

A REVIEW OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND ITS IMPACT ON STUDENTS' INTERPERSONAL SKILLS AT THE HIGHER SECONDARY LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

The advancement of interpersonal skills has become a goal of modern education critical as students are more and more demanded to exhibit their competencies in the field of effective communication, collaboration, empathy, and conflict-management. However, conventional methods of instruction using lectures usually give students little chances to rehearse and train these competencies. This paper is a review of the theme of experiential learning as a powerful pedagogical style when it comes to the development of interpersonal skills in the students of higher secondary level. Based on the experiential learning theory and the learning cycle developed by Kolb, the paper summarizes theoretical insights and empirical findings in the learning settings in the world and Pakistan. The review identifies the use of experiential techniques like role-plays, simulations, project-based learning, and service-learning in building real-world social contexts that promote students in terms of communication, assertiveness, teamwork, and emotional regulation. Meta-analyses across the globe and regional studies have consistently shown that experiential learning has more impactful interpersonal results than the conventional teaching programs, particularly when followed by guided reflection as well as facilitators. The challenges to implementation that are contextually dictated in Pakistan are also discussed in the paper, such as the inflexible curricula, lack of resources, huge classes, and the lack of training of teachers, whereas the administrative support and professional growth are identified as important facilitators. The assessment finds that experiential learning has a lot of potential to reinforce interpersonal skills learning at higher secondary level and suggests that it should be systematically integrated in the curricula with policy changes and capacity building programs on teachers.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of interpersonal skills in the modern educational system has become more and more popular, along with academic performance. Interpersonal skills such as communication, teamwork, empathy, assertiveness, conflict management, emotional regulation are important to the success of students in academic, social, and professional

life. With the increasing level of interconnectedness of the societies, and the workplaces requiring collaboration and adaptability, it is likely that educational institutions will prepare students with skills that go beyond the knowledge of the subjects. Nevertheless, most of the traditional teacher-centered pedagogies based on memorization

and performance in the examinations fail to give these social competencies sufficient time to be practiced and honed by the students (Zepke and Leach, 2010; Hattie, 2008).

Experiential learning has come out as an effective pedagogical approach that fills this gap by involving the learners in real life works, reflective work and group problem solving. Experiential learning is based on constructivist and pragmatic philosophies, which focus on the idea of learning by doing and by reflection and application enable students to convert experience into knowledge and skills (Kolb, 1984). Existing international and local literature indicates that experiential learning can contribute to the development of interpersonal competencies greatly because it puts learners in realistic social situations where communication, cooperation, and negotiation are required (Eyler and Giles, 1999; Freeman et al, 2014).

Experiential learning is not fully embraced in Pakistan especially at the higher secondary level although its advantages have been recorded. In rural and semi-urban schools, the use of lectures is still significant and students have little or no exposure to group work, simulation or community based projects. The present review is based on the synthesis of theoretical views, global and Pakistani findings by empirical means, and contextual issues concerning experiential learning, particularly on how it helps to instill interpersonal skills in higher secondary students.

2. Conceptual Understanding of Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal skills are a collection of skills that help in the interaction of individuals with others in a smooth and complementary way. The skills include verbal and non-verbal communication, active listening, empathy, cooperation, emotional support, conflict resolution, and assertiveness (Buhrmester et al., 1988). Interpersonal competencies in the educational setting have a strong relationship with student engagement, motivation, and psychological health and with the capacity to actively contribute to the classroom activities (Johnson, 2020).

Researchers believe that interpersonal skills are not inborn but they are acquired through social

interaction and training. The social constructivist school of thought developed by Vygotsky underlines the role of interaction in the training of the skill to be learned as the process of developing skills goes through a social interaction before the individual internalizes it (Vygotsky, 1978). Empirical research also shows that students who have stronger interpersonal skills are better academically, have lesser behavioral problems, and have healthier peer relationships (Durlak et al., 2011).

Recent research in Pakistan has shown that school-going children are aware of the value of interpersonal competencies, although they do not have formalized means of experientially learning such competencies in their formal education. Rehman et al. (2024) discovered that students place a high value on communication and teamwork but these skills are not the focus of traditional curricula. As a result, an increasing number of people agree that interpersonal skills should be explicitly incorporated in teaching and learning activities instead of being regarded as the outcomes of these activities.

3. Theoretical Foundations of Experiential Learning

Experience and reflection are the philosophical basis of experiential learning since knowledge is built upon these factors. One of the first advocates of this concept was John Dewey (1938), who held that significant learning happens when students are personally involved in real world scenarios. Arguing on the work of Dewey, Kolb (1984) created Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which is a conceptualization of learning as a cyclical process that includes four stages of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Kolb suggests that successful learning should also involve a learner passing through all four phases of the cycle so that he or she can be able to combine action and reflection and theory and practice. This model has gained extensive use in the educational contexts because of its flexibility and focus on learner-centred teaching. Interpersonal skills are another area that the experiential learning cycle fits best at since it prompts the students to interact with

each other, think about their actions, and use better tactics in the next scenario (Moon, 2013). In addition, the experiential learning is supported by complementary theoretical views. The social learning theory has focused on observation, modeling and feedback in acquiring a skill whereas constructivist theories focus on the learner autonomy and contextualized knowledge construction. Collectively, the two frameworks justify the application of experiential techniques as a powerful tool of developing interpersonal competence in adolescents.

4. Global Evidence on Experiential Learning and Interpersonal Skills

The research conducted worldwide has always shown that experiential learning has a positive effect on interpersonal development of students. Research in various disciplines (nursing, business, engineering, and teacher education) demonstrates that experiential learning approaches, such as role-play, simulations, service-learning, and project-based learning, are effective in improving communication, teamwork, and empathy than traditional lecture-based learning (Freeman et al., 2014; Salam et al., 2019).

These findings are also supported by meta-analytic evidence. According to Hattie (2008), the active learning techniques that have similarities to the experiential learning strategies have larger effects on student outcomes than the passive learning techniques. In the same way, Chan et al. (2021) have established that the use of experiential programs had a profound beneficial impact on the prosocial behavior of adolescents, their empathy, and subjective well-being.

Experience learning also helps in confidence and self-efficacy among the students. When students are involved in real-life activities that involve cooperation and problem solving, they will acquire a realistic experience in sharing ideas, negotiating roles, and conflict resolutions. These experiences promote a feeling of competence and agency which can be transformed to better interpersonal functioning in academic and social spheres (Kong, 2021).

5. Experiential Learning in the Pakistani Educational Context

Experiential learning is slowly becoming popular in Pakistan especially in higher education and professional training programs. Research carried out in the urban centers like Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad has given positive results related to experiential pedagogies. Indicatively, Raja and Najmonnisa (2018) established that business students that had been subjected to role-play and group project lessons achieved much higher levels of communication skills than their counterparts trained in lectures.

In spite of these achievements, experience learning is not fully used at the higher secondary and secondary levels. According to Saeed and Khan (2023), the science classrooms in Pakistan depend on examinations, and very little attention is paid to practical tasks or a group approach to learning. Common reasons given by teachers include inflexibility of the curriculum, large class sizes, and lack of training to do it.

The problem is also worsened by regional inequalities. Other problems encountered in rural districts like Malakand are scarcity of resources, overcrowded classrooms and institutional support. Consequently, the students in these regions have fewer chances of having organised interpersonal skills development education via experiential learning.

6. Effectiveness of Experiential Learning for Interpersonal Skill Development

The global and Pakistani research indicates that experiential learning is an effective technique regarding the increase of interpersonal skills. Communication skills (initiating conversations, assertive communication, teamwork, and conflict management) demonstrate especially good improvement when students are involved in experiential activities that involve active participation and reflection (Buhrmester et al., 1988; Durlak et al., 2011).

In the case of observable behaviors, including making social interactions and expressing opinion in a respectful manner, short-term and experiential interventions would have the most benefits. Such skills can be taught and exercised more easily in the framework of a structured

activity such as role-plays and group projects. The more intimate relational skills, by contrast, like trust and emotional disclosure, are frequently in the long-term growth and continual interaction to build up completely (Greenberg, 2023).

The indicators have indicated that experience learning is best achieved when the programs are properly designed, well-equipped and with trained facilitators. It is proposed that experiential learning is best done with well-designed programs that are well-resourced and guided by experienced facilitators by way of reflection and feedback. Feedback and reflection are essential elements of assisting students to internalise the lessons gained within the experience and to put them into practice in new situations (Bui and Yarsi, 2023).

7. Implementation Challenges and Facilitators

Although the advantages of learning experience are well documented, it presents tremendous challenges when implementing, especially in the developing educational situations. The inflexible curriculums, time, and exam oriented assessment systems in Pakistan curb the scope of teachers to embrace experiential activities. Big classes and inefficiency of infrastructure also limit the chances of true communication (Akhtar, 2021).

Another vital factor is the preparedness of the teacher. Most educators do not have formal training in the experiential pedagogies and might find it difficult to move out of the position of authority and take up the positions of facilitators. The lack of professional development opportunities, as well as resistance to change, can act as impediments to the successful implementation.

On the other hand, powerful administrative back-up and specific teacher training are the major facilitators. Research has shown that teachers become more willing to take on new practices when school leadership supports experiential efforts, and offers logistical support to those efforts. Last but not least is the flexible scheduling, material access, and collaborative planning that are even more effective in programs (Durlak et al., 2011).

8. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Although there is an increasing attention to experiential learning, there is a great gap in research especially at higher secondary level in Pakistan. A lot of literature available in the market is centred on higher education or urban areas leaving rural areas and under-researched areas mostly unexplored. The systematic, context-specific research on the long-term effect of experience learning on interpersonal skills in adolescents is needed.

The future study needs to utilize longitudinal and comparative designs in order to measure the retention of the skills and the cause-effect effects. Validity would be reinforced by the incorporation of different sources of data, which include teacher observations, peer ratings, and behavior indicators. Besides, the investigation of technology-enhanced experiential learning can provide new concepts related to logistical limitations in schools.

9. Conclusion

This review shows that experiential learning has a great potential as a pedagogical intervention to education of interpersonal skills in higher secondary students. Being based on sound theoretical concepts and backed by a lot of empirical evidence, experiential learning provides students with valuable chances to train communication, cooperation, and assertiveness in real life situations. Although implementation issues still exist, especially within resource limited environments, the problem can be addressed through strategic planning, institutional backing and training of the teachers.

Introduction of experiential learning in secondary education is a very important move in Pakistani context, as it will bring about a shift in the control of the outcomes of educational programs to match skills in 21 st century world. Schools can enhance the development of interpersonal skills in addition to academic achievement to be more equipped to prepare students to higher education, employment and active citizenship.

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