

EDUCATION AND SOCIETY-SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

Social interactions lie at the heart of classroom learning. As a result, thoughtful, new applications of social psychological principles may have multiple, large, lasting benefits for teachers and students. These applications are needed in schools now more than ever. Seeing the changed role that education is playing and the added effect of technology, inclusion, increased awareness and explosion of knowledge, the classrooms have become complicated. There are numerous variables operating and effecting the teaching learning process, social relations and classroom dynamics. Understanding the social dynamics of the classroom requires that teachers are aware about the principles of Social Psychology and there application in the field of education and classroom instructions.

Education and Society

Dewey (1938) is of the view that education has two aspects Psychological and Sociological. He accepts the contention that education of the child should be according to his native endowments. He further asserts that the development of a child does not take place in vacuum, it takes place in and through the society in which the teacher and the child both live. It is the society which will determine the aims, contents and methods of teaching.

In this way, the process of education contains three poles (1). The teacher (2) The child and (3) The society. Therefore to, improve the process of education a general understanding of Psychology (Scientific study of behavior), Sociology (Scientific study of human society) is required. For doing this an inter disciplinary domain that bridges the gap between psychology (teacher, child) and sociology (society) and this domain is named as Social Psychology.

Social Psychology

Myers (2006) opines that social psychology is the scientific study of how people think about, influence, and relate to one another. Feldman (1998) defines social psychology as the scientific study of how people's thoughts, feelings and actions are affected by others. It tries to investigate and understand the nature and causes of the peoples behavior in social situations. The aforesaid stated broad definition of social psychology shows clearly that it covers a great deal of territory.

One major focus of social psychology is to study the consequences of **social influences** on the individuals and the way they understand the world. **Social Interaction** between and among people is a second principal focus of social psychology. The third primary focus of social psychology is on **group processes**. Social psychology as a discipline is based on many principles and theories which were evolved to explain the social dimension of real world phenomena. Lewin remarked that a theory is not a good theory unless it has sensible applications.

Social Psychology in its Applied Form

Applied social psychology is concerned with the development and implementation of intervention programs based on social-psychological principles so as to improve the quality of behavior. So, first and foremost, applied social psychology uses theories and principles derived from social psychology. These theories are then utilized to formulate intervention programmes, the purpose of which is to solve problems. Social psychology when applied to the field of education is called **social psychology of education** and it becomes a useful instrument to understand human behavior in education. It deals with the variety of content. e.g. classroom instruction, students wellness and interactions, group dynamics etc.

An Introduction to Social Psychology of Education

Social psychology bears a very special relationship to the behavior of students in school. Generally speaking, schools are the first formal place outside the family where a child shows how his/her cognitive abilities are related to achievement and adjustment. Schools do not simply teach the children more knowledge. Schools teach children to think about the world in different ways; it

can influence the child's moral value orientation (Minuchin& Shapiro, 1983); and, it has a major influence on the ways in which children organize their thoughts and cognitions (Rogoff, 1981).

Social Influence, Social Interaction and Group Processes Operating in the Schools

1) Socialization in the school

While no one contradicts that the school is a vital socializing agent, it is important to keep in mind that it exerts its influence not independently, but in interaction with other salient agencies such as the family and the peer group. We therefore need to conceptualize the school from the systems point of view.

Some of these other subsystems are the home, the neighborhood, and the church (or other religious institutes)

The school may thus be viewed as a well knit conglomeration of at least three clusters.

- The school (its size, facilities, organization, policies, etc.)
- The teacher (gender, age, ability, skill, personality, socio-cultural background, etc)
- The peer group (its size, gender, morale, acceptance of the child, etc.)

Together, these three clusters determine the emergent group dynamics faced by the child.

2) The Cross-Cultural Aspect of Education

There is at least some research evidence to show that while there may be some universally applicable principles (since we are all offspring of Homo Sapiens, irrespective of our cultural background) there are other aspects that are clearly culture specific.

- **Attitude Towards Knowledge and Learning**

One of the first pieces of evidence regarding culture specificity in learning came from the findings that Asian children do better at school than their Western counterparts, and, that this difference becomes heightened for subjects such as mathematics and science (Lueng, 2002).

This "**learning gap**" (as Stevenson &Stigler, 1992 have called it has been explained in various ways. While some have attributed it to higher IQ among the Asians (Hernstein& Murray, 1994), others have held the view that the difference is due to higher achievement motivation

(Tweed & Lehman, 2002), higher expectations of the Asian parents (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992) and even greater effort on the part of the Asian students (Stevenson & Lee, 1999).

Recent analyses (for example, Li, 2002) have, however explained the difference as being due to the difference in the very attitudes to learning. It is argued that East Asian cultures emphasize a **Confucian approach to learning**, while the Western cultures are more in favor of the **Socratic approach** (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). While the former is characterized by "effortful, pragmatic, and respectful learning; behavioral reform; and the acquisition of essential knowledge" (Gurung, 2003, p 145), the latter is "exemplified by questioning one's own beliefs, evaluating others' knowledge, having high esteem for self generated knowledge, and focusing on error to evoke doubt.

3) The Teacher: Attitudes and Behavior

Do teachers form expectations concerning behavior and achievement of students and tend to overestimate or underestimate their performance? Unfortunately, several empirical studies demonstrate the relationship between teacher expectation and evaluation of students.

Rosenthal (1976) is well known for his research on the **expectancy effect**. According to him, if people have an expectation for certain behavior, the probability of the occurrence of that behavior increases. This type of expectancy is referred to as the self-fulfilling, prophecy, or the **Pygmalion effect**.

4) Attitudes and expectations of students

In their studies, Feldman and Co-workers demonstrated that students learned more and perceived their teacher to be competent and interesting when they were told in advance that their teacher was outstanding (Feldman & Proshaska, 1979; Feldman & Theiss, 1982). Further research by Jamieson (1987) showed that those students who receive positive information about their teacher tended to pay more attention to the lecture. This effect escalated to the teacher also, who, in turn, gave superior grades to the students and found them enthusiastic about the course material. Students also tend to form first impressions of teachers much as teachers form impressions of students.

5) **Student control of teacher behavior**

By applying the principles of operant learning used by teachers, children have been taught to modify their teachers' behavior. In one California class, 12-15 years olds were taught to reward positive teacher behavior by smiling and making eye contact and sitting straight (Gray and Co-workers, 1974). It should be noted that this effect of teachers on their students and the students' impact on teachers can be minimized if they are forewarned about the expectations they have for the other.

Applying Social Psychology

1. Social Psychology and the Classroom

By and large our schools are competitive in nature. From their grades to giving answers to questions put to them by their teacher, students try to demonstrate that they have superior skills than their competitors..

Individualistic cultures promote competition on the other hand, in **collectivist cultures**, people are concerned about behaving appropriately and keeping their goals subordinate to the group. School scientists have advocated the use of **cooperative learning situations** to enhance

Overall, the results indicate that cooperative learning can have positive effects on students achievement, self esteems and inter-group relations. Some long-term gains have been noted by Stevens and Slavin (1995). After two years, students in the cooperative classrooms had significant higher achievement in reading, vocabulary, reading comprehension, language expression and mathematical computation. Moreover, the gains were consistent across normal, gifted and disabled children.

2. Social Psychology and the Process of Classroom Instruction

Class room instructions can also be modified by applying principles of Social Psychology. One social psychological factor that correlates with teacher effect is Socio Economic Status (SES). The following quote from (Brophy 1986) illustrates this point. High SES students are likely to be confident, eager to participate, and responsive to challenge. They want respect and require feedback

but usually do not need frequent encouragement or praise. They thrive in an environment that is academically stimulating and some what demanding. Low SES students are more likely to require warmth and support in addition to good instruction and to need more encouragement for their efforts and praise for their success. Therefore, understanding the socio psychological variables would help a teacher to provide suitable instructions to the students.

3. Social psychology of stress in students

Stress is a major concern during the 21st Century and its health consequences and economic cost have increased.

Survey Kouzma and Kennedy (2004) identified the following principal stressors:-

- Examinations and their out comes
- Too much to do
- Worry over future
- Making choices about career
- Studying for examinations
- Amount to learn
- Need to do well imposed by others
- Self imposed need to do well.

While there are innumerable ways for reducing stress, how should a program for students be designed? One way in which social psychology can help is by providing insights regarding the major causes of stress among students. Once we know what these causes are, we can design programs what that would help mitigate the effects of these causes.

4. Social Psychology of Special Education

- **Inclusionary education**

For decades together, in fact for centuries, children with special needs were educated in special schools catering to the special needs of these students the general findings were that though the children became academically able, they were at a great social disadvantage because they did

not know how to interact with people in the world at large. One way of overcoming these negative consequences of segregated education and living was to mainstream children with special needs into the general schools.

- **Changing attitudes**

While teachers and their attitudes are crucial for the success of any inclusionary program no less important is the attitude of the parents and that of other pupils. MacPherson-Court and co-workers (2003) carried out a survey on teacher trainees to assess necessary modifications and additions to the teacher training curriculum. Some of the aspects that the respondents felt strongly about were classroom management, instructional planning, behavior management and collaboration skill. Other pupils of the school also need to be educated regarding the needs of special children. This help them to accept such children in the classroom and also to develop more positive attitudes towards them. Flem and co-workers (2004) give us a very interesting account of inclusive education in practice. This is the account of how one teacher managed to include special children in a normal classroom in Norway. The main themes that she worked on were the cognitive learning process, the social learning process and the collaborative process.

Social Psychological Implications of E-Learning

Studying the 21st Century classroom and its psycho-social dynamics is also important. Online teaching, online examinations, and online universities have overshadowed the traditional teaching learning forms. While everyone, from governments to educators and trainers and even parents, realize the convenience of electronically enabled learning, one has to think of the physical and psychological costs attached. These physical problems due to prolonged computer use are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. The psycho-social impacts of e-learning are even greater. Confined to their homes or individual work stations, the role of the peer group is diminished. Such interactive opportunities are narrowing more than ever before in the growth of children.

Concluding Thoughts

In thinking about how the infusion of novel social psychological principles might happen, the role of teacher educators, particularly educational psychologists, seems pivotal. Social psychological principles need to be adapted into actual classroom practices. Social psychological principles can provide an efficient way to clarify pre-service teachers' understanding of topics that are being covered anyway. For example for tackling diversity in the classroom, dealing with group dynamics, conflicts among students etc. Infusing novel social psychological content into pre-service coursework and professional development workshops will provide a useful starting place for expanding the role of social psychology within education.

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