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Reflections on Research Studies in Stress and School Environment

Nisha K. P.*Senior Research and Teaching Assistant, School of Education, IGNOU, New Delhi, India***Abstract**

Stress and school environment has received considerable thrust in the research literature on significant variables related to academic achievement. Also, these variables have been found to be crucial elements of students' mental health. Academic stress is broadly related to school-related worries of children and is also inversely related to school engagement among students. School environment can be broadly referred to the cumulative set of physical, psychological, social, academic and behavioural elements that constitute an academic setting. A positive and conducive school environment is significantly related to higher school productivity and positive mental health.

In the present article, the author attempts to reflect upon a few prominent research studies on stress and school environment. The research studies selected are neither all-inclusive nor comprehensive. The discussion is intended to re-emphasize the imperative need for divergently studying the diverse perspectives of stress (academic stress) and school environment in the contemporary system of schooling. It is also an invitation to the academic community to urgently arrive at a consensus on the feasible strategies towards creating a stress-free schooling.

Key Words: Reflections, Academic Stress, School Environment, Stress-free

Background: A recent study on substance abuse among children in the country emerged with alarming findings on the pattern and profile of substance abuse. The study also identified the primary reasons behind substance abuse among children. The major reasons identified were curiosity, peer pressure, migration, poverty, street-life, easy availability and stress. In-depth analysis of these primary reasons and its degree of prevalence among the substance abusers were beyond the scope of the study. Nevertheless, these reasons have reiterated the need for revisiting our assumptions about the whole perspective of a holistic development of children.

In the present paper, the author is trying to reflect upon the research findings of a few

major studies on stress and school environment. The studies are part of an annotated bibliography prepared at Stanford University under the supervision of faculty from the Law School and the School of Education. It is not intended to be all-inclusive. The author is making an attempt to highlight the prime inherent areas of scope (*Hot-spots*) in each research study and thereby rekindle the need for creating a safe, stress-free schooling, leading to joyful life-long learning.

Research studies on stress

The section below discusses the major findings related to stress and its influence on total child productivity. The discussion commences with the research findings followed by the author's reflections on the inherent hot-spots in each

study.

- ◆ *As there has been an increase in psychological distress for students over time, there has also been an increase in school disengagement and worries about school (Sweeting et al., 2010).*

Inherent hot-spots

- i. Psychological distress among students is not a new phenomenon and its prevalence is increasing over time.
 - ii. What are the primary triggering factors of psychological distress among students?
 - iii. Why are students manifesting an increasing tendency for not being engaged in schooling?
 - iv. What are the specific school related- worries of students?
- ◆ *Many studies find a relationship between increased testing and academic workload, and increased physical, psychological, and emotional distress and stress for youth (Robinson et al., 2009; Galloway & Pope, 2007; Connor, 2003; McDonald, 2001; Hui, 2000; Elias, 1989; Sarnoff et al., 1958).*

Inherent hot-spots

- i. How to create a stress- free process of evaluating student performance?
 - ii. How far is the present system of continuous and comprehensive evaluation alleviating the academic stress of students?
 - iii. What are the specific factors in the whole curriculum that is significantly contributing to academic workload ?
 - iv. What are the warning signs of academic stress related psychological, physical and emotional symptoms?
 - v. How efficient are our teachers in accurately identifying academic stress among students?
- ◆ *Studies show that students tend to experience*

more stress in relation to academic struggles instead of typical adolescent concerns. Additionally, research demonstrates that students tend to manifest worse (mental and physical) outcomes due to academic-related stress (Suldo et al., 2009).

Inherent hot-spots

- i. What are the primary elements of academic struggle in school?
 - ii. Typical adolescent concerns also contribute to stress among students.
 - iii. What are the typical physical and mental manifestations(outcomes) of academic stress?
- ◆ *Research shows that students in more academically challenging programs tend to perceive more stress than students in general education, and they differ in terms of coping strategies and mental health outcomes from students undergoing general education (Suldo et al., 2008).*

Inherent hot-spots

- i. What are the different innovative approaches of providing academically challenging programs prevalent in our education system?
 - ii. What is the most adaptive stress- free approach of the academic enrichment programs?
 - iii. There is a need to identify the specific repertoire of coping strategies present in students undergoing academically challenging programs and general education.
- ◆ *Academic stressors are associated with both increases in depressive and aggressive symptoms, and this varies depending on gender (Little & Garber, 2004).*

Inherent hot-spots

- i. Do we have an effective inbuilt curricular strategy to accurately identify the typical manifestation of depression and aggression

in students?

- ii. What are the most common academic stressors in school?
- iii. How do the boys and girls differ in their manifestation of aggressive and depressive behaviour?

◆ *Students report above average levels of stress, and the sources of stress most frequently reported are concerns regarding one's future goals, followed by school-related items like tests and homework (de Anda et al., 2000).*

Inherent hot-spots

- i. What are the specific common concerns of students regarding their future goals?
- ii. How can teachers help the students set realistic expectations of future goals?
- iii. How can we design a system of general education where homework and tests are tailored to the individual abilities of students and thereby are perceived stress-free by all the students?

◆ *Particular groups of students have been found to be more vulnerable to examination induced distress. The most significant contribution to distress has been found to be anxiety proneness, followed by lower socio-economic status, self-confidence, academic and verbal self-concepts and perceived ability to cope (Hodge et al., 1997).*

Inherent hot-spots

- i. Who are the particular group of students who are more susceptible to examination induced stress?
- ii. What are the school factors that contribute to student anxiety?
- iii. How can we design and actively implement an integrated life-skill education programme that enhances the overall self concept of students by empowering them to cope with adverse life situations?

◆ *Higher academic stress and less emotional*

support from family have been related to lower academic self-concept. Additionally, higher peer stress and less companionship support from peers has been associated with lower social self-concept (Wenz-Gross et al.1997). There is an inverse relationship between stress and self-concept (Garton & Pratt,1995).

Inherent hot-spots

- i. Effective handling of academic stress require a conducive and caring home and school environment.
- ii. What are the symptoms of higher peer pressure and less companionship support manifested by students?
- iii. Who are the stakeholders in developing a positive social and academic self-concept in students?

◆ *Findings from a study based on interviews with 141 first-grade, third-grade, and kindergarten students indicate that the primary stressors perceived by these students are school work and peer relationships. The coping strategies most often mentioned by these children were social support and acceptance, direct action, and distraction (Dickey &Henderson, 1989).*

Inherent hot-spots

- i. Kindergarten and elementary class children are also academically stressed.
- ii. What are the stressors related to school work and peer relationships in kindergarten and elementary classes?
- iii. There is a need to integrate foundations of life-skill training at the kindergarten and elementary classes too.

◆ *Research shows that students experiencing high levels of anxiety cope with this anxiety by means of social support, whereas students with lower levels of anxiety may benefit by having a reduced workload, or they may avoid demands (Suldo et al., 2008).*

Inherent hot-spot

- i. Creating a stress-free schooling is possible through a collaborative participation of teachers, parents and community at large.

Key Reflections

The previous section has highlighted a few major research studies related to stress (academic stress) and the author has attempted to reveal the inherent hotspots in each quoted study. These inherent hotspots form the grit of the reflections. Listed below is a consolidated review of the key reflections related to academic stress.

1. Psychological distress is a growing concern among students and require immediate, imperative action.
2. Action research on the different perspectives of school disengagement and school-related worries of students needs urgent execution.
3. Teachers need to be psychologically empowered and adequately trained to accurately identify, manage and deal with academic stress among students.
4. Curriculum reformation process should appropriately consider the stress inducing elements intrinsically and traditionally linked into the school curriculum.
5. Academic testing and evaluation strategies needs to be strictly productive, positive and joyful.
6. Academicians, parents and all the stakeholders of education needs to reiterate on whether our children are struggling with schooling or enjoying learning.
7. Have we sidelined to nurture the mind, heart and spirits of our children in our race to stuff them with cognitively challenging inputs?
8. There is an urgent need to integrate life- skill education at all levels of schooling and design evaluation strategies to assess its outcomes.

9. How far we have succeeded in providing individualized need -based and ability-driven instruction to our students?

10. Parent-Teacher-Community partnership needs to be adequately encouraged to design a comprehensive strategy for developing a positive social, personal and academic self concept among students.

Research studies on school environment

The section below discusses a few major research literatures on school environment and its influence on student outcomes. The discussion commences with the research studies followed by the author's reflections on the inherent hot spots in each study.

- ◆ *Research shows that elementary students who are in classrooms lacking resources, with teachers who are lacking respect, tend to have more mental health problems. Student behavior, mental health, etc. seems to be improved in resource rich classrooms and with teachers who receive respect and support from the surrounding community (Milkie & Warner, 2011)*

Inherent hot-spots

- i. Declining mental health of students is a greater concern for elementary students as they are in the lower rung of the development process.
 - ii. What are the specific ingredients of a resource rich classroom?
 - iii. Teacher personality and social interaction matters in a classroom.
 - iv. Positive community participation of academicians needs to emphasized and adequately trained.
- ◆ *Studies show that student perception of an emphasis on competition and differential*

treatment by ability in their school environment are related to diminished academic values, feelings of self-esteem, and academic achievement; and increases in school truancy, anger, and depressive symptoms over time (Roesler & Eccles, 1998).

Inherent hot-spots

- i. Perceived student perception on teaching effectiveness, teacher, academic culture and one's ability needs to be critically analyzed and studied for better school productivity.
 - ii. How can academic values be operationally defined in the contemporary system of education? What are the essential academic values for today's children?
 - iii. How can a teacher arrive at a balance between appreciation of individual accomplishment and general academic motivation?
- ◆ *Studies show that students may perform worse on academic tasks as a result of stereotype threat. Therefore, academic environments that perpetuate feelings of stereotype threat may negatively influence student achievement (Rydell et al., 2010).*

Inherent hot-spots

- i. What triggers stereotype threat in a school environment?
 - ii. What are the elements of a school based education programme that can alleviate feelings and sources of stereotype threat among students?
- ◆ *Studies examine how to decrease the stress in school environments. Broadly speaking, research shows the need for shared leadership and a coordinated approach to changing the culture and environment of a school (Richards, 2009).*

Inherent hot-spots

- i. How to inculcate shared leadership among students and teachers?
 - ii. Who are the primary stakeholders of the coordinated approach towards positively changing the school culture and environment?
- ◆ *Research suggests that high performing urban schools have certain factors in common, including solid leadership, a positive and supportive school culture and good teaching. Student engagement has also been identified as a key factor related to school academic success (Alpern, 2008).*

Inherent hot-spots

- i. Performance of a school significantly relies on a cumulative balance between leadership, conducive school environment and teaching effectiveness.
 - ii. How can we enhance intrinsic student engagement among students for joyful learning?
- ◆ *Research finds that students' perception of a supportive and caring middle school environment positively relates to student adaptation, cognition, affect, and behavior. Perceiving a task goal structure in middle school is positively related to academic self efficacy, whereas perceiving an ability goal structure is related to academic self consciousness. Perceiving positive teacher-student relationships predicts positive school related affect and this relation is mediated through feelings of school belonging. Feelings of academic efficacy and school belonging in turn are positively related to final-semester academic grades (Roesler et al., 1996).*

Inherent hot-spots

- i. Perceived school belongingness, academic self efficacy and academic self consciousness are significant predictors of school achievement.
- ii. Perceived positive teacher-student relationship is an intrinsic element of a positive school environment.

◆ *There can be negative effects of the decrease in personal and positive relationships with teachers after the transition to junior high school during early adolescence when children are in special need of close relationships with adults outside of their homes. Also, researchers have documented an increase in ability grouping, comparative and public evaluation, and whole-class task organization at a time when young adolescents have a heightened concern about their status in relation to their peers (Eccles et al., 1993).*

Inherent hot-spots

- i. Need for an emotionally intelligent teaching approach is more crucial at the adolescent stage of development which is characterized by demand for increased individual attention.
- ii. Peer relationships and peer pressure needs to be given significant and genuine space in high school classes.

◆ *School and classroom environments can impact student motivation. Middle grade school math teachers tend to control students more, provide fewer opportunities for student decision-making, and feel less efficacious than elementary school teachers. Ability grouping between classrooms also tends to increase in middle school versus elementary school. Many of these changes are related to declines observed in student*

motivation in middle school, which is why some researchers suggest that there is often a mismatch between characteristics of the classroom environment in traditional middle grade schools and early adolescents' developmental level (Eccles et al., 1993b).

Inherent hot-spots

- i. Student motivation is a crucial predictor of holistic student development.
- ii. Perceptions of middle grade students and elementary grade students on school environment needs to be studied critically and compared to enhance the resources.

◆ *Research in kindergarten classrooms show that children in a developmentally inappropriate classroom tend to exhibit significantly more stress behaviors than children in a developmentally appropriate classroom (Burts et al., 1990)*

Inherent hot-spots

- i. What are the developmentally inappropriate elements in a kindergarten classroom?
- ii. What are the fundamental developmental elements to be integrated in a kindergarten curriculum?
- iii. Creating stress-free and secure living environment needs greater emphasis than cognitively challenging learning environment at the kindergarten level.

Key Reflections

The previous section highlighted a few research studies on the influence of school environment on student productivity and the author's reflections on the inherent hot-spots in each study. Discussed below is the consolidated review of the reflections.

1. School environment as a crucial variable related to mental health of students needs to

- be rigorously investigated and research evidences implemented.
2. A positive school environment should comply well with the developmental stage of the students.
 3. Teacher personality and social interaction of teachers significantly matters in a classroom.
 4. Contemporary academic values needs to be operationally defined by the academic community.
 5. Feelings of stereotype threat adversely affects student achievement.
 6. Student engagement should be continuously and comprehensively enhanced through rich resources.
 7. There is an imperative need to create an emotionally safe and intelligent school and classroom environment to foster positive mental health in students.
 8. Perceived school belongingness, academic self efficacy and academic self consciousness are significant variables of school environment.

9. Kindergarten curriculum needs to emphasize a little more on inculcation of fundamental coping skills in children than mere cognitive enrichment.

Conclusion

Considerable research evidences indicate towards the various academic elements related to the mental health of students. Stress(academic stress) and school environment are such two significant variables. Research literature suggests a strong relationship between total student productivity and academic stress and school environment. The present discussion has attempted to highlight a few significant researches on the above themes and reflected on the inherent potential areas(hot-spots) that demand further potential inquiries for better understanding. The studies are not all inclusive. The discussion is an initiative by the author to rekindle creative thoughts on the contemporary academic inputs provided and to understand schooling from a student perspective.

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