



REVIEW ARTICLE

STRESS LEVEL IN SCHOOL CHILDREN OF SINGAPORE AND INDIA: A COMPARATIVE
EPIDEMIOLOGICAL PICTURE

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ABSTRACT

India and Singapore are two important Asian countries having commonality of being a multi-religions and multiethnic societies. Currently, both the countries are on the vibrant continuum of different developmental levels. One of the most important ladder of this journey is education. Students, in both the countries, are experiencing significant psychological stress arising from the environmental and socio-cultural pressure to perform well. Sometimes, such chronic stressors in extensive levels lead to psychological disorders and impairment in the child's functioning. This review aims to elucidate the nature of this ongoing stress being experienced by school students from an early age and the possible reasons as why these are perpetuating. Certain possible preventive measures that might help curb this trend have also been discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Perspective of meritocracy is quite apart in India than Singapore. Singapore is a country which has relatively recently attained a status of a multi-ethnic society, comprising of a majority Chinese population, persons of Malay origin, persons of Indian origin and a non-negligible proportion of expatriate population. Mainstream school education is divided into two different curriculum systems which are local and international systems. While the international curriculum attracts the expats mostly, citizens and permanent residents mostly enroll their children in the local school systems. Although students in Singapore work hard and are known all over the world for their good academic results, local education system in Singapore is extremely competitive which is characterized by student stratification into "elite" and "non-elite" schools. The streamlining of students, which is based on the academic results of the primary school level examination, creates stress in most students. However, at the same time it motivates the students to work hard. Parents too want to support their children in this endeavor and engage private tuitions and enrichments classes for their children. As a result Singapore has seen a rise in the number of enrichment centers over the last few decades. A study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2012) showed that Singapore students are the hardest working globally.

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They on an average devote 9.4 hours to home studies per week, coming at a third position after China and Russia. On the other hand, after 70 years of independence, India is a fast developing country where policy makers are increasingly focusing on education in the urban, semi urban and the rural areas. In a democratic set up, one can witness a highly competitive battle for a few seats in government owned prestigious institutes of higher education. Therefore, the stress to perform well begins right from the school years. In India, school students can find 4 main boards of education systems, Central Board of Secondary Education (C.B.S.C.), Indian School Certificate Examinations (I.C.S.C.), International Baccalaureate (I.B.) and International General Certificate of Secondary Education (I.G.C.S.E.). In addition, every state has its own Board of Education / Examinations for 10 + 2 system. These systems have their own merits and demerits. Different education institutions and schools are run / managed by both government as well private stakeholders in all the states. There is an immense amount of parental and caregiver pressure on the children with regard to excelling in academics and also extra co-curricular activities, which leads to clinically significant stress among the children. The resultant severe psychological pathologies lead to incidences of suicides and self harm among the children and adolescents. A survey showed that in there were more than 2400 reported cases of suicides committed by students, whereas this number was around 2200 in 2012, signifying that pathologies and stress among students is indeed increasing in India at a fast rate.

Even though there has been a growing number of studies and reviews examining the difference between the developed west and the developed east, few have focused on the two sides of the same coin that we call Asia. India, a country of 1.2 billion people, where 25-27 percent belong to the youth category, cannot now truly be called a meritocracy. With ever increasing reservations and quotas (for women, schedule castes, scheduled tribes, other backward classes and individuals with disability) for seats in secondary and higher educational institutions, merit is sometimes if not always a factor inevitably ignored. This factor is engulfed within the shackles of traditional thought and cultural rules and prejudices based on caste, gender and age that further reduce the factor of merit while choosing the students who get through the filter. Therefore, if seen from a third party perspective, both India and Singapore have their own economic and social bars, that decide the fate of children's education and lifestyle and both have different concerns attached to it. This review aims to shed light upon the degree of psychological stress that school students are going through due to academic pressure in both India and Singapore, what might be the causal factors for the same and steps being taken by the government to support the students.

The presence of psychological stress in students

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggested that stress occurs when an individual perceives that the demand from an external situation is beyond their capacity to cope. Today, the definition "stress is the process of interaction from resolution requests from the environment (known as the transactional model)" is broadly accepted. Psychological stress is the first step towards the occurrence of a psychological disorder. Malhotra and Patra (2014) reported in a meta-analysis aimed at discovering the prevalence of child and adolescent psychiatric disorders in India, that within the community 6.46% and within the school 23.33% of children suffer from Mental disorders. This finding also states that the reporting system of these disorders among children is not adequately developed. In Singapore, a large epidemiological study of mental health among primary school children, in which self report measures were employed, found clinically elevated symptoms of anxiety in 9.3% and depression in 16.9% of the sample. Separation and social anxieties were most common. An earlier study, which aimed to shed light upon the emotional and behavioral problems in Singaporean children, asked parents and teachers to complete the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) and Teacher's Rating Form (TRF) respectively. The results from parents found the presence of clinically significant concerns in 12.5 percent of the children and those from the teachers found significant concerns in 2.5 percent of the population. This shows that there exists a discrepancy between the reporting of the parents and the teachers.

According to Sharan and Sagar (2007), the in-congruity between the available mental health services and the number of children afflicted by such conditions is significant in most of the countries. However, this paucity of services is even more pronounced in developing countries such as India. Patel, (2000) found that globally the kind of treatment available for children is not adequate and this is because of the use of mainly screening tools for diagnosing mental disorders, second stage assessment for the child and mental health services by non-specialist workers in the community. As the preceding study suggests, the best strategy is to educate the child's caregivers (such as parents and teachers) about mental health

issues and possible ways of detecting significant concerns. The importance of this point can also be reiterated as the above mentioned study conducted in Singapore. It clearly demonstrated an under-reporting of symptoms by the school teachers, as compared to the parents' report of their children's emotional and behavioral concerns. A study by Deb, Strodl and Sun (2015), which aimed to shed light upon academic stress, parental pressure, anxiety and mental health issues being faced by Indian high school students, found that 2/3rd of the sample population experienced academic stress and 2/3rd reported experiencing stress from parents for academic performance. The amount of parental pressure related to academics increased with a decrease in father's education. Additionally, 1/3rd of the sample population reported significant psychological concerns. Singh and Gururaj (2014) found that 10-30 percent of the Indian youth are actively involving in behaviors that are impacting their health seriously. These concerns range from substance abuse, to the prevalence of communicable and non-communicable health conditions, common psychiatric conditions and over or under nutrition. Overall it can be said that there is a major degree of stress among children and youth in India.

How different are these students with respect to their leisure time?

Because leisure time is developmentally an important activity and, therefore, it should be utilized to enhance one's wellness and relaxation and not burdening one with health problems, some accounts of how these times are spent by the youth in these two countries can be one of the initial lookouts. Based on a youth's subjective feelings of fitness and wellbeing, he or she is then able to devote time to their educational or vocational activity and design their lifestyle. Thus, making this an important determinant of youth's attitude towards life. A study by Qidwai, *et al.* (2010) showed that only 16.8% of the 16-18 year old mixed gender sample opined that physical activity is essential for health. Watching television and listening to music was reported to be the activity responsible for 61% of students staying awake late night, and getting less than 8 hours of sleep daily. Females were more depressed than males and had more sleep problems, whereas males documented substance abuse and other addictions more than females. Singh and Misra (2015) also showed a greater prevalence of the use of electronic media and telecommunication gadgets, reflecting a larger engagement in sedentary activities than in cultural, community, and physically demanding leisure activities. With respect to Singapore, a study by the National Institute of Education found that male and female adolescents spent significantly more time on weekdays and on weekend days engaged in sedentary activities than engaging in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA). The pooled data of both sexes showed that the average time spent sedentary was more than 15-fold of the time spent engaged in MVPA on weekdays. This difference increased to more than 20-fold on weekends. Overall girls were significantly more 116% more sedentary compared to boys on weekdays and 148% more sedentary than boys on weekend days. This shows that the preferences for sedentary activities over physical activities are not country specific.

The economic bridge between the India and Singapore: a developed vs a developing nation

When comparing the prevalence of student's distress due to academic pressure, true results cannot be reached without

taking into account the difference between the economic statuses of the two countries. Singapore is a highly developed and successful free market economy that is mostly corruption free and has stable prices. Unemployment rate is much smaller than India and modernization is far more pronounced. India on the other hand is developing into an open market economy and still the government is fighting poverty and corruption. These above factors do affect the youth, their growth and education opportunities. A recent longitudinal study by Tamis-Le Monda (2017), investigating the relationship between the child's early home learning environment and his/her later academic skills, showed that the child's earliest learning environments facilitated the emergence of pre-academic skills that continued into early adolescence and predicted the child's academic skills at 5th grade. This study also propounded that when parents provide stable learning environments to their children, right from the first year of life, these practices, either helpful or detrimental may solidify into patterns of engagement that accordingly either continue to support or impede the child's emerging skills. The study highlights the importance of early childhood experiences for children's skill development and long-term academic success, and reinforces the notion that families have a major influence on children's academic outcomes. In a family environment that might have financial inadequacy, parents might not be able to provide adequate resources to stimulate the child's emerging cognitive functioning and as a result this child might struggle with academic performance. This poor performance in turn can cause psychological distress in the child.

A review by Karande and Kulkarni (2005) reiterated that poor school performance not only results in the child having a low self-esteem, but also causes significant stress to the parents. There are many reasons for children to under-perform at school, such as, medical problems, below average intelligence, specific learning disability, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, emotional problems, poor socio-cultural home environment, psychiatric disorders and even environmental causes. The information provided by the parents, classroom teacher and school counselor about the child's academic difficulties guides pediatrician and the child psychiatrist to form an initial diagnosis. However, a multidisciplinary evaluation by an ophthalmologist, otolaryngologist, counselor, clinical psychologist, special educator, and child psychiatrist is usually necessary before making the final diagnosis. It is important to find the reason(s) for a child's poor school performance and come up with a treatment plan early so that the child can perform up to full potential.

Comparable situation in other countries

When speaking about cultural factors, especially in Asia the cultural demands are also seen highly in students who are not only in school but also those who have finished secondary education and are now starting higher studies. In a study conducted by the University of Lahore, Khan, Gulzar and Yahya (2013), found a significant relationship between stress factors and demographics for undergraduate students. They found that students guided by strict rules and regulations accounted for stress (categorized by the researchers as family stressors); not being able to make personally optimal choices for living with a partner can also lead to major amount of stress (categorized by the researchers as emotional stress) and students belonging to low income families have restricted purchasing power of leisure resources and commodities

(categorized by the researchers as financial stress). If these findings could be applied to undergraduate students then school students with less emotional mature coping skills can be deemed more vulnerable to experiencing stress. Therefore, this study majorly sheds light upon the strong role, cultural aspects can have on the mind of a student who is in school.

On a whole, in comparison to western countries, students in the eastern countries, example China, have more sense of responsibility towards their parents. Pomerantz et al. (2011) examined American and Chinese children's sense of responsibility to their parents during early adolescence with an added emphasis on its effects of the student's academic performance. This results of this study indicated that children's sense of responsibility to their parents declined over the seventh and eighth grades in the United States. However, such findings were not made for the Chinese students. In both the countries, children's sense of responsibility was predictive of enhanced academic functioning among children over time. However, the same increased sense of responsibility can also lead to stress in the children.

Conclusion

Both India and Singapore are unique societies in their own right. Singapore, a peaceful cooperative multi ethnic society working rapidly towards continued excellence. India, with a large democratic set up, steadily moving towards development and westernization, have a strong youth population. In both these countries, education is utilized as the ladder for development and right from the primary years of schooling students often feel stressed with the demand to perform. Stress among students although prevalent in both India and Singapore, is strongly hued by the unique cultural set up of these countries. In India stress among students emerges from significant financial problems, lack of infrastructure, and lack of mental health support on one hand to the strenuous education system, cultural demands and family pressure on the other. In Singapore too parental pressure, strenuous local education system and traditional/cultural expectations affect the student's mind. Although the nature of stress among Indian and Singaporean students vary greatly, a noteworthy wish (and its inevitable strength) among both the masses for development or moving their countries towards the developed west often leads the students to experience stress in their own unique socio-cultural environments. In India, the large population, and in Singapore the limited area and number of extended opportunities are maintaining the stress among students. Although policy makers are recently trying to draw measures for alleviating psychological concerns of students, we have a long way to go before constructive changes will be visible.

Suggested points may be taken into consideration for helping children overcome stress

- Strengthening the understanding of mental health issues among children, parents and teachers.
- Increasing the availability of mental health support for children at school and community.
- Helping children learn effective stress management techniques right in school in the form of a mandatory resilience building training program.
- Develop feasible policies to reduce academic demands during student evaluation.

- Move towards a more enquiry based, experiential learning system that induces curiosity among the students that drives their learning rather than the fear to perform in examinations.
- Lessen the gap between gender generalizations and emphasis of gender oriented roles for each student that lead to detrimental psychological health for the student.
- Increase availability of training in vocational courses and skills that students can learn for securing employments, beyond the traditional core educational routes of doing so.
- Encourage entrepreneurship and leadership skills among students right from the school years to help parents recognize the potential of a student who might be performing above the set 75th percentile.
- Psycho-educating parents about the rationale behind the need for Gifted Educational programs that not only compliment the child's unique intellectual skills but also help the child flourish in a comfortable social environment (class and friends circle). Considering all children to be appropriate for these special classes should be discouraged as it leads to undue psychological pressure on the child with average or above average intellectual abilities.

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