introverts have a high level of brain arousal, specifically in the reticular activating system (RAS), which causes them to have a low threshold for social stimulation (Eysenck, 1967). Introverts are also highly sensitive (categorized as HSP - highly sensitive persons) and get easily aroused by their surroundings (Aron, Aron, & Jagiellowicz, 2012; 2004; Aron & Aron, 1997).

Introverts can be uncomfortable in situations that are highly socially arousing, such as when social contact is encouraged to increase social support. They are highly sensitive in social settings, and prefer to be in situations that are less socially stimulating, and thus, are more involved in solitary activities or situations that require very limited social interactions.

Shyness

Shyness is about being socially reticent (Biedel & Turner, 2007). It involves feelings of anxiety and inhibition in social situations. Common terms associated with shyness are bashfulness, timidity, self-consciousness, and reticence. Interactions with strangers, encounters requiring assertive behavior, and explicitly evaluative settings are said to be some of the most discomforting situations with respect to shyness (Cheek & Tyson, 2009). Shy individuals, therefore, face a lot of discomfort in situations that are socially stimulating.

Shy people have an anxious temperament and experience anxiety in social situations (Degnan & Fox, 2007; Aron, Aron, & Davies, 2005; Svhirra & Katzman, 2004; Kagan, Reznick, & Snidman, 1987). The reason for this is that people who are shy have an overly sensitive amygdala (Blackford, Buckholtz, Avery, & Zald, 2010; Beaton et al., 2008). The amygdala is the emotional centre of the brain, which controls the fight-or-flight response. It is a part of the limbic system, which is the brain area that prepares people to react to threats and novel situations.

When the amygdala is activated, it causes the nervous system to freeze and evaluate the situation before telling the rest of the body to remain calm or avoid the situation. When the amygdala is too sensitive, it assesses the situation to be fearful, which may lead to anxiety. For people who are shy (who have an overly sensitive amygdala), a normal and routine social situation can appear fearful and trigger anxiety (Blackford, Buckholtz, Avery, & Zald, 2010; Beaton et al., 2008).

Introversion, shyness, and methods of enhancing social support

In the case of introverts and shy individuals, a situation in which social interaction is facilitated, such as a sociopetal arrangement or group activities, may not be very appropriate (Cain, 2012a). These individuals can become uneasy in such circumstances, causing them to perform poorly. Due to their discomfort in such situations, they may not be able to perform to their full potential.

Introverts, contrary to popular belief, form a large part of the population (Cain, 2012b). Similarly, the prevalence of shyness is much higher than is commonly assumed. Introverts and shy people being part of a sociopetal structure

and group tasks, turns out to be insensitive for them. These strategies do not meet their needs, which include being placed in situations where they can work to their full potential, that is, situations in which they may not feel uncomfortable.

Issues regarding group tasks

Group activities can inhibit productivity and creativity, and can violate the personal space of students. Group processes such as *conformity*, *evaluation apprehension*, *social inhibition*, and *social loafing*, may also affect performance in a negative manner.

Group activities inhibit creativity. In group tasks, individuals are not able to show their creativity in a proper manner (Feist, 1998; Nemeth & Goncalo, 2005). Creativity is best expressed in isolation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Individuals have been found to be more creative when they are alone, have their own time, and can work at their own pace without feeling rushed. While a group can produce a lot of ideas, they do not always turn out to be useful. The best of scientific innovations and the best ideas have been generated when individuals are in isolation (Gladwell, 2000).

Group activities or tasks involve a lot of decision-making that is collective in nature. Group decision making may not always be effective and that there are ways in which individual decision making is advantageous over group decision making (Maier, 1967; Hill, 1982; Martell & Borg, 1993). In a group, one or a few members may be able to force the group's decision-making process, at times. If the dominant individuals, along with whom the entire group sways, are relatively incompetent, the effectiveness of the group may also suffer. Group decisions take more time as a lot of dialogue and discussion is involved. Furthermore, this dialogue and discussion may not always be very engaging and concentrated. It may lead to a distraction from the key problems and, in some cases, tension within the group, all of which has a negative impact on the success of the group.

When people are in a group, they often encounter conformity. They sometimes are compelled to go along with a group, neglecting their own views and perspectives (Asch, 1956). They act in such way that their behavior fits within their group, usually, in order to not feel out of place (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

Some members, while being in a group, might feel evaluation apprehension. Evaluation apprehension is the concern of being evaluated and judged in a negative manner (Cottrell, 1972; Rosnow, Goodstadt, Barry, & Gitter, 1973). Due to this, individuals may not express their views, and may unwillingly

go along with the group (Fiske, 2010). They might feel conscious about expressing themselves and thus, are unable to perform to their full potential (Opt & Loffredo, 2000). This can also happen in a sociopetal arrangement, where people are aware that their acts are easily seen by others.

The mere presence of others also can make a person not perform up to his or her true potential. This is called social inhibition. The presence of others might lead individuals to inhibit their performance (Zajonc, 1965). When in the presence of others, the individual can feel constrained, feel very conscious, and lack confidence. Many people, also, engage in what is known as social loafing while participating in group activities. Social loafing is the tendency to put in less effort while working together in a group (Crisp & Turner, 2010; Hogg & Cooper, 2007). Individuals might believe that others are putting in a lot of effort, so putting in less effort would not matter. As a result, all members of the group do not always give it their all, resulting in a less successful performance.

Group tasks also seem to violate an individual's personal space (Engleberg, 2006). While working on a task, in a classroom, according to Susan Cain, the author of *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking*, students like to have their own private space (May, 2014). Working in a group, with frequent interruptions from others, or simply being in a crowded environment does not allow them to have that privacy. They feel like they are always being watched and because of that continuously work under a lot of pressure.

Working in a group, with constant interference from others or simply finding the surroundings to be crowded does not provide them with that privacy. They always feel themselves to be under a scanner and due to that work under a constant pressure.

Therefore, enhancing social support in the classroom using a sociopetal arrangement and assigning group tasks are not very appropriate, keeping in view introversion and shyness. For not causing such students discomfort and allowing better productivity and creativity, it is better to have alternative methods of enhancing social support.

Alternative methods of enhancing social support

There are two ways in which social support can be enhanced in the classroom, without being insensitive to introversion and shyness - (1) students

should be made to sit in pairs, and (2) students of similar personality traits should be made to work together.

Making students sit in pairs

Susan Cain suggests that instead of making students work in groups, they should be made to sit in pairs (May, 2014; Nadworny, 2016). Introverts due to their physiological make up, feel uncomfortable in highly socially stimulating situations. Sitting in pairs does not place them in a highly stimulating social environment, and yet, at the same time provides them with enough opportunities to communicate with others.

Shy individuals will also not feel very fearful when sitting in pairs as even though they will have to interact with someone else, it will still not be very discomforting for them. Sitting in pairs will automatically take care of all the aforementioned group processes that affect performance in a negative manner. It will also give individuals enough private space in which they could work without any pressure and enable them to express their creativity in a good way.

Making students of similar personality traits work together

In a classroom, students of similar personality traits can be made to work together. Similarity helps in developing better interpersonal relationships - trait similarity has been found to be very effective (Goldman, Rosenzweig, & Lutter, 1980; Banikiotes & Neimeyer, 1981; Bleda, 1974). Individuals with similar personality traits are like-minded, behave in a similar manner, have similar beliefs, and are more likely to have similar ideas.

Making students interact with other students who share similar traits can provide them with a warm, friendly, and enthusiastic atmosphere to work in. It will enable them to easily express their ideas, they will not feel inhibited, and will feel very relaxed. It will also facilitate proper social interaction and develop good interpersonal skills, which will lead to being both receptive and providing of social support.

This, however, should be done only for a specific time period so that the students do not become accustomed to interact with individuals who only have similar traits. They should be gradually made to intermingle with individuals of dissimilar traits as well, once they develop proper interpersonal skills. This will help them to advance their interpersonal skills and will enable to further enhance social support.

Therefore, making students sit in pairs and making students of similar personality traits work together will help in enhancing social support in the

classroom, without being highly socially stimulating, inhibiting creativity, and violating personal space. Both these alternative methods can, thus, be used effectively in enhancing of social support, and deal with the issues that occur due to either having a sociopetal arrangement or assigning of group tasks.

Conclusions

A classroom having a socially supportive environment is highly significant for students who constantly have to face various sources of stress. However, it should be kept in mind that a classroom has all kinds of individuals, each having their own needs and their own comfort levels. Furthermore, the existing classroom methods must be objectively analysed, with all underlying problems taken into account, before they can be implemented.

Social support is highly important for mental as well as physical health. Encouraging proper social interaction facilitates social support. This encouragement of social interaction must be done properly, taking into account a variety of viewpoints and issues. Especially for introverts and shy individuals, encouraging high levels of social interactions can be discomforting and create more problems for them. The proper development and enhancement of social support in the classroom would be enabled by the use of effective methods to facilitate social interaction.

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