



ADDING NEW DIMENSIONS TO STUDENT ENABLEMENT: IDENTIFYING HAZY AREAS IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT:

The development of technology and corresponding progress in every field has enabled the use of diagnostic tools for better alleviation of the human distress in every field especially the field of mental health and education. However, the danger of misdiagnosis and/or non-identification of the real areas of deficits can be extremely debilitating. This paper deals with a new but most important area of 'awkwardness' which has not been identified as an area of concern. It has been wrongly clubbed with Autism or totally ignored. Picking up from Tashiro's (2017) book, "Awkward, The science of why we're Socially Awkward and why that's Awesome," the author tries to bring in a new dimension of understanding to enable teachers identify and empower students with such difficulties. Tashiro was himself a person who overcame awkwardness to attain a doctorate in psychology. He has developed a scale for awkwardness which has been provided as also the negative manifestations of awkward traits and its conversion to positive traits. The author does not intend to bring in a new label in diagnosis, rather is interested in providing teachers a better tool to prevent students who do not fit into the existing framework of disabilities to promote growth.

KEYWORDS : Awkward, Awkwardness and autism, Giftedness and Awkwardness, Measure of Awkwardness.

INTRODUCTION

We are living in a world of labels and diagnostic tags. These labels are being used indiscriminately and irresponsibly at least in some cases to the detriment of the citizenry and adding to the already existing chaos in the field of education. Labels like ADHD, Autism, Asperger Syndrome, are common and at times not warranted. In the context in India school authorities are more prone to use the labels of Learning Disability for students who fall in the margins and treat them accordingly. Such kinds of diagnosis is a universal phenomenon and creates distrust and misinformation in the minds of the general public. Some instances of these are:

1. Bill Gates (Microsoft) has been listed as having Asperger Syndrome- without a medical diagnosis. He stands as a hero for many people with aspergersyndrome, who look to his success with hope (Natcharian, 2010). The U.S. government (via the National Institutes of Health), considers Asperger's as an Autism spectrum disorder. A person may have impaired social skills and "repetitive or restrictive patterns of thought or behaviour," with an obsessive interest in one narrow subject area, and have no insight that the rest of the world does not share this interest. Speech delays, a clumsy and awkward ("bouncy") gait, and difficulty modulating the volume and tone of voice could also be present. Asperger's syndrome is not easy to diagnose. Bill Gates, has some behaviour patterns that are not generally considered normal, including the habit of "rocking" and a disregard for the opinions

of others. These patterns have led many to believe that he is a sufferer of Asperger's (Natcharian, 2010). Jonathan Mitchell, in "Undiagnosing Gates, Jefferson and Einstein," points to Mr. Gates' successful social relationships as proof that whatever his eccentricities, he could not have Asperger's as he can "function so well in "normal" society (Natcharian, 2010).

2. Muir (2003) quotes autism expert Simon Baron-Cohen, that Einstein and Newton might both have shown many signs of Asperger syndrome. Baron-Cohen and mathematician Ioan James of Oxford University assessed the personality traits of Newton and Einstein but did admit that a definite diagnosis was not possible. Muir (2003). They base their findings on the understanding that they exhibited three key symptoms of Asperger syndrome: obsessive interests, difficulty in social relationships, and problems communicating. Simon Baron-Cohen's based his diagnosis for Newton on some of Newton's behaviour patterns: he hardly spoke to anyone, was so engrossed in his work that he often forgot to eat, was lukewarm or bad-tempered and if no one turned up to his lectures, he gave them anyway- talking to an empty room. Newton had a nervous breakdown at 50, brought on by depression and paranoia. Einstein, was also a loner as a child, repeated sentences obsessively until he was seven years old, and was a confusing lecturer. However, Einstein had intimate friends, numerous affairs and was outspoken on political issues. Simon Baron-Cohen states that passion, falling in love and standing up for justice are all perfectly compatible with Asperger syndrome and what most people with AS find difficult is casual chatting – they can't do small-talk. However, contrary to this Glen Elliott, a psychiatrist from the University of California at San Francisco, has a different opinion and states that attempting to diagnose on the basis of biographical information is extremely unreliable. Any behaviour can have various causes and he opines that being highly intelligent would itself have shaped Newton and Einstein's personalities. According to him geniuses could be "socially inept and yet not remotely autistic." Geniuses could be impatient with the intellectual slowness of others be narcissistic and have a passion for their mission in life making them "isolative and difficult." Elliott adds that Einstein had a good sense of humour, a trait that is virtually unknown in people with severe Asperger syndrome. Muir (2003).

It is into this kind of niche of human tendency to label without proper understanding of the traits involved in persons that a newer element has been identified and studied that has far reaching consequences at least to a very small minority of the student population. Awkwardness and awkward situations do arise in the life of every person. Just imagine a teacher coming to the classroom with shirt worn inside out at the least, though many more interesting episodes may be available as anecdotes in our student life. That would be a very awkward moment for the teacher when it is brought to his notice. Such situations are within the level of normalcy. There could be a student who is unable to communicate with teachers or with others, who has difficulty taking decisions, who says the wrong things or who is unable to comprehend what the other person intends or wants. Such a student would be considered as awkward and awkwardness itself could itself be seen as a trait of such a student.

The meaning of the term awkward is: Causing difficulty, hard to deal with (awkward: meaning, 2018). There are such students in the school system who are invariably misdiagnosed or misunderstood or even punished for being different. This paper aims to bring to the teaching fraternity the need to be more vigilant about the 'different student,' and makes a case for environmental evaluation of the student's mental processes for better handling of the need. Awkward situations and awkwardness have to be seen differently and understood from the context of a situational experience versus a personal pattern. Unlike awkward situations, for some people, awkwardness can be a way of life, punctuated by regular experiences of painful misunderstandings that lead to social exclusion. This not only hurts them, but can be hard for their colleagues and loved ones. (Suttie, 2017)

Suttie quotes Tashiro who was himself a person with awkwardness who overcame it to become a psychologist, as stating that awkward people tend to see things differently, shining a spotlight of attention on parts of their perceptual world that others tend to look past. This means that they might spend hours poring over spec sheets for their computer, but miss the subtle cues—like foot-tapping or arm-crossing—

that let them know someone is bored or impatient. (Suttie,2017). Such behaviour could be disastrous in social situations and could result in social isolation and rejection. The effect of such experiences could be disastrous in the life of the student/child having life-long developmental effects that cannot be remedied easily.

Awkward children could do or say things that could be embarrassing to the parents as well as create tensions for the young person. In this area parents have a very important role to play in the rehabilitation process of the child. The awkward child may be blunt to the point of being rude without any intention of being so and may not even recognize that he/she is being rude. Parents could act as coaches to help children towards behaviour that can ease and improve social interactions. This can be done through empathetic responses that help such children develop social scripts which will enable them to flow along with socially appropriate behaviour. Tashiro explains that children become overwhelmed by social situations and need help to prevent their actions from being interpreted negatively. It becomes imperative for the parent to go beyond stereotypes to understand their child's needs and develop the necessary skills to teach/train their children.

Parents can equip their children by training them in social norms, especially those that get noticed and can make them targets- manner of dressing, talking, body language, facial expressions etc. These can be learned and rehearsed over a period of time. In addition, parents can enable children to identify their areas of interest and passions and also open up avenues such that they can interact with people of similar interests. Tashiro encourages parents to use the privileges of modern technology to provide awkward kids a platform for face to face interaction and social encounters, which they tend to avoid by, finding persons with parallel interest who could communicate with them on the internet.

One important area of interest with awkward persons is the tendency to be excessively focussed, thinking within a circle, showing spotlight attention, thinking within the box. While this is to be appreciated if the person is able to move in and out of the circle/box, it is a serious disadvantage if the person is stuck within firm boundaries. The excessive focus results in the child becoming unable to see the larger picture. Socially, the child/person experiences tunnel vision to the extent that the vision is a limited and narrow one and the larger world outside is ignored or consciously avoided. This results in a "brilliantly illuminated spotlight and this gives them a deep, nuanced perspective about things that no one else takes the time to notice." (Suttie, 2017)

In the late 1970s, Hurlock (1978), the emphasis was more on the physiological aspects of awkwardness. She believed that children should be considered as awkward or clumsy only if control over the movements of their bodies falls below the accepted standards for their ages. She also stated that children who are mentally precocious are very likely to be judged by standards for their apparent ages not real ages. The focus of these early years was more on the physical aspects and the psychological damage due to awkwardness. She identifies these as:

Feelings of inferiority, Jealousy of other children, Resentment towards adults, Social rejection, Dependency, Timidity, Boredom

The understandings in awkwardness has changed with the passage of time. It is in this context that Tashiro has to be read. He brings an extremely radical and incisive understanding on awkwardness and how to deal with it. It is the help of his parents and a teacher who encouraged him, that enabled him to achieve his niche in life. He realized that people like him have an awkward disposition and unusual perspective. He recognized that people like him have a tendency to overlook minor social expectations. This also results in a struggle to navigate routine social situations. However, Tashiro also sees an upside to being awkward, "It may not be as bad as we tend to make it out to be." Tashiro, (2017).

A better way to see awkward persons is to see them as 'unique persons' with unique traits. Simon Baron-Cohen and his colleagues at Oxford University have found that awkward individuals have an unusually intense focus, which gravitates toward interests governed by rules, such as those of logic or math. Tashiro, (2017). Awkwardness could also be associated with specialized talent. Pedro Vital and his

collaborators at Kings College found that the best predictor of striking talent in children was not their I.Q., but rather the kind of intense focus that is characteristic of awkward people. However, it is not a norm that awkward people will exhibit striking talent. However, when their sharp focus, passionate interest and unusual perspective combine with a dash of natural ability, it raises the possibilities of creative expressions. Tashiro, (2017). These observations point back to our earlier understandings about the need to see awkward persons as unique individuals. In fact instead of seeing awkwardness as something to be overcome it can be seen as a gateway to a greater opportunity for growth and development with the appropriate stimulus and behavioural changes.

SOME OTHER TERMS FOR AWKWARD:

Other terms for awkward would include 'nerd' which in Hindi is 'bevakooph (Nerd in Hindi, 2018).'" This is a derogatory term used to undermine the personality of another. Other more demeaning words which are unprintable are in vogue and are not considered appropriate. However, the term in Hindi does not bring in the correct understanding of the term and etymological parallels need to be further researched.

Excerpts from Tashiro's (2017) book (Awkward, The science of why we're Socially Awkward and why that's Awesome), are used below to convey the importance of identifying such traits and enabling empathy and enablement for such students in the school environment:

DEFINITION OF AWKWARD

The American Heritage Dictionary defines "Awkward" as a lack of skill or grace, which is a simple and accurate definition of what it means to be an awkward person. The roots of the word come from Old Norse "afgr," which means 'facing the wrong way.'

"Awkward" is a useful and relatively benign term compared to some of the other names kids call each other, but awkward people know that they see the world differently from most people. However, the meaning attributed to this term limits the identity and personality of the person who is awkward in the sense that it labels the person from the perspective of a norm that does not explain the whole person and may not necessarily be demonstrative of the person's latent capacities. Of course awkward people need guidance about how to navigate the social world and chronic awkwardness can and does threaten an awkward person's social inclusion. However, the use of therapeutic and behavioural methods can enable them to learn, develop and maintain meaningful and creative possibilities in life. It is in this area that teachers have a very important role to play in identifying and developing the whole personality of students with awkward traits.

SEEING THE WORLD THROUGH AWKWARD EYES

The most important feature is that awkward people see the vast world before them with a spotlighted view. They are highly focussed and see the world differently. They are naturally drawn to the part of their world where their spotlighted attention shines brightest and this creates a narrow intense focus. This focus can be inhibitive, leaving the person with a handicap or if channelled with appropriate reinforcements and training can lead to a future that is meaningful as Tashiro has proved through his achievements. The processing style of people with awkwardness has been described by Francesca Happé at King's College London college and Uta Frith at University as a "localized processing style", which describes people who tend to narrowly focus on some of the trees rather than the entire forest. They are people who have trouble seeing the bigger picture.

Awkward people have a world view where they are focussed and hence miss social cues that other people would normally notice. At the same time they may notice things that others would miss and what they see would be seen with greater clarity and focus. Their ability to see differently could also be creative and funny like the character of Charlie Chaplain movies. It has to be recognized that by virtue of their particular traits they could be strait jacketed in their response and behaviour patterns as these provide them

with gratification. This would also make it difficult for them to adjust to changing scenarios. When there is change in a situation they have to take deliberate effort to shift focus as the spotlight shifts outside the area of the 'natural set point.' The spectrum of change possible and the ability to change will also be dependent on the willingness to change, which at times may be a difficulty. This is where the teacher has to use empathetic and patient approaches and methodologies with the student.

AWKWARDNESS AND AUTISM

It is important to differentiate between awkwardness and autism. The parallels can be close and hence there exists the danger of misdiagnosis. As has been pointed out in the introductory paragraph awkward persons or geniuses/gifted persons can easily be misdiagnosed with autism. The differences are subtle and awkward persons are not necessarily autistic. Persons with autistic features could be awkward in their behaviour as there are abnormalities in their behaviour patterns that indicate awkwardness. However, the symptomatic features that differentiate between autism and awkwardness are very diverse. Autism criteria has been clearly laid down as severe social impairment, repetitive behaviour, fixation on objects or obsessive focus, tantrums, intellectual disability, and would most probably always need to lead supported lives (depending on the level of functioning). They may be irritated by sounds and may close their ears to certain sounds. Some of them may also have comorbid mutism. This very clear distinction is what a teacher needs to be aware of as otherwise the difference between awkwardness and autism would be missed. This would also lead to the use of a different set of tools based on improper diagnosis.

Awkwardness and three other areas: a. Social anxiety, b. Personality disorder, c. Introversion

- a. Social Anxiety is a diagnosis for people who feel an excessive fear of social interaction and an unreasonable concern that they will embarrass themselves or be negatively judged. It is based on an unreasonable fear about being inappropriate in social situations and is ego dystonic. Awkwardness is about one's actual ability to be appropriate and is ego syntonic. Awkward people are also often anxious about how they will navigate upcoming interactions, but their worry is not necessarily excessive or unreasonable.
- b. Personality disorders, such as being a sociopath or narcissist are characterized by pervasive insensitivity to others' needs that is driven by their excessive selfishness. The pathology arises from a high level of self-centeredness. Awkward people could also be insensitive, but their insensitivity is unintentional, without meaning to be so and occurs because they have poor skills to handle a delicate situation.
- c. Introversion is based on preferences for social interaction Susan Cain (Quiet), which do not match the cult of extroversion in countries like the United State. This is also culture based to a certain extent whereas awkwardness is about the ability to effectively interact with the environment.

Awkward people find themselves in a grey area where society tries to draw clear lines between normality and abnormality. They find it hard to navigate simple social situations like going to the shop, asking a teacher for assistance which prevents others from recognizing who they really are. In addition, awkward people have a harder time making and maintaining friendships in childhood and early adulthood. The differences also highlight the delicate situation awkward persons are placed in and unless a proper diagnosis is made he/she cannot be therapeutically treated on a model that may be appropriate for the individual. Hence the key for teachers is to rule out other areas of dysfunction and focus on the fact that the awkward person needs more of guided behavioural training than a direct on hands approach which would be the feature in other more serious disorders.

GIFTEDNESS AND AWKWARDNESS

Giftedness also needs to be differentiated from Awkwardness. The lines of difference between the two are thin. According to Ellen Winner author of 'Gifted children,' gifted individuals are extremely focussed and have an insatiable curiosity about their areas of interest. They work with tremendous energy to master

their area of interest. This affects their social and emotional lives and hence they have a greater possibility of developing depression in later life. Their possible awkwardness arises as they are typologically unique and they are rare leading to their becoming social isolates resulting in possible negative consequences. The stimulation for their efforts are from within themselves and hence they also tend to become introverted. They could be stubborn, rebellious and even perfectionistic and eccentric. The area of their focus would lead them to be challenged by their need to find fulfilment through the activity. These can be easily identified in the lives of Newton and Einstein. They were geniuses who had their peculiarities.

There is a conceptual overlap between giftedness and awkwardness. Awkwardness is spotlighted attention on specific interests and gifted individuals are likely to narrowly focus on their specific talents. Awkward people become obsessed about their interests and gifted people on their rage to master. They both enjoy more time alone to engage in deliberate practice. These are points of overlap and there may also be some common genetic influences which need to be researched.

This paper is intended to enable teachers to identify, treat and enable students with awkward traits. Reproduced below are a set of tools that was developed by Tashiro (2017) to measure the level of awkwardness and this can be used by the teacher to identify the levels of awkwardness in his/her care.

Measure of Awkwardness: To determine the level of Awkwardness

10th Percentile: Very rarely

20th Percentile: Not often

50th Percentile: Average

80th Percentile: Frequently

90th Percentile: Almost always

Identify from the above list in the areas mentioned below as to which percentile you fall in and write the percentile

Sno	Areas	Percentile
1	trouble with social skills	
2	ommon sense with everyday tasks	
3	I am uncertain about how to behave in new social situations	
4	I have a hard time understanding what other people are thinking	
5	I am prone to saying the wrong thing	
6	I have a hard time understanding the point people are trying to make	
7	I have a hard time communicating with others	
8	I lecture people instead of having a back-and-forth conversation	
9	I am uncomfortable dealing with emotions	
10	I am uncomfortable dealing with emotions	
11	I am uncomfortable dealing with emotions	
12	I struggle with showing emotions for other people's situations	

13	I become obsessed with one thing for months at a time	
14	I choose to work on solitary tasks versus socializing with others	
15	I tend to see details instead of the big picture	
16	I need to have a system or method for how I do things	
	Total Percentile	

Separate areas itemized to identify particular strength/deficit

Social skills: 1-4

Communication 5-8

Emotions 9-12

Obsessive interests 13-16

Add together the percentile scores and divide by 16 to get the average percentile score.

Present author’s note: The scale is a subjective scale and may require some level of language proficiency if it is to be used independently. If not the scale has to be administered with external help without prejudicing the answers.

Negative and positive manifestations of awkward traits

Teachers can also promote the positive manifestation in awkward children by going beyond the negative manifestation and their negative interpretations by looking at the positive-other side of the coin, thus enabling them to be more proficient and able to communicate in their unique views of the world

Negative menifestations	Awkward trait	Positive manifestation
Asocial	Narrow interests	Focussed
Low empathy	Nonsocial focus	Notice unusual details
Compulsive	Obsessive interests	Determined
Rigid	Need for sameness	Disciplined

The teacher needs to identify the level of awkwardness and the traits that need redirection and rectification. In order to enable the student the teacher can develop a customized plan for the individual student.

HELPING KIDS BUILD SOCIAL FUNDAMENTALS

The steps would include meeting with the parents to develop a common pathway for meeting the objective and main goals.

- The students can be trained to get them mentally prepared to identify the areas that need remediation/correction.
- Students can practise (through imagery mental preparation drills and in real life situations), to help navigate the social world
- The social expectations as “if-then” statements. The ‘if referred to the social expectation and the ‘then’ referred to the behaviour that needed to be executed.
- A schedule of evaluation and feedback can be worked out with sufficient scope and flexibility for the student not to feel pressured.
- Teachers can through the process try to instil a core set of pro-social values in children and model the specific behaviour that communicate pro-social intent to help them grasp the fruition of these and feel the success of the program.

- Feedback with empathy will enable and encourage the awkward student to go the next step in developing their lives.

CONCLUSION

Labelling can be a past-time as it is for most people or a professional gaffe. In the field of education this has far reaching consequences. Education is not about leading students up a blind alley. Neither is it a mass movement where the individual is merely a part of the whole mass. It is a systematic process where each individual is important: whether it is the nerd/geek/awkward/befkhoof, the so called normal, the student who falls below the standard and the highly proficient student. Each individual forms a link in the chain of human existence and where the weakest in the link is neglected the whole system suffers and can collapse. The forest is important so is the individual tree. There is a very critical and dangerous trend that ignores the lower performing students with excessive applauding of the proficient ones leading to the filtration of those who are not within the normal averages into the marginalized areas of the education system. There is also the grave danger of students who are capable of doing well but who have other deficits like 'awkwardness' who fall through the loopholes of the existing system. This paper challenges that notion and hopes to provoke the teaching fraternity to go behind the screen of the syllabus and indexed content into the very hearts and minds of their wards. This may seem awkward in the present scenario of commercialized education but only then would we be able to do justice to our society, country and the world at large.

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