

Role of Open and Distance Learning System in Reducing the Stress Among the Learners

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During the past few years it has been observed that a large number of students in the formal system of education have taken very harsh steps even up to suicidal attempts. Moreover, many of the students who have successfully completed their studies and have joined good organizations are not able to cope up with the challenging and difficult situations in day to day life. The main reason of all such unwanted incidents seems to be in the faulty education system focusing only on the completion of a programme with out bothering for the development of life skills to deal with the adverse situations and failure in life. The fact is that the main focus of all the education systems has been to get success in terms of passing the examination for getting certificate, degree or diploma within the rigid and fixed conditions. Whereas the heterogeneous group of students have different pace of learning, different learning abilities, different socio-economic background and individual way of handling the life situations.

The open and distance learning system because of its inbuilt learner friendly features and flexibilities has the potential to enable the learners to deal with the challenging and difficult situations and thus help them in reducing the stress as compare to their counterpart in the conventional system. Besides highlighting the basic principles and dimensions of stress management, the proposed paper will focus on the features of the ODL system which help in reducing the stress among the learners and also to prepare them to handle the adverse situations in life. It will also highlight the different areas of the ODL system that need to be redesigned so that the teaching-learning and life skill development takes place simultaneously. The related issues and challenges in doing so will also be discussed in this paper

Introduction

During the past few years it has been observed that a large number of students have taken very harsh steps even up to suicidal attempts. The rigidities of our existing education system focusing on the examination and certification create havoc and unnecessary stress among the students for passing the examination rather than giving them freedom to learn at their pace, place and time convenient to them. Recently, a student, Rohan in Kolkata committed suicide in the school itself. Another student of IIT, Kanpur also took his life in the hostel. Such

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incidents put a question mark before the existing system of education which seems to be helpless in checking such increasing incidents. Not only this, many other students who have completed their studies and have joined good organizations, are not able to cope up with the challenging and difficult situations in day to day life.

Why can't we think of such an education system which can provide life oriented education appropriate in terms of learners' potential, abilities, interest and need? Why do we want every child to learn each and every thing which may not be equally important and useful for all? Why we want all to appear in the examination simultaneously at the fixed time schedule? Does our education system want students to become learned and good citizens or merely a bearer of the degree and certificates? The educationists all over the country particularly our Human Resource Development Minister has taken it seriously and has initiated for educational reforms which is aimed at reducing the unusual pressure among the students. These initiatives will certainly be helpful in reducing the stress among the children of formal education system. But the open and distance education system particularly the open schooling system in our country already has certain inbuilt features which have potential to reduce stress and tension among the students while studying their courses.

Possible Reasons of Stress Among the Learners

Before we discuss about the potential of open schooling system in reducing the stress, it becomes important to identify the possible reasons of increasing stress among the students. It is a fact that one of the main reasons of such unwanted incidents is the faulty education system focusing only on the completion of a programme without bothering on the development of life skills to deal with adverse situations and failure in life. The main focus of all the educational systems has been to get success in terms of passing examinations for getting certificate, degree or diploma within the rigid and fixed conditions. Whereas the heterogeneous group of students have different needs, different socio-economic and educational background and have individual way of learning. Besides they want to handle the life situations in their own ways. We are teaching them to learn books, pass examination, get certificate and any how manage to get job. But we fail to develop life skills on how to cope up with the failure, adverse situations, and manage other challenges of life. It is generally assumed that adverse life events or challenges cause stress. If this stress becomes very chronic, it leads to stress related diseases and sometimes suicidal attempts by the students. There are some other reasons also which leads to the stress among the learners, following are some of such reasons:

- the rigidness of the existing education system leaving less choices for the learners and the time bound examination system are the main reasons of increasing stress and fear

among the learners. The increasing peer pressure and uncertainty of career also add to the stressful conditions. Hardly any attention is given on life skill development to deal with such adverse situations.

- apart from the faulty system of education, another root cause of stress among the students starts from home. sometimes the negligent behavior of the parents and their high expectations of parents in terms of academic achievements proves to be the main cause. In some cases the deprived childhood and growing up tension also lead to the stress. The increasing demand for family responsibility along with the studies, also causes stress among the students.
- in addition to the above, the fast changing societal needs and the rat race to win the competition for more and better opportunities also create stress and maladjustment in the society.

Stress Management Among the Learners

Basically the stress is due to our physical, mental, and emotional response to the various demands, changes, events in our life. Stress symptoms begin to manifest themselves when we perceive or feel that life demands are exceeding our ability to deal with them. According to Anandi Iyer, “stress occurs when you are not capable of handling a given situation”. Janki Chopra of Vedanta institute said that stress is an agitated mind, a state that is caused by unfulfilled desire. In case of students also, there are several situations in which the students feel helpless and they are not able to handle them properly. As mentioned above, there are several reasons of stress among the students where they need support and guidance for how to cope up with stress. Stress management is a collection of skill, tools, and techniques that help a person to reduce, manage and even counteract the negative side effect of stress. There are four main strategies for stress management:

1. ***Providing Stress Free environment:*** Changing the environment is one of the important aspect of stress management. It is tried out fact that the well organized and calm environment can help reduce stress level and improve productivity.
2. ***Changing Direct Response To Stressors:*** Managing the reaction to various stressors is also an important stress management strategy.
3. ***Changing attitude and perceptions:*** If one is not able to change the stress directly then the next best thing is to change mindset and to view the situation in a positive way. Understand your thought patterns, examining your beliefs and attitudes, and stress resiliency

4. **Recover from stress:** There are a number of ways to combat the effects of stress. Many people use specific relaxation techniques including yoga, meditation and breathing techniques. Other people prefer to participate in their favorite games and sports to spend excess energy and to divert their stressful mind. A healthy diet is also important in reducing stress.

Keeping in view the above mentioned four strategies of stress management, the increasing problem of stress among the students can be reduced by:

- Providing stress free learning environment
- Providing life oriented education as per need and choice of the learners,
- Providing freedom of pace, place and time for learning,
- Giving less emphasis on examination,
- Developing Life Skills among the Learners

ODL for Stress Management

The open and distance learning (ODL) system because of its inbuilt learner friendly features and flexibilities has potential to enable the learners to deal with the challenging and difficult situations and thus help them in reducing the stress as compared to their counterpart in the conventional system. ODL system has the potential to bring education to anyone anywhere at any time in a stress free learning environment. Because of its learner friendly features and flexibilities, its relevance in the present circumstances has been recognized by a large section of society. Particularly at school level many of those learners who are not able to cope up with the formal system of education, are pursuing their education through ODL system.

National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), an organization under Ministry of HRD, is catering to the educational needs of the deprived sections of Society like out of school children, the marginalized groups of boys, girls, women, adults, working people, handicaps and the disadvantaged social groups who are facing different financial, social, emotional or another types of stress and missed the opportunities for availing school education.

Let us see how the open and distance learning system is helping students in learning in a fearless and stress free environment.

1. Providing Stress Free Learning Environment

21st century has drastically changed the learning environment and consequentially the educationists of India are trying to transform the existing methodology of teaching-learning accordingly. The main focus is to provide education of that kind which can reduce the prevailing stress among the especially school going learners.

The open Schooling system offer an open entry to all the interested and motivated with out restrictions of upper age limit and entry qualification for admission to various vocational and academic programmes up to secondary level. Besides, availability of variety of subjects and much greater flexibility in the choice of subjects to suit personal needs and requirements provide a stress free learning environment for the learners. Multimode instructional system including the self instructional study material, audio-video programmes and face to face contact programmes at the study centres also help in learning effectiveness. Modular approach to learning and six monthly term end examination and continuous assessment through tutor marked assignment are some of the factors which help in providing better learning environment.

2. Providing life oriented education as per need and choice of the learner

Education is not merely getting information and acquiring bookish knowledge but it is now a lifelong process for self development and at a large scale development of the country. Unlike conventional system, the NIOS focuses on learner centric education by providing life oriented education as per the need and choice of the learners. The curriculum is designed in such a way that it helps in all-round growth and development of the learners. There is no rigidity of choosing a particular combination of subjects as in case of formal system of education. learners can choose any subject combination for their studies as per their interest and needs. This feature of NIOS not only helps in reducing the stress among the learner but encourages them to complete their studies. Besides it there are several life enrichment courses which are specially meant for individual as well as society progress. For example, courses of Jan Swasthya, yoga, Community health etc. Thus through ODL system, a learner is free to select one or more subjects as per their choice and need.

3. Providing freedom of pace, place and time for learning

We know that the existing formal system of education has several good features but its rigidness in terms of completing a course in a fixed time frame. bound and confined structure at specific places make it stressful for many of the learners. It is estimated that because of these factors about 30 % children are deprived from the mainstream of education system. But because of inherent flexibilities of the ODL system such as any-time any-where education, no compulsion to attend the PCPs, many attempts to appear in a Examination, Credit transfer, Credit accumulation, On-Demand Examination, this system has emerged as a learner friendly and stress free system of education.

ODL system provided the facility to reach to the door step of the learner through multimedia and other sources and also given enough changes to the learners to appear up to five years to complete a course as per their convenience. That is why there is no

question of rigidity of time to study and thus the learners enjoy the freedom to learn at their own pace, place and time.

4. Giving Less Emphasis on Examination

In the formal system, examination is considered as a phobia. Learners become afraid of examination and instead of learning for life they learner for examination. Majority of the cases of suicide and stress related problems among the learners are reported to be due to the examination. Because of such incidents the government as well as all the educationists are in favour of eliminating the examination completely. But practically it is not possible to do away with examination and evaluation. Therefore, now there is emphasis on examination reforms in the entire education system so that the evaluation becomes a continuous process and the students can appear in the examination as per their preparation.

Fortunately the ODL system has already been providing the facility to appear in the examination as per the preparation and need of the learners. Particularly the NIOS and IGNOU besides six monthly term end examination, offers examination on demand also. Which ensures no stress and pressure on the students. NIOS has designed a flexible scheme of examination where a learner could take the examination at a time in one or more subjects (up to six). Their credits are accumulated and as soon as a students attains requisite number of credit, he/she becomes eligible for certificate. Not only this the credit of the subjects passed from other recognized boards are also transferred to NIOS and given equal weightage. This also proves to a factor for reducing the chances of stress among the learners.

5. Developing Life Skills Among The Learners

In the present scenario it is a fact that whatever change we bring in the teaching-learning system and provide any type of flexibility, may not be sufficient unless we develop life skills among the learners. Besides curricular instructions, the life skills need to be integrated in the education system of India. Life skills are abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges that facilitate the physical, mental and emotional well-being of a child. The government of India has taken a decision to implement the adolescence education programme in all secondary and higher schools. Global and Indian experiences have shown that educational interventions that focus on life skills development have proven very effective in empowering adolescents to manage their AHI and concerns.

It is fact that when student acquires knowledge about life skills his attitude changes positively, he starts thinking critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathize with others and develop ability to cope up with the

adverse situations. It helps them to manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner. Such knowledge and skills can lead to positive behavioral changes and enable young people to play leadership roles. Moreover, the knowledge and life skills education imparted to the students are likely to be passed on their own children, thus influencing future generations. It is therefore necessary that like open and distance education system, our formal education system should also effectively addresses the issues related to growing aged students in an integrated way so that they are able to handle the difficult situations.

NIOS in collaboration with the UNFPA is contributing towards empowering the adolescents enabling them to make informed choices in their personal and public lives. This is achieved by providing learners information, life oriented education and services in a supportive environment, so that they can learn through their experiences and build their skills for facing the challenges of growing up.

In order to enhance the life skills different types of interactive methods are used that make learning a meaningful, relevant and interesting. Some common methods are group discussions, brainstorming sessions and role-playing, quiz and case studies etc.

Conclusion

Conclusively it can be said that any education system that becomes a cause of stress among the students needs to be revamped. Why we should force a child to study a combination of subjects which is not of her/his interest and use? There is a need to bring changes in the existing system where the learning time, learning style, and the pace of learning, and the evaluation system is such that it does not create any pressure and stress on the learners. As the open and distance learning system particularly the NIOS has tried and tested such flexibilities in the teaching-learning and evaluation system and found that hardly any such untoward incident has happened. Therefore it is suggested that the entire education system including the formal system of education may provide flexible and learning friendly education system which causes no stress among the learners. The focus of the education should be on life skill development rather than making the children bookworms. The learners should be made capable of using their potential and capabilities for an happy and stress free life. For this they should be provided with an open and free environment at home as well as in the schools.

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