

**Faculty of Education of The Open University of Sri Lanka
5th Annual Academic Sessions
February 3rd, 2010**

“Towards A Stress Free Education”

International Perspective

**By
Upali M. Sedere PhD (Iowa)
The Chief Adviser
Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka
upalisedere@yahoo.com**

Stress is simply the body's response to changes that create taxing demands. When one cannot cope with it, these cause 'distresses. Stress is not always bad. The manageable stress motivates individuals to achieve what he/she wishes to achieve. When one can cope with stress it is called 'eustress' which is good. Education in many countries cause distress in children and there are many factors such as too much demands place on the child by parents and school system; severe competition and fear of failure, Child's inability to cope with pressure, ones fitness, socio-economic and family backgrounds, cost of learning and more over the system of education that places too many bureaucratic and systemic controls such as examinations which are not learner friendly. The paper examines the international perspectives around some of these issues.

“Towards a Stress Free Education” – The International Perspective

By

Upali M. Sedere PhD (Iowa)
Chief Adviser, Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka

Stress is common in the lives of students. Stress is common to all which is part and parcel of life. Stress refers to how the body and mind responds to any number of **physical or emotional stressors**. Continued exposure to stressors, especially of a negative type, will often lead to mental and physical symptoms such as anxiety, depression, heart palpitations, and muscular aches and pains. Eventually, if one cannot find a way to effectively regulate stress, various physical and mental disorders may develop which may be serious enough to cause disability and even death.

Stress is not always a bad thing. Stress is simply the body's response to changes that create taxing demands. Lazarus, building on Selye's work (1975)¹ suggested that there is a difference between eustress, which is a term for positive stress, and distress, which refers to negative stress. In daily life, we often use the term "stress" to describe negative situations. This leads many people to believe that all stress is bad for you, which is not true (Harry Mills 2008)².

Stress has a positive impact on ones behaviors. All human beings experience stress and develop positive ways of dealing with those stressors. This leads to another dimension of the behaviors, i.e. ones **capacity to cope with stress**. It is the coping capacity that decides whether it is too stressful or not. This is a highly personalized situation. Each individual's capacity to cope with stress differs very much. Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman³ suggested in 1984 that stress can be thought of as resulting from an “imbalance between demands and resources” or as occurring when “pressure exceeds one's perceived ability to cope”. Stress management was developed and premised on the idea that stress is not a direct response to a stressor but rather one's resources and ability to cope mediate the stress response and are amenable to change, thus allowing stress to be controllable.

Some authors have said that education is all about coping with stress and challenges. One has to learn to deal with stress; means learning to understand what stress is, identifying common sources, and then adapt to some form of stress reduction mechanisms. This means find ways of reducing stress. In order to effectively manage stress, one must become aware of the amount and types of stressors in his or her everyday life.

¹ Lazarus, R.S., & Folkman, S. (1984), *Stress, Appraisal and Coping*, New York: Springer.

² Types of Stressors (Eustress vs. Distress), Harry Mills, Natalie Reiss, and Mark Dombeck, *Types of Stressors (Eustress vs. Distress)*, Harry Mills, Ph.D., Natalie Reiss, Ph.D. and Mark Dombeck, Ph.D. Updated: Jun 30th 2008.

³ <http://academic.cuesta.edu/wholehealth/Level2/Lecpages/strmgmt.htm>

What Is Stress Free Education?

In education stress comes from many sources: Stress can come directly due to various pressures learning and performance such as competition amongst students, Examinations and fear of failure, Pressure from parents to reach certain level those are beyond the child's ability, conflicting interests of parents and the child; economic factors particularly lack of resources to pursue child's interests or even to have access to extra sources of learning; ambivalent situations within the self etc. Some pressures causing stress could be external to education. A student may have insecurity at home due to family conflicts, divorce, illness of an important family member, death, financial problems etc.

The theme of this discussion is on the direct education related stress. **Hans Selye (1975)⁴**, the Nobel Prize winner for his work on stress, says that different persons perceive the stressor differently. As a result, one stressor might produce distress in one person and eustress in another. **Eustress** is stress but manageable stress that brings positive outcomes in the person. **Distress** is an unpleasant or disease-producing stress. Chronic, sustained, uncontrolled stress of a negative type may lead to a compromised immune system, illness, and even death. Eustress, or positive stress, has the following characteristics:

- * Motivates, focuses energy
- * Is short-term
- * Is perceived as within our coping abilities
- * Feels exciting
- * Improves performance

In contrast, Distress, or negative stress, has the following characteristics:

- * Causes anxiety or concern
- * Can be short- or long-term
- * Is perceived as outside of our coping abilities
- * Feels unpleasant
- * Decreases performance
- * Can lead to mental and physical problems

⁴ Selye, H. Confusion and controversy in the stress field. J. hum. Stress 1 (2): 37-44 (1975) (Answer to the preceding articles.). Also see The Nature of Stress, by Hans Selye, <http://www.icnr.com/articles/thenatureofstress.html>

What is 'Stress Free Education'? Although there is no one definition, in my opinion, an education program that facilitates an individual learner's coping capacity and generates eustress for learning in the learner could be called 'stress free education'.

Education Stress in Sri Lanka

In the Sri Lankan context there are several factors those contribute to distress.

- The public examination system,
- High competition for limiting access to more reputed and demanding study programs,
- The heavy content loaded curriculum and examination culture
- Undue demand on children t by the middle class parent's to seek entry to the most demanding courses

The above are some of the obvious factors causing distress in students at all levels of the education system - The Grade Five Scholarship Exam, the Ordinary Level and Advanced Level Exam. As is the case in Sri Lanka, if public examination is the only instrument available to prove one has learnt the expected subject content as enlisted by the course syllabi, then a student has to study over two or three years in examination oriented classrooms and face a 3 hour question paper on a given day at a set time. Further a candidate has to take a prescribed set of subjects to qualify for further studies and pass certain subject combinations including some compulsory subjects to obtain the minimum qualification for legibility to study at the next level of education. In Sri Lanka it is better if all these happen in one sitting. The stress on the student is seen in many ways. First the student has to maintain good health during the entire period of examinations if not examination performance could be adversely affected. Secondly, the student has to have some amount of luck to get the types of questions that favors him or her to produce better answers. Thirdly, none of the examination test items are pre-tested, the examinee is at the mercy of the examiners to obtain requisite level of scores because the marking schemes are so examiner-biased. Fourthly, particularly at the GCE A/L exams the university professors who have neither taught in a school nor are competent of test item writing set the papers. These are obvious and hidden factors those bring stress on the students in Sri Lanka. Because the question papers are set by the university academics and not by the experienced practicing subject teachers students have got into the habit of attending private coaching classes. Students in GCE A/L classes in Sri Lanka spends every weekend, after school hours every day attending such coaching classes and live a highly stressed life.

What are the international best practices of 'Stress Free Education'?

International Best Practices of Stress Free Education:

Some of the practices in the more developed countries such as the United States, Ireland, England, would help us to see how such stress is mitigated, and stress free education is practiced. However, in most of the countries where competition is high the stress turns to distress. Japan is the worst case amongst the Asian countries as well as the developed countries. The following are some illustrations.

United States: In United States there are no public examinations. The Elementary, Middle School and High School graduation is by **School-Based Assessment (SBA)** Systems. However, to ensure validity and reliability of SBA schools follow certain standard procedures. The schools use two types of assessments.

- I. **Standardized Testing Program:** In US every school administer standardized tests at certain grade levels and use these test results to accredit schools as well as to bring schools to accepted minimum standards to ensure schools are at par with norms. These are school-based standard assessments. There are at least four well recognized Testing Services: The Educational Testing Service (ETS) of Princeton University: Iowa Testing Program (ITP) of University of Iowa, California Testing Service (CTS) of University of California and the American College Testing (ACT) Program at Iowa. These testing organizations provide standardized tests for all grade levels. Metropolitan Tests by ETS is available for all primary grade levels and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is available for the High School. Iowa Test of Basic Skills is (ITBS) for the primary schools and Iowa Test of Educational Development (ITED) is for the Middle and High School. Similarly California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) is for the Primary Schools and California Test of Educational Development (CTED) is available for the high school. ACT provided testing particularly for the College Entrance and colleges use either SAT or ACT in the university admissions. Every school district takes the responsibility in administering these tests. These are utilized for National Assessment of Standards, design of remedial programs to help every child to achieve success. These tests are utilized to help and guide student learning. Further schools receive assistance for remedial programs to ensure quality in student learning to bring every child to standards. These ease the stress in learning because it is employed at different grade levels, and defines different achievement levels, facilitates remedial programs and facilitates child's development and eases stress.
- II. **School-Based Assessment System:** Though the Standardized tests are used at school level, the schools use the teacher made classroom tests for passing of grade levels and graduations from Elementary, Middle and High Schools. Often the School Based Tests are learner friendly. A student getting a lower score can re-take a 'Make-up-test' and raise his/her grade. Teacher and student works together to facilitate learning and ensure standards are achieved. These eases stress, tension and are more humanistic. Oppose to public examinations certainly child has less stress.

Further most of the learning systems in the United States, particularly at higher educational level, leaves a high degree of flexibility for the learner to decide the number of courses he or she should study in a given semester, the number of credit horse to register, the level of achievement the student wishes to achieve such as non-credit or credit courses, higher level or lower level etc. Similarly at high schools a student can select Advance Program courses- (popularly known as AP courses) or regular courses. Student can repeat a class if he or she was not happy with the grade received. A student completes work by semesters than waiting for two years to sit for a public examination like in Sri Lanka.

These measures definitely reduce distress and system allows the individual learner to cope with his or her capacity to earn credits towards graduation.

England: We inherited most of our education practices from the British. Yet, the English system has changed. In the English education system, though there are public examinations, when compared with the Sri Lankan system, the examination stress is systematically reduced. The London O/L and A/L exams could be completed in phases. A candidate could take a few subjects in the first year and the balance in the following year. A candidate making a lower grade in the first year could re-appear for that subject in the following year and obtain a better grade. In other words eustress is in place and allows the candidate's coping capacity to decide which way the candidate wishes to do it. Whereas in Sri Lankan system of education one has to pass the examination with the required compulsory subjects, core subjects and electives in one sitting to be able to find the desirable next level of education in a desirable school.

SEAMEO Countries⁵: Stress in education in SEAMO countries is not very different from Sri Lanka. Malaysia takes three types of national/public examination, the last of which is taken after two years of higher secondary education. Passing the Malaysia High School Certificate (STPM) is one of the requirements for entry into universities in the Country. Malaysia is now evaluating to have a fewer subjects at public exams and testing of certain subjects is left at school-level, so that there would be fewer subjects at national-level examinations. However, all SEAMEO nations except Thailand and Lao PDR conduct some forms of public examinations at the secondary level. The public examination is held at the provincial/state level. Generally public examination is held at the end of the lower secondary level, and also at the end of the upper secondary and higher secondary/pre-university level.

The level of stress in learning also has a socioeconomic aspect of opportunities. Though there is pressure due to competition and streamlining of education countries such as Singapore students and parents also have the assurance of opportunities for framing the future of any student. This helps to mitigate the stress factors. However, Singapore has three types of streams - Special, Express and Normal- based on the Primary Leaving School Examination (PSLE) result and are highly streamlined on student's abilities at the level of Grade eight.

Japanese Experience: Japanese education perhaps is more stressful than any other known system. Sri Lanka may be better in the management of stress in education than how it is in Japan.

A curious phenomenon seen in Japan among both primary and middle school Japanese children—but more among the latter—is called "school allergy⁶." This term describes an emotional condition whereby a child develops fever, headaches, nausea, or other medical symptoms that make him or her stay home

⁵ THE SECONDARY SCHOOL EXAMINATION SYSTEMS IN COUNTRIES IN THE SEAMEO REGION:
<http://www.seameo.org/vl/library/dl/welcome/publications/ebook/exam/2ndintro.htm>

⁶ Read more: Japan - Secondary Education <http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/740/Japan-SECONDARY-EDUCATION.html#ixzz0cVQe5NJm>

from school. The numbers of affected students have risen sharply in recent decades. A Ministry of Education survey determined that in 1991, 54,112 middle school children missed 30 or more days of school in a year as a result of emotional problems.

Admission to high school is based on the results of a test, and competition for acceptance into the best schools is incredibly fierce. To prepare for the exams, many students attend what are called yobiko (cram schools) in the evening—to gain admission both to high school and also to the university. With a full school day and evening obligations such as yobiko, many secondary school students have little if any time remaining for personal activities beyond the routine of schooling. “This phenomenon worries many Japanese leaders and has led to a reevaluation of the average number of hours students spend in school each year. Japanese education includes a "shadow" system of private schooling that students use to supplement the conventional education they receive. In addition to the yobiko (cram schools), Japanese students and teachers to encompass the full range of academic options outside the school system often use the umbrella term juku. The two main types of juku, other than cram schools, are as follows: naraigato/okeikogoto, courses that provide personal enrichment such as calligraphy or piano; and gakushu, (academic) juku, courses and tutoring that are directly related to academics. Academic juku can be taken to gain remedial help in particular courses or to provide advanced learning in preparation for entrance exams. These courses are to be distinguished from the specific type of juku called yobiko, which exclusively prepares students for particular exams. Although ideally juku are taken while a student is still in school, students who fail to gain admission to colleges of their choice may spend a year or two after high school studying in yobiko in hopes of being admitted on their next try.” (*Japan - Secondary Education, education.stateuniversity.com*).

Reorganization of Learning Systems:

The system of education in Sri Lanka as well as many other countries has set strict time frames for students. Most of the formal systems are fixed systems and are not flexible. A student has to simply comply with those and get no choice to select. Examination oriented classes run two to three years and no in between position for a student to complete a part of it in a one semester for that matter even in a year. The system accumulates pressure and brings more unhealthy stress on the learner.

Conclusion:

There are many factors those affect student’s stress level. Eustress or the manageable stress and the coping capacity of the student are what education has to support. The learning systems could be redesigned to mitigate distress. Examinations need to be reorganized to mitigate distress. Self paced learning culture needs to be promoted and child should have more freedom to education. Socioeconomic conditions and opportunities for higher learning and employment are factors those indirectly cause distress. Educators and educational institutions need to take affirmative steps to reduce distress and design learning to suit a student’s coping capacity.