

Beneath The Surface:
An Investigation of School Related Fears and Harassment
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Abstract

This study looks fundamentally at the areas of harassments for students of secondary schools, and to highlight that apparently conducive environment of classroom may have some element of fear and harassment which hinder learning. Stratified random sampling technique was used and a questionnaire for students was administered followed by classroom observation. Statistical analysis of data revealed that girls face more harassment than boys and the major area of fear for girls is examinations and boys feel fear from their teachers. Studying under stressful conditions put extra burden on the students which adversely affect students' mental and physical health. Education is an accepted basic human right, directed to the full development of the human personality, can only be ensured, when learners are free from all kinds of stresses. The development of human personality in totality is not possible under stressful conditions. If such conditions prevail, it is for sure that some aspect of human personality will be damaged and a balanced personality is not guaranteed. Due to ignorance we are striving against our educational objectives of personality development it may be said that students over come these fears as time passes, but the fact remains that being fear free and getting immune are two different things and both may not be mixed up. The positive reinforcement (pleasant feeling) gear us towards our objective, but a negative reinforcement (unpleasant feeling) develops avoidance behavior.¹ The existing situation is negatively reinforcing the students and gradually they are developing fearful feeling for all educational activities. Thus the school has turned into a terrifying place, where they feel scared all the times and where there are threats linked with all tasks. Teachers, educational managers and school counselor can change schools into more friendly and favorite place for students using results of this study.

Keywords: Education, Harassment, Fear, Schools, Children

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Introduction

A bill was introduced in National Assembly on Jan 12, 2010 by Pakistan Muslim League MNA, Dr. Attiya Inayatullah proposing the prohibition of corporal punishment against children in all types of educational institutions to protect their lives and their inviolable dignity. It is a function of the state to protect the inviolable dignity of its citizens and protect their human rights...²

The above press release was published in majority of the daily news papers, and was welcomed by a large proportion of the population of this country. The question arises “why the need was felt to introduce this bill?” a simple answer is that the educational institutes use different means including corporal punishment to maintain and exercise authority. State of affair regarding the prevailing condition of educational institutions of the country, specially the public schools, is such that students feel scared and terribly insecure. It is a common observation that corporal punishment is applied in schools and young children are reluctant to go to schools which result in higher dropout rates, 49 %.³

We hope that with the approval of this bill corporal punishment will stop in our schools but corporal punishment is not the only thing which scares the students. In fact there are other factors which cause harassment among students and as a result learning becomes fearful activity and schools a symbol of fear. Corporal punishment can be regarded as extreme level of harassment which is against the personal safety.⁴ The students are already under so much stress; that proper personality development can not be ensured; and over and above it corporal punishment is too much.

If we want to bring some radical changes our focus must be teachers; as they alone, can bring the desired change of making schools a pleasant and fear free place where students can learn and enjoy their child hood side by side and this can be achieved through psycho-moral awareness and teacher training.⁵

This study highlights as to what are the factors which causes harassment and fear, how these affect students’ learning and what role teachers can play to replace this fear with trust, understanding and affection.

Most of the school going children get disturbed and face anxiety when they attend school, this may occur at any stage during the period spend at school. Fear of attending school (School phobia) is one type of high level anxiety which may cause other forms of anxieties, such as “agoraphobia” and “Sophophobia”. The visible signs of anxiety could be nausea, dry lips and throat, or trembling.⁶

The foremost day at school in a child's life is an event of great importance and anxiety, because young children experience for the first time to spend a major part of the day away from their parents among other people and children of same age, where they have to look after themselves personally. Very young children, when left by their parents at school feel left alone, "separation anxiety".⁷ Which is not dealt by those children and they develop a kind of fear related with school, teachers and all sort of teaching learning situations. On the other hand the children of age eight years and above do not face separation anxiety but they are more worried about their academic performance and other achievements. All such types of fears and anxieties if not attended properly may cause sever behavioral and personality problems. This separation anxiety is a natural observable fact and a sign of growth. But it is associated with fear of being alienated from parents and care takers on the first day of school.⁸

Not only the first day at school is a time when children feel insecure but they may experience anxiety on the way to school, in school, or preparing for a class test. Associating these events with additional sickness and sign of fear and consequently would like to keep away from them to avoid fearful sign for instance, nausea, turning pale or frequently visiting toilet.⁹

Students face another major threat in the form of bullying by other students of the same school. This generates anxiety and students refuse to go to schools.

The main risk to individual protection are the other student normally attending the same school but threat to students personal safety may be linked with elements laying out side the school premises. Such fears are viewed as 'low impact' including verbal abuse, use of dissolute language and name-calling. Although classified as low impact incidents but these incidents can possibly have a considerable consequence on the emotional development of young children.

In recent past school going students have developed a new kind of fear; in Pakistan especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; is the Fear of War and Terrorism. Children feel in secure on their way to school, in side the schools and on their way from school, because of bomb blasts and similar other terrorist activities. Terrorism and terrorist attacks in our country are bleak veracities of terrorism which are terrifying incidents. Children are in particular afraid of terrorism and war because it will bring loss of life and brutality. Also frequent display of devastation of assets and human life is highlighted in the reports and electronic media therefore children can realize that 'terrorist' may harm them directly or indirectly. The depth of emotional distress depend upon the level of

exposure to the terrorist activities and how much directly the children have experienced these activities, for example the eye witness will be more exposed to emotional distress as compared to those who have second hand knowledge of such events.¹⁰

Some times young children are afraid of strangers and crowds, and a school with a lot of students and teachers, may appear a frightening place for students. A term 'Agoraphobia' Greek origin meaning 'fear of the market place', is used when people are afraid of places with a lot of strangers around, where they think, they might get trapped in. A school can also turn into such a place, for students especially new at school, from which they can not escape.¹¹

Agoraphobia may cause direct fear of teachers, thus a child suffering from agoraphobia may develop an association of this kind of fear with school. This can latter on cause refusal to attend school. A modified kind of agoraphobia can be observed after a extended absentee or winter holidays. Small children need time to differentiate between harmless and apprehensive.¹²

Sophophobia, trepidation of wisdom can formulate necessary instructive lessons extremely complex and the students suffering from Sophophobia may find learning nearer to torment. Some times students are worried about failure, which causes anxiety.¹³

Methodology

For investigating the situation, the following procedure of sample selection, data collection and interpretation was adopted.

Population and Sample

The population for this study comprised of the total enrolled students (31000 female and 27000 male) in city circle, district Peshawar in secondary schools. Stratified random sampling was used to select the sample. 623 students of class 6th and 7th (276 female and 347 male) were selected as sample for this study, from a mixture of 131 rural and urban schools (59 female and 72 male). Two female and two male schools were randomly selected for the study.¹⁴

Research Questions

Based on the earlier analyzed abstract and experiential evidences, the following research questions were proposed:

- Q1. Are the children spending their time at school under stress?
- Q2. What are the major elements causing anxiety among the students?
- Q3. How fears affect students' learning?

- Q4. What role teachers can play to minimize fear of learning?

Tools of Data Collection

A questionnaire was developed for this study and administered to 623 students of four government schools followed by class room observations. There were two parts of the questionnaire.

Part A required students to fill up their demographic details such as gender, age, and class in which studying.

Part B required students to indicate how often they felt scared and categorise the elements which they are scared off most.

During class room observation the frequency of student's response were noted. Also the prevailing atmosphere of class room as, active, passive or dull was recorded.

Procedures

Students were asked to answer the questionnaire, participation was voluntary. The level of harassment was rated as, 1 (Very often), 2 (Often), 3 (Occasionally), 4 (Rarely) and 5 (Never).

For more detailed investigations the following five elements of harassment were introduced;

- on the way to and from school,
- in the school premises,
- during the class,
- from teachers,
- from examinations and tests,

Students were asked to categorize these element as 1 (Very often), 2 (Often), 3 (Occasionally), 4 (Rarely) or 5 (Never).

Results and Discussion

A total of 498 completed questionnaires (yielding a response rate of 83%) were obtained and found satisfactorily filled in to be used. before applying statistical analysis to the data, each and every item of the questionnaire was converted to frequency distribution table Also, the data was manually examined to spot any possible irregularities No such discrepancies were noticed therefore the sample was considered to be of adequate value for numerical investigation.

It is revealed that in general students feel scared as the results in table 1 and 2 indicates that the average score, for both the girls and boys less than 4 which means that they don't feel scared rarely but more often.

Table 1: Level of Harassment (Girls)

Rating (r)	No of students (f)	(fr)
Very often (1)	56	56
Often (2)	104	208
Occasionally (3)	23	69
Rarely (4)	17	68
Never (5)	11	55
Total	211	456
Average		2.161

Table 2. Level of Harassment (Boys)

Rating (r)	no of students (f)	(fr)
Very often (1)	48	48
Often (2)	83	166
Occasionally (3)	91	273
Rarely (4)	16	64
Never (5)	39	195
Total	277	746
Average		3.536

Data Analysis

In the initial analysis it is examined that, whether there is significant difference between gender (male/female students) and the frequencies and level of incidences of being scared.

Based on the results shown in Table 1 & 2, there were significant differences between gender for all the areas of harassment. On closer observation, female students were found to be more scared compared to the male students for all the five areas of harassment. Based on the mean score results, both male and female students are scared in all the tested areas' of harassment, but the level of scaredness for boys and girls differ from each other.

Girls feel more scared, on their way to and from school, during the class and from examination and tests. While boys feel scared from their teachers, during the class and from exams and tests.

From table 3 & 4 (see annexure 1) the comparison of the level of the harassment in each area is given in the following table.

Category wise Comparison of level of the harassment for Boys & Girls

Elements of Harassment	Boys mean	Girls mean
on the way, to and from school	2.906137	1.758294
in the school premises	2.725632	2.701422

during the class	2.166065	1.895735
from teachers	1.94958	2.393365
examinations and tests	2.223827	1.64455

The data shows that all tested areas of harassment lie below 3, it means that students do not occasionally feel scared but the frequency of being harassed is higher. Also the area of most harassment for boys and girls are different, for example girls feel most scared from test and examinations while boys feel most scared from their teachers. These results can be arranged for boys and girls in the following tables.

Magnitude wise Area of Harassment for Boys.

Elements of Harassment	Boys mean
from teachers	1.94958
during the class	2.166065
examinations and tests	2.223827
in the school premises	2.725632
on the way, to and from school	2.906137

This table shows that boys are most scared from their teachers, next they feel scared during the lessons and class and least scared on their way, to and from school.

Magnitude wise Area of Harassment for Girls.

Elements of Harassment	Girls mean
examinations and tests	1.64455
on the way, to and from school	1.758294
during the class	1.895735
from teachers	2.393365
in the school premises	2.701422

Results for girls show that, girls are most scared from examination and tests; next they are scared on the way to and from school and least scared in the school premises.

During the class room observation it was found that girls were shy as compared to boys, however both, boys and girls lacked the confidence to give a prompt answer because it was found that they were

not ready to answer the simple question asked related to the subject and topic under discussion. Other common signs of fear were; irregular breathing, trembling, dry lips and throat and turning pale.

Discussion

Teaching learning process is not merely telling some facts or explaining a concept but it demands construction of knowledge on the part of students under the watchful eye of the teacher. This can happen when the learner is not under stress and is free from all fears. But the results show that the learners in our schools are very much under stress. However one element of being under stress of the learners during the study might be the fact that students knew that they have been subjected to some kind of study and they were conscious of their responses, dominating fear of being wrong, subjected them to other kinds of fear.

Another interesting element during classroom observation was that the teachers had no effective strategy to take away their students from the prevailing fear;¹⁵ rather they themselves became irritated and tried to motivate their students to answer the question but in such a manner that their comments made the students more confused. For instance 4 out of 7 student's setback after teacher made their, so called, motivational comments, when the students were almost at the verge of uttering an answer. Such type of teacher behavior can also be a factor which might have affected the results of the study. From the results of the study it is revealed that girls fear less their teachers as compared to boys or we can say that female teachers are friendlier than male teachers. As the results show that fear from teachers fall at 4th number for girls and for boys it is on top with mean scores 2.393365 and 1.94958 respectively. The category during the class harassment comes on second number for boys and on third number for girls with mean scores 1.895735 and 2.166065 respectively, although the mean score for this category, for boys is more than that for girls but it is the second most feared element for boys and the same is third in ranking for girls.

During the class fear could be closely related with the fear from teachers there fore for boys, as fear from teachers is at the top, during class fear is on second position. This association could be inter related i.e. students fear their teachers hence they are scared in the class also, as the teacher is the dominating figure in the class which turns the class in to a fearful place hence hindering the learning process if not completely banishing it.

“On the way to and from school” category is second in ranking for girls and fall at fifth position for boys. This might be due to the gender difference; in any case especially for girls it is a major element of

stress, causing unease and discomfort. Seeing this, as an element of daily routine, directly linked with school, become more severe hence creating a multiplicative effect and making school; and learning, being associated with school, both frightening.

Test and examinations is an area of harassment for both boys and girls but again its ranking is different for boys and girls. Tests, being the most frightening element for girls and third in ranking, for boys, can not be overlooked. In our schools tests are considered as an element of mental stress and means to highlight poor performance of the students, except few. The difference in the ranking of this category for boys and girls could be the result of the difference in the level of sensitivity of boys and girls. But still the fact remains that exams are a major source of stress for students. In addition to this, test and exams is a regular feature of our school activities and each time they add a little more to the stress and frustration of the students, by reminding them their poor performance.

Students also feel scared in the school premises, in this study this element fall on fifth position for girls and second last for boys. Why students feel scared on school premises? The reasons for this threat is being bullied by other students or class fellows or being alone among many strangers, with out some one taking care off.

All these elements cause fear and stress which negatively effect the abilities of young children.

Conclusion

Studying under stressful conditions put extra burden on the students which adversely affect students' mental and physical health.¹⁶ Education is an accepted basic human right, directed to the full development of the human personality, can only be ensured only, when learners are free from all kinds of stresses. The development of human personality in totality is not possible under stressful conditions. If such conditions prevail, it is for sure that some aspect of human personality will be damaged and a balanced personality is not guaranteed.

Due to ignorance we are striving against our educational objectives of personality development it may be said that students overcome these fears as time passes, but the fact remains that being fear free and getting immune are two different things and both may not be mixed up.¹⁷

The element of reinforcement in education and learning is an important one. The positive reinforcement (pleasant feeling) gear us towards our objective, but a negative reinforcement (unpleasant feeling) develops avoidance behavior. The existing situation is negatively

reinforcing the students and gradually they are developing fearful feeling for all educational activities. Thus the school has turned into a terrifying place, where they feel scared all the times and where there are threats linked with all tasks.

Fear causes more fear, fear never develops affection, every day and every passing moment in school confronts students with fearful situation. As time passes by this fear results in more fear, hence reinforcing dislike and hatred for school, teachers, learning and all the activities attached to school.

The teachers work in a set pattern, they have their job to do and they pay little attention to this aspect of their class, they struggle only on the surface, where there is every thing smooth and pleasant, in apparently conducive and peaceful environment we have never tried to find out any sinking of young hearts. It is our obligation to explore the world beneath the surface and take measures to remove all fears attached to teaching and learning.

Appendix: 1

Table 3: Area of Harassment and its Level (Girls)

Girls (211)	f	Rating (r)						
Elements of Harassment		1	2	3	4	5	fr/277	fr
On the way, to and from school	f	97	85	15	11	3		
	fr	97	170	45	44	15	1.758294	371
In the school premises	f	53	61	24	42	31		
	fr	53	122	72	168	155	2.701422	570
During the class	f	81	95	22	2	11		
	fr	81	190	66	8	55	1.895735	400
From teachers	f	66	55	50	21	19		
	fr	66	110	150	84	95	2.393365	505
Examinations and tests	f	103	87	14	7	0		
		103	174	42	28	0	1.64455	347

Table 4: Area of Harassment and its Level (Boys).

Boys (277)	f	Rating (r)						
Elements of Harassment		1	2	3	4	5	fr/277	fr
On the way, to and from school	f	54	51	79	54	39		
	fr	54	102	237	217	195	2.906137	805
In the school premises	f	53	62	77	48	37		
	fr	53	124	231	162	185	2.725632	755
During the class	f	91	105	42	22	17		
	fr	91	210	126	88	85	2.166065	600
From teachers	f	107	94	59	13	4		
	fr	107	184	177	52	20	1.949458	540
Examinations and tests	f	83	82	88	15	9		
		83	164	264	60	45	2.223827	616

Notes & References

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