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Original Article

Cooperative Learning: A Preventive Approach To Extremism At Higher Education, Pakistan

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Abstract

The study was intended to identify cooperative learning as a preventive approach to extremism at higher education institutions. In addition, explore the process of social interdependence and constructive controversy to prevent extremism. Research shows that certain cognitive, social and emotional skills broaden students' minds and enable them to seek pieces of evidence of imposed opinions. Cooperative learning is considered as a successful teaching strategy in higher education to enhance critical thinking, psychological health and interpersonal skills. Here, a group of students works together irrespective of gender, age, culture and abilities to achieve the common goals. Further, the process of constructive controversy promotes moral and civic values among students which leads to global citizenship. The framework of this research is based on social interdependence and constructive controversy within a cooperative context, which can be a positive approach to reduce radicalization and extremism. Within the qualitative paradigm, semi-structured interviews were conducted with students of higher education to share their reflective experiences of cooperative learning. The outcomes of this study revealed that students gain moral reasoning, tolerance problem solving and critical thinking skills when they involve in constructive controversy within a cooperative context. Further, this research proposed to implement different engaging instructional strategies at higher education levels for gaining prosocial behavior, psychological health and conflict management. Accordingly, suggested mentoring and counseling for at risk students.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, Extremism, Positive Interdependence, Constructive Controversy, Higher Education

1. INTRODUCTION

The term extremism or radicalization is conventionally referred to as irregularity in behavior towards society. It can be an expression of violence. Also, an act of advocating, engaging in, preparing or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic and political objectives (Policy, U. S. A. I. D., 2011; Bhatia & Ghanem, 2017). Extremism is considered a threat to global security. Pakistan, due to its geographical location always been confronted with challenges like radicalization and terrorism and several attempts has been taken by higher authorities to resolve these issues. Currently, the higher education system of Pakistan is in chaotic condition due to the threat of extremism. Further, identified various reasons like intolerance, in acceptance of diversities, deprivation of rights, social division. In addition, financial factors and discrimination in public and private institutions also play a vital role to maximize extremism in the education system of Pakistan (Ali, 2009; Abbasi, 2014; Abdullah & Saeed, 2016). The United Nations Security Council in a plan of action on extremism emphasized the importance of quality education to promote the culture of peace, tolerance, intercultural and religious dialogues (Macaluso, 2016).

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Typically, it is determined that the didactic method of teaching is common practice at higher education level in Pakistan, where the teacher does not work as a facilitator but an information provider and students are passive learners (Mc leish, 2009). Further, it is observed that a high number of students in classrooms with multicultural backgrounds and different socioeconomic status and languages are unable to express themselves due to fewer opportunities for freedom of expression and ideas. The research indicated that "constructive controversy exists when one person's ideas, information, conclusions, theories, and opinions are incompatible with those of another, and the two seek to reach an agreement". Accordingly, it is identified that students gain certain skills like critical thinking, interpersonal communication (Johnson & Johnson, 2006:2012). The main purpose of this research is to promote engaging strategies like constructive controversy and cooperative learning which provide an environment for freedom of expression and ideas that results in positive relationships and greater psychological health.

The research is guided by two theories of cooperative learning social interdependence and constructive controversy. The focus of social interdependence theory is promotive interaction where all group members work for mutual success. The basic premise of constructive controversy is concurrent seeking where group members emphasize to reach an agreement despite divergent opinion, ideas and theories (Johnson & Johnson, 2000; 2003) The study will explore the student's perceptions towards cooperative learning and identify the importance of cooperative learning strategies to promote prosocial behavior and moral reasoning in students that eventually reduce radicalization. Further, examine the effectiveness of group work to prevent violent behavior of students in education systems. Cooperative learning can be used as a tool for inculcating peace and restorative justice in groups or individuals. (Vaandering, 2014). This research will also add value for teachers training institutions, higher education policymakers, university teachers and institutional researchers to design and implement group lead instructions to encourage students from diversities. Meanwhile, the findings of this study identify, whether cooperative learning is a helpful strategy to neutralize extremism.

Research objectives

- To analyze the perception of students about cooperative learning in higher education.
- To identify the significance of cooperative learning to prevent extremism at higher education.

Research questions

- How does cooperative learning perceived by students in higher education?
- What is the significance of cooperative learning for preventing extremism in higher education?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Pakistan, since its establishment facing challenges of extremism whether political, religious, sectarian, class and gender (Ahmer, 2011). According to the Global Terrorism Index 2017, Pakistan is one of the five top states which are highly affected by extremism. In the recent years highly educated youth of the renowned universities were found to be involved in extremist activities. It is clearly identified that education systems of Pakistan are unable to inculcate tolerance in the individuals. Further, failed to neutralize the extremist views of students (Abbasi, 2014: Khan & Ashraf, 2017). Ismail et al. (2020) notified that individuals that are involved in various violent activities are universities graduate which are mostly passed out from sciences, IT and engineering fields. Further, he claims that in order to deal with the cutting edge technology needed for extremist activities, extremist groups now seek out young people with academic degrees. Bangash (2017) found that the ignorance of social sciences and humanities is one of the cause of inhuman and violent behaviour in students. He further claimed that universities and higher authorities are more focused on science and technology due to its importance for economic development.

There are three main factors which drive individual towards violent extremism which is "pull factor" (well-organized groups of extremist provide appealing opportunities to involve in such activities), "push factors" (discrimination, inequality, lack of quality education, unacceptance of right) and "contextual factors" (weak economy, inadequate resources, rules and laws, corruption and criminality) (Choi, 2016). Considering these factors, individuals need an encouraging, engaging and disciplined environment where they feel accepted, free to express their ideas and perspectives which leads to greater psychological health. Also gain, certain skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, decision making and moral reasoning.

According to Gillies (2004) cooperative experiences tend to foster more social support than activities

that are competitive or individualistic. "It promotes a much wider range of moral inclusion and scope of justice. Especially when the members of diverse backgrounds and cultures participate in the same cooperative effort, moral inclusion is broadened." Moreover, to promote peace culture in institutions it is important that individuals should have opportunities to build a positive relationship and sense of mutuality and should be taught through the process of constructive controversy (Johnson, et. al, 2008). Van Ryzin and Roseth (2018) claimed that cooperative learning can also lessen bullying, stress, victimization, emotional issues, and more while also enhancing students' social interactions. All of these are warning issues that students encounter on a daily basis. However, more fruitful social connections and relationships emerged when students were given more regulated opportunities to engage in conversation. Hence, it can be concluded that for maintaining peace citizens need to acquire cooperative behavior for resolving conflict and cooperative learning is the favorable strategy to promote prosocial behavior which reduces radicalization to prevent violent extremism.

Social interdependence exists when individuals work for the mutual success of the group. In other words, the achievement of one member is dependable on another member of the group. There are two types of social interdependence. Positive interdependence, when the individuals link their accomplishment with others' success. Negative interdependence, when the individuals work to compete with others because they perceive that they can achieve only if the others fail to achieve their goal. As a result of positive interdependence, individuals gain positive relationships and greater psychological health. Whereas negative interdependence promotes negative relationship and less psychological health (Johnson, Johnson, & Tjosvold, 2012)

Constructive controversy exists when one person's ideas, information, conclusions, theories, and opinions are incompatible with those of another, and the two seek to reach an agreement. Moreover, identified that conflict is a crucial part of a cooperative context that strengthen the cooperation among members. Within the cooperative group, individuals learn how to conflict with each other ideas and opinions and challenge oppositions constructively. Further, proposed that the instructor organize a group of four and then divide them into two groups involved in constructive controversy. Then, guide student according to the following steps: Research and prepare a position, Present and advocate their position, Engage in an open discussion in which refute the opposing position and rebut attacks on their Position, Reverse perspectives, Synthesize and integrate the best evidence and reasoning into a joint position Also, several benefits of conflict controversy are recognized by many researchers like gain in critical thinking, metacognitive ability, achievement, retention, conflict management (Abdullah & Saeed, 2016).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Researchers within the qualitative paradigm utilize social interdependence and constructivist controversy theories to analyze the phenomenon of cooperative learning. Creswell (2005:2003) noted that in qualitative research, "the intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon", which is best achieved by using purposeful sampling strategies. Therefore, six participants i.e. (S1, S2, S3…S6) were selected from a public sector university, through purposive sampling, who were previously involved in the group activity. Data was collected through interviews. Researcher developed interview protocol in line with the research questions to explore the views of respondents regarding their experiences of cooperative learning. Participants were given an informed consent form to be interviewed and audiotaped. In addition data was analyzed through thematic analysis followed a simplified version of the general steps of qualitative data analysis i.e. transcribing interviews, reading through the data, generating codes and themes (Creswell, 2009).

Research Findings

When respondents were asked about their experiences they give responses under the following themes.

Group work

S1:	The teacher assigned us group work for the presentation. .AA... It was the discussion on a given topic. We have to discuss the pros and cons of the topic in two groups. Quite interesting, we enjoyed it a lot.

S2: Hmm, it was nice to be a part of an argumentative discussion, I find it useful for my learning….. there was an equal chance of participation, no one left behind

S3: At first it was boring as my coordination among group members is not so…. good but gradually I realize that

I have to work on, without which we cannot gain success. Then, on the day of the presentation, we move up because we did the best.

S4: I was usually found group work a boring activity…. a written assignment was given by the groups to the teacher, getting equal marks. No one answerable for his or her work, even the absentees get marks of group assignment, it was a nice experience to work for discussion only. I… I think that being a participant in discussion everyone was accountable for his or her work

S5: Yes…. discussion in groups motivated me to learn, sometimes we don't have an understanding of the topic, so we learn from each other. Even, friends in our group find the relevant material for us. Coordination and a good relationship is more important for this type of discussion

S6: At first we were not involved in the activity but eventually whole class participated in the discussion by adding their opinion in the discussion. Sometimes, it seems fish market…..haha… but there we had freedom of speech. This type of group work encourages us to speak and built up confidence. I need this activity more in the class.

It is explored from all the responses that they enjoyed it a lot, S4 indicated that it was boring at first due to lack of coordination but eventually for group success worked hard.S4 indicated that there they had freedom of speech which build their confidence, also they need this type of group work in class.S2 and S5 indicated that these type of activities give the motivation to learn and speak so that no one left behind.

The positive relationship among students

S1…. Working with classmates with dedication automatically develops a positive relationship. Especially when we were taking part in group discussions. I have found my new friend.

S2: Yes …… bonding develops among students we learn how to deal and work with different types of students in a friendly way. ….. we have several students in class with their abilities and weaknesses. It also builds up the patience to listen to others point of view

S3: Being in a group, break tasks into parts and distributed among groups also helps to manage time. It develops strong bond among peers due to which we can communicate with each other easily

S4: In my point of view in some way it creates a positive relationship but many times due to different nature and opinions they conflict …..and a negative relationship occurs too.

S5: All the students cooperate, share their ideas and become more vocal by these activities..….. which promotes positive relationship among students

S6: Definitely…..these types of activities promote relationships among members. Students learned in a friendly environment. it is said….. that further the discussion broader the opinion thus enhancing the mutual.

It is explored from all response that positive relationship and bonding developed among student during group work five respondent agreed that group work enhances the positive relationship among students, but S4 contradict that sometimes due to conflict in opinion and ideas negative relationship also developed among student S3 and, S5 indicated that they become more vocal and communicative during this activity.

Acceptance of multiple perspectives, moral reasoning and critical thinking

S1. All the students cooperate, share their ideas….. which eventually helps them in reaching towards an agreed solution. We can say enables a person to take decisions accordingly for the group's success.

S2: We were working together with full of dedication with our group mates'. In this activity, we learn how to respect other perspectives and manage conflict with healthy debate.

S3: As every student has his way of thinking, so in this activity, we learned to listen patiently to other ideas. Frequent, feedback enables us to cover the backend knowledge that has been missed out and to search for more.

S4: Yes ….it was an effective strategy because all member comes up with different ideas, reach an agreement. Sometimes, non-acceptance of other perspective has been seen due to the conflict in ideas and intolerance

S5: The whole concept of group work was very productive. Each individual came up with his idea and shared his own opinion concerning the topic with the whole class. Some of the students agreed while the others disagreed and laid down several reasons for their disagreement.

S6: When we work in a group under any perspective they also start understanding and accepting other views on a particular topic. There….We learned to deal with different types of temperaments. Ummm…..when we were involved in more discussion and took part with enthusiasm, we learn to understand other's opinions and accordingly started pointing out reasoning and start thinking critically and oppose other's opinions.

It is explored from all responses that interaction among the groups make a person broader his views and ideas or in other words develop moral reasoning acceptance of other ideas.In addition responses of S3, S5, S6 are the indicator for critical thinking. In contrast, S4 indicated that due to intolerance of any member of the group developed the non-acceptance of other's perspectives.

Discussion

The major aim of this research was to explore the phenomenon of social interdependence and constructive controversy within a cooperative context though perceptions of students. Further, it's significance for gaining prosocial behavior, moral reasoning and conflict management to prevent extremism or radicalization. When the respondent were asked about cooperative learning, all of them were agreed that they have enjoyed it and gain confidence because in that environment they have the freedom to express their point of views. Smith (2010) also indicated that freedom of thoughts and equality is more important to reduce violent behavior in education systems. Further, Gillies (2016) identified that students learn to communicate, negotiate, and empathize with their peers, which can contribute to a more tolerant and understanding society. Further, it is found in this research that engaging instruction is more important to promote positive relationships among students. As almost all respondents were agreed that the group activity built a positive relationship among members of one group as well as another group. Positive relationship and promotive interaction promote mutual respect among different cultural identities this lead to a peaceful environment in the education system (Išoraitė, 2019). Also found by Gillies (2008) that students who experience cooperation are helpful and more inclusive to others. Moreover, respect of own identity as well as diversities is an important concern to reduce violent behavior. Respondents also indicated that during the discussion in groups they also learned how to justify the intellectual conflict among members accept diverse perspectives through open discussion. As stated by Ludvik and Goldin (2017) engaging in compassionate dialogue even when in conflict, appear to be potential solutions, not only cultivate educational success in students but also prevent violent behavior.

4. CONCLUSION

The researcher concluded by this study that an encouraging and engaging environment is more important to neutralize the "push" and "pull" factor of extremism. Further, teaching strategies that give opportunities for a positive relationship, expression of opinion and ideas and promote creativity can be an effective tool to foster mindfulness among students. Cooperative learning environment can be a helpful tool to enhance critical thinking, perspective-taking and restorative justice in individuals to reduce violent extremism. It also helps individuals to counteract the isolation and marginalization that contribute to tendencies towards extremism.

Recommendations

Following recommendations are given according to the findings of this research:

- It is suggested to higher authorities of higher education to encourage faculty to design strategies that foster engagement and cooperation among students.
- Further, promote teacher training practices that promote inclusion in classrooms.
- Provide opportunities for open discussion where students can express their views without judgement.
- Provide mentorship to students, so students can discuss their academic and personal issues.
- Incorporate programs that promote students and faculty engagement i.e. seminars, conferences etc.
- It is recommended to organize the programs that promote peace culture in higher education.
- Conduct trainings and workshop for faculty and staff to understand the early signs of extremism.

Competing Interests

The authors did not declare any competing interest.

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