32

Effects of Lessons on Empathic Responding and Perception on Conflict Reduction among Secondary School Adolescents

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Abstract
The study sought to ascertain the effects of training techniques of empathic responding on conflict reduction among secondary school adolescents. The training technique is Lessons on Empathic Responding and Perception (LERP). Gender was examined as a moderating variable on the effects of the treatment. The study was delimited to senior secondary school II students in Ika South Local Government Area of Delta State. The study adopted the quasi experimental design. Three research questions were raised and answered. The sample for the study consisted of forty students (20 males and 20 females) who were screened using the conflict prone instrument (CPI) and assigned to experimental and control groups. The experimental group was exposed to an eight week training programme, while the control group received life skills lessons that were not related to empathy. Davis’ Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) and the conflict prone instrument (CPI) were used to measure...
empathy and adolescents proneness to conflict. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data collected. Mean gained and loss formed the basis for acceptance or rejection of the researcher questions. The major findings include: LERP was significantly effective in improving students’ empathy; Post test empathy mean scores as measured by IRI of adolescents exposed to the treatment significantly increased; there was a mean loss in the post test conflict mean scores of adolescents exposed to treatment. There was also no significant interaction effect between gender and treatment. Based on the results and educational implications of these findings, it was recommended among others that LERP should be used as secondary school-based programmes for the development of empathy and its related skills in adolescent in order to foster the reduction of adolescents’ conflict in secondary schools.

Conflict is a natural and inevitable part of man’s personal and social life. It is one of the most pervasive aspects of human affairs. It exists in almost all social relationships, whether they are personal and informal or impersonal and formal. Conflict according to Hornby (2007) is a situation in which people, group or countries are involved in a serious disagreement or argument. Hornby also defined it as a situation in which there are opposing ideas, opinions, feelings, or wishes; a situation in which it is difficult to choose. Schellenberge (2001) defined conflict as behaviour in which people oppose one another in their thoughts, feelings and/or actions. Agulanna (2008) opined that conflict is an antagonistic struggle over certain scarce objects. This brings about injury, destruction and defeat of an opponent. Agulanna also reported that conflicts, though destructive, can also have functional and beneficial consequences for a group and community life.

The prevalence of conflicts among Nigerian students as observed by Anokam (2002) had increased in the last three years in terms of frequency of recorded clashes and number of adolescents involved. Students are quick to resort to conflict to get what they want. Physical and sometimes fatal fights can start at the slightest comment, a sideways glance, or an unintended bump (Cohen & Nordås 2012). Jehn & Mannix (2001) opined that some conflicts such as interpersonal incompatibilities, disagreements in viewpoints and opinion, disagreement over the group’s approach have often resulted in cruel behaviours and no community in the nation, rural or urban, rich or poor is immune to the incidence and tragedies of youth conflicts. Kalgo (2001) asserted that students tend to have disrespect for their seniors and teachers in schools and that incivility and widespread dishonesty, cheating and violence are on the increase in secondary schools. This was corroborated by Minchakpu (2003) and Ademu-Awuja...
and Kwaja (2013) who observed that students are involved in various forms of cruelty such as bullying, hitting, kicking and assault of both students and teachers, destruction of property and even murder. World Health Organization (2013) also opined that because of the pressure many students face, they tend to put themselves at high risk for intentional and unintentional injuries which result from some sort of conflict among them.

One of the results of these conflicts is that students miss school and participate less in class. Ojo (2000) asserted that interpersonal incompatibilities, disagreements in viewpoints and opinions and disagreement over the group’s approaches had accounted for many incidences of school drop-out, drug addiction, cultism, prostitution and many other social vices persisting today among adolescents. Ojo thus, concluded that such a situation is hardly conducive for meaningful learning and academic success. Some of the likely causes of conflicts are quest for recognition, envy jealousy, sectional pride, disagreement, mistrust, corruption, group assertion, selfishness and group staying too long in power. Agulanna (2008) observed that students’ conflict had been associated with a variety of factors, which included difficulty in controlling anger. Kwaja (2010) agreeing with Agulanna (2008) noted that students injure and kill themselves over incidents that could be considered trivial – an insult, a dispute over a girlfriend or boyfriend, or a rumour. Economic deprivation had been one of the major causes of youth restiveness in Delta State. This orientation had over time gradually crept into institutions of learning. The spate of adolescents’ conflict in secondary schools in Delta State had resulted in the cancellation of internal and external examination results, disruption of academic calendars and eventual close down of some secondary schools within the state (Aghanta, 2006). Some students in secondary schools in Delta State and in Agbor particular engage in various forms of conflicts resulting in violent behaviours which have negatively affected academic activities. In addition, students at the senior secondary school level are entirely adolescents who are experiencing developmental problems.

Adolescent is a young person in the process of developing from a child into an adult. World Health Organization (WHO) (2001) described an adolescent as a person who is between the ages of 10 to 19. WHO observed that the biological determinants of adolescents are fairly universal; however, the duration and defining characteristics of these individuals may vary across time, cultures, and socioeconomic situations. The International Planned Parenthood Federation - IPPF (2004) defined adolescents as people who are between ages 15 to 19. Actually, IPPF also admitted that the age can be as wide as 10 to 19. However, the categorization of adolescents according to the organization varied depending on the individual’s situation. For many of these adolescents according to Kwaja (2014), the only way to vent their anger is by striking out, often with grave consequences. Kwaja (2014) asserted that this is so because the majority of these adolescent who get involved have low empathy.
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, feel his or her emotions and share in his or her pain. Lack of empathy is one of the main factors that allowed adolescents to abuse their victims in diverse forms. Thagard (2010) noted that adolescents’ inability to feel their victims’ pain and accept their victims the way they are encouraged cruel behaviours. However, the basic capacity to recognize emotions is probably innate and might be achieved unconsciously for some, yet it could be trained and achieved with various degrees of intensity or accuracy. In view of the fact that the lack of empathy had been blamed for the many conflicts that adolescents in secondary schools engaged in, Ojo (2000), opined that there was the need to reduce the damaging effects of these conflicts by increasing the amount of empathy that students possessed. It would be possible to reduce on the cruelty and violence of adolescents and keep civility alive in the society through training in empathic responding. The training aimed at equipping the adolescent with conflict reduction skills through emotional understanding. The provision of empathic training according to Cotton (2001) could be used to enhance empathic behaviour in both adolescents and adults. One of the components of empathy training approach according to Cotton (2001) is lessons in empathic responding and perception.

Lessons in Empathic Responding and Perception, (LERP) is an empathy training programme involving traditional lessons on issues related to empathy such as what is empathy? how is it developed?, 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. It is on this premise that this study utilized LERP to find out its effects on conflict reduction among secondary school adolescents.

Purpose of Study
The study aimed at finding out the effects of empathic responding and perception and role playing on conflict reduction among secondary school adolescents. Specifically, the study sought to:
1. Determine the effect of lessons on empathic responding and perception (LERP) on conflict mean scores of adolescents in secondary schools;
2. Ascertain the effect of lessons on empathic responding and perception (LERP) on empathy mean scores of adolescents in secondary schools in Delta State;
3. Determine the differences in the mean conflict scores of males and females exposed to lessons on empathic responding and perception (LERP).

Research Questions
The following research questions were raised to guide the study.
1. What is the effect of LERP on the post test conflict mean scores of adolescents exposed to LERP compared with those in the control group?
2. What is the effect of LERP on the post test empathic mean scores of adolescents exposed to LERP and those in the control group?
3. What is the difference between males and females’ post test conflict mean scores of adolescents exposed to LERP and those in the control group?

Research Method
Research Design
The design of this study is a quasi experimental research design. This experimental research design according to Egbule and Okobia (2012) involved the investigation of possible cause and effects relationship by exposing one or more experimental groups to one or more treatment conditions and comparing the results to one or more control groups that were not exposed to treatment. This comparison between the two leads to the acceptance or rejection of a research question.

Area of the Study
The area of the study is secondary schools in Agbor, Delta State. Agbor is the headquarters of Ika South local government area of Delta State and is bounded by Edo State at the North, West and South, the area was chosen because the town though not metropolitan in nature is situated in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria which is known for militancy.

Population of the Study
The target population of this study comprised all Senior Secondary School II (SS II) students in public schools in Agbor. The SS II students’ population figure in Ika South Local Government Area was 1,706 while SS II student population in Agbor town stood at 749. This figures were obtained from the Post Primary Education Board, Agbor Zonal Office in 2013.

Sample and Sampling Technique
The sample size for this study was 40 students drawn from two of the six public secondary schools in Agbor which is locality in Ika South Local Government Area. The class registers were used to code the Instrument which was used to select twenty students made up of ten males and ten female from each of the two schools. This agrees with Ali (2006) assertion that for experimental studies, the number of schools as sample size should not exceed four as experiments impose more rigorous demands on the researcher and so in order not to make the study unwieldy or intractable, smaller samples are usually preferred in experiments.
Instruments for Data Collection

The instruments that were used for this study were the Davis’ Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) and the Conflict Prone Instrument (CPI).

The Davis’ interpersonal reactivity index (IRI), according to Frias-Navarro (2009) was designed by Davis in 1980 to assess empathy. It is made up of 28 items using 5-point scales. Davis’ IRI had test-retest reliability coefficient ranging from .62 to .71 and internal reliabilities ranging from .71 to .77.

The second instrument used in this study was the Conflict Prone Instrument (CPI). The questionnaire was structured, having twenty items with a four point rating scale of Strongly Agreed (SA) Agreed (A) Disagreed (D) and Strongly Disagreed (SA). The CPI was used to screen adolescents who were prone to conflict and also served as pre test for the participants before the commencement of the experiment. For the purpose of selecting adolescents who participated in the study, this instrument was coded using the class registers of the intact classes (SS II A-C) and the responses were analyzed using mean. Students with mean scores of 2.50 and above formed the number required to participate in the study from each of the three schools that were used.

Experimental Procedure

The treatment was conducted in three stages; i. Pre-treatment Stage ii. Treatment Stage and iii. Post-treatment Stage.

1. Pre-treatment Stage

Prior to the first session with subjects, the researcher first explained the purpose of the study to the two research assistants who served as facilitators for the experimental and control groups involved in this investigation. These research assistants were guidance counsellors in the selected schools. They were chosen because they were already teachers as well as guidance counsellors in the sampled schools who had been attending training programme in different aspects of adolescent well being within the school system. The use of research assistants as facilitators became necessary because the two groups were engaged at the same time (during the school break hours). The research assistant handled one of the two groups within this period; while one handled lessons on empathic responding and perception (LERP), a second handled handled the control group which received training on life skills.

Secondly, the researcher and the research assistants met with all the subjects and established rapport with them to ensure that they were relaxed throughout the programme.

Thirdly, the structure of the programme was laid out to the subjects. Specifically, the subjects were told that they would be involved in the group’s activities for a period of eight weeks. Expectations such as regular attendance, punctuality and cooperation were spelt out. Specific time for the programme was discussed and agreed
Effects of Lessons on Empathic Responding and Perception on Conflict Reduction among Secondary School Adolescents

The meetings held between 11.30 am and 12.15 pm, reinforcers for the adolescents and preferred snacks such as doughnuts, meat pie, water, and soft drinks were provided since it was supposed to be their break period.

Finally, the adopted Interpersonal Reactivity Inventory (IRI) was administered after the initial screening in a group setting to all the subjects as pre-test before the commencement of the treatment. Subjects completed this instrument and were assigned code numbers to protect their anonymity in their test results.

ii. Treatment Stage

Treatment group received lessons in empathic responding and perception (LERP) while the control group did not receive any training, rather, they received lessons on life skills.

Each group interacted with a facilitator for about 45 minutes every Friday morning for eight weeks (two weeks for pre and post-testing while six weeks was for the treatment programme proper). Neither the treatment nor the control subjects were aware of their group status because they were in separate schools.

iii. Post-treatment Stage

After the treatment, all subjects – both treatment and control groups were tested again using the adapted IRI and the Conflict Prone Instrument. This was necessary to obtain the post-test scores. There was a formal ending of the experiment where both the researcher and the subjects recounted their experiences and gave votes of thanks to the facilitators.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The mean score differences between the pre and post test (mean gained or loss) will form the basis for the acceptance or rejection of a research question.

Results

Research Question 1

What is the effect of LERP on the post test conflict mean scores of adolescents exposed to LERP compared with those in the control group?
Table 1: Mean of Post test (conflict mean scores) of Adolescents Exposed to LERP and Control Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Pre test</th>
<th>Post test</th>
<th>Mean score difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LERP</td>
<td>N 20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean 62.16</td>
<td>34.05</td>
<td>-28.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTROL</td>
<td>N 20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean 61.45</td>
<td>60.70</td>
<td>-0.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows the post test conflict mean scores of adolescents exposed to LERP and those in the control group. The result indicated that adolescents exposed to LERP had pre test conflict mean score of 62.16 and a post test conflict mean score of 34.05. The post test conflict mean score (34.05) was lower than the pre test conflict mean score (62.16). The mean loss score for adolescents exposed to LERP was -28.08 and the mean loss score for adolescents in the control group was -0.75.

The post test conflict mean score for adolescents exposed to LERP was 34.05 and that of the control group was 60.70. The post test mean score of those exposed to LERP was lower than those in the control group. The post test mean score difference was -26.65. The implication of this result was that treatment was effective for adolescents exposed to LERP as compared with adolescents in the control group.

Research Question 2

What is the effect of LERP on the post test empathic mean scores of adolescents exposed to LERP and those in the control group?

Table 2: Mean of Post test (empathic mean scores) of Adolescents Exposed to LERP and Control Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Pre test</th>
<th>Post test</th>
<th>Mean score difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LERP</td>
<td>N 20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean 68.10</td>
<td>77.25</td>
<td>9.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTROL1</td>
<td>N 20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean 69.25</td>
<td>61.30</td>
<td>-7.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows the pre test and post test empathic mean scores of adolescents exposed to LERP and those in the control group. The result indicates that adolescents exposed to LERP had pre test empathic mean score of 68.10 and a post test empathic
mean score of 77.25. The post test empathic mean score (77.25) was higher than the pre test empathic mean score (68.10). The mean gain score for adolescents exposed to LERP was 9.15 and the mean loss score for adolescents in the control group was -7.95.

The post test empathic mean score for adolescents exposed to LERP was 77.25 and 61.30 for those in the control group. The post test empathic mean score of those exposed to LERP was higher than those in the control group. The post test mean difference between LERP and the control group was 15.95. The implication of this result was that treatment was effective for adolescents exposed to LERP when compared with adolescents in the control group.

Research Question 3
What is the difference between males and females adolescents' post test conflict mean scores of adolescent exposed to LERP and those in the control group?

Table 3: Mean of Post test (conflict mean scores) of Male and Female Adolescents Exposed to LERP and Control Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Pre test</th>
<th>Post test</th>
<th>Mean Diff.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LERP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>N 10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean 61.90</td>
<td>34.20</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>N 10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean 62.44</td>
<td>33.89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTROL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>N 10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean 61.40</td>
<td>59.90</td>
<td>-1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>N 10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean 61.50</td>
<td>61.50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 showed the post test conflict mean scores of male and female adolescents exposed to LERP and those in the control group. The pre test conflict mean score for male adolescents exposed to LERP was 61.90 while the female adolescents had a pre test conflict mean score of 62.44. The post test mean score for male and female adolescents exposed to LERP are 34.20 and 33.89 respectively and that of male and female adolescents in the control group were 59.90 and 61.50 respectively. The post test mean score difference of male and female adolescents in LERP was 0.31 while the mean score difference for male and female adolescents in the control group was and -1.60. The implication of the result was that treatment had no effect on gender.
Summary of Findings

The major findings of this study were;

1. Adolescents exposed to LERP had a significant loss in their conflict mean scores as measured by the conflict prone instrument. This implied that there was a reduction in their proneness to conflict.

2. Adolescents exposed to lessons in empathic responding and perception had an increase in their post empathic mean scores as measured by the Davis’ interpersonal reactivity index.

3. The finding revealed that treatment had no effect on gender.

Conclusions

From the findings, the following conclusions are made:

1. Lessons on empathic responding and perception (LERP) as a training technique of empathic responding had a significant effect on adolescents exposed to the treatment as it caused a reduction in adolescents’ conflict as the adolescent exposed to treatment had a reduction in their post test conflict mean scores.

4. Adolescents’ proneness to conflict reduced notably as there was significant differences in the post test conflict mean scores of adolescents exposed to treatments and those in the control group.

3. LERP had a significant effect as it increased the empathy level of adolescents. There were significant differences in the empathic mean scores between adolescents exposed to treatments and those who were not exposed to it (control group).

4. Treatments had no effect on Gender.

Educational Implication of the Findings

The findings of the present study have extensive educational implication. The findings provide useful feedback on the efficacy of the training techniques of empathic responding – Lessons on Empathic Responding and Perception and Role Playing. The results had ascertained that LERP and role playing were effective in the reduction of adolescents’ proneness to conflict and also increased the empathy level of adolescents in secondary schools.

Consequently, these training techniques could now be used in Nigerian secondary schools with a high degree of confidence to reduce adolescents’ proneness to conflict. If this is done, this menace which had been associated among adolescents in schools and the society at large would have been reduced significantly.
**Recommendations**

LERP and role playing were found to be successful in fostering empathy and reducing conflict among adolescents in secondary school schools and so the researcher made the following recommendations.

1. LERP could be used by Counsellors and other school personnel as school-based programmes in secondary school for the development of empathy and its related skills in adolescents. It could also be useful in enhancing interpersonal relationships by guidance counselors in schools through group counseling.

2. LERP could be used by Curriculum experts and planners in developing in-school programmes, which emphasize prevention and equip adolescents with necessary competencies that would enable them, shun conflict and it attendant ills plaguing the nation today.

3. Teachers and Counsellors could be trained by their employers and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the effective ways of implementing LERP through organization of seminars and workshops.

**References**


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