

EFFECTS OF ROLE PLAYING AS A TRAINING TECHNIQUE OF EMPATHIC RESPONDING ON CONFLICT REDUCTION AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

The study sought to ascertain the effects of role play as a training technique of empathic responding on conflict reduction among secondary school adolescents. 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. 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. Mean as a descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data collected. The major findings include: role play 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 role play 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 behavior in which people oppose one another in their thoughts, feelings and/or actions. Merreni in 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 and Nordås 2012). Jehn and 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. The 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 is on the increase (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.

That conflicts exist in institutions 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. In the context of this study, conflict among students would be seen as a disagreement in which those involved perceive a threat to their needs, interests or concerns which could result to violent behaviour (Kwaja and Mormah, 2011). This, according to Kwaja and Mormah (2011), meant that one student or group of them engaged in an activity that interfered with a second activity of another student. Conflict for students is a disagreement among them over issues that could lead to breakdown of law and order within the school system. Anokam (2002) observed that conflicts occur often in schools, where large number of students of different backgrounds clash over a variety of problems. 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. Thagard (2007) opined that the regulation of egoistic behavior springs from internal sources, which were limits that individuals place on themselves. These limits according to him, were controlled by what he called sympathy. Thargard (2007) 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.

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. Thargard (2000) 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.

Given that adolescent are sanguine to solve hard-hitting mathematical problems, carry out snooping science experiments, learn about diverse cultures and languages, they could also be encouraged to become individuals who could identify with the feelings and experiences of family members, teachers, classmates, and acquaintances (Ojo, 2000). Therefore it would be possible to reduce their cruelty and violence and keep civility alive in the society through training. The training would be 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. Some specific components of empathy training approaches include lessons in interpersonal perception and empathic responding; role playing and components empathy training (Cotton, 2001).

Role-playing referred to the changing of one's behaviour to assume a role, either unconsciously to fill a social role, or consciously to act out an adopted role (Rilstone 2004). Hornby (2007) defined role-playing as "the changing of one's behaviour to fulfill a social role". Blatner (2002) believed that the natural vehicle for the experiential learning of an interpersonal skill such as empathy was role-playing. Role playing they said was a natural vehicle of learning because it is an extension of the imaginative, pretend play of childhood. Role Playing (RP) involved activities and modeling of empathic behaviour in which one imagined and acted out the roles and situations of others. Role playing built a type of understanding and a more flexible type of thinking. For the purpose of this study, role playing was seen as imagining one's self to be

someone else. Fisher and Vander (2002) had empirically established that adolescents could be effectively taught empathy through role playing and that it was very effective in increasing empathic behaviour. Adolescents differ in sexual categorization; they are either males or females.

Purpose of the 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 role playing on empathy mean score of adolescents in secondary schools;
2. determine the effect of role playing on conflict mean score of adolescents in secondary schools;
3. determine the differences in the mean conflict scores of males and females exposed to role playing.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study.

1. What is the effect of role play on the post test empathic mean scores of adolescents exposed to role play and those in the control group?
2. What is the effect of role play on the post test conflict mean scores of adolescents exposed to role play compared with those in the control group?
3. What is the difference between males and females' post test conflict mean scores of adolescent exposed to role playing and those in the control group?

Research Method

Research Design

The design of this study is a true experimental research design. The true 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 led to the acceptance or rejection of the research questions.

The design was chosen for this study because treatment was given to one group while the other group was used as the control group. The researcher studied the effect of treatment on adolescents selected through a screening process before assigning participants to groups. The subjects in both the experimental and control groups were pre tested and the pre test results were used to determine the initial group equivalence.

Figure 1 Experimental Design

Groups	Pre-test	Treatment	Post-test
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Experimental group	O ₁	X ₁	O ₂
Control group	O ₁	-	O ₂
O ₁	=	Pre-test	
O ₂	=	Post-test	
X	=	Treatment -	Scenes/activities on role playing
-	=	(None)	

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.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample size for this study was 40 students drawn from two of the six public secondary schools in Agbor, 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.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions. A gain in empathy mean score and loss in conflict mean score are determinants of the effect of treatment.

Results

Research Question 1

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

Table 2: Mean of Post Test Empathic Mean Scores of Adolescents Exposed to Role Playing and Control Groups

Group		Pre test	Post test	Mean gain score
Role Playing	N	20	20	
	Mean	71.50	76.55	5.05
CONTROL	N	20	20	
	Mean	70.30	63.20	-7.10

Table 2 shows the pre test and post test empathic mean scores of adolescents exposed to role playing and those in the control group. The result indicates that adolescents exposed to role playing had a pre test empathic mean score of 71.50 and a post test empathic mean score of 76.55. The post test empathic mean score (76.55) was higher than the pre test empathic mean score (71.50). The mean gain score for adolescents exposed to role playing was 5.05 and the mean loss score for adolescents in the control group was -7.10. The pre test standard deviation for role playing was 5.61 while the post test standard deviation was 3.14.

The post test empathic mean score for those exposed to role playing was 76.55 and that of the control group was 61.30. The post test empathic mean score of those exposed to role playing was higher than those in the control group. The post test mean difference was 15.25. The finding shows that those adolescents exposed to role playing performed better than those in the control group.

Research Question 2

What is the effect of role play on the post test conflict mean scores of adolescents exposed to role play compared with those in the control group?

Table 3: Mean of Post Test Conflict Mean Scores of Adolescents Exposed to Role Playing and Control Groups

Group		Pre test	Post test	Mean loss score
Role Playing				

Academic Scholarship

CONTROL	N	20	20	
	Mean	60.86	34.90	-25.96
	N	20	20	
	Mean	60.65	58.20	-2.45

Table 3 shows the post test conflict mean scores of adolescents exposed to role playing and those in the control group. The result indicates that adolescents exposed to role playing had pre test conflict mean score of 60.86 and a post test conflict mean score of 34.90. The post test conflict mean score (34.90) was lower than the pre test conflict mean score (60.86). The mean loss score for adolescents exposed to role playing was -25.96 and the mean loss score for adolescents in the control group was -2.45. The pre test standard deviation for role playing was 2.12 while the post test standard deviation was 3.73.

The post test conflict mean score for those exposed to role playing was 34.90, while that of the control group was 60.70. The post test conflict mean score of those exposed to role playing was lower than those in the control group. The post test mean difference was -25.80. The finding shows that treatment was effective for those adolescents exposed to role playing as compared with adolescents in the control group.

Research Question 3

What is the difference between males and females' post test conflict mean scores of adolescent exposed to role playing and those in the control group?

Table 4: Mean of Post Test Conflict Mean Scores of Male and Female Adolescents Exposed to Role Playing and Control Groups (N = 10 Males and 10 Female for LERP and 10 Males and 10 Females for Control Group)

Group			Pre test	Post test	Mean Diff.
Role Playing	Male	N	10	10	
		Mean	60.40	35.40	
	Female	N	10	10	
		Mean	61.27	34.45	
CONTROL	Male	N	10	10	
		Mean	60.30	58.70	
	Female	N	10	10	
		Mean	60.35	60.32	

Table 4 shows the post test conflict mean scores of male and female adolescents exposed to role playing and those in the control group. The post test conflict mean scores for male and female adolescents exposed to role playing were 35.40 and 34.45 respectively, while the post test conflict mean scores of male and female adolescents in the control group were 59.90 and 61.50. The post test mean score difference of male and female adolescents in role playing was 0.95 even as the post test mean score difference for those in control group was -1.62. The finding shows treatment was not sensitive to gender.

Summary of Findings

The major findings of this study were;

1. Adolescents exposed to role play 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 role play 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.

Conclusion

1. Adolescents' empathic behaviour could be boosted using role playing. There was a significant difference in the post test empathic mean scores of adolescents exposed to role playing and those in the control group.
2. Role playing as training techniques of empathic responding increased the empathic level of adolescents and thereby causes a reduction in adolescents' conflict as the adolescent exposed to treatment had a drastic reduction in their post test conflict mean scores.
3. Gender had no significant effect on empathic training of adolescents.

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 – role playing. The results had ascertained that role playing was effective in increasing the empathy level of adolescents and reduction of conflict among in secondary schools.

Consequently, this training technique could now be used in Nigeria secondary schools with a high degree of confidence to enhance empathy. If this is done, the problem of low level of empathy which had been associated with conflict among adolescents in schools would have been solved.

Recommendations

Role playing was 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. Role playing 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. They could also be useful in enhancing interpersonal relationships by guidance counsellors in schools through group counselling.
2. Role playing 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 its 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 role playing through organization of seminars and workshops.
4. Proper awareness could be created by school heads and media houses among teachers, parents and the entire nation on the need for early exposure of children to empathic environment through various means of mass enlightenment and mobilization.
5. Parents could be taught how to use role playing, thus increasing their capacity to produce more desirable outcomes in their children and complement the effort of the school. This could be done through the school parent teacher programme.

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