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ACADEMIC STRESS AND MENTAL HEALTH AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Stress becomes an integral part of human life. Anything that creates a challenge or a threat to our comfort is a stress. All kind of stress is not considered to be bad because it helps people to perform well. In academics, stress is unavoidable among students, and it influences students' performance in all academic activities. Academic stress plays a major role in determining the mental health of students. This study was conducted to explore the academic stress and its relationship with mental health among high school students. 200 high school students from Government and Private schools in and around Salem city, Tamil Nadu were selected through stratified random sampling and the data was collected with Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents and Positive Mental Health Scale. The results revealed that students from private school experienced higher academic stress than that of government school students, and private school students have higher mental health status than their counterpart. It was also found that academic stress had a significant relationship with the mental health of high school students. The implications of this are presented in this article.

KEYWORDS : Academic Stress, Mental health, High school students

Background

Today the entire world is witnessing stress and its consequences. Bernstein (2008) viewed stress as "a negative emotional, cognitive, behavioral and physiological process that occurs as a person tries to adjust to or deal with stressors". The effect of stress is understood in many walks of life with diverse population especially among students. Richlin-Klonsky (2003) reported that "stress has lessened academic performance, hinder with a student's capability to involve in and add to campus life, and raise the probability of substance abuse and other potentially destructive behaviours". Rawson (1999) highlighted that "many students reported their experience of high academic stress at predictable times which have resulted from preparing and taking exams, class ranking competition, and mastering huge amount of syllabus in a comparatively very small amount of time". Fairbrother (2003) recognized that "academic stress as stressors which occurred due to various reasons such as too many assignments, competitions with other students, failures and poor relationships with other students or teachers". Erku (2006) opined that "pressure to perform well in the examination or test and time allocated makes academic environment very stressful. One of the major impacts of stress is that it affects drastically the psychological functions in turn mental health of people".

According to World Health Organization (2014) mental health is viewed as "a state of well-being in which individuals realize their own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and able to make a contribution to community". Galderisi, et al (2015) defined "mental health as a dynamic state of internal equilibrium which enables individuals to use their abilities in harmony with universal values of society. Basic cognitive and social skills; ability to recognize, express and modulate one's own emotions, as well as empathize with others; flexibility and ability to cope with adverse life events and function in social roles; and harmonious relationship between body and mind represent important components of mental health which contribute, to varying degrees, to the state of internal equilibrium". Being in a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, adolescents have to confront with varied types of stressors. Kaur (2014) pointed out that "the rising expectations of the parents in terms of scores and academic performance sometimes put extra burden on children, which may sometimes cause many physical or mental ailments". Madlan (2004) indicated that "mental health is a way of thinking, feeling and behaviour in a person's daily lives. People with a positive mental health can recognize themselves on their ability, willing to accept failure, able to control their emotions and appreciate

themselves".

Many researches were attempted to explore the relationship between academic stress, mental health and other correlates among students. Prabu (2015) reported that "higher secondary students experienced moderate level of academic stress, especially students in private schools experienced high level of stress than the students in government schools". Deb (2015) indicated that "students' academic stress and parental pressure as well as psychiatric problems were positively correlated in Indian context. Examination-related anxiety had significant positive association with psychiatric problems among students. It is emphasized by this study that academic stress was a serious issue, affected about two-third of senior high school students". A study by Kaur (2014) revealed that "significant differences exist in the mental health of adolescents due to their academic stress; girl students with high level of academic stress had poor mental health status than their counterpart". Anjna (2011) reported that "academic stress had significant negative correlation with academic achievement and mental health of the adolescents, also academic achievement had significant positive correlation with mental health". From these studies we could recognize the negative impact of stress on the mental health.

Need for the study

Indian constitution assured that school education is a fundamental right to every child. Due to liberalization and global market, education today became a service-oriented business sector in the hands of private agencies. Students are pressurized to get higher marks by the educational institutions to increase their market value. Parents are under constant pressure to provide their children a better education to get jobs in the global market. As a result, students experience severe stress in their academics. There is a disparity in educational awareness among students in private and government schools which would enhance their stress further. To excel in the competition and secure seats in higher education, more specifically in professional courses, students were compelled to take additional classes and special coaching. Due to the comparison and competition, parents tend to pressurize children to the core. The students are driven to study for getting job rather than understanding subjects. Hence, the mental health of students get affected. High school is a crucial stage thereafter students have to choose different subjects in higher secondary, where their marks are the only consideration to allocate various streams of study; and hence they are under tremendous stress to secure marks in public examination. In this context, it is imperative to explore the

relationship between academic stress and mental health among high school students.

Hypotheses

1. There is a significant relationship between academic stress and mental health among high school students
2. Students from government and private schools differ significantly in their academic stress
3. Students from government and private schools significantly differ in their mental health

Research Method

The present study adopted survey method. The following tools were used to collect the data.

1. The Academic Stress Scale by Jinadong Sun (2012). It consisted of 16 statements with 5-point responses, measuring five factors of academic stress, such as pressure from study, work load, worry about grades, self-expectations and despondency.
2. The Positive Mental Health Scale by Vaingankar et al., (2011). This tool consisted of 48 statements with 6 responses measuring six dimensions of mental health, such as general coping, emotional support, spirituality, interpersonal skills, personal growth & autonomy and global affect. Both of these scales are highly reliable and validated in the Indian context.

The population of this study consisted of government and private school students in and around Salem city. 200 school students were selected through stratified random sampling. The above mentioned tools were distributed to the students and the data was collected under personal supervision. Out of the 200 data collected, only 178 were considered for final analysis.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Relationship between Academic Stress and Mental Health of High School Students

Dimensions of Academic Stress/Mental Health	Pressure from Study	Workload	Worry about Grades	Self-Expectation	Despondency	Total
General Coping	0.215*	0.173*	0.11	0.065	-0.154*	0.176*
Emotional Support	0.084	0.052	0.190*	-0.022	-0.175*	0.066
Spirituality	0.241*	0.06	0.114	0.08	-0.029	0.196*
Interpersonal Skills	0.273*	0.143	0.226*	-0.068	-0.115	0.203*
Personal Growth and Autonomy	0.268*	0.203*	0.262*	-0.034	0.013	0.294*
Global Affect	0.12	0.170*	0.018	0.001	-0.076	0.098
Total	0.262*	0.166*	0.215*	-0.004	-0.113	0.226*

*Significant at 0.05 level

Table 1 revealed the relationship between academic stress and mental health among students. From the table, it is observed that the academic stress and mental health are significantly correlated with each other. Hence, the hypothesis is accepted. It is observed from the table that general coping is negatively correlated with despondency which is clearly indicative that students are frustrated from their academic. This may be due to the pressure from parents as well as school to get higher grades. Emotional support and despondency are negatively correlated which is evident that students did not get proper emotional support from their family and school management. It was found that academic stress and mental health of students positively correlated each other. The result is indicative that students will be mentally healthy when they are more productive in their academic activities. The findings are relevant to the Yerkes-Dodson Law (1908) which suggested that there was a relationship

between performance and arousal. Increased arousal can help improve performance, but only up to a certain point. At the point when arousal became excessive, performance diminishes (Coon et al., 2007).

Table 2: Academic Stress among Government and Private School Students

Dimensions of Academic Stress	Private (N=83)		Government (N=95)		t' value
	M ₁	SD ₁	M ₂	SD ₂	
Pressure from study	12.37	3.3	11.19	2.67	2.60*
Work load	9.66	2.68	8.48	2.17	3.19*
Worry about grades	10.66	3.06	9.99	2.34	1.62 ^{NS}
Self-Expectation	9.27	2.33	9.89	2.46	1.75 ^{NS}
Despondency	8.72	2.44	8.51	2.25	0.61 ^{NS}
Academic Stress Total	50.69	7.31	48.06	5.93	2.60*

*Significant at 0.05 level, ^{NS} Not Significant

From table 2 it is found from the table that students from government and private schools differ significantly in pressure from study, workload and overall academic stress. Generally in private schools, students are provided with a lot of home works and pressurized to get higher marks. Also, parents of these children invested huge money on their academics and expect their children to get very high marks. So, these children experience pressure from school as well as parents and obviously they could experience higher academic stress. Hussain et al., (2008) & Ghosh, (2016) also reported the similar finding.

Table 3: Mental Health of Students from Government and Private Schools

Dimensions of Mental Health	Private (N=83)		Government (N=95)		t' value
	M1	SD1	M2	SD2	
General Coping	36.75	5.18	35.68	7.48	1.11 ^{NS}
Emotional Support	35.08	7.39	36.16	11.11	0.76 ^{NS}
Spirituality	31.46	5.98	29.51	9.53	1.65 ^{NS}
Interpersonal Skills	42.83	6.97	37.12	11.62	4.03*
Personal Growth and Autonomy	42.76	7.89	37.23	9.72	4.18*
Global Affect	20.63	5.6	18.68	5.33	2.35*
Mental Health Total	209.51	22.48	194.38	47.36	2.77*

*Significant at 0.05 level, ^{NS} Not Significant

Table 3 revealed the differences in mental health of students from government and private schools. It is noted that students differ significantly in the dimensions of interpersonal skills, personal growth & autonomy, global affect as well as in the overall mental health. It is witnessed from the practices that most of the private schools focus on training activities to promote academic success, motivation and other social skills. Also, many students from private schools are from upper middle class and also their parents are educated. On the other hand, majority of students in government schools are from poor socio economic background and illiterate family, and many of them are first generation learners. These students struggle a lot to fulfil their basic academic activities and these factors would have affected their mental health adversely. This finding is also supported by the finding of Sarita et al., (2015).

Implications

The findings of the study indicated the need for understanding academic stress among school students. Periodical training programmes could be organized for school students and parents to sensitize about academic stress and ways to handle it in an efficient way. Teachers can provide interventions to reduce stress among students. Teachers can break the complex tasks into manageable

segment which will be easy to do without stress. Relaxation techniques such as meditation and yoga can be provided to students to reduce the stress and being mentally healthy.

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