Psychological Engagement of Students Enrolled in Schools through 'Age-Appropriate-Grade' Provision of RTE Act 2009: A Case of Deprived Urban Children in Uttarakhand

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ABSTRACT

RTE Act 2009 has stated that children above six years who could not complete elementary education shall be admitted in 'class appropriate to his or her age.' To ensure that all such children complete elementary education it is necessary to ensure they become intrinsically motivated and feel engaged with their school and with learning, besides making systemic provision of access and bridging the learning gap. The sample of the present study included such students from Class III – VIII of government schools (urban and semi-urban areas) of two districts in Uttarakhand. Results throw light on perception of students towards their schools, teachers, peers as well as themselves, their psychological needs, factors which facilitate and factors which impede their psychological engagement with school. Understanding of the above may help schools to create a conducive environment for active involvement of these students with school activities and thus facilitate their completion of elementary education.

Introduction

The paradigm shift in recent years has encouraged students in school/classroom to be perceived as a dynamic participant in the construction of their knowledge, thereby making learning environment conducive and adequately enabling for them. Such an environment affords opportunities for children to ask questions, relate what they are learning in school to things happening

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outside, etc. With 'Education for All' as the vision and mission where 'all' children have access to and opportunity for completion of elementary education, the importance of making the learning environment adequately engaging has gained further prominence. However, though statistics shows that, since *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) was initiated, there has been a rise in the enrolment rates, but the same may not be said for the rate of retention and completion of elementary education. The reasons for this are many. The students' demotivation and their disengagement with school is probably one of the reasons for this.

The implementation of the *Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009* (RTE 2009) has further given impetus to ensuring 'Education for All'. The Act stated that in such cases where a child above six years of age was 'never enrolled' or could not complete her/his elementary education, then she/he shall be admitted in a 'class appropriate to his or her age' (RTE 2009: Section 4 of Chapter II) and that such a child has the right to receive special training to be at par with his/her classmates. This provision of the Act, on the one hand, ensures that every child not only has access to but also completes elementary education and, on the other hand, challenges the schools to become 'the enabling and conducive environment' which motivates a child to continue 'being in school' and complete his/her education. In order to facilitate their *'pursuing and completing of elementary education on any grounds'* (RTE 2009: Section 8c of Chapter III) it is of utmost importance to bring the re-enrolled and never enrolled students academically and psychologically at par with their classmates. Besides the extrinsic support through special training provision, it is necessary therefore to ensure that such students become intrinsically motivated and feel engaged with their school and with learning. A strong bonding with the school, peers and teachers is crucial to bring students to school every day but also motivate her/him to put greater efforts in learning. Besides, to engage in a school/classroom a student needs help by understanding her/his psychological needs as they have a drive to satisfy three core needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness (Ryan, 1995).

A student does not stop attending school all of a sudden. Dropping out of school is a process that occurs gradually which often gets initiated by low academic performance, feelings of being neglected by peers and teachers, or feelings of unworthiness and lack of competence. When a student begins to view school

as a place which is not valuable enough to spend time, it is then onwards that she/he begins to get detached from it. Participation of students' and their sense of belongingness with the school are of concern not only for its relationship with students' learning, but also because of its relation in students' disposition towards the process of schooling and more importantly their life-long learning. Over the years, researches have led to the understanding that the construct of engagement is useful for understanding and dealing with this gradual process of disconnecting with school (Finn, 1989). Engagement, therefore, is that construct which helps in providing a means to intervene and prevent students from distancing themselves from school life and its educational outcomes.

Researchers have proposed different models for describing students' engagement; however, it remains the primary theoretical model in understanding dropout and is a necessary component in promoting school completion, with adequate academic and social skills (Christenson et al., 2008; Finn, 2006). Student's engagement is considered as an active involvement of the students in school and learning tasks (Reeve et al., 2004). According to Klem and Connell (2004) students' engagement is an ongoing engagement (students' behavioural, emotional and thought processes) in school and a reaction to challenges (students' strategy for coping with difficult situations) faced in school. Thus, student engagement is a multi-dimensional construct encompassing the behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions.

When student engagement was treated as an outcome variable, research findings revealed that school environment has influences on the level of students' engagement (Bryk and Thum, 1989; Finn and Voekl, 1993). Goodnow (1992) further revealed the relation between students' sense of belongingness and their valuing of academic work demands considerable persistence and expectations of successful educational outcomes by them. This supports the finding of Eccles et al. (1993) which revealed that motivation of students varied with 'fit' between educational context and students developmental needs. Furrer and Skinner (2003) in their study showed that both student and teachers reported that students' level of behavioural and emotional engagement mediate significantly the relationship between relatedness and academic performance.

Thus, it can be said that psychological engagement with school does play a crucial role in their motivation and their academic

outcomes. It also points towards the pivotal role that quality of instruction, school and classroom environment and teachers' interaction has on students' engagement, which further goes to influence their learning outcomes.

The systemic provision of establishing learning centres and bridge courses is an effort to bring such students at par with their classmates and thus fill up their academic gap and facilitate their academic engagement. The RTE Act 2009 though has made systemic provisions to ensure that education is provided to such children who are entering school and getting admitted to grades as appropriate to their age, but simultaneous efforts also need to be made to ensure that such students feel psychologically engaged with their school and do not drop out. Against this backdrop, the present study made an attempt to identify factors that facilitate/ impede engagement with school of students who have been admitted to grades appropriate to their age.

Method

Objective and Research Questions

The objective of the present paper was to understand the process of psychological engagement of students' enrolled with school through 'age-appropriate-grade' provision of RTE Act 2009. For the attainment of this objective, the following research questions were framed:

- What are the perceptions of students enrolled through 'age-appropriate-grade' towards their school, teachers, peers and self?
- What are the psychological needs of students enrolled through 'age-appropriate-grade'?
- What are the factors that facilitate/impede 'age-appropriate-grade' enrolled students' engagement with school?

Population

The sample population lived in slums particularly in Rudrapur block of Udhamsingh Nagar and Haldwani block of Nainital, while in Gadarpur and Baazpur blocks of Udhamsingh Nagar the students lived in semi-urban areas surrounded by lands of sugarcane, corn and 'popular trees'. In Rudrapur and Gadarpur industries and factories provided students' families opportunity for earning. In Baazpur and Haldwani, with the Kosi river running nearby,

most families indulged in seasonal work of loading and unloading sand from the river. It was during this season when parents urged the entire household (including the school going children) to take part in digging sand and loading them in trucks. Since payment was made on the basis of the number of trucks loaded, the family required more hands to dig and load more number of trucks and increase its chance of earning a good sum of money. However, this led to the children remaining absent from school for considerable number of days/weeks. The situation was more acute for the upper primary stage students as with their youthful energy they could dig faster and run around faster.

Another activity for earning livelihood which prevented the students from regularly attending the school, particularly those in Grades 3–5, was that of plucking green peas and scaling them to be packed and sold in markets. *'Matarchilna'* as it is popularly called was one of the biggest reasons for students to dropout in earlier instances and still continued to be a predominant factor in their remaining away from school for a long period of time during its season.

The average size of household was 8–10 with minimum of 4 to 8 siblings. It was noted that in most of the families the younger siblings were sent to school, while the elder ones never went to school/had left school after Class V and were presently either working at home or married away. However, there were few rare cases where an elder sibling (of the students in the study) had completed elementary, secondary or senior secondary schooling.

Sample, Tools and Data Analysis

The study was carried out in two districts of Uttarakhand (Udhamsingh Nagar and Nainital). The districts having high density of the sample population, as shared by the office of SSA of Uttarakhand, were selected. A total of 140 students enrolled through 'age-appropriate-grade admission provision of RTE Act 2009, from Classes III to VIII in Government boys and girls schools in semi-urban areas of the districts, formed the sample for the study. Purposive sampling was followed for drawing the sample of the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interview schedule to assess behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions of engagement of the target population and observation of the samples' interaction inside classroom as well as in other unstructured spaces of the school such as playground and corridors were recorded as field notes.

The thematic analysis of the data was carried out and responses were categorised under the identified parameters of the three dimensions of students' psychological engagement i.e. behavioural, emotional and cognitive.

Results and Discussion

Perceptions of Students Enrolled Through 'Age-appropriate-Grade' Towards their School, Teachers, Peers and Self

The perception of 'age-appropriate-grade' enrolled students about their school was implicit in their responses to queries on how they felt about school and their participation in curricular and co-curricular activities. The reason for liking school ranged from liking the regular ritual of coming to school, being in school, getting an opportunity to play in school and getting to eat food on time. Students shared that their urge to concentrate in class was the primary reason for their coming to school, since attending school and being attentive in class was the only way through which they could learn. Therefore, paying attention in class and concentrating was pertinent. However, there were also a few who shared that though they perceived school and learning in school as crucial and therefore made serious efforts to concentrate, but either got diverted or failed to be attentive because they were in 'no mood' to study and/or were plagued with memories of the difficulties faced by their families.

Analysis of the students' perception towards their teachers revealed they perceived teachers as someone whom they 'should' like, as 'it is the teachers who make it possible for them to read and write', the purpose for which they were in the school. Indeed, almost all expressed their liking for their teachers as the teacher talked lovingly and behaved in a manner that expressed the teachers' care for the students, and she/he taught in such a way that it was easy to understand and clarify their doubts. The teacher was also perceived as a compassionate person who is fair, 'just' and concerned with her/his wards. The teachers who fulfilled the above expectations were liked by the students. The behaviour of teachers which were viewed by the students as righteous were: 'punishing someone only when the student(s) committed mistake, such acts as making noise in the class and distracting other students, teasing or harassing some classmate, not completing the given task or coming to class without learning or completing the assigned tasks.

The teacher who 'let them play during games period' and 'in her/his presence in the class prevented occurrence of any kind of teasing of classmates' was perceived as a 'just' teacher. However, students' perception of a teacher as the 'knowledge provider' and a role model of a righteous person led to their disliking certain aspects of some teachers in the same schools. When the teacher(s) punished the students for committing errors in reading-writing, spared no time to clarify doubts, got angry and scolded when clarification for any doubt was sought, the students perceived them as not fulfilling the role of a teacher and thus their respect and liking for such teachers were rare. The students also did not like those teachers who displayed non-caring feelings towards them and lack of understanding of their problems, such as not being able to come to school in uniform, not attending school due to helping parent at home or work and scolding student who has not committed any mistake.

The students perceived the school as 'belonging' to them and were found to participate in activities. Analysis of students' responses revealed that such schools were considered good where students perceived their teacher/teachers as caring, understanding and 'just', and they participated actively in curricular as well as other school activities. In schools, where teachers helped students who perceived themselves as incapable of learning/doing an activity, the students had high opinion about such types of schools. On the other hand, in schools where most of the teachers were not perceived fulfilling their role as 'teachers', and students participated due to motivation by sibling, friend or self, such schools were not liked by the students. The students considered 'worthy' of running to only those teachers at the time of crisis who were perceived as 'understanding' and 'non-judgmental'. In cases where the teacher was found non-caring and judgmental, it was usually a friend or a sibling to whom the students turned to for assistance and guidance. In very rare cases where an elder sibling had completed her or his elementary, secondary or senior secondary education, the students' in the study were found to be guided and motivated by them at hours of distress caused by uncaring and judgemental teachers.

Results revealed that students liked peers who were cooperative, collaborated in learning and other activities, were caring and shared similar purpose of coming to school (i.e., 'to read-write' and learn something ' meaningful'). Using foul language by peers in

school premises, teasing and fighting were behaviours that were disliked by majority of the students.

Lastly, the students' perception about themselves revealed that those who perceived themselves worthy and competent were persistent and found innovative ways of not only taking time out for studying at home but also gave utmost importance to school and studying. Preparing for any activity related to school (be it an examination or a group dance), such students gave importance to planning, seeking help and setting goals. As for those students who perceived themselves as incompetent were the ones who always sought support from either a friend, sibling or teacher, and were motivated only when they were pushed by the friend/teacher. For such students the need to monitor their own progress and reflect upon their own actions was not considered necessary and their urge for 'reading-writing' was only due to their parents/school desires.

Psychological Needs of Students Enrolled through 'Age-appropriate-grade'

Analysis of the responses of students to queries on what did they like in the school and what did they like and dislike doing in school, it was obtained that for majority of the students school fulfilled their need of feeling competent. The situation of coming to school, being in school, and learning to read and write while in school were matters of pride for doing something meaningful. Also reading-writing in school concretised the hope for enhancement in their quality of life, as adults and thus enthused optimism (a crucial psychological need) amongst them. The scope to actively participate in 'doing' things in school and classroom, be it for peers or teachers, was enjoyable and was expressed by the students recurrently. This made the need of 'being useful' to their significant stakeholders as one of the prominent psychological need of the population. Also like any student the need to feel 'belongingness' and 'being part of a group' was shared by the students. Liking a teacher for being compassionate, understanding and facilitating learning in the population helped in making the students' feel comfortable with the teacher and strengthened the need of belonging to the teacher and school, thus encouraging them to make efforts and actively participate in learning.

Analysis showed that there was an unanimous feeling of dislike amongst the students when there was fighting, teasing, shouting

in the class, when teacher scolded, when there was no one to teach in class and everyone loitered around, when classmates did not talk with each other or there was gossiping among groups of students. It was noteworthy that while students enjoyed 'doing things' for their school and class which gave them the feeling of a 'being a student' where they were indulged in 'reading-writing', they disliked cleaning floors, and fetching water for entire school as these work they did at home and they did not 'come to school' for this reason.

The responses of students also revealed their need for a friendly and harmonious school environment. School was a place where they came for happiness and some relief from the unhappy surroundings of their life at home, hence the reason for liking such behaviours of classmates as — not indulging in fighting, talking courteously, and making efforts to extend help with studies and in preparing for examinations. Further, students liked teachers' behaviours such as talking lovingly, visiting classmates' home or calling them from home when they remained absent in school, punishing only when someone commits mistake, and not scolding even when not able to do/learn anything in the class. In students' opinion, such behaviours contributed towards developing and maintaining a harmonious environment in the class and school.

Factors Facilitating/Impeding 'Age-appropriate-grade' Enrolled Students' Engagement with School

The responses of students about their perception of the peers, teachers, school and self and their sharing of the psychological needs as well as their responses to why they participated in school or classroom activities, what they liked or disliked doing in school, revealed the factors that facilitated their engagement with school and also factors that created a distance between the student and her/his school. It was revealed that factors that facilitated the engagement of students were mainly an amicable relation with classmates and peers in school, caring and collaboration amongst peers for academic activities, being made to feel competent and efficacious about self as a student and also as a human being by teachers, made to feel 'useful' as a student to peers/classmates, teachers while in school, and the presence of teachers in class as a compassionate but authority figure. It was also observed that their relationship with others (peers, teachers) played a crucial role in helping them to feel bonded; which further facilitated their

engagement with school, wherein teacher's cooperative behaviour (verbal as well as non-verbal) played a pivotal role for motivating students.

The factors impeding engagement in the sample population were poor conduct and using foul language by peers/classmates, teachers as well as self, being made to feel 'separate' in class/playground etc. by teachers and/or classmates, lack of appreciation of efforts made by a student, perceived lack of understanding of their family conditions by teachers, non-comprehensibility of subject matter being taught (irrespective of making efforts by self) and lack of adequate number of teachers in school, which led to many classes going without any teacher and thus leaving scope for 'free-time' amongst students during which they fought and quarrelled with each other. Poor learning environment at home was another major impeding factor towards their engagement with school. The students were bound to engage in household chores as well as help elders in the family at work place (agriculture, taking care of cows, accompanying elders to brick kilns and during paddy cotton cutting seasons) in earning money for their survival. These became major obstacle for their being regular in school. In addition, lack of support, motivation and guidance at home made the students find it very difficult to 'resume going to school' once they were away for a considerable number of days (even a week's absence from school was shared as a long time by the students and that it was difficult to resume school again!).

Implications

The study highlights that engagement with school of such students who are enrolled through 'age-appropriate-grade' (and majorly live in the urban/semi urban slums) is a collaborative endeavour between teachers and students as a team. The findings of the study may help schools to create an environment conducive for active involvement and participation of these students with all activities of school by designing interventions that fulfil their psychological needs. The study throws light on the sample population's psychological engagement revealing how they perceived their school, teachers, peers as well as themselves as effective stakeholders in school and also brings forth the factors which facilitated and factors which impeded their emotional, behavioural and cognitive engagement with school.

The systemic provision through the RTE Act 2009 of providing special training for bridging the academic gaps with their classmates may include the above mentioned observations from the study so that their behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement with school is ensured and thus bridge their emotional gaps and enable such students to complete their elementary education.

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