

4

School Education — The Way Forward

Ruchi Shukla*

Abstract

This paper tries to ascertain if the Self-determination Theory and its concepts of competency, autonomy and relatedness, which lead to intrinsic motivation, can be utilised in solving the rising problem of stress among students, including those at the primary stage. Apart from theoretical interventions and approaches, one practical way of handling not just stress but related problems as well is by having trained teachers as 'level one counsellors'. It is a teacher who serves as link among students, parents, school education system and administration. The presence of such a person in a school, whom students can reach out to, would not only ensure better stress management in them but also help build resilience and intrinsic motivation, enabling them become independent learners, who are self-driven and determined despite the challenges they face in life.

INTRODUCTION

Learning for an end — which refers to the annual exam results and securing social status by acquiring a job thereafter — seems to be a common understanding of the education process among most parents and other stakeholders. It seems that the school education system does not emphasise 'intrinsic motivation' for learning as opposed to extrinsic

motivation. Academic efforts and extrinsic factors to sustain learning have multiplied stress levels among students, adversely affecting their mental, physical and psychological health.

Educational stress has led to a rise in the number of suicide cases and anxiety issues among students. The situation is alarming and has drawn the attention of

* Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Psychology and Foundations of Education, NCERT, New Delhi.

educationists, psychologists and counsellors worldwide, including India. The education system in India aims to accommodate students coming from diverse backgrounds of society. Curriculum overload makes them study a number of subjects that too for longer hours, adversely affecting their retention capacity, and gradually, their mental and physical health.

Moreover, parents' expectations from their wards to excel in extracurricular activities, apart from pursuing some hobbies, have also increased (Shukla, 2004). This pressure is overwhelming for a student to handle. At times, the student may not be able to share one's feelings with anyone, which may add to their stress and anxiety.

Adolescent students are more prone to educational stress, which starts from struggling to know themselves as individuals, along with handling academic pressures like performance in examinations, making a career choice, and meeting the expectations of parents, teachers and school. This stress among adolescents is reflected in the increasing number of suicide and other related cases like depression, anxiety, etc.

Though there are theoretical approaches to problems faced by children and adolescents, few actually look at school and parental pressure, and the resultant stress. One such framework for understanding the dynamics of educational stress is the Self-Determination Theory proposed

by Deci and Ryan (1985). The theory seeks to explain the conditions under which individuals internalise external contingencies. With the movement of the states of motivation towards intrinsic or internalised motivation, students are enabled to assume greater self-control over their efforts and outcomes. The theory suggests that with the satisfaction of the three needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, an individual can experience well-being (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Such well-being when sustained over a lifetime leads to a sense of personal integrity and satisfaction or 'eudaimonia' (Ryan and Frederick, 1997; Waterman, 1993).

Several factors in the Indian education context add to students' curricular and co-curricular burden. One of them is public and private schooling, which are different not only in syllabus and teaching practices but also in the socio-economic backgrounds of the students studying in the schools. Gender, too, adds to stress levels among students. Therefore, all these and other related factors need to be analysed so as to understand the dynamics of education stress among students.

Students at the primary stage have to adjust to a new environment outside home, i.e., school. Here, teachers serve as an important link helping the students connect with the system. Therefore, this study aims to understand the complexities of stress among students, including those at the primary stage.

However, this stress is mostly observed in students of Classes X–XII. It is at this stage that they are not only pressured to perform well in exams from home and school but also realise that the marks scored in Classes X and XII board exams are important for their career. Uncertainty related to career choices leads to stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental and physical health ailments in them. The high stress levels may affect their efficacy, academic performance and well-being. However, it is to be noted that these behavioural symptoms sometimes start in many students right at the primary stage, which may go unnoticed or are ignored by parents and teachers at that time.

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY— AN ANALYSIS

According to the Self-determination Theory, low relatedness is a major factor for lack of intrinsic motivation among students. Moreover, the education system does not allow much scope for autonomous self-determined learning. Further, external control seems to dominate the schooling and educational experience of the students. Other factors affecting the sense of autonomy are — authoritarian system, structured teaching, one-way teaching style (which hardly has scope for interaction or discussion with students), etc. Competence is affected by lack of positive feedback, snowball effects of poor performance and consequent increase

in negative feedback, achievement related anxiety, etc. According to the Self-Determination Theory, autonomy and competence have significant influence on students' interest and intrinsic motivation in the learning process. These three factors, i.e., autonomy, competence and relatedness, are crucial for learning and facilitate or impair the degree of internalisation of external motivating conditions.

According to Bandura (1977), efficacy belief and the concept of competence in the Self-Determination Theory are related in meaning and experience as they refer to an individual's sense of self-worth that contributes to one's motivation. Efficacy has a strong relation to performance and competence belief. This correlation is more prominent in adolescents than children. The hypothesised relationship between self-efficacy and academic motivation has been proved by researchers (Lent, Brown, and Larkin, 1986). A study of different content domains (writing and reading) shows that there is significant relationship between self-efficacy and academic motivation (Lent, Brown, and Larkin, 1986; Multon, Brown and Lent, 1991; Pajares, 1996; and Schunk, 1995). Therefore, it can be said that efficacy belief is central to students' goal setting and efforts they put in to achieve their targets. Students with a strong sense of efficacy belief will make persistent efforts to achieve

their goals and experience lower stress levels than those with a lower sense of efficacy. The latter type of students may slacken in their efforts and feel anxious or stressed out due to lack of self-confidence.

Self-esteem and efficacy belief are closely related as they emphasise perceived competence in the Self-Determination Theory. Different people have different speed of internalisation of environmental characteristics, usually, referred to as the rate of adjustment.

Research studies indicate that stress affects the process of self-determination or the ability to control one's thoughts, perceptions and orientation (Salkovskis and Harrison, 1984). Kant and Gibbons (1987) point out: "It is not the sheer frequency of disturbing thoughts, but the perceived inability to turn them off, that is a major cause of distress". This view emphasises a major factor in causation and outcome of stress. If people are intrinsically motivated, they have the strength to overcome external difficulties that the environment may pose before them. Besides, the coping process is much smoother in this case. The stronger a person's sense of efficacy, the bolder is the way of tackling problems that breeds stress and anxiety, and greater is one's success in shaping the environment to one's liking (Bandura, 1997; Williams, 1992).

Two decades of research on factors of intrinsic motivation and educational performance suggests

that autonomy motivated students thrive in education and they benefit when teachers support this autonomy (Reeve, 2002). This sense of autonomy is related to competence and relatedness. Therefore, all three factors are important determinants of a student's sense of self-control and intrinsic motivation.

THE INDIAN SCENARIO

Schools in India are diverse in nature — varying widely across context and locations like urban and rural, catering to students belonging to different socio-economic backgrounds, and following varied norms and standards. The socio-economic difference in the status and background of the students studying in government and private schools influences their educational achievement. The ecology of the students brought up in conditions of poverty is characterised by inadequate physical facilities, stimulation and models (Sinha, 1982; and Vagreacha and Bapna, 1993). Research studies, further, indicate that lack of basic facilities like food, hygiene, health and education not only adversely affects the health of these students but also their cognitive development.

Saraswathi and Dutta (1990), in their study, share the strengths and weaknesses of poverty conditions. They point out that weaknesses are characterised by limited scope for social mobility, while strengths are typified as availability of informal support system, family atmosphere, and realistic and practical orientation to life.

In India, students belonging to different socio-economic backgrounds and school types are subjected to parents' and teachers' expectations regarding their performance in exams, which are apparently related to their levels of intrinsic motivation. Government schools provide subsidised education and greater accessibility — both geographically and economically. While government school students mostly come from families, where there may be little intellectual support for studies further aggravated by economic disadvantage (no tuitions), those in private schools are likely to get maximum support (either from the institution or family or both). Therefore, the two school types are seen of becoming important factors in determining the educational achievement of the students.

Though the findings are sometimes contradictory, there is a strong indication of general impairment in cognitive functioning due to poverty conditions. Most of the cognitive processes that are affected are relevant to students' academic performance (Sinha, 1990). The effect of this deprivation is not limited to the cognitive functioning of the students but is also reflected in their levels of motivation. The disadvantaged mostly have a low and stagnant level of aspiration; display low goal discrepancy index and greater fear of failure, and lack risk taking attitude. They display low need of achievement, autonomy, and also lack

of initiative and aggression. The level of motivation, thus, is low. Hence, it may be said that these students have a low sense of self and self-efficacy (Mohanty and Misra, 2000).

Another important variation between the two groups coming from different Socio Economic Status (SES) is achievement related cognition. Kelley (1971) suggested that attribution is one of the basic cognitive functions. Attribution is the cognitive process, whereby, an individual tries to locate causes to one's behaviour and its outcomes. The person tends to attribute the outcomes of one's behaviour or efforts either to internal or external causes. In case of people belonging to poor sections of the society, failure is, generally, viewed as lying inside a person, while success is treated as a resultant of luck (Jain and Misra, 1986). Hence, students coming from lower economic backgrounds not only suffer from negative consequences of the Pygmalion Effect (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968) or low expectations but also from self-defeating cognitions, where a person is unable to perceive oneself as the master of one's life, taking the blame for failures. Thus, students from low SES are less likely to experience autonomy, relatedness and competence in an educational setup, which may lead to lack of or poor intrinsic motivation in them. However, in many cases, such students experience less stress as parental and societal pressure to

perform is lesser. Some children from low economic backgrounds show resilience or non-vulnerability, and emerge as 'lotus in the mud' (Mohanty and Misra, 2000).

In India, gender is one of the most important factors that influences the life of a person. Often, girls studying in government schools have to fulfill household responsibilities like cooking, cleaning, taking care of younger siblings and performing other domestic chores that adversely affect their education. However, in private schools, girls come from a small section of the privileged population, where gender discrimination is at its minimal and they, therefore, enjoy family support in pursuing their education and ambitions.

CONCLUSION

The Self-Determination Theory and its concepts of competency, autonomy and relatedness, which lead to intrinsic motivation, can help solve the rising problem of stress among students not just at the secondary but also at the primary stage of schooling. Therefore, building on the students' sense of self — be it identity, self-esteem and efficacy — can offer solution to the rising stress levels among them. If teachers work on a student's sense of relatedness, competency and autonomy, it will make one capable of handling academic, as well as, personal and social problems. Therefore, it is suggested that teachers, especially, at the primary stage, be trained as level one counsellors as the foundations of a child's future are laid at this stage.

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