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Appraising the stress level of private and government school children and identifying its correlation with the parental stress level

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Stress level among Indian school children is high especially before getting into high school (i.e.) before their public exams. The objectives were to Appraise the perceived stress level of school children and identify its institution - specific differences, and to measure the stress level of the parents of the selected children and find out its association with the stress level of their children. The 8th standard students (N=128) and their parents (T=128) of a school under private management (n1=76 and t1=76) and a school run by government (n2=53 and t2=52) in the district of Coimbatore, formed the sample for the study. A checklist was framed to assess the stress level of the selected school children. A parental stress scale with 5 point rating was also formulated. The study was conducted and the data elicited were subjected to statistical analysis. The study indicates higher stress among government school children when compared to private school children. The parental stress does not affect the stress level of parents. The influence of other variables are also discussed.

Keywords: student stress, parental stress, private and government school

Stress is defined as the adverse reaction of the people to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them. Stress occurs when pressure exceeds his/her perceived ability to cope (Centre for Stress Management, 2004). Stress can also be defined as a process in which when environmental demands strain an organism's adaptive capacity resulting in both psychological as well as biological changes that could place a person at risk for illness (Cohen, 1995). A very early but exhaustive definition explains stress as a biological term which refers to the consequences of the failure of a human or animal body to respond appropriately to emotional or physical threats to the organism, whether actual or imagined (Selye, 1956 as cited in Adeyemo & Ogunyemi, 2005).

When the term stress is related to children and adolescents, call it pressure, or call it great expectations - whatever its name, the result is the same - school stress. It starts as soon as kinder garden. It turns play into competitive sport. It turns the joy of learning into a struggle to excel. It turns friends into social connection and charitable acts into a line on a resume. Today students are put in a position of feeling they just must not stop. They are put in an environment where they are not accepted for themselves but only for what they are going to achieve. All this builds stress.

As of today in a competitive society, the stress levels among children have been going up dangerously due to the pressure of their academic or cultural activities. Not all children can cope with such high levels of expectation and parents do not seem to realize or accept that their children are under severe pressure says Elizabeth Vdakkekara, Child Psychologist and the Director of Thrani (2003).

As the Indian middle school children are passing through the doorway to adolescence, stress in them has become a common phenomenon. By and large this period is said to be a very difficult period. With so much change, middle school children are feeling frustrated by their inability to handle situations they used to handle with ease. The transition to high school from middle school is where the peer dynamics change entirely. Quite often it is a very abrupt

change. It can be pretty painful, since these children haven't fully learned self control and are in the process of still honing their social skills.

The middle school level is of particular concern even to educators and public policy makers because many state, national and international tests indicate low performance and decrease in academic achievement during these school years. Research has found that middle school academic achievement scores make a consistent, independent contribution to whether students' graduate from or drop out of school (Brobeck et al., 2007).

Hariharan (2008) states that, stress level among Indian school children is high especially before getting into high school (i.e.) before their public exams. These children are under constant pressure from their parents and teachers to score good marks. Hence this study focused on eighth standard children, since, these children should be analyzed for the levels of perceived stress and the causes behind it, before getting into the high school so that they could be helped in getting out of this bad stress.

Perceived stress can be viewed as an outcome variable measuring the experienced level of stress as a function of objective stressful events, symptoms experienced and personality factors. In India stress appraisal per se is not a well explored area especially among adolescents and therefore, the available literature is very meager. Stress studies done in India are mostly based on the objective measurement of stress. This is the point where the current research has gained significance. The present study is proposed with the rationale as given below.

Scope of the study

Early intervention assumes importance in addressing chronic stress symptoms and the studies need to be targeted at a group where corrective measures can bring about an impact. The adolescent age group is considered to be most vulnerable to stress, as these group of children are in the transition stage and has become the ideal target group for such studies. Therefore students of 8th standard from both private and government schools were considered for the study as they are to step into the high school having gone through public exams.

Also several studies have come up with different results of the stress levels among private and government school. The present study wanted to verify the marked difference level in the stress level of the children enrolled in private and government school and also analyse the various repercussions related to stress.

Stress in children and teenagers are just as prevalent as in adults. Parents who are not emotionally available for their children or who lack positive coping mechanisms themselves, often spur stress in their offspring.

With this background the present study was undertaken to examine the level of perceived stress among eighth standard students and adjudge and correlate the parental stress level with that of their children. The objectives framed for the study were as follows

Objectives of the study

- Appraise the perceived stress level of school children and identify its institution - specific differences (private/government schools) and other dependent variables
- Measure the stress level of the parents of the selected children and find out its association with the stress level of their children.

Hypotheses of the study

- Level of perceived stress among government school students will be significantly higher than the private school students.
- Level of perceived stress does not show marked difference with reference to the dependent variables
- The parents of government school children are more stressed when compared to the parents of private school children and
- The parental stress levels influence the stress level of the selected children.

Method

Participants

As this study is a school based study, two schools were identified giving due representation to the private management and government schools in the district of Coimbatore. The selected two schools are comparable in terms of location - the Coimbatore district and the syllabus offered - Samacheer pattern designed by Government of Tamilnadu.

The sampling of respondents for the current study involved two categories

- School children
- Parents of the selected school children

School children: A random purposive sampling technique was used to select respondents from the schools identified. All students of 8th standard in the selected schools formed the first category of the sample. Thus a total of 128 students - 76 students from Private school and 52 from Government School, were screened to get the desired data. N indicates the total number of children with n1 indicating the sample of the private school and n2 denoting the sample size of the government school.

Parents of the selected school children: All the parents of the selected children constituted the second category of the sample. For the present study, a total of 128 parents (T) - 76 from Private School (t1) and from 52 from Government School, (t2) were screened to get the relevant data.

Ethical consideration

As a matter of ethics the respondents, both children and their parents were informed about the research through a simple and clear consent form. The research participants (both children and their parents) were given the freedom to make an informed decision of whether to participate in the research. However all the children and parents with whom the investigator requested for their consent cooperated.

Instruments

Questionnaire to elicit the general background of the selected children: questionnaire was used to collect the general and personal profile of the children with relevance to age, sex, type of family, and the family background/profile.

Checklist to assess the perceived stress level of school children: This checklist had a total of 75 items. The mode of response to each of the item is in the form of a forced choice (i.e.) either 'yes' or 'no', indicating complete agreement or disagreement with the proposed statement respectively For the items numbered 54, 62, 64, 72, 73 the response 'yes' in indicative of no stress and 'no' for the presence of stress. For the remaining items, 'yes' provide clue for the presence of stress and 'no' for its absence. For scoring, one mark to be provided for the response indicating the presence of stress and zero for its absence. The checklist gives the total stress score based on which the levels of stress in children are divided into low, moderate, and high. The Table I present the classification of the stress levels of the school children with regard to the total scored.

Table 1: Grading the levels of stress among children

Level of stress	Range of scores
Low	0-25
Moderate	25-50
High	51-75

This tool was subjected to content validation. Subject experts from the fields of Education, Psychology and Human Development were identified to scrutinize the developed tool. The suggestions put forward by the experts were incorporated while developing the final version of the tool. The tool after content validation was subjected to translation into regional language to be used by the students of government school. Then a pilot study on 10 students from private schools (English version of the checklist) and 10 students from government schools (Tamil version of the checklist) was carried out to gain insight on the difficulty in comprehension and phrasing of the statements. Statements which were found to be difficult to comprehend were reworded/ rephrased.

Parental stress inventory

The inventory comprises of two parts.

- General profile of the parent.
- Parental stress scale.

General profile of the parent - The parent who spends more time with the selected child was requested to answer the stress scale.. The general profile part of the stress scale elicits data on the age, sex, type of family, educational status, income and occupation of the parents.

Parental stress scale - A total of 18 statements were framed giving a count on the stress level of the identified parent. There are nine negative and nine positive statements for which the subjects were required to choose from a scale of five alternatives namely 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'undecided', 'agree' and 'strongly agree' relating

to their feeling of being stressed on parenting on a 1 - 5 point scale. The higher the score indicate more stress. The nine negative statements were reverse scored and added with the scores of 9 positive statements to get the total score. The Table III provides the scoring pattern measuring the stress level of parents with regard to parenting.

Table 3: Scoring pattern of the parental stress scale

Description	Statement no	Total	Scoring pattern
Positive statements	3,4,9,10,11,12, 13,14,16	9	1 strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 undecided, 4 agree, 5 strongly agree
Negative statements	1,2,5,6,7,8,15, 17,18	9	5 strongly disagree, 4 disagree, 3 undecided, 2 agree, 1 strongly agree

Higher the score indicates higher the stress of the parent. The maximum score is 90 and the minimum is 18. Based on the scores obtained by the parent, they were categorized into the following three levels of stress as indicated in Table - IV.

Table 4: Grading the levels of stress among parents

Level of stress	Range of scores
Highly stressed	61 - 90
Moderately stressed	31 - 60
Low stressed	18 - 30

This tool is also subjected to content validation and pilot study and the final version was circulated among the selected parents.

Collection of the required data

The tool designed for children on the stress level was administered to all the children of 8th standard enrolled in the identified schools after establishing necessary rapport with the school authorities, staff and students. Then the students were urged to take home the tool and fill it up with the help of their parents if needed. The participants were enthused to complete the tool and bring it back to the next day itself. However it took about three days for the 100 per cent return of the

forms. Also the parental stress scale was put together with the children's tools and the parent were sent a circular indicating the purpose of the study and asked for their cooperation. However each and every parent filled up the inventory and sent it back with their signature.

Analysis of data

Student t test was used to ensure the institution specific difference in the perceived stress level of the selected children, Also t test was used to adjudge the parental stress level in relation to the institution where the child has been enrolled and the difference shown in relation to the parental variables. Chi square test was used to analyse the age, gender and type of family specific differences among the selected children. Karl Pearson's Correlation Coefficient was used to assess the relationship between the stress level of the parents and their children.

Results

General profile of the selected school children:

Higher percentage of children of private school is in their 14th year and reverse is the case of government school children. They were in their thirteenth year. The ratio of enrollment of boys to girls was approximately 4:3 for private school and 3:2 for government school. However more or less equal percentage of representation of boys from government school and private school as well as girls from government school and private school are noticed. Tracing the type of family from which the children hail from 105 children out of 128 belong to nuclear family

Appraising the perceived stress level of the selected children

Institution specific differences: As the school atmosphere and the home environment is entirely different for the private and government school children analysis were done to appraise their perceived stress level separately based on the scores and categorized into low, moderate and high level. Table V chronicles the categorization in relation to the institution specific differences among the identified children.

Table 5: Perceived stress level of the selected private and government school children

S.No	Stress level	Score				Total	%
		Private		Govt			
		No	%	No	%		
1.	Low (0-25)	13	17	-	-	13	10
2.	Moderate (26-50)	53	70	31	60	84	66
3.	High (51-75)	10	13	21	40	31	24
	Total	76	100	52	100	128	100
	Mean	36.74		49.25		41.82	
	SD	12.18		7.31		12.13	
	t value			6.631**			

The magnitude of stress among the selected middle school children (8th std) was found to be very high particularly among government school students as 21 of them were categorized under high level of stress against 10 private school students.

The difference in the perceived stress level between the two groups of students was also statistically tested by computing ratio which was also found to be significant ($t = 6.631$) at 1 per cent level.

Thus it can be said that the school environment and the family situation of government school might be contributing towards enhanced stress among them. Similar results were also obtained by Bohannon (2000), who investigated the impact of school related stressor on public school students and found significant correlations among them. The mean scores of the private and government school students is found to be concordant with the study of Augustine et

al (2011), which stated that the students of both government and private school showed similar stress perception, though the former tend to have a higher mean score.

Looking further into the data majority of the children (i.e) 84 out of 128 (private 53 and government 31) were under the category of moderate level of stress. It also has to be noted that none of the student from government school has low level of stress. Due to the high competitive nature of private schools preparing the students for professional courses, it was expected that the stress appraisal among these students could be high. But the present study has got a different conclusion. This might be because the students at the government school belong to poor income group where parents are found to take lesser interest to resolve the stress in their children due to the family compulsion and burden. Whereas for the children in private schools hailing mostly from middle income or high income group, the parents take more interest to help and support their children to overcome stress in every way possible. Further at the school level the

teachers in private school interact better with the children than the teachers in the government schools. With better atmosphere at home and more responsive school environment, the children at private schools undergo lesser stress.

Hence it can be concluded that government school students suffer from higher level of perceived stress accepting the hypothesis numbered one which states that the level of perceived stress among government school children will be significantly higher than the private school children.

Age, gender and type of family specific differences

The background characteristics (age, gender and family type) showed that the participants were comparable across school. Table VI analyses the data relevant to the background characteristics (age, gender and family type) of the selected private and government school children

Table 6: Age, gender and type of family specific differences among the private and government school children

Variables	School											
	Private						Government					
	Low (0-25)		Moderate (26-50)		Severe (51-75)		Low (0-25)		Moderate (26-50)		Severe (51-75)	
	n1	%	n1	%	n1	%	n2	%	n2	%	n2	%
Age												
13 years	6	24	16	64	3	12	-	-	18	55	15	45
14 years	7	14	37	72	7	14	-	-	13	68	6	32
Chi - Square Value	1.249NS						0.964NS					
Sex												
Male	8	18	30	68	6	14	-	-	18	58	13	42
Female	5	16	23	72	4	12	-	-	13	62	8	38
Chi - Square Value	0.125NS						0.077NS					
Type of family												
Joint	9	14	46	72	9	14	-	-	22	54	19	46
Nuclear	4	33	7	59	1	8	-	-	9	82	2	18
Chi - Square Value	2.712NS						2.857NS					

Researchers in the difference of stress level between sexes are usually conducted directly or indirectly. Therefore the purpose of this research is to verify the result of previous researches that concluded that female students experience more stress compared to the male students. Gadzella and Baloglu (2001) found that female students experience stress during changes in their life. Sinha (2003) found that there is a significant difference between the stress experienced by male and female students and the research by Mates and Alison (1992) showed that female students experience more stress when faced with problems compared to the male students.

However the present finding of the study is not concordant with the previously quoted researches. Male students of both private and government schools 14 percent and 42 percent respectively are highly stressed against female students 12 percent and 38 percent. However the difference when computed statistically is not significant.

The gender influence of stress though not significant highlights that the schools concerned have to consider measures to study the reasons for higher level of stress among the boys than the girls and evolve measure to help the boys manage their stress. This does not mean that the stress among the girls can be ignored. The stress among

the girls needs to be carefully monitored so as to help them to perform better.

The average stress level based on the age specific difference of both private and government school children did not show significant difference. In the same way the type of family also did not have significant difference among children having from joint and nuclear family, thereby accepting the hypothesis numbered two.

Parental stress

While students stress is a common subject, the parents of these adolescents are rarely referred to. Therefore this study embarked to find out the stress level of the parents with regard to parenting and its association with stress level of their children and discussed as follows.

General profile of the parents: Collection of data from parents with reference of their stress level also necessitated their personal profile. So data was collected with relevance to the age and gender of the parent who fill up the inventory meant for them. However it has already been informed that the parents who spend more time with their children has to respond to the inventory. The Table VII projects the general details of the parents who responded to the inventory

Table 7: Parental profile

Variables	School				Total T=128	%
	Private t1=76		Govt t2=52			
	No.	%	No.	%		
Age of the parents						
Upto 35 years	18	24	41	79	59	46
35 - 40 years	43	57	10	19	53	41
Above 40 years	15	19	1	2	16	13
Gender of the parent						
Male	36	47	23	44	59	46
Female	40	53	29	56	69	54

A child of age 13 or 14 years usually, as per the Indian system of marriage, will have their parents in the age of 30 to 40 years. This was true even in the present study. Forty six percent and 41 percent of the parent were within 35 years and 35 - 40 years respectively.

The gender of the parent who reported to the inventory shows an interesting reading. Forty six percent (Government 59% and Private 47%) of male parent responded to the parental stress scale. Therefore, today even fathers are said to spend quality time with their children.

Appraising the parental stress level

Being a parent can be one of life's most joyful and rewarding experiences, but there are times in everyone's life when the demands and hassles of daily living cause stress. The additional stress of caring of children can, at times make parents feel angry, anxious or just plain stressed out.

Table VIII illustrates the difference between the parents of private and government school children in correspondence to their stress level.

Table 8: Appraising the parental stress level

Stress level	Private t1= 76	Govt. t2= 52	Total T=128
Low (18-42)	57	24	81

Table 9: Influence of parents age and gender on their level of stress

Variables	Schools							
	Private			t value	Government			t value
	t1	Mean	S.D		t2	Mean	S.D	
Age								
Upto 35 years	18	39.89	7.23	1.266NS	41	41.88	7.73	3.477**
35 - 40 years	43	37.09	8.11		10	51.10	6.51	
Above 40 years	15	38.27	5.90		1	40.00	-	
Gender								
Male	36	35.39	6.67	3.007**	23	45.57	8.85	1.539NS
Female	40	40...	7.55		29	42.07	7.53	

The age of the parents of private school children did not show significant difference in their mean stress score whereas, the 't' value of parents (3.477) who had enrolled their children in government school is significant at 1% level.

Reverse is observed in the case of gender where in a significant 't' value for parents of private school children has been registered. However the stress means score of female parent is higher than the male parent. A contrary situation was noticed

Moderate (43-66)	19	28	47
Severe (67-90)	0	0	0
Mean	37.99	43.62	40.27
SD	7.52	8.25	8.27
t-value		3.998**	

The table shows that 75 per cent and 46 per cent of the parents who has enrolled their wards in the private and government school respectively are found to score less in their stress level. The verity that majority of the parents scoring low in their stress level, shows the realistic attitude of these parents and their ability to step back and take a long - range point of view.

Thirty seven per cent of parents when put together (private 25% and government 47%) were moderately stressed. However the moderately stressed parents may get into the next stage of high stress sooner or later. This shows the lack of confidence among these parent in their feeling that things will turn out well and their inability to realize that children could go through different stages with little bit of help.

However the hypothesis numbered three is strongly accepted which states that the parents of government children are more stressed than the parents of private school children. The augmented mean scores of the government school children's parents and the 't' value being significant at 1% level further demonstrates a strong proof to the acceptance of this hypotheses.

Influence of variables (parent's age and gender) on their stress level

As always, the parents are important role models in the life of children and can greatly contribute to their learning and development. However sometimes parents can have a negative influence on students and can contribute to their stress, instead of helping to alleviate it. Understanding of how the demographic variable influence the parental stress level gains its importance in helping these parents to cope up with stress. Table IX projects the influence of variables on the stress level of parents.

with parents of government school children. Though the 't' value is not significant higher mean score on stress is found among the male parents.

Correlating the stress level of the parents and their children

The table X projects the association of the parental stress scores with that of their children's overall stress scores.

Table 10: Correlating the parental stress level with the overall stress score of their children

	Private school	Government school
Correlation between Overall stress score of students and parental stress score	0.019NS	0.246NS

While it can sometimes be a common misconception that parents are often a big cause of stress, the actual situation is that, parents are more often the major factor helping their adolescent deal with the issues causing the stress and are essential to their child successfully coping with excess stress (Kumar et al, 2011). This finding is in concordance with the finding of the parent of the present research that the stress level of parents of both private and government schools do not correlate with the perceived stress level of their children (Coefficient value - Private 0.019 and Government 0.246) Therefore the hypothesis numbered four is strongly rejected. In fact the home atmosphere is usually the place where the children learn their skills for coping. Research has also shown that adolescents learn coping mechanisms usually from their parents, which serves as a supportive basis to the present findings

Conclusion

Laconically the findings of the study indicating higher stress among government school children strongly recommends that government school should put some measures in place so that all factors responsible for stress might be reduced to the minimum. However the stress of private school children, in no way, could be ignored. Every school should have a counsellor assisting each and every

student by campaign to improve the student's ability in coping should be embarked upon. The prevention and management of student stress requires institutional level interventions since it is the institution that creates the stress.

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