

Impacts of Crowding on Mental Health in School Children

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Abstract

School life is the very first step towards a fulfilling academic and career life. The very fundamental learning of the competitive world in the field of career is learnt at this very stage. In today's paper we shall be discussing the growing competition amongst the youth and how crowding affects the mental state of an individual. In simple words, crowding is the phenomenon of multiple people working and taking active action towards one goal in a single setting. The more the crowd, the more the competition. This can often lead an individual in a state of anxiety. In this regard, we cannot ignore the fact that the population of a country affects the growth of each and every individual. India is a nation of massive population with youth in majority. With a limited number of seats in every field of career, it is natural for one to feel overwhelmed and questioning their own place within the crowd. The question arises "how will I make it if there is so much competition?". Let us find a way to deal with such a situation, and search for a middle path where one can thrive without having a mental breakdown of any sort in a competitive world.

Keywords: crowding; classroom; children; educator; student

Introduction

The basic definition of crowding refers to a condition where the available space in an area (physical, social, or even psychological) is insufficient for the number of individuals or objects present. Whereas in psychology crowding is referred to the subjective psychological experience of stress, anxiety or any sort of mental discomfort that occurs when a person perceives that available space is insufficient for their needs. The density of the crowd may not be intense but since the very idea of personal space depends from person to person, the individual may start feeling psychological tension due to the crowd where he/she exists. Sometimes the perception of crowding can be completely mental and psychological and not physical. Crowding can also trigger the self-esteem of a person, making him/her question his/her place in the society. Individuals may start feeling overwhelmed from the fact that he/she is not the center of it all but he has to fight his way through from the crowd to become something. Crowding can be of various types:

- **Physical crowding:** It is often associated with too many objects taking up a space and making the space/area crowded. It has to do less with people crowding but more with object crowding. Too many furniture in one room or too many benches in a park or desks in a classroom are some examples of physical crowding

- **Social crowding:** Social crowding is the type of crowding that one faces in social situations. Too many people in a mall is one of the examples of social crowding. It often happens in places where people visit to socialise. Tourist places are often crowded with this type of crowding. It often does not project any harm because most of us visit a social situation for some time. Stampede is a very common effect of social crowding.

- **Psychological crowding:** Psychological crowding can be quite subjective in nature as the discomfort is not always caused by physical crowding. Psychological crowding is caused due to different reasons such as too much noise, too much light, lack of privacy or social pressure and many more. Psychological crowding is completely on the mental level. A child studying in school may feel anxiety and an overwhelming feeling of competition due to the perceived crowd. He/she may feel a lack of opportunity or lack of space to express their own creativity.

- **Institutional/school crowding:** This type of crowding is by far the common type of crowding. Every institution or school is built by keeping in mind how much capacity it can hold but in a nation like India where the population of school going children is pretty high, faces the problem of crowding in classrooms. A classroom made for 35-40 children has to accommodate 50-60 children. This is a common occurrence. Children

have to sit very closely in a small room packed with students. This causes a lack of personal space and a very congested space for children. Institutional crowding can often lead to anxiety and physical discomfort as well. It affects the learning efficiency of children along with their creativity. It also affects the academic growth in children. Institutional/school crowding can often make the student feel very restricted in mental and physical aspects.

Crowding in school

Now let us look in detail how crowding in school affects children on a psychological, mental and physical level. The impact on mental health from crowding is quite more profound in school students compared to other crowds. This is because school children are at a tender age, where their surroundings have an immense impact on their psyche. Most children are sensitive and are still learning the fundamentals of how a society works. They are not just learning new things about their external environment but also experiencing internal changes happening to their physical body and brain. The need for personal space is especially high at this age as the child is exploring a whole new world around him/her. Therefore, crowding can have a major psychological impact on a student's mind. A confined classroom can trigger anxiety and stress in students. Too many students seated in a small room which is insufficient for a large crowd can invoke the feeling of physical, mental and psychological tension. The problem of crowding in schools is not new to India. On one hand our nation has taken various steps towards giving education to each and every child regardless of their financial capacity. New schools have been developed in underdeveloped and even remote areas. The country has long been fighting for girl education and we have come to a point where free education is being given to every child. But since one problem is solved another arises, and it is that of how many children can fit one classroom. India is a nation with a huge population, it is easier to make a scheme but becomes difficult to execute. Even when executed there are multiple challenges that have to be tackled and in the area of school education the biggest challenge is the availability of quality teachers, school hygiene and sanitation, and availability of enough classroom/space so that each student can get proper teaching and can learn effectively whatever has been taught. A previous study done by Vakili et al (2024) titled 'Overcrowded Classrooms: Challenges, Consequences, and Collaborative Solutions for Educators: A Literature Review', highlighted the negative impact of overcrowded classrooms on both students and teachers. A large crowd in a limited space can act as a barrier for a student's potential and academic growth while it can cause difficulty for educators to provide knowledge effectively. It can hamper the flow of instruction provided by teachers. It is also observed that overcrowded classrooms can lead to less engagement between student and teacher. In another study authored by Ahmad et al. (2018), the researchers aimed at investigating the effects of overcrowded classrooms on the teaching learning process at secondary level. On the basis of analysis and interpretation of the data collected through survey it was found that classes become undisciplined due to the overcrowding. It affects the teachings provided by the educators and it becomes extremely difficult for the teachers to assess the performance of each student effectively. This study also highlighted the problem where overcrowded classrooms hinders the interaction between students and teachers. In 2005, Upadhyay et al. did a study to examine the impact of both subjective and objective crowding on evaluation of classroom, hostel and health, and the second objective of this study was to examine the perceived improvement suggested by the students so as to increase the effectiveness of the Ashram

School System. The finding suggested that crowding majorly affected the performance of the students. It was also seen that these students were highly affected by the inadequacy of the facilities for a smoother experience in ashram and to carry out comfortable day to day activities. Overall results revealed a negative impact of crowding on the classroom assessment, performance, and health. In another study done by Shirley et al. (2017) highlighted the effects of overcrowding on student academic performance in Kentucky high school. After collecting required data it was seen that overcrowding for three-four consecutive years did not have a significant negative effect on students but it did impact negatively on their academic score and grades. Therefore, the study concluded that crowding in schools should be monitored and should be minimised.

Theories explaining the psychological impact of crowding

1. Stimulus overload theory by Stanley Milgram (1970): The core idea of this theory suggests that the human brain is capable of processing a limited capacity of incoming information. Brain needs time and space to process each information given to it and it can do so effectively but if overloaded with too much information at the same time simultaneously, an overload of stimulus occurs. These stimuli or the incoming information can be categorized in different forms such as noise, visual cues, social interaction, advertisements, conflicts, crowding and many more. Since the human brain cannot comprehend all incoming information at once it starts to filter out information to cope with the overload. This type of overload can often lead to negative impact on one's psychological wellbeing. The person may start losing concentration, miss out on important information due to the automatic filtering process of the brain, feel anxiety and stress due to pressure, act in an aggressive irritable manner or may show reduced social response to its environment.

2. Control Theory by Lazarus and Averill: This theory suggests that crowding reduces a person's sense of control over its environment. For example, being stuck in an overcrowded classroom where a person cannot leave can have a negative effect on his/her psychological state. The common effects can be seen in the form of anxiety, lack of control, frustration, helplessness and a feeling of suffocation.

3. Behavioural constraint theory by Stokols (1972): This theory highlights the impact of crowding in one's behaviour with respect to their environment. Crowding can often bring the feeling of being restricted. Every individual needs an appropriate amount of time and space to behave freely and achieve goals, but when their sense of boundary and space is threatened it can often lead to an individual to face hindrance to achieving their goals and blockages to complete the desired task. As each one of us is born with different creativity and potential, for the growth to occur we need to feel the freedom to express. The psychological impact can be seen in the form of frustration and stress.

4. Personal Space theory by Hall (1966): The Personal Space Theory tells us that each individual has its own idea of personal space. Every individual has a bubble of personal space around it which we do not like to be invaded. When an individual's personal space is invaded he/she may feel a sense of discomfort. It is also suggested that this space bubble can be different for everybody and for everybody we meet. We allow some people to be close and for some to be not. Some people might have a small bubble and some people may have a large bubble depending on how close proximity is comfortable to them.

5. Arousal theory by Mehrabian (1976): The core idea of this theory is that an individual when finds himself stuck in crowded places experiences

physiological arousal such as an increase in heart rate and increase in stress hormone which further leads to stress and anxiety. It can trigger the nervous system for flight or fight mode and can damage the performance of an individual.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative review approach, synthesizing peer-reviewed research articles, psychological theories, and public health reports from 2015–2024.

Discussion

In almost all cases we can see that crowding is associated with the various types of negative experiences. From the above theories and review of literature it is not hard to tell that crowding leads to various psychological issues and also physiological issues. Now let us look at some key findings observed from this study:

- **Crowding leads to stress:** The most common finding from this whole study tells us that stress is the very primary response in children. Since small children cannot label their discomfort or put a name on it, we can tell by the above evidence that children tend to feel a sense of irritability and if exposed to crowding for a very long time it leads to stress and anxiety.
- **Crowding impacts future goals:** A student in a crowded institution or school may find himself / herself in a bigger and more intense competition than those who are not. Being in one single setting where everyone is striving for the same type of future can be very pressurising in nature. This type of impact completely on a mental and psychological level. A moderate amount of competition is necessary for a healthy growth but overcrowding can do the opposite and can affect one's self-esteem and confidence to achieve their goals in a negative way.
- **Crowding impacts teacher-student relationship:** An overcrowded classroom hinders the relationship between the educator and the students. More the crowd less the chances of the teachers to know and assess their students accurately. An overcrowded classroom brings many challenges for educators too as they become unable to transfer the knowledge and information to each student. A room packed full of students makes it harder for them to grasp the incoming information or effectively interact and share their problems with the educators. An overcrowded place also means unorganized and undisciplined leaving very small room for any type of effective learning to take place.
- **Crowding and academic performance:** Every child is different and they thrive in different types of environment but as seen in above literature, we can safely infer that overcrowded places can impact a student's academic growth in a big way. It can be seen that almost no student can thrive in a crowded setting. Lack of discipline, disturbance, lack of personal space and a sense of being stuck can bring out the defence mechanism in a child and this disrupts the pace of their learning. When learning becomes difficult we can safely say that it would lead to less retention power and lower attention span. What can be done in an hour may take a few hours for children to complete or learn. This largely affects academic performance.

Let us look at the current situation of India. India is a country of billions of people. Almost each and every child has the right to education irrespective of their financial status. While our country is taking major steps to give each student education, it is failing immensely with regards

to proper infrastructure and hygiene and sanitation. Basic facilities in government institutions are lacking. A classroom made for the capacity of 30 children faces overcrowding of 50 children. A bench made for two children to sit on has to adjust 3 children causing a lack of personal space. If we talk on a larger scale, there is another issue of growing competition. Due to the lack of opportunity thousands of children have to face crowding and find their way out. Crowding can impact self-esteem and self-confidence. A student may find himself losing hope or even give-up if he senses that he is competing against a large crowd where the chances of succeeding is extremely less. On an even bigger level, and for a country like India we can safely say that this in return affects the growth of a nation. A nation relies on its young generation but if the young generation starts to lose hope it automatically affects the growth of the nation too. Hence, the government must take actions towards betterment of the conditions of its youth. A child should face moderate competition for a healthy competency skill but must not feel crowded where he loses a sense of himself and his future. Therefore, it is very important for the government to take active steps with regards to these issues in India. Optimizing classroom sizes is one of the biggest changes that can be made for the betterment of children's growth. A class should have children according to its capacity and the educator should not feel burdened by his job of teaching. Management of amenities, proper sanitation, open space and field for students to carry out their outdoor activities are extremely important measures that must be taken. It is very important for students to feel connected with their teacher. They should have enough space and time for proper communication and sometimes also for one-on-one interaction. Crowding can also lead to teachers feeling stressed and stressed educators can not manage the classroom effectively. There should be enough educators in every institution so that all the workload is not burdened on one single educator. If the crowd is big and competition is high then policies aimed at increasing employment rates should be taken in action.

Conclusion

Crowding is not an issue worldwide and it is evident that those nations or cultures are thriving as they have more room to breathe than us. Crowding can also be very cultural in nature, what we call normal may be abnormal for other cultures. We become what we experience. If we don't understand the basic etiquettes of respecting other people's boundaries and personnel from a very early age, we fail to do so at later stages in life too. Hence, we must aim at improving this cultural behaviour. But it is not difficult to say at the end of this paper that crowding never has a positive impact, it is always associated with negative impacts it has on a person on a mental, psychological, emotional and physical level. A person can compete as long as they see a chance of growth and can explore its own potential. For a child to become great and successful it is extremely important to feel a sense of control over its environment. He should be able to act freely and work on his craft. If we fail to address an issue like crowding in India then we are robbing off the opportunity from children to become creative and successful personalities. We do not wish to see our coming generation in stress, anxiety and depression. The responsibility of this not occurring relies heavily on the hand of our respective government and leaders. Every school must have a child counsellor or psychologist to tackle these issues. The role of a psychologist is to address the issue not the matter in its own hand. We can only think of a great nation as long as its own people are thriving, especially the young and coming generation.

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