Causes of Mental Stress and Associated Social Behavior in Students: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

This article explored the sources of mental stress and their reflection on the social behavior of the students in an institutional (private) school in Palungtar of Gorkha district, Nepal. A phenomenological study was carried out using semi-structured questions and in-depth interviews with purposive sampling of the participants. Five students who were distressed from mental stress, one parent, and one principal of the institutional school were the participants. Due to the English language, the learners couldn't have in-depth conversations with their teachers and couldn't express their difficulties. So, students had a low relationship with their tutors. They were continually thinking about how to get out of school and play with their friends outside of the house. As a result, they were subjected to maltreatment and pressure to study. Most of the children were suffering from mental stress as a result of overburdened teaching-learning activities, difficult discipline, joining school at a young age, and being tied by particular school norms. Teachers and parents thought optimistically but acted ineffectively, viewing the children as machines. Maltreatment, forcibly learning, English as a second language resulting in difficulty in expressing feelings, instance rule of discipline, and rote learning all caused mental stress. The fitted standards of discipline and non-humanistic conduct generated imbalanced homeostasis in the kids' bodies, resulting in mental tension, and thus they acted unsociably. Implications of this study include the use of intrinsic motivational processes by the schools to foster a social environment and promotion of social behaviors among the students rather than forcibly changing them.

Keywords: Corporal punishment, maltreatment, mental stress, social behavior of students, source of stress

Introduction

Mental stress is the homeostasis condition of the body and is controlled by the stress system of the central nervous system (Chrousos, 2009). Luine et al. (1994) also illustrate how the mind produces emotion or tension, and may generate frustration, anger, or harassment. Its impact is simple to complex in the central nervous system. The stressful brain has weak functioning in the body for reading, writing, thinking, and memorizing. The cause of mental stress is the secretion of a high level of adrenal glucocorticoid hormone in the body (as cited

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in Alkadhi, 2013). Adrenal glucocorticoid hormone is also a source of physiological stress in different parts of the body (Ahmed et al., 2019).

Deb et al. (2015) found that educational stress and anxiety, parental pressure, and mental problems are interrelated in children. Locke et al. (2016) reported that many American high school students are suffering from mental disorders. It is also increasing in order. Rebellon and Straus (2017) found a relationship between corporal treatment and the resulting negative behavior of children and adults. They suggest that childhood and adolescence stages produce long-term antisocial behavior. That depends on the types and intensity of corporal punishment of parents. It may also happen with the overloaded teaching-learning activity, corporal punishment, rote-learning, and continue-learning but the absence of creative activity. Different types of corporal punishments are happening in the schools of Nepal (Mishra et al., 2010). Some of the students even follow the conflicting activity with their parents and teachers. It means that it may be against a stressor, the way for releasing their stress.

Teachers and parents want their children to be obedient toward their teachers and parents, but they don't know about the child, their soul, inner ability, and creativity. Due to parents' and teachers' misunderstanding, several numbers of students are frustrated and in unsocial manners in later life. Murphy and Fonagy (2012) argue that the problem of mental health is common in low-age people, and it has a long-term effect and is harmful to the individual as well as society. This is an emerging social issue that directly or indirectly affects child psychology and creates mental stress.

Middle-class families in Nepal who understand the importance of education and have a strong desire for higher educational achievement want to control their children only in a fixed boundary of forceful learning. But because of ignoring the human developmental process and individual differences in their children, they create pressure on them. We believe that due to the absence of such knowledge in the parents, the children are suffering from mental stress. Such children are producing conflicting or anti-social behavior. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the sources of mental stress among the students that result in associated social behaviors in school and at home and to find out how the conflicting social behaviors relate to stress.

Materials and Methods

We followed qualitative strategy (Cohen et al., 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Geertz, 1973), interpretive paradigm (Bryman, 2016), and phenomenological methodology (Neubauer et al., 2019; Bernet, 2015; Creswell, 2014; Elliott, 2005). This study was closely related to transcendental phenomenology because transcendental means beyond the human experience. It is the lived experience of certain people who directly experience the phenomenon and it is a first-person experience (Yee, 2019).

This study was conducted in an institutional school in the Palungtar municipality of Gorkha district. The participants of this study were purposively selected five students from classes nine, ten, and twelve, one teacher, and one parent. They were from middle-class families and were intelligent and creative at the beginning, but currently suffering from mental stress and showed anti-social behaviors in school. They learned in an institutional school or were in an institutional school at the beginning stage and now in a public school. We identified the case and context of the students from the school administration. Then, the first author visited them individually and interviewed them in a natural setting maintaining a close relationship with the participant (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019) by using a semi-structured interview guideline and recording it with their permission. The record was stored

in the computer and later transcribed. Based on the information, some previous knowledge and experience, themes, and sub-themes were developed. Similarly, memoing about their hearing, seeing, experience, metaphor, and other things (Miles et al., 2019) was one of the alternative methods of data collection during the interview.

We employed interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), a qualitative technique that aims to provide in-depth evaluations of unique life experiences. The Tindall (2009) IPA research framework serves as the basis for the analysis. Coding, bracketing, phenomenological reduction, delineating the units for meaning, and clustering were all used in the data analysis and interpretation process to produce the themes. To identify common and distinctive themes from each interview and create a composite summary, all of the interviews were summed up, validated, and modified. We also bracketed ourselves from our ideas, convictions, and life experiences to comprehend the participants' actual experiences (as recommended by Carpenter, 2011; Fischer, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Ethical issues always remain in the case of study among children. Therefore, we followed all possible means of ethical considerations to be aware of the purpose of the study, protect the privacy of the participants, inform any possible risks and means to control them, assure voluntary participation of the participants, and follow no harm policy (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000; Kvale, 1996; Street, 1998). The data is preserved in Nepal Open University (NOU) for at least five years to secure the personal identities of the respondents.

Results

After using research tools and collecting information from the students and their parents, four themes were constructed based on the responses of the participants. This shows key sources of mental stress and their associated behaviors among the students. We explored the meaning of information and their body language in these themes.

Compulsory English-Speaking Provision

We had observed learners suffering from problems with spoken English in school. So, we concentrated on finding the actual condition of it and its effect. For fulfillment of this purpose, we asked the question for the participants about spoken language in school. One of the girl's mother did not like the provision of compulsory English speaking in school but her father supported it. We found that she knew it was difficult for her child, however, she did not want to oppose the school's policy due to the international need for the English language. But the participant hearty opposed her parents' arguments and fluently described the condition of the school.

> "*Almost all the time in school, we should speak English even outside the classroom, so we are mostly silent in school. Even if we want to speak something to our friend due to this we are helpless in school*" (Participant A).

She also said that if they spoke in Nepali language, their monitor reported to the school, and the school punished them.

> "*When we go outside the school, we speak Nepali freely, and feel outbreak the prison*" (Participant B).

Other participants also disliked the provision of compulsory English speaking in the classroom and school. They felt stressed when they could not express their feelings in a foreign language.

Strict Discipline

One of the participants was intelligent, talented, and active in extra-curricular activities but not in studies. However, she was good at studying at the beginning of school. She expressed her previous and present views about the school which closely showed the absence of student-centric learning activities and strict discipline as the source of stress.

> "*My parents want to admit me and my brother to the school hostel, but we don't want to be far from the family. School and family always want to bind us to limited boundaries, but we want to break the boundaries. Our parents suggest us to be ready for formal activity only, that is, reading, and writing, and following complex discipline continuously. That is the main reason for our tension. So we want to live far from them. Likewise, the school also wants to bind us by using class monitors, teachers, and the principal. Nowadays, they also use CC cameras to watch us, which is the other way of controlling us*" (Participant C).

Some of the children wanted to draw, some played with a peer outside the house, and some did other activities. However, their parents always bind them to certain boundaries for their safety and force them to read and write only the school book and do homework repeatedly. So, some of them were frustrated and stressed.

> "*At the beginning of a class, the teacher usually says to be ready for learning and/or sit with silence and threatens us to punish if fail to do so. In this condition, all our friends are afraid even if they don't beat us. However, I never forget this and don't like to live or learn in this school*" (Participant D).

A broken relationship between teacher and learner was also found as the source of frustration among the learners which led them towards antisocial activities.

Parent's Attitude towards Corporal Punishment

Parents wanted good discipline in their children such as "reading, writing, doing homework, being obedient toward parent and teacher, not going outside the home, not being dirty". They wanted to admit their child to a hostel for good education and discipline, even if it was costly. When the participants claimed that their parents were also a source of stress, it made us concerned. We found they were forced to school for intense discipline and hard work.

We wanted to know the view of the parents and tried to suggest a different example such as what some of the elder people in our society said about the child-mother relation "*Aama ko kakha, auru ko lakh*", it means that the child should live with their mother as much possible as. They agreed with this statement but did not want to follow it. On the one hand, they argued that: "*I have more love toward my child and their good future*" (Participant E). On the other hand, they wanted far from the child or without disturbance. It is a controversial policy of parents. They have negative views about physical and mental punishment. However, the parent said that it was the way of controlling the child, otherwise, they might lose discipline.

We believe that maltreatment, both physically and mentally, in the childhood stage is long-lasting and harmful. Among the both, physical treatment may relieve after some time rather than mental. Mental problems or stress may change them negatively. In addition, their family was suffering from conflicting thoughts about the child's education and corporal punishments. Parents were suggesting children falsely and repeatedly. So, it is claimed that

all the creativity and intelligence of students changed to frustration and expression of unsocial behaviors.

Administrative Compulsion

We discussed discipline, quality of education, and other school problems with a school principal. The principal (Participant G) said, "*Most parents want to have strong discipline and exam-oriented learning and emphasize the English language. They want their children to always be busy at home only in reading and writing. They should not have any extra time for playing and other activities*".

The principal further added, "*We do not do only for children but for the satisfaction of parents because they are our stakeholder and source of our business*". Therefore, the provisions of compulsory English speaking, intense discipline, and a strict learning environment are the compulsions of school administration for successfully operating the school.

The participants believed that punishment was the easy and effective way to manage the discipline of students in the Nepalese education system. Exam-oriented learning, rote learning, and objectively measurable learning were the ways of parent satisfaction. The admission of children early in the school age was the school policy. Most parents were interested in admitting their child at this age.

Discussion

The study found that learners in Nepalese schools struggle with spoken English and feel stressed when they cannot express their feelings in a foreign language. They also dislike strict discipline and the absence of student-centric learning activities. Parents, who want good discipline, often resort to corporal punishment for their children. School administration enforces compulsory English speaking, intense discipline, and strict learning environments, which the parents and teachers believe is an effective way to manage discipline. Parents also prefer exam-oriented, rote, and objectively measurable learning methods.

Parent's and students' expectations differ. Students take school and its activities as the source of stress, whereas parents expect the associated social behaviors of their children should be resolved by the schools. Reviewing the stress of secondary and higher-level students, Pascoe et al. (2020) claim that educational stress is a considerable problem for students. It harms their ongoing process. The learning capacity, education, student employment, daily activities, and other physical, mental, and social activities are affected by mental stress. School is a significant stressor for school children (Pascoe et al., 2020). Altman and Wohlwill (1978) say that children of school age spend near about 14,000 hours from initial to class twelve (as cited in Movassaghi, 2020). However, in the present context of Nepal, children spend nearly 15600 hours in school from five to eighteen years of age or pre-primary to grade twelve. So school's physical and social activities have a significant role in children's behavior.

As many Nepalese students face problems in expressing their feelings in the English language, its compulsion seems stress-creating. Sha and Li (2018) state that the non-native teachers and head teachers of English medium schools try to speak English only, however, they use both languages due to lack of expertise; likewise, students have more difficulties writing and speaking English. Institutional schools in Nepal forcefully move toward speaking English for their students. If they speak Nepali, they punish them physically or mentally. Due to this, the students keep silent even if they want to say something. It is an important issue generally observed in institutional schools in Nepal. It may produce stress or pressure and

may burst or promote unsocial activities. Similarly, if mental stress is produced at a high level they may possess high conflict behavior or unsocial activities in school.

Woodrow (2006) suggests that English is a second language for non-native speakers, which produces debilitating, nervous, and fearful experiences for oral speaking. The child does not have sufficient words to express their internal view in a second language. It is the origin of stress and frustration among the students.

According to the National Framework of Child-friendly Schools for Quality Education (2010), there are several dimensions of child-friendly schools like teaching-learning process, teaching and learning in the mother tongue. It advocates speaking in the mother language as the right of children. All are responsible for protecting the child's right, mostly to talk in their mother language. So, the policy of various schools regarding compulsory speaking of English should be reviewed. However, English being an international language, schools and parents should motivate their children to learn English language skills for additional semantic benefits.

Ponciano et al. (2020) found that playing is more important for human growth and development, especially when playing with the mother. With different types of games, they express their skill, interest, and power. Rawal (2020) argues that the quality of teaching-learning achievement is related to the cooperation and coordination of the tutor and learner relationship. Qualified professional teachers and parents are mostly oriented toward the relationships and motivation of the student and focus on their interest area.

Bjorklund (2006) states that "lower levels of monoamine oxidase A (MAOA) a monoamine-metabolizing enzyme could relate to higher aggression only if the individual in his childhood experienced maltreatment" (p. 35). MAOA controls the mood of children, anger, quality of sleep, and hunger, and controls the body's response to stress. If the children face physical punishment or any threat they may have reduced MAOA that produces offensiveness and anti-social behavior.

On the impact of punishment, Eme (2013) also suggests that MAOA is a kind of gene located in the X chromosome of males. They produce a type of enzyme that is monoamine oxidase. With maltreatment, there is low production of MAOA, and higher levels of aggression that is the cause of antisocial behavior among the male child. Most of the parents and teachers are thinking positively. But they do not know about this and they have no skills to manage their child. Several investigators found physical punishment exists at home and school by using different substances. Due to physical treatment, children may want to go far from their parents, oppose them, and act indifferently to release their stress. Khanal (2015) finds that the teachers of private schools believe physical punishment is a fundamental necessity for developing good behavior, quality education, and morals in the students.

Likewise, Khanal and Park (2016) also believe that several numbers of the teachers, guardians, and principals of private schools are oriented toward maltreatment to learn, discipline, and respect. Neupane et al. (2018) also describe that more than 88% of the high school students of the Kathmandu district are suffering from punishment at home and school. The treatment is a physical attack, inattention, and psychological insult. Similarly, Rimal and Pokharal (2013) argue that corporal punishment of school children is a worldwide problem, generally in developing countries.

According to Rungo (2008), a child's age and health determine how prepared they are for school. To ensure that students join the school in better shape and avoid financial hardship for their future education, parents and instructors should be aware of this. For their

protection, their parents always want to impose boundaries on them; this is a necessary part of life, but it shouldn't appear like a jail. Because they do it, whether consciously or unintentionally, parents' awareness programs are essential for this reason. Positive thoughts are held for their children by the majority of parents. Positive thinking is the means but not the end. Skillful execution is the final step.

Conclusion

One way that youngsters experience mental stress is when English is forced upon them. As a result, the schools ought to act to update this policy in light of the circumstances surrounding their students. Schools should, however, take further steps to support English as a global language and provide students with an internal incentive to study it. In general, families and schools want constant control over their kids in many ways. This encourages the youngster to think outside the lines between home and school. It might be counterproductive to supervise a youngster constantly and frequently and to put pressure on them to follow rules. Since most kids in urban areas start school early, they have an abundance of school-related responsibilities. While the majority of institutional institutions admit students early, they also give an excessive amount of teaching and learning activities that may cause the students to become burned out. From a parent's standpoint, school management must provide successful learning settings, strict discipline, and mandatory English speaking; however, this is not the case from the viewpoint of the children. Therefore, parents' heavy concern for their children's mental health unintentionally leads to mental stress.

Declaration

Conflicts of Interest**:** None.

Contributors

Each author contributed equally to the paper. While BRB carried out the research and wrote the manuscript, BA supervised the study, reviewed the manuscript for publication, and corresponded with the publishing processes. The final version to be published is approved by both authors.

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