‘The most stressful period of my life’

Understanding and Addressing Academic Stress in Urban, Middle-Class Indian Youth

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCRIFT

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door

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Summary

Background and research question

Stress and related mental health issues have become a prominent public health concern among youth, globally, and particularly in rapidly developing countries such as India. Suicide, for example, has become one of the top three causes of death among youth in the age bracket 19 to 25 years old in India, and both stress and depression are among the leading causes of illness and disability in the lives of adolescents. As such youths are at the crucial stage of maturation and increased independence, these mental health problems bring up serious concerns related to personal wellbeing, often affecting aspects of economic, family and social life.

While, globally, mental health problems are mostly witnessed in low- and middle-income countries (WHO, 2001), the burden is not necessarily only experienced by the poorest groups. In India, for instance, suicide rates are noticeably high among higher-educated people, and highest in the richer (Southern) states. Equally, there are many studies which depict the elevated levels of stress, depression and anxiety experienced among middle-class youth, most notably students. Furthermore, a wealth of Indian studies have continuously shown the relation between stress and education, indicating particularly the influence of competition, academic pressure from parents, parent-child conflicts as well as the effect of peer relations on the wellbeing of students. More specifically, stress in youth (often described as ‘academic stress’) has been explained by fear of failure, exam results, as well as features of modernization (including substance use and increased individualization in society, for example) often seen in students living in urban, middle-class contexts.

Regarding the latter, India has seen major social-economic changes, particularly after economic reforms which have opened up India’s market to an increased global foreign exchange of goods, ideas and knowledge. The withdrawing influence of the State and increased reliance on international economies has forced Indian industries to modernize and become more specialized, making India one of the fastest growing large economies in the world. Liberalization has also had an accelerated impact on the growth of the new middle class, the influx and spread of the Internet, ICT and mass media, and, simultaneously, the distribution of various ‘Western’ values such as individualism and meritocracy.

Similarly, features of the current academic system, family life in Indian society, as well as the coping strategies available for Indian youths today, seem to play a role in affecting the mental health status of many young Indians. Academically, students are generally pushed to adhere to a relatively rigid form of rote learning, with tedious examination processes and, what becomes, an intense competition between peers to gain placement into one of the most reputed universities, in order to obtain the required qualifications necessary to secure a job in the future. Families, and particularly parents, are often described as a major part of the issue, as they are the first to install a sense of (academic) achievement in their children, spurring them on to take extra-curricular activities and private classes, and comparing their results with other peers. Moreover, whenever students feel a sense of loneliness, anxiety or depression, it is likely to go unnoticed and/or untreated as India’s mental health system is still very much in its infancy. This has mainly to do with the history of political neglect towards mental health in India, which has led to a situation where only 0-3 psychiatrists per 100,000 people and between 1-5 clinical psychologists per 100,000 people were available in 2013; accounting for a staggering deficit of around 97 percent.

It is in the absence of sufficient governmental support and scarcity of public health resources, that the treatment gap has therefore been mostly responded to by the private sector (mainly in the cities), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and community workers, following the practices of Community-Based Health (CBH). Learning from CBH practices could therefore be urgently required to effectively reduce the burden of mental health problems for young people in India. There is a general consensus, after all, that many of the mental, behavioral and psychological problems that exist in Indian youth could be averted if
interventions would take place at an early stage, for instance through population-based interventions with students (in school settings) as well as with other relevant actors in the community.

Considering the complex and dynamic relationships that exist between societal actors and other factors that continue to impact the wellbeing of Indian students, the way stress is addressed requires a socio-ecological approach that is sufficiently comprehensive to evoke sustainable change. As such, this thesis is concerned with understanding and addressing stress from a social-ecological perspective, aimed at reducing academic stress in Indian, middle-class youth in Pune, a relatively large city in the state of Maharashtra, India. It is in the context of this rapidly expanding educational hub (often referred to as the ‘Oxford of the East’) that this transdisciplinary research was implemented, following the steps of an Interactive Learning in Action (ILA) approach, in order to develop, evaluate and scale-up Community-Based Health initiatives for the promotion of mental wellbeing in Indian students between 15 and 24 years old. The main research question to be addressed by this thesis comprises:

‘How can academic stress in middle-class, urban India, be understood and addressed from a social-ecological perspective?’

The approach of this thesis is therefore deliberately interventionist, and aims to both understand (part 1) and develop socially embedded solutions (part 2) to the issue of academic stress. In doing so, I relied on the close collaboration with a Pune-based suicide prevention NGO, as well as various mental health professionals, parents, teachers and students.

Part 1: Understanding academic stress

Part 1 aims to answer the following research questions:

1a) How do middle-class Indian students experience and cope with stress in the context of their academic development?

1b) What role does the social-ecological system play in either stimulating or reducing stress in students?

To address this question, and as part of the first stages of the ILA process, I undertook three different studies aimed at exploring: 1) the self-reported experiences of stress and related problems of Indian students over the course of their academic career, 2) the perspectives and experiences of parents regarding parenting stress, parental pressures and their hopes and expectations regarding the future of their children, 3) the perspectives and experiences of unschooling parents (parents who choose to not send their children to school) regarding the issue of academic stress and the role of parenting and education in their lives.

More specifically, regarding the first study (chapter 4), my colleague and I employed a Life Course Perspective in order to understand how stress, as experienced by students, can be traced back to surrounding social structures and their geographical locations, which can change over time. Based on in-depth timeline interviews with 12 students, as well as a focus group discussion with 8 students, we were able to abstract a number of personal and more commonly experienced events that contributed to their feelings of stress, including stressful role transitions, health issues, academic failures and conflicts with peers or parents. We also reflect upon the mediating factors that play an important role in how intensely stressful such events are experienced, including social networks, coping styles and mastery.

Regarding mediating factors, we saw that students are often limited in using their social environment for emotional support, either due to personal factors (self-esteem, level of openness, communication skills etc.), or the absence of ‘good friends’ and ‘accepting parents’ in the prevailing culture. For some students, a sense
of disconnection led to feelings of loneliness and depression. In terms of coping, we distinguished three separate pathways of approaches in the self-reports of students, from which they (implicitly) choose: 1) a social vs individual approach, 2) an avoiding vs attacking approach, and 3) a denial vs accepting approach. Finally, we witnessed that some students, over the course of time, had developed a sense of mastery and locus of control, which enabled them to understand and navigate their situation with more clarity and responsibility.

With regards to the second study (chapter 5), we aimed to understand the deeper causes of parental pressures on children (which can lead to academic stress) by specifically examining parenting stress as expressed by various actors, as well as experienced by parents themselves, along with the emotions, needs and fears underlying parenting behaviour. Through a qualitative study, including in-depth interviews and focus-groups with parents, high-school students, mental health professionals, teachers and educational experts, we were able to find three commonly perceived parenting issues which lead to parenting stress, comprising: 1) the education system and societal pressures to ‘not fall behind’, 2) the generation gap and increased complexities inherent within modern cities, and 3) emancipation and changing family structures. The results are discussed with regards to the broader social-ecological context of India, referring to key aspects of social, cultural, political and economic importance.

Finally, regarding the third study (chapter 6), we employed a narrative approach to explore how, based on the parenting journey of three families, stress can be understood in the context of unschooling. Three in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the motivations and experiences of parents who do not send their children to school, in relation to the concept of academic stress. Two important results from this study reflect the ambiguity and subjective nature of the concept of ‘stress’, and how stress is perhaps a natural part of the human development process, regardless of the influence of formal schooling. It also shows that formal schooling, in the way that it is currently practiced in India, brings up critical questions regarding how educational institutions benefit the overall wellbeing, and intrinsic motivation, of children. As such, unschooling parents instead attempt to allow their children to follow their own natural learning processes. In these contexts, children experience stress as part of a ‘creative energy’ resulting from a self-induced quest for improvement or transformation, and less as a product of educational processes which subject students to aspects of standardization, achievement, competition and comparison, as is often evident within India’s formal education sector.

Part 2: Addressing stress from a socio-ecological perspective

The second part of this thesis comprises four chapters and attempts to respond to the following research questions:

2a) What factors play a role in the development of social-ecologically sensitive interventions that help to prevent academic stress?

2b) How can the mechanisms of interventions be shared in other contexts in order to proliferate their potentially positive outcomes?

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 reflect on the development and results of three distinct interventions aimed at reducing stress and related mental health issues in Indian youth. In the first study we reflect on the development and implementation of a university-based stress management program in two different universities in Pune. The program comprised of four sessions, developed to address challenges commonly experienced by students, including fear of failure and low self-esteem, conflicts with peers and friends, and various issues related to academics and other daily life struggles. Research-based methods such as Emotional Freedom Technique, Interplay and Arts-Based therapy (e.g. poetry) were used to evoke a sense of relaxation, reflection and play in
the students. Baseline study results indicate a significant drop in self-reported levels of stress after the program, and qualitative data reflects the overall positive feedback from the participating students, as well as high acceptability from teachers and school authorities.

In Chapter 8 we describe the development and results of a Creative Stress-Relief Program for parents based on a Theory of Change (ToC). In the ToC, the objectives of parents, as well as the pathway of change to relieve parents from excess stress and improve relevant parenting practices, are visualised and described. More specifically, the ToC depicts the theory-based methods employed in this particular context to support parents in their learning process, including Non-Violent Communication and Rational Behavioural Emotional Therapy (REBT) principles, in order to evoke change. Qualitative data collected before and after the program suggest that, after the program, parents were able to spend more and improved quality time together with their families, communicate more dialogically with their children, as well as their partners, and also felt a sense of overall comfort in sharing their challenges with other parents.

In Chapter 9, we evaluate the effects of a Peer-Education Program (PEP) aimed at reducing suicidality, depression and anxiety in students, and implemented in 8 different high schools in Pune. The objective was to explore the effects of the PEP program on the development of students who were involved as Peer Educators (PEs), based on the perspectives of parents, teachers and students. More specifically, this study explores how PEs were motivated, empowered and otherwise impacted through the trainings they received during their involvement. Results show that the SALT trainings, focused on aspects of empathy, self-healing, appreciative listening and leadership, empower PEs to effectively respond to the needs of themselves and their peers, but also in relation to other actors within their broader social environment.

Finally, in Chapter 10, I address the issue of upscaling, and the question of how lessons derived from the aforementioned programs can be shared with a wider community. For this project, four parenting videos were developed based on transformative stories for parents with children in the age groups of 0-6, 6-12 and 12-18 years old, and young adults aged between 18-24. For this study, we employed 8 different focus groups to evaluate the impact of these videos on parents, regarding any evidence of vicarious learning and other therapeutic benefits. Results from this explorative study indicate that videos, when sensitively developed, are a great medium to evoke learning and therapeutic priming in parents regarding various parenting issues. At the same time, as similarly shown by the parenting programs, videos can provide a sense of comfort and relief to parents, as they can relate their parenting challenges with those of the fictional characters in the film, as well as other parents in the group. Regarding this last point, it is recommended to use videos in combination with, or complementary to, parenting workshops, therapy sessions, or parent discussion groups in order to foster long-lasting change.

Main findings and conclusions

The focus of this thesis was on improving the well-being of students, through the development of several distinct interventions, and to explore how these could improve several aspects of the social-ecological environment that were found to be related to academic stress in urban, middle-class India. In the discussion, I refer to these interventions as ‘niche experiments’, a term borrowed from System Innovation and Strategic Niche Management (SNM), to explain how, in the context of protected spaces (e.g. a school, university or parenting workshop), local knowledge and resources can be used to create socially acceptable (robust) solutions to the issue of academic stress, and eventually create ‘a ripple of change’ through the diffusion of such learned lessons.

With regards to the facilitation of change processes, I discuss in depth the concept of empowerment, and particularly, what I define as, ‘double empowerment-loops’ in socio-ecological contexts, to understand how an effective power balance can be maintained in the context of intervention programs. Double empowerment
loops occur when facilitators or trainers aim to empower participants who, in turn, obtain a role in empowering others (e.g. empowering parents to evoke a sense of independence and autonomy in their children). I suggest that programs which (implicitly) create double-empowerment loops arguably require tools necessary to identify the current level of understanding and attitudes of participants, as well as facilitators, to define the best starting position for the intervention and identify the successive steps necessary to reach further beyond it.

I conclude by addressing the lessons that practitioners in the field of CBH could take from this thesis, firstly asserting that continuous attention to the relational aspects involved in personal stress is required to understand the deeper causes of stress in each new context. Secondly, finding and employing psychological theories that are focused on ‘individual appraisal mechanisms’ (including fundamental fears and values) and exercises based on experiential learning, creativity and play, are shown to be useful in empowering individuals to better address stress in urban, middle-class societies; as appose to providing ready-made answers or pre-determined coping strategies to deal with it. Particularly in India’s current phase of modernization, a lot of stress, internal chaos, conflict and doubts can be evoked, requiring a certain amount of reflexivity within young people in order to remain connected to the world around them. In many quickly changing contexts (including other Asian countries for instance) similar issues might also be encountered, and for which the outcomes of this thesis might too be useful.

Finally, with regards to the methods employed in health-promotion interventions, I recommend professionals to make use of locally available resources and knowledge, as well as to find readily available entry points to effectively engage and reach out to people, such as schools and universities. I also state the importance of continuous learning within such spaces, by stimulating the adoption of the programs’ successful features into their broader regimes (e.g. the curriculum, examination processes, and overall structure of educational Institutes). As such, I conclude by endorsing further research that focuses on the practice of learning for wellbeing, with concepts such as ‘holistic approach’, ‘interactive learning’, ‘self-evaluation’ and ‘school-family partnerships’ being integral, effective and sustainable solutions to stress, and other related mental health concern among students, not just in India, but many other contexts alike.
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Account

Chapters 4 to 10 are based on co-authored articles that are published, or under review for publication, in peer-reviewed journals. I have maintained the ‘we’ form in co-authored articles.

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E.E. de Wit, B. Zachariah, J.G.F. J.D. Bahirat, Bunders-Aelen and B.J. Regeer (under review). What is in it for them? Understanding the importance of a Mindfulness-based Suicide Prevention Peer Education Program for Peer Educators. Journal of School Mental Health

Chapter 10

Prologue

In 1905, the German author Hermann Hesse wrote the book ‘Unterm Rad’ (Beneath the wheel), which was first translated into English in 1961 as ‘The Prodigy’. When I came to read this book, somewhere around the second year of my PhD study on academic stress in India, I was struck by Hesse’s account of the young and talented Hans Giebenrath who initially thrives in his studies but ends up with severe mental health problems, and the similarities this story poses with the many stories I heard about students in India. It shook me that, already more than 100 years ago, someone had written about the agonies involved in pursuing someone else’s academic dreams, in a competitive society, and how the intricate burden of academic stress seeps through to many facets of one’s being. In the Prodigy, a young boy’s spirit is eventually broken under the weight of his teachers’ and father’s high expectations, who forget to consider his wellbeing and health. An excerpt from the last pages of ‘The Prodigy’ (p.156-7), right after the alleged suicide of Hans Giebenrath, gives us a glimpse of Hesse’s perspectives on the role of the environment in facilitating Hans’s fate.

‘The funeral brought a large number of followers and onlookers. Hans Giebenrath had once more become a celebrity in whom everybody was interested and once again his teachers, had a share in his fate…

The Latin teacher looked particularly sad and the Principal murmured, ‘Yes, he could have become someone. Isn’t it tragic that one is so often unfortunate with one’s best pupils?

…… It is incomprehensible, sighed Herr Giebenrath. He was so talented and everything was going so well, school, examination—then, suddenly one misfortune on top of another.’

The shoemaker pointed at the frock-coated men as they disappeared through the cemetery gateway. ‘There’s a few of the gentlemen, he said in a quiet voice ‘who have helped to drive him to this.’

What?’ said Giebenrath, and he stared frightened and incredulous. ‘In the name of heaven, how?’……

‘Oh nothing. Just that. And you and I as well- don’t you think that perhaps we failed the boy in many ways’?

In India, a story such as the young Hans has become a familiar one; a story that is publicly understood, repeated and grieved over in many parts of the country, each time a news item reports another case of suicide committed by a student. As such, the existence of academic stress in India is indeed not new. It seems, however, that although academic stress is certainly acknowledged, we have yet to find ways to understand and address this issue in many new contexts, with all the complexities of globalization and rapid social changes taking places in contexts such as urban India today. The aim of this thesis is therefore to help in understanding and addressing the complex mechanisms underlying academic stress in India, so that new stories can be created, and these old ones will fade with the generation to come.
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Aim and scope of this thesis

To say something meaningful about the general state of young people’s wellbeing today, even when bringing in features of shared nationality, age, socioeconomic- and cultural background, is a challenging task. In fact, any real understanding of how individuals experience their mental wellbeing, particularly when making the intricate transition from being a child to a young adult, is likely to be incomplete and ambiguous. Nonetheless this thesis responds to the widely expressed concern about young people in some parts of the world today, who, for various reasons, seem to bare an amplified risk of experiencing severe stress, anxiety and depression. Such concerns have been picked up by the World Health Organization, who conclude in a ‘Health for the worlds adolescents’ report that: ‘the world has not paid enough attention to the health of adolescents’, and ‘mental health is an emerging public health priority...taking particularly big toll in the second decade’ (2014, p.4). Indeed, in many countries, suicide is one of the top 3 causes of death for young people in the age-bracket of 15-29 years old, and depression one of the leading causes of illness and disability in the lives of adolescents (Patel, 2012; WHO, 2014). In India, suicide death rates are estimated to be among the highest in the world, and the second leading cause of death among young adults (age 15-29) (Patel, 2012). Annual numbers of suicide-related deaths are estimated to lie between 170.000 (WHO, 2004) and 187.000 (Patel, 2012), of which about 34.4 % are committed by young people (General Registrar of India, 2012). This brings up concerns about a serious public health problem, as young people are at a stage in which more severe mental health problems can begin to take root, affecting aspects of economic, family and social life in the future (Patel, Flisher, Hetrick, and McGorry, 2007).

While, globally, mental health problems are mostly witnessed in low- and middle income countries (WHO, 2001), the burden is not necessarily only experienced by the poorest groups. In fact, many studies that aim to correlate socio-economic factors to various mental health problems show a more complicated picture. In India, for instance, suicide rates are noticeably high among higher-educated people, and highest in the richer (Southern) states (General Registrar of India, 2012). Equally, there are many studies who notify the elevated levels of stress, depression and anxiety experienced among middle-class youth, most notably students. Deb, Chatterjee and Walsh (2010), for instance, found higher levels of anxiety among middle-class adolescents in Kolkata City when compared to high- and low socio-economic groups. Particularly adolescents with working mothers, for example, felt more anxious and stressed (Deb et al., 2010). Another study with approximately 100 middle- and high class adolescents from 19 schools in Chandigarh (Verma, Sharma, and Larson, 2002) showed high levels of stress and anxiety to be strongly related to excessive school-work and tuitions. Few other studies make explicit comparisons or notifications of the participant’s social-economic background, but nevertheless reveal the extent of psychological issues experienced in school-going youth in settings that suggest a middle-class context (e.g. an English-medium private school, private tutoring classes, an urban context, nuclear and dual earning family households, highly educated parents, etc.). For instance, Deb, Strodl and Sun (2014) show high levels of stress and anxiety among private secondary school children in Kolkata, mostly related to academic and parental pressures. A different study with 2402 students showed that about 45.8 percent experienced psychological problems, and 8.82 percent reported life to be a ‘burden’. The latter result was also strongly related to having a working mother (Arun and Chavan, 2009).

Again, a study in Delhi, with 1205 students from two schools, of which a large majority came from small size families and had parents with high education, reported a high prevalence of suicidal ideation, self-harm and suicidal behavior among respondents (Sidhartha and Jena, 2006). In Bangalore, in a study with 1087 students from an English-medium college, of which the majority came from nuclear, urban families, it was found that 25.4 percent had regular suicidal thoughts, and 134 students had attempted suicide in their lives (Bhola, Rekha, Sathyanarayanan, Daniel, and Thomas, 2014). To conclude this list, a study in Utter Pradesh with 242
secondary school students belonging to middle-class families reported high levels of depression, anxiety and stress in students particularly in the last years of their studies (Bhasin, Sharma, and Saini, 2010).

These studies already exemplify the complex relation that exists between psychological problems in adolescents, and their experiences of school life in India. This relationship is also continuously demonstrated in public media articles that cover accounts of student’ suicides (see figure 1.1), as well as research that explores the psychological well-being of young people studying at university level, finding severe levels of depression, anxiety and stress in a considerably high number of students (Iqbal, Gupta, and Venkataraao, 2015; Kumar and Kumar, 2009; Mehta et al., 2013; Sahoo and Khess, 2010). A significant number of suicide deaths occur in the student age group of 20-29 (Registrar General of India, 2012; Rane and Nadkarni, 2014), which are also often related to study-related causes, such as exam failures (Aaron et al., 2004; Bastia and Kar, 2009).

In fact, based on national statistics over the year 2012 (RGI, 2012) about 2246 of all suicide cases were directly related to failure in examination alone. Students account for about 6.1 percent of all suicides in India. This figure brings up important questions with regards to why and how features of distress, often referred to by scholars as ‘academic stress’ (Deb, Strodl, and Sun, 2015; Joshi, Gumashta, Kasturwar, and Deshpande, 2012; Nandamuri and Ch, 2009), are developed, particularly in the course of people’s academic careers. Similarly, there is a need to understand academic stress in the broader context of students’ lives, as numerous studies also point to the influence of family conflicts, parental pressures, peer influences, and features of modernization as contributors to stress among students (see e.g. Aggarwal and Berk, 2014; Chadda and Deb, 2013; Deb et al., 2014; Patel et al., 2007; Waghachavare, Dhumale, Kadam, and Gore, 2013). Finally, and most importantly, suitable population-based solutions are required to help address ‘academic stress’ in all its complexity, and in order to improve this worrying mental health trend among India’s middle-class youth (Latha and Reddy, 2007); equally, in a way that can support the inadequate but slowly developing mental health system in India also (Patel et al., 2007; Gopikumar, 2014, p. 64, 151)
Hindustantimes, March, 5, 2015:
IIT-Bombay student found dead on campus, suicide note recovered

A third-year chemical engineering student from the Indian Institute of Technology-Bombay (IIT-B) was found dead on campus on Saturday evening. 21-year-old Jitesh Sharma’s body was found on the terrace of hostel number 15 while a suicide note was found in his hostel room, an IIT spokesperson said.

Students said that he left a note behind and is believed to have consumed something poisonous. "He has written a suicide note in Hindi and English that shows he was under depression," the investigating officer from Powai police station said.

According to police, Sharma was apparently unhappy with the choice of his academic course, and a suicide note, purportedly written by him and found near his body, indicates he was depressed. "I should not have been into this field. I did a mistake by passing JE exam. I have now learnt to be away from my parents (sic)," the officer said quoting the suicide note.

A student at the institute said, "While he was active in extra-curricular activities, he was not doing well academically and was under pressure because of this."

New Delhi (NDTV), April, 13, 2015:
Woman Student at Delhi Khalsa College Attemps Suicide,

A student of Delhi university’s Khalsa College today allegedly attempted suicide by jumping from the third floor of the institution’s building. The 20-year-old, who was pursuing a degree in B Tech, was depressed over her studies, say the police.

"The girl had jumped from the third floor, computer block of Khalsa College. Her family has been informed about the incident. We have recovered a suicide note from her in which she has attributed study-related pressure for the extreme step," said Deputy Commissioner of Police Madhur Verma.

Though the girl wrote about study stress in the two-page note found by the police, the principal has said that she was a good student; she had scored 75 per cent in the second semester.

Figure 1.1: Two of many examples of student suicides regularly covered by the public media.

1.2 India’s globalizing economy; a brief history

India is one of the oldest civilizations on earth (some of the earliest written scriptures were found from the Vedic period, since around 3000 B.C) and hosts an immense diversity and plurality with regards to language (around 225 distinct languages are spoken across the country), traditions and religious beliefs (a vast majority of about 87 % of the population of India are Hindus, followed by Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, neo-Buddhist, and a small number of Zoroastrians, and Jews), cultural habits and socio-economic backgrounds (India’s Gini-coefficient of around 51 percent indicates high levels of income inequality, mainly as a result to rising differences in rural and urban development). India’s complex society is also known for its contradicting aspects of wealth and poverty, humanistic spiritual tradition and iniquitous social practices, cultural resilience and modern advancement. As such, the country breathes an infinite sense of heterogeneity and elusiveness, yet there are patterns of socio-cultural similarity among its citizens which tell a somewhat unified story (Kashyap, 2004). When we look at Indian youth, for instance, any adolescent or young adult living and studying in India today was born during the time after the liberalization in 1991 (Sridharan, 2004); a time of tremendous economic, social, technological and political change. A brief historical overview of the events that greatly influenced India as a nation, therefore, reveals some important turning points.
Introduction

This overview starts with the ending of British rule in 1947, and the introduction of Nehru as the first Prime Minister, leading India towards becoming the world’s largest modern democracy. Post-independence, an economic system of protectionism and state-directed economic development was implemented under the regulations of the so called ‘License Raj’, which constituted a relatively safe economic path of ‘growth with equity’ (Pandey, 2011). It was within this somewhat burdensome system of state-regulation, bureaucracy and monopoly that most parents and grandparents of today’s youth were educated and found jobs. Although some efforts were made already under Indira Gandhi, and later Rajiv Gandhi, to shift the economy towards free market principles, it was only after the economic crisis in 1991 that India’s economy was seriously transformed, hereby creating more openness to global foreign exchange, investment in Western technology, as well as new knowledge and ideas (Pritchett, 2009). The withdrawing influence of the State and increased reliance on international economies forced Indian industries to modernize, become more specialized and rapidly grow, making India one of the fastest growing large economies in the world (Pandey, 2011). Similarly, liberalization has had an accelerated impact on the growth of the new middle class (estimated between 70 and 250 million depending on the calculation method (Sridharan, 2004)), the process of urbanization, the influx and spread of the Internet, ICT and mass media, and, simultaneously, the distribution of various ‘Western’ values such as individualism and meritocracy (Jiloha and Asia, 2009; Pandey, 2011). Accordingly, various changes are also observed in the way education, as well as family households, are structured in India, particularly for middle-class people living in cities (Altbach, 2007, 2014; Medora, 2007; Sonawat, 2001).

1.3 The Indian Education system

A quick glance at the literature on the education system in India immediately reveals a multitude of challenges and frustrations, which to date have been tremendously difficult to solve. As such, the inputs, processes and outputs of education seem to be a continuous cause of distress for families and children. Again, we will take a brief look at the short history of education in India, to understand its current state. Post-independence education in India is still heavily based on the principles of the London-based utilitarian middle-class university system of the 19th century, which was adopted in the Raj period as a model that would help to create skilled manpower at the country’s service, but not too many (risky) innovative, independent thinkers. This governmental influence is still visible in the Indian education system today, which Altbach (2012, p. 11) explains as ‘a curious combination of close links between the university and government at one hand (bureaucracy), and virtually unplanned and random growth on the other’. Both the demand for-, and the supply of, education has grown exponentially in the past few decades (Altbach, 2014), with a current student population of 28 million people, and about 750 institutes and 41.435 colleges existing in the year 2016 (Dreducation, 2017). Free and compulsory education for children between 6 and 14 years old, as well as governmental efforts to increase access to education for scheduled castes and tribes1 (Brown, Scrase, and Ganguly-Scrase, 2017), has also raised the student demand in India (Gupta and Gupta, 2012). Under the principles of liberalization, a growing proportion of education is provided by the private sector, particularly in middle- and higher education. Still, however, one of the key challenges remains the lack of seats available to accommodate the growing student demand, which seems to induce a strong sense of competition among students (Deb et al., 2015). To add to this, evidently there is a lack of quality education in many schools (with various complaints about the lack of innovative teaching methods, training of teachers, as well as adequate learning content and materials available for students (Altbach, 2014; Bagla, 2011), stimulating families to acquire education through alternative means, such as private tuitions and extra-curricular activities (Deb et al., 2015; Verma et al., 2002). Moreover, it should be noted that India has, for a long time, stimulated a type of qualification and examination fever, by creating a system of educational

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1 Scheduled castes and tribes are a range of designated groups of historically disadvantaged people in India. Since independence, various governmental policies have been introduced to positively discriminate these groups.
ranking in which students must score high on various Board Examinations in order to gain admission to some of the higher-reputed Universities (Deb, 2010). Finally, scholars warn about the output of higher education in India, which seems to produce graduates that are insufficiently competent to meet the demands of the market (Agarwal, 2001). Altogether, the education system seems to play a significant role in inducing problems and distress in children and young adults during their time at school and in higher education, both directly through their learning environment, as well as indirectly through their parents and the academic achievement culture.

1.4 India’s family system

According to Medora (2007, p. 173): ‘the family has always been the most salient institution and integral part of Indian culture’ and therefore serves as the ‘cornerstone and foundation of the Indian community and society’. Furthermore, traditional Indian cultures are often characterized as ‘collectivistic’ in nature, in which family values play a significant role in shaping the behavior of its members. Collectivistic family cultures, as observed in many Asian countries, are known for putting the collective needs somewhat above the needs of the individual, creating more emphasis on values such as loyalty, duty and cooperation (Medora, 2007; Sarma, 2015). As such, Indian families are also traditionally formed in ‘joint’ or extended family structures, in which properties and living space are shared with the elderly parents (Medora, 2007). Furthermore, Indian families are typically patriarchal, in which authority and control is often in the hands of the father, and passed on to the son, which has somewhat separated men from women and particularly problematized the value of women in various ways (Sonawat, 2001). Parenting styles are often found to be slightly more authoritarian and controlling, rather than democratic, hereby promoting a sense of obedience and solidarity in children rather than independence and autonomy (Albert, Trommsdorff, and Mishra, 2003; Inman, Howard, Beaumont, and Walker, 2007). Naturally, however, under the influence of economic change and modernization, aspects of India’s traditional family life are undergoing noticeable change, posing new challenges for children today. Berk et al (2014), for instance, point to the increased amount of dual earning, nuclear families, a reduced sense of parental involvement, decreased contact with extended family members, and an increase in individualistic, materialistic values as potential risk factors for mental health problems in youth in India. Divorce rates have also risen in India, often disrupting family life (Jiloha and Asia, 2009; Vig and Jaswal, 2008). At the same time, the real implications of modernization, particularly for middle-class urban families, are likely to be far more complex, with some Indian family traditions showing to be more robust than often assumed (Kashyap, 2004). It is only this new generation of parents that is confronted with a world that offers limitless access to information and knowledge, which is likely to shape some of their children’s core beliefs and values as different to their own (Harvey, 2003). As such, there is a moral confusion which is likely to be integrated in the minds of many of today’s youth, posing questions as to how these supposed changes might influence their experiences of stress and wellbeing.

1.5 India’s mental health system

With regards to the mental wellbeing of young people in India, it serves to say something about the state of the national mental health system, and in particular the organized care for children, adolescents and young adults in the country. As a broad definition, the WHO refers to Child and Adolescent Mental Health as the ‘capacity to achieve and maintain optimal psychological functioning and wellbeing’ (WHO, 2005, p. 7). In India, a specialized policy or program targeted at ‘child mental health’ does not yet exist (Vranda, 2015; Nair, Russell, and Sadanandan, 2013). Also, there are few epidemiological studies conducted to explore the mental health treatment gap for young people in India (Malhotra and Patra, 2014), yet it is estimated that around 28 percent of all school-going children are burdened by mental health problems (Nair et al., 2013). Furthermore, there is a general consensus that many of the mental, behavioral and psychological problems that exist in Indian youth could be averted if interventions would take place at an early stage (Vranda, 2015). For this, scholars point to Community Based Health Organizations (CBHO), as well as population-based interventions (for instance in schools) as instrumental in achieving better mental health for Indian youth (Thara and Patel, 2010). This has
mainly to do with the history of political neglect towards mental health in India, which has led to a situation where only 0-3 psychiatrists per 100,000 people were available in 2013, and between 1-5 clinical psychologists per 100,000 people; accounting for a staggering deficit of about 97 percent (Patel et al., 2016). In 2014, a National Mental Health Policy (NMHP) was launched aimed at improving the care for people with mental disorders, although these policies were not substantiated with adequate resource allocations. In fact, the budget allocated for mental health is only 0.06 percent of the total expenditure of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (Rathod et al., 2017). In the absence of governmental support and scarcity of public health resources, the treatment gap has therefore been mostly responded to by the private sector (mainly in the cities), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and community workers. According to Patel et al (2016), NGOs are driven by a certain idealism that inspires commitment, high quality of care, as well as social inclusion, partnership and participation. NGOs often set an example on how Community-Based Health (CBH) care can be implemented in various communities, including home-based interventions or prevention programs at schools. The contribution of such programs is often not substantial enough to reach out to people on a National level, but they might help in the development of culturally sensitive models which could be scaled up and replicated (Nair et al., 2013; Patel et al., 2016). Learning from CBH practices could therefore be urgently required to effectively reduce the burden of mental health problems for people in India (Padmavati, 2005; Patel et al., 2016).
In this thesis, I am essentially concerned with the well-being of young people as they are moving into adulthood. More specifically, the issue of 'academic stress' and how to prevent such distress is what drives this research. Before delineating how best to approach these issues, a theoretical framework is required to grasp the multifaceted and complex environment in which human development takes place, including the intricate webs of linked lives and socio-cultural influences in the child’s context. As such it is assumed that sole explanations of academic stress in youth, based on, for instance, distinct aspects of the school environment or personality traits of students, will be insufficient to explain this complex problem, and not lead to appropriate solutions. Rather, I am interested in exploring and addressing the plethora of influences that are at work in the direct and indirect environments of growing children, in order to understand how the experience of academic stress can be addressed. I finally reflect on the theory regarding community-based health promotion to understand what challenges are involved in developing contextually well-embedded interventions for change.

2.1 Bronfenbrenner’s Bio-Ecological Systems Theory

Although the notion of contextualizing aspects of human behavior gathered interest from various disciplines by the end of the 1960’s, it was the work of scholar Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) that brought many fundamental beliefs of contextualization together in his ‘ecological systems theory of development’. Since then his work has been highly influential across various study fields, but particularly in the field of childhood development. Bronfenbrenner’s approach to human development is particularly helpful for understanding stress in young people because it encompasses the wide range of contextual systems in which children are involved, as well as the dynamic nature of the linkages that are formed between these systems (Swick and Williams, 2006).

The ‘ecological system theory’ basically asserts that there are four major components of human development, of which the first two are ‘Person’ and ‘Processes’ (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). ‘Processes’ essentially involve all the transactions or events that happen in a person’s life that contribute to their gaining of skills and overall wellbeing, and that are instrumental in their development. From this perspective, researchers tend to look at what it is the child receives that could make him or her more competent, healthy and protected. ‘Person’ refers to the attributes of the child itself and is mostly associated to biological models of understanding development. Questions asked have much to do with characteristics of children (often particular risk groups), such as temperament, age, sex, disability and illness, which could influence the reciprocal relationship between children and their environment (Bronfenbrenner et al., 2006).

The second two concepts are ‘Context’ and ‘Time’, which we will discuss henceforth. First, within the ‘Context’ there are four embedded system levels that impact human development: the microsystem (1), mesosystem (2), exosystem (3) and macrosystem (4) (figure 2.1). Each level is uniquely formed around a person’s life and represents distinct features that can pose both risks or opportunities for growth. As such, there are some universal factors that exist across cultures that tend to benefit children’s upbringing, such as parental warmth as opposed to parental denial (Stafford, Luster, and Okagaki, 1994).

The system most intimately influencing the child is the microsystem, which involves interactions with the ‘direct’ environment, including the parent-child relationship, wider family network and school setting, etc. (U Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Garbarino, 2014). It is within this system that children are offered their first encounters with the world, which form the early foundations for his or her framework of meaning. Much of the pedagogic research on factors related to wellbeing is focused on microsystem dynamics as they are generally understood to noticeably impact the child’s development. For instance, the accepting or punitive parenting styles that
Theoretical framework

children are exposed to in the parent-child relationship are likely to influence their (mal)adaptive behavior and health outcomes in the future (Darling and Steinberg, 1993; Rapee, 1997). However, it is important to understand that parents also do not live inside a vacuum and are part of a broader context regarding both time and place (B. A. Kotchick and Forehand, 2002). As such, it is relevant to explore the (historical) background of parents including, for instance, their education level (Stafford et al., 1994), attachment histories (Bögels and Brechman-Toussaint, 2006; Rabbani and Kasmaieehadaffard, n.d.) or family income (Dooley and Stewart, 2007).

The mesosystem encompasses the linked relationships that exist between various settings in which a child could be involved, that mediate the experiences of the evolving child through the quality of these relationships. As such, a child could be impacted by the level of communication that exists between school and family, or the support parents perceive from their surrounding community (Garbarino, 2014). The mesosystem is very much linked to the idea of social capital (Ashiabi and O’Neal, 2015); the strength and quality of networks and continuously expanding relationships that enable families and societies to function well. Without effective mesosystems families tend to become isolated, which may be a risk factor for the child’s wellbeing (Swick and Williams, 2006).

The more ‘indirect’ impact of the exosystem can be vicariously felt by children, and is often not well enough attended to in research (Swick et al., 2006). The exosystem refers to the physical spaces that other people around the child reside in, and therefore influence the child, without him or her entering that space itself. As such, the workplace of parents, including the stress they may experience within that space, can play a role in the child’s wellbeing, as they can imagine and vicariously experience their parent’s distress without having gone through the actual experience of ‘being at work’ (Crouter, Bumpus, and Bumpass, 2001). Similarly, one may imagine that the stress parents derive from engaging with other parents about their children’s test scores, as part of the shared culture, will vicariously impact children, without necessarily being exposed to such settings themselves.

Finally, the macrosystem refers to the all-encompassing cultural, social- and institutional world in which the other systems take place (Garbarino, 2014). This wider system of political trends, societal norms, institutional laws and cultural beliefs play a constant role in shaping the meaning of people’s behavior and decisions; it largely determines why, what, where and how we manage our relationships (Bronfenbrenner et al., 2006). Interestingly, although positioned far from the child in the framework, this system is actually intimately connected to the child’s development, as its facets become ingrained in people’s consciousness; those of the children themselves, of parents, and of professionals etc. (Garbarino, 2014). While it is tremendously important to be mindful of the macrosystem influences, this system is not often studied, particularly in relation to the wellbeing of children (Kotchick et al., 2002; Taylor and Ali, 2017).

Later, Bronfenbrenner added the concept of ‘time’, which is also often referred to as the fifth part of the process, called the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). It is a relevant concept as it places all of the dynamics in the systems around the child within their historical context. For instance, as earlier mentioned, parent-child relationships may be influenced by the history of the parent’s relationships with their own parents (attachment history), or by the impact of a divorce or loss in the family at some point in time. Furthermore, the concept of time plays an important role in the macrosystem, as important societal events that happened in the past, such as political conflict or economic upheaval, can continue to influence peoples’ world views and beliefs (Swick et al., 2006). A great example of such notions is represented in Elder’s study on the effects of the Great Depression on children in the United States (Elder, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1994), that formed the base for his Life Course theory; which we will explore in more detail later.
2.2 Stress theories

Notions regarding stress have been conceptualized in various ways throughout the centuries (Rice, 2012). The idea that human beings could suffer from stress is demonstrated, for instance, in the works of various literary works, and even in documents as early as the Old Testament (Rice, 2012) in which disruptive life events are characterized in reference to ‘adversity’, ‘pressure’, ‘hardship’, ‘affliction’, and ‘troubles’ (Fowler, 1999). The word ‘stress’ has received several connotations over the past 100 years, as researchers from different disciplines aimed to understand the stress process. Some of the earliest contributions came largely from the field of psychobiology and physiology (Krone, 2002), with numerous models for individual, as well as family, stress being produced (Rice, 2012). Perhaps the most influential insights came from the endocrinologist Hans Selye (Selye, 1976; Selye, 1973), however, who developed the ‘General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) theory’, which brought forward the essential (and regularly disputed) message that stress includes all the non-specific, commonly shared changes that happen in the body in response to a variety of triggers or demands. According to Selye (1976), these changes could be traced over the course of three distinct stages: a) the ‘alarm reaction’ stage, which involves the initial shock, along with a plethora of autonomic nervous system reactions, such as decreased muscle tone, hypotension, hypothermia, increased adrenaline discharge, etc. After this there is a period of counter-shock, which helps the body prepare for defense, b) the ‘stage of resistance’ which is meant to allow the body to adapt to the stressor, and c) when the former stage takes too long, organisms enter into
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the ‘stage of exhaustion’, which often leads to irreversible damage, or, when overstimulation persists, death (Krohne, 2002).

Seyle’s work had an important impact on the evolution of stress theories, also because it made a distinction between agreeable forms of stress (which he called ‘eustress’), and more unhealthy forms of stress (commonly referred to as ‘distress’) (Rice, 2012). Still, Seyle’s theory on GAS was heavily criticized for his disregard for ‘cognitive mediation’ in the stress process. Other studies made evident that the way an organism perceives the quality of a stressor, as well as his or her own potential for adaptation, influences the stress outcome, challenging the basic idea of ‘non-specificity’. These criticisms led to the development of several psychological stress theories which emphasized the more dynamic, transactional relations between the stressor, mediating factors (such as appraisal and coping) and stress outcomes, of which the most well-known is the ‘Transactional Stress Model’, developed by Lazarus and colleagues (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Lazarus and Folkman, 1987).

2.2.1 The transactional stress model

According to the last updated version of the Transactional Stress Model (Lazarus, 1991), stress is provoked through the transactional relationship between an external event and the internal cognitive framework of a person, in which demands are appraised as taxing and exceed ones available coping resources (Lazarus and Folkan, 1984). As such, it is important to realize that, for instance, failing to pass an exam could be commonly perceived as a negative life event, yet the extent of the individual’s stress response differs depending on e.g. how the person evaluates the significance of that failure with regards to his or her future, how much value he or she attaches to being successful, how responsible he or she feels for the failure, and how capable he or she considers herself in solving this ‘problem’. As such, Lazarus (1991) defines two processes as essential in shaping an emotional outcome, which are the primary and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal is about evaluating the significance of an event for one’s wellbeing, while secondary appraisal concerns the availability of relevant coping options. In primary appraisal, furthermore, two processes are distinguished in which, first, an event is evaluated in reference to his or her needs and, second, in terms of congruence (positive or negative influence) with his or her goals. The secondary appraisal concerns the concept of accountability (who or what someone considers to be accountable for his or her stressful event), which is likely to guide their coping efforts and strategies.

2.2.2 Coping

Although much debate exists on how coping should be categorized and evaluated (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, and Wadsworth, 2001), the most referenced definition of coping is provided by Folkman and Lazarus (1980, p. 223), who define coping as ‘the cognitive and behavioral efforts to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts among them’. In essence, coping has to do with the mechanisms that a human being employs to tolerate or reduce the experience of stress. With regards to how coping approaches are organized under this definition, Folkman and Lazarus (1980) looked mainly at the aim of the coping effort, either being focused on changing the environmental realities that trigger distress (problem-focused coping) or on changing the internal cognitive processes to help reduce the negative appraisal of a triggering situation (emotion-focused coping). Finally, work by Folkman et al. (1987) helped to understand how some positive feelings could be experienced simultaneously during extreme hardship and high stress, when people used their hardship to reorient their beliefs, goals or essentially framed their stress in a more positive (sometimes spiritual) context, leading to more sustained coping approaches (Figure 2.2).

While their approach to categorizing coping is often adopted in research, numerous alternative coping models have also been developed over the past decades (see e.g. Boyd, Lewin, and Sager, 2009; Carver and Connor-Smith, 2010; Compas et al., 2001; Schwarzer and Knoll, 2008), either focusing on the identification of available
resources and inclinations regarding coping in individual people, as well as particular vulnerabilities in groups at risk (trait-oriented coping), or on the actual coping strategies and their respectable outcomes (state-oriented coping). The coping theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1980) could therefore be considered a state-oriented theory focused on making useful distinctions of strategies and their effectiveness in the coping process (such as identified in their ‘Ways of Coping Questionnaire (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980). Interestingly, they have not been able to make any generalized conclusions regarding the usefulness of any distinct style however (e.g. wishful thinking or denial, which in some cases might be the best option) (Lazarus, 1993). Other coping theories categorize coping along alternative lines, such as Compas et al. (2001) who define three separate categories of coping, including, 1) primary control coping, or attempts to change either the stressor or ones emotional response, 2) secondary control coping, including efforts to adjust to the stressor through cognitive restructuring and 3) disengagement coping, which includes strategies to direct ones’ attention away from the stressor altogether (Compas et al., 2001). Similarly, more simplistic models are also still used, which distinguish between both active (approach) and passive (avoidant) coping styles (Roth and Cohen, 1986).

The general mechanisms with regards to coping as described by Lazarus et al. (1980), however, are still most predominately followed, and the dynamics of appraisal within this model will accordingly be used in this thesis to support the conceptualization of student’s responses to stress (see figure 2.2). However, since the thesis is mainly focused on exploring the availability of resources and opportunities for coping in a particular (student) population, we are less concerned with the particularities of categorizing or evaluating coping strategies and evolving coping theory. As such, I will now describe which theories will be used to understand how (under which circumstances) children and young adults appraise events in their environment as stressful, and how (within their social environment) they access and develop resources in order to regulate their stressful response. Theories that place stress in its social-ecological context will be predominantly focused upon.
2.2.3 Stress in the social-ecological context

With regards to the sociology of mental health, the contributions of Leonard L. Pearlin (Pearlin, 1989, 2010; Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, and Mullan, 1981) over the past six decades have been noteworthy. His theory on ‘The Stress Process’ influenced our current ideas on the embeddedness of stressful life events and put chronic strains into their unique context of cultural values, social norms and socio-economic status (SES) (Avison, Aneshensel, Schieman, and Wheaton, 2010). Pearlin (1989, p. 242) relates to stress as: ‘Many stressful experiences, it should be recognized, don’t spring out of a vacuum but typically can be traced back to surrounding social structures and people’s locations within them’....’Therefore, the structural contexts of people’s lives are not extraneous to the stress process, but are fundamental to that process’. Pearlin was therefore also critical of Seyle’s argument that all change could lead to harmful stress because it requires adaptation, as for him, since change is an integral part of human development, it is mostly the undesired, unplanned and deviating changes that are mostly harmful (Pearlin, 1989).

This sociological way of looking at stress contributed to the understanding of why some events are incredibly stressful in some situations, while evoking perfectly neutral responses in other contexts. His stress model, first, emphasizes the distinction between life events (sporadic, instantaneous occurrences or changes) and life strains (the relatively durable, reoccurring problems and conflicts people encounter). Underlying the severity of many problems is the way these interact with the institutional, social and cultural roles individuals take up in their lives (e.g. ‘the husband’, ‘the home-maker’, ‘the mother’ or ‘the provider’) and how successful we are in containing the expectations and demands that are associated to these roles. Considering the concept of roles, Pearlin (1989) found that they could lead to various types of issues underlying strains, such as role overload, interpersonal conflicts between people occupying different roles (e.g. parent-child conflicts), inter-role conflict, role captivity (when involuntarily taking up a role) and role restructuring (e.g. a young adult being given more responsibility in the household as he or she grows up). Again, the quality of these strains is
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influenced by the individual’s context, which supports their value systems and largely determines how people perceive their situation (Pearlin, 2010). In the case of students in India, for instance, the impact of a bad grade may have much to do with how academic success is valued by the external environment of parents, peers and within the collective culture, which shape the expectations connected to the student role.

Pearlin (1989) also introduced a number of mediating forces to his Stress model, including *coping, social support* and *personal resources* (such as self-esteem and mastery) (Pearlin, 1989; Pearlin, 2010). With regards to *coping*, the social context is emphasized again to understand how different ‘forms’ of coping could be used by diverse individuals, in various situations, regardless of its general ‘function’ which is to: 1) change the situation, 2) manage the meaning of the situation or 3) regulate the symptoms of stress to an untroublesome degree. *Social support* refers to the variety of formal (institutionalized) and informal resources an individual actually uses for either instrumental (advisory) or emotional support, when dealing with life events. This means that social support, according to social researchers, refers to those resources that are perceived as accessible and useful to the individual, as opposed to the, often wider, network that is framed around them (Pearlin, 1989). Finally, there is the mediating factor of *personal resources*, including self-esteem and mastery; describing a sense of self-efficacy and overall belief that one has control over their life (Thoits, 2006).

In later work, Pearlin and Skaff (1996), somewhat parallel to the function of the chronosystem in the biocultural model, developed linkages between the ‘Stress Process Model’ and the ‘Life Course Perspective’ developed by Glenn Elder, (Elder, 1994; Elder, 2007; Elder, 1998), including the concept of time, further specified by aspects of *transitions, sequencing* and *linked lives* (Pearlin, 2010). These aspects are utilised in this thesis, particularly to emphasize the various developments children and young adults go through as an integral part of their normal human evolution, including the very influential stages of adolescence and emerging adulthood (Lindell and Campione-Barr, 2016), which bring up very specific transformational demands. The conceptualization of *transitions* (described as any significant change in role, relations or personal context people face), *sequencing* (referring to the extent of which the timing of transitions are congruent with normative standards) and *linked lives* (emphasizing the idea that people’s actions and initiatives reciprocally effect the people they are socially tied to) (Pearlin, 2010), are therefore adopted in this thesis.

2.2.4 Parent-child relationships and parenting stress

With regards to the concept of *linked lives*, we want to draw special attention to the significant relationship that exists between children and their parents, and the concept of ‘parenting stress’ as an important mediating aspect in this parent-child relationship. An abundance of research affirms the notion that a parent’s ability to cope with (daily) stressors related to parenthood (parenting stress), is related to a variety of parenting outputs, and indirectly to the parent-child relationship (Hodapp, Ly, and Fidler, 2009). Most influential models on parenting behavior emphasize the role of various mediating factors, including parents’ own developmental history, personality, work factors, marital relationship, child characteristics, life events and daily hassles, environment and social resources, as well as the bidirectional interplay between child-characteristics and parenting stress (Abidin, 1992; Belsky, 1984; Bowlby, 1973). What is relevant about Abidin’s model (1992) on parenting stress, and something that is somewhat missing from earlier models, is his consideration for the parent’s beliefs considering their role as parents (*parenting role variable*), which impact the way parents appraise potentially stressful situations. As such, each parent has an internal framework of meaning, including expectations regarding themselves as well as their children, derived from their social/cultural environment and life history. Admittedly, these notions parallel the works of Lazarus et al (1984) earlier described. Building upon these notions, however, Abidin (1992) argues that unfortunately too much research has been conducted on personal-behavioral characteristics in the past decades, hereby largely neglecting the highly significant influence of *environmental* factors, as already suggested by Bronfenbrenner (1979). It is argued that to understand the efficacy of parents, one needs to
study parenting stress in the context of various environmental factors, such as socio-economic status, work status, community factors, cultural aspects, and time (Hodapp et al., 2009; Kennedy, 2012; B. A. Kotchick and Forehand, 2002). This emphasis on parenting stress within our thesis, in turn, is depicted in our proposed academic stress model (see figure 2.3).

2.2.5 Academic stress; a proposed model

According to Pearlin (1989, p. 248), the task of any stress researcher is to ‘cast a wide net to capture the full array of stressors that are present in an individual’s life’. In reference to academic stress in students, we aim to be wary of the potential influences of non-academic features that occur in the environment of school-going youth. As such, we purposely neglect more delineated definitions of academic stress, as proposed, for instance, by Bishta (1989) cited by (Lal, 2014) as: ‘a demand related to academics that tax or exceed the available resources (internal or external) as cognitively appeared by the student involved’, as well as research that is solely focused on exploring features intrinsic to the education system (such as high work load, examination pressure, grades, education quality, etc.) (Putwain, 2007). Instead, the definition of academic stress employed here is a practical one, whereby I look at the stress experienced by youth (particularly between the ages of 15 and 24) who are attending school or university. This way, I remain open to the possible influences of non-academic related life events that tend to occur in the lives of middle-class, urban students, such as specific parent-child dynamics, peer influences and various transitions, etc.

It is worth also noting the fact that stress as a concept is often intermingled with that of anxiety (Putwain, 2007). As such I would like to clarify that anxiety refers to the subjective experience of fear and apprehension, accompanied by a state of physiological arousal (Eysenck and Calvo, 1992), which is predominately a negatively connoted outcome and only one potential aspect of a stressful response. Stress can also be defined as a cause (stressor), such as ‘stressful exams’, ‘stressful relations’. In terms of other psychological outcomes of stress, scholars also refer to depression, anger, efficacy, etc., so stress is also more broadly defined as a starting point for various potentially negative psychological outcomes (Putwain, 2007).

As mentioned earlier, there is a reason to single out, or ‘zoom in’, on the influence of parents (as opposed to the other actors in one’s microsystem) because of the suggested weight of parenting pressures and parental expectations in the story of academic stress in India. It is often said that parents also do not live in a vacuum, and so it is important to bring more consideration to how parenting stress is evoked in Indian, middle class parents, and how it mediates their position and behavior in the parent-child dynamics. To bring all of the above mentioned theories on ‘appraisal of stress’ (including aspects of coping), ‘parenting stress’ (as one of the mediators in the parent-child relationship) and ‘environmental embedding’ together in one framework, a model has been formulated, as visualized in figure 2.3 below.
Theoretical framework

Figure 2.3 Theoretical framework for academic stress, based on the Bio-ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1979), adapted with insights from Pearlin (2010) and Abidin (1992)

2.3 Community-based health promotion

Besides understanding how stress is conceptualized and experienced within a social-ecological setting, similarly it is required to understand how health can be promoted whilst taking into account these environmental complexities. As such, I look at the literature of community-based health promotion to describe what challenges are involved in finding solutions to complex health problems.

A brief overview shows that in the past few decades there has been a paradigm shift from individually oriented approaches to health promotion models that embody and integrate both health behavior interventions, as well as environmentally-based strategies to improve population health and well-being (McLeroy, Norton, Kegler, Burdine, and Sumaya, 2003; Merzel and D’Afflitti, 2003). An increased appreciation of the ecological oriented health promotion has been the result of a growing acknowledgement that most public health problems are incredibly complex in nature, thus requiring a more holistic approach to analyzing and addressing community health issues. As such, health promotion is understood as employing multiple interventions that encompass both individual, as well as social-environmental, change with recognition for the dynamic interactions that exist at the interpersonal, communal, organizational and political levels, to achieve wide reaching change in both risk behaviors (habits and lifestyle) and health outcomes (Merzel and D’Afflitti, 2003; Stokols, 1996). Health promotion is preventive in the sense that it is concerned with individual and community wellbeing, and emphasizes the role of partnerships between various professional and non-professional agents to stimulate better health.
Theoretical framework

Based on the work conducted by Stokols (1996), three levels of health promotion can be distinguished, including theories for ‘individual behavioral change’, ‘environmental enhancement and restructuring’, and ‘social-ecological’ approaches that effectively integrate these two (see table 2.1). First, ‘individual behavioral change’ theories are concerned with attitudinal and behavioral change in the target group itself (in our case, Indian students). An overview of the literature on interventions that reduce stress (as well as stress-related problems, such as anxiety and depression) in students, gives us, among others, the following theoretical approaches (Regehr, Glancy, and Pitts, 2013):

1) **Psycho-education** finds its origins in theories of social learning and planned behavior, and asserts that improving a person’s knowledge and beliefs can affect their motivations and lifestyles regarding health (Fruzzetti, Gunderson, and Hoffman, 2014).

2) **Arts-based interventions**, with connections to positive psychology theory, affect purpose and meaning, positive emotions and social engagement in people (Wilkinson and Chilton, 2013).

3) **Cognitive-behavioral therapies**, including various different techniques (including relaxation and guided imagery) and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) exercises using desensitization (Gaab, Sonderegger, Scherrer, and Ehlert, 2006; Neil and Christensen, 2009; Regehr et al., 2013), which explain behavior based on the interaction between the external, environmental variables and internal cognitive processes. Most of these therapies are aimed at exploring and restructuring/healing habitual patterns and beliefs that lead to negative emotions (e.g. fear of failure) and stress.

4) **Mindfulness-based approaches**, which have gained popularity over the past decades from various fields, generally involve meditation techniques to provoke greater body-awareness, relaxation and more effective breathing, and, in turn, to increase people’s connection to, and acceptance of, oneself (Bögels, Lehtonen, and Restifo, 2010; Regehr et al., 2013).

‘Environmental enhancement and restructuring’ is understood by Stokols (1996) as addressing the stress-evoking qualities of environments, as well as enhancing their stress-buffering aspects to promote population health. With regards to stress-management for students, the following approaches can be utilized to engage the environment, including mainly peers, the direct family and school systems:

1) **Peer interventions**, are described usually as a method, but are mostly based on theories of health communication, health advocacy, social network theory (for the diffusion of healthy social norms), and emotional support, to create a healthier, more supportive environment for students (Simoni, Franks, Lehavot, and Yard, 2011).

2) **Parent-strengthening approaches**, including a variety of interventions across the life-span of children, mostly aimed at improving and supporting parenting resources and behaviors, which potentially affect the child (Kane, Wood, and Barlow, 2007; Sanders, 2002). A large number of parenting programs are focused on vulnerable groups that already display a heightened risk of maltreatment, including features of divorce or family conflict, poverty and material hardship, substance-use, child abuse, harsh parenting styles, and isolation, illness or death in the family, etc. Still, there are numerous interventions for ‘normally functioning’ parents to improve general parenting skills, parent-child communication, parenting consistency, quality family time, and which provide information on common age-specific transitions and challenges (Weare and Nind, 2011; National Research Council, 2009).

3) **School-based programs**, including various initiatives that target mediators for stress, such as bullying, violence, sexuality and substance abuse in children (Neil and Christensen, 2009).
Finally, ‘Social Ecological Approach’ is understood as a ‘broad, overarching paradigm that bridges several fields of research’, with a focus on ‘the level of congruence (or compatibility) between people and their surroundings as important predictor of well-being’ (Stokols, 1996, p. 285, 286), and reserves an active role for community actors. Any ecological research approach usually integrates several analytical levels to understand and address health issues in the community. As such, this approach may require more interaction within teams, including professional and non-professional experts, to understand the dynamics between different aspects of the intervention and the setting in which it is applied (Angeles and Dolovich, 2013).

Usually such studies are comprehensive ‘system change’ research projects (Golden and Earp, 2012), such as Whole School Projects (Hodapp et al., 2009; Scott and Gardner, 2015; Weare and Nind, 2011) and large scale health projects, like, for instance, ‘the Wheel of Well-being’, developed for a community in South London, incorporating several mental health partnerships and a range of activities to improve the mental health of youths (Harries, Hodgon and Noble, 2014). The complexity of human behavior and problems, and the need for approaches that work at several system levels is clarified by Merzel et al (2003):

“If individuals’ behaviors are the result of social influences at different levels of analysis, then changing behavior may require using social influences—family, social networks, organizations, public policy—as strategies for change. Our interventions may include family support (as in diet and physical-activity interventions), social network influences (used in tobacco, physical activity, access-to-health-care, and sexual-activity interventions), neighborhood characteristics (as in HIV and violence prevention programs), organizational policies and practices (used in tobacco, physical-activity, and screening programs), community factors (observed in physical-activity, diet, access-to-health-services, and violence programs), public policy (as in tobacco, alcohol, and access-to-health-care programs), the physical environment (used in the prevention-of unintentional-injuries and environmental-safety programs), and culture (observed in some counter advertising interventions). Thus we can intervene at multiple levels within the social ecology as a way of addressing behavioral risks.”
Theoretical framework

Table 2.1: Overview of Individual, Environmental and Social Ecological theories to Stress Prevention (inspired by Stokols, 1993).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health promotion orientation</th>
<th>Key determinants of health and illness</th>
<th>Intervention approaches associated with each level of orientation</th>
<th>Focus of health promotion interventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral change or life style modification</td>
<td>Individual health behavior</td>
<td>Cognitive-behavioral therapy, Positive Psychology and Arts-Based Intervention, Psycho-Education, Mindfulness-Based approach.</td>
<td>Modify person’s health-related attitudes, beliefs and behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental enhancement and restructuring</td>
<td>Quality of people’s physical and social environment</td>
<td>Peer-intervention, Health information, Parent-strengthening, School-based risk-reduction programs.</td>
<td>Improve environmental safety and strengthen social supports for health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social- ecological approach</td>
<td>Degree of fit between people’s biological, behavioral and sociocultural needs and the environmental resources available</td>
<td>System change approaches, such as e.g. Whole School and Community Projects.</td>
<td>Integrate behavioral and environmentally based health promotion strategies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2.1 Challenges regarding upscaling

System-level health projects are often large-scaled and well-funded (Goos, 2006), so there is a real challenge involved for small-scale research projects to create interventions that are sufficiently comprehensive to all system levels. Most programs, even those who are targeting highly complex issues, such as obesity, smoking, HIV/AIDS, etc., tend to operate from one theoretical perspective to create interventions (Merzel et al., 2003). For instance, one particular behavioral-cognitive health theory may be employed to target individual change (Smedley and Syme, 2001), or a community organization model which solely focuses on community processes, thereby neglecting the proper theoretical foundations in order to respond to individual needs (Merzel et al., 2003). As such, an integration of both individual and community level change is not often found as it requires more complex interventions (Golden et al., 2012).

Besides the difficulties of conducting complex research projects that sufficiently integrate multiple system levels, there is a challenge in upscaling complex interventions in order to extend their breadth of benefit to the larger population, and indeed there is, no doubt, a general understanding that actions and tools should be used to disseminate and share the outcomes of complex interventions with other communities (Mangham and Hanson, 2010; Willis et al., 2016). Moffit (2007, p.173) explains that while scale-up efforts are often
focused on translating and re-developing the exact nature of an intervention at a larger scale, he argues that this can be unnecessary and at times even obstructive. An alternative would be to look at the problem of upscaling in definitions of easily implementable solutions to share the same effects in larger system-level institutions. For the creation of innovative solutions, examples could perhaps be drawn from the field of experiential learning, such as in community-based adaptations to climate change (Ayers and Forsyth, 2009). In this field, for example, researchers have explored the use of games, videos and other learning applications to engage a larger community in managing the complexities around climate change, as part of a scaling-up approach (Suarez et al., 2008). This may be useful for this research also, particularly as the concern of academic stress in students, like climate change, contains complexities which require adaptive thinking in individuals; including children, teachers and parents.
3 Methodology

In the previous chapters my aim was to draw a picture of the social-ecological complexities that are involved with the public health concern of academic stress among studying youth in India. Furthermore, considering the difficulties that exist in rolling out whole-system change projects, including policy makers and macro-level institutions, I emphasized the need for niche-experiments or interventions that are sufficiently comprehensive and culturally sensitive to the dynamic relationships that exist between actors at several system-levels. Within this, it is acknowledged that there are various strengths, knowledge assets and resources that exist within people and communities which are the building blocks for positive change. As such, students, parents, NGO workers, teachers, and mental health workers are considered agents of change, rather than subjects receiving help. Finally, I stated the need to find ways of sharing important lessons with other actors at various levels.

In order to contribute to the understanding and addressing of academic stress in urban, middle-class India, a set of research questions were proposed, following a transdisciplinary Action Research approach of understanding and preparing, planning, acting and observing, reflecting and re-planning. I will first present the main research question and guiding sub-questions, and describe further the outline of this thesis. Then I will elaborate on the research approach, the study population of middle-class families in the city of Pune, and the methods that were used. Lastly, I will end by discussing issues of validity and ethical considerations.

3.1 Research questions

The main research question of this thesis was formulated as follows:

**How can academic stress in middle-class, urban India, be understood and addressed from a social-ecological perspective?**

Two sets of sub-questions were formulated to guide this thesis, aimed at understanding (1a and 1b) and then addressing (2a and 2b) academic stress:

- **Sub-question 1a) How do middle-class Indian students experience and cope with stress in the context of their academic development?**
- **Sub-question 1b) What role does the social-ecological system play in either stimulating or reducing stress in students?**
- **Sub-question 2a) What factors play a role in the development of social-ecologically sensitive interventions that help to prevent academic stress?**
- **Sub-question 2b) How can the mechanisms of interventions be shared in other contexts in order to proliferate their potentially positive outcomes?**

The answers to these questions are provided in three parts. The first part includes three chapters, which mainly reflect the status quo of how stress is experienced and dealt with by 1) university students reflecting on stress over the course of their academic life, 2) parents of school-going children (according to parents, teachers, and professionals), and 3) middle-class parents of non-school going children, engaging in ‘unschooling’. Part 2 contains three chapters showing the results of three case study interventions, including 1) a university-based stress management program for students, 2) a creative stress relief program for parents, and 3) a Peer-Education Program (PEP) for high-school children. Part 3 contains one chapter in which we reflect on a Video-Learning project, aimed at sharing lessons regarding academic and parenting stress with a larger
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The audience of parents, teachers and family members. An overview of how the chapters correspond to each sub-question is provided below (table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Overview of chapters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Chapter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Understanding Academic stress</td>
<td>1a. How do middle-class Indian students experience and cope with stress in the context of their academic development? 1b What interactive role do relevant actors in the social-ecological system play in either stimulating or reducing stress in students?</td>
<td>4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Addressing through interventions</td>
<td>2a. How can local transdisciplinary knowledge and resources be used to create social-ecologically sensitive interventions that help to prevent academic stress, directly and indirectly?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Addressing through Learning and upscaling</td>
<td>2b. How can the lessons of interventions be shared in other contexts in order to proliferate their potentially positive outcomes?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 Research approach

The research approach chosen for this thesis was deliberately interventionist, aiming thus to not just understand the situation, but also, if indeed required, generate potential actions for change. Transdisciplinary Action Research (AR) is a methodological approach that is first of all concerned with real life, complex problems, and promoting the ‘common good’; described by Pohl and Hadorn, (2008, 117) as ‘a regulative idea for reflecting and deliberating controversial attitudes towards issues and plural values and norms at stake’. Pohl et al., (2008) also make explicit that, unlike in mono, multi- or inter disciplinary forms of research, no individual field or actor is given full authority to claim what the common good entails. Instead the ‘common good’ is to be defined and co-created in an interactive, reflexive process with various professional and non-professional actors, to integrate both scientific and practice-oriented ‘lay’ (experiential) knowledge, leading to socially embedded, robust solutions (Pohl, 2008).

In AR approaches, knowledge is developed (or ‘co-created’) in communities of practice. A community of practice is defined locally, and characterized by the mutual engagement between multiple actors (often from various scientific, professional and non-professional backgrounds) who share a common concern, vision and/or goal, and interact with each other to deepen their understanding and expertise regarding the shared interest (Wenger and Trayner-Wenger, 2015). For this study, I positioned myself as one of the change agents or intermediaries, in which I both facilitated and took an active part in co-creating knowledge and knowledge dissemination in the community.

Transdisciplinary AR is furthermore understood as an emergent approach, open to develop in various directions (be it through activities developed in schools, in neighborhood settings, family centers, etc., or even by deliberately choosing not to intervene at all) (Wenger et al., 2015). It is a process that helps research to be practice-focused, aiming to bring an improvement in learning, as well as in the situation that is being explored.
As such, AR approaches often include a number of reflexive research cycles, visualized by Kemmis & McTaggart (1988) in their ‘action research spiral’ (figure 3.1). These cycles indicate a phase of reconnaissance or exploration, after which there are several cycles of 1) planning change, 2) acting and observing the process of change, 3) reflecting on the process and consequences of change, 4) revised planning. However, I felt more aligned with McNiff’s (1988) model of action research, which depicts a more ‘messy’ way of considering real life research (figure 3.2). He says about this figure the following (Mcniff and Whitehead, 2002, p. 57):

In my diagram, the spirals of action reflection unfold from themselves and fold back again into themselves. They attempt to communicate the idea of a reality which enfolds all its previous manifestations yet which is constantly unfolding into new versions of itself, constantly in a state of balance within disequilibrium. I am certain of uncertainty; I am balanced within my own disequilibrium. In action research terms it is possible to address multiple issues while still maintaining a focus on one, a realization of Plato’s idea of holding together the one and the many.

As such, smaller AR cycles could also occur within a larger research cycle, which ultimately serve the same goal.

Figure 3.1 Action research spiral (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988)
A more specified, transdisciplinary AR strategy for the integration of different inputs of knowledge, is the Interactive Learning and Action approach (ILA), developed originally by Bunders (1990) and Broerse (1991) in the field of sustainable agriculture for small-scale farmers, and has since then been applied in various other countries (e.g. Bangladesh, the Netherlands, South-Africa and Zimbabwe) and research contexts, including biotechnology (Broerse, de Cock Buning, Roelofsen, and Bunders, 2009), food security and wellbeing (Swaans, Broerse, Meincke, Mudhara, and Bunders, 2009) and synthetic biology (Betten, Roelofsen, and Broerse, 2013). The process of ILA is identified by five phases that occur somewhat prior to the implementation of an action-research spiral, such as that of Kemmis et al. (1988), and are focused on creating a shared vision, trusting relationships and joint understanding of the problem at hand. The ILA approach should not necessarily be taken as a blueprint, yet it provides principles that can be adapted to any other research context, and can be followed along the lines of the following phases:

*Exploratory phase:* a research team is established, and a preliminary inquiry into the problem context, the relevant stakeholders and particular developments in the research field is made.

*In-depth phase:* to gather the opinions, ideas and reflections of relevant stakeholders regarding the problem at hand.

*Integration-phase:* a deeper analysis of the dynamic relations involved in causing the problem, based on the compared perspectives of various stakeholders.

*Prioritization and action planning phase:* the stakeholders explore and prioritize issues, common goals and plans of action.

*Implementation phase:* the plans are put into practice in learning-action spirals as visualized by Kemmis et al. (1988).

A note of consideration would be that the research phases identified in the ILA approach are indicative of the steps taken in this current research study. However, the reality of giving shape to an ILA process in the context of our otherwise non-existing, non-funded research project bared the risk of being more unpredictable, as we were dealing with people in the real world, who were likely to be dedicated to work, family, and hobbies, apart from being invested in the cause of preventing academic stress. As such, throughout this research project my approach was to, as much as possible, follow the ILA steps with all the participants in all steps, within the practical boundaries of the research context. Therefore, I expected to remain the common denominator in
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holding the threads of understanding and addressing academic stress together, yet through the engagement with various other actors involved.

3.2.1 ILA phases in the study context of middle-class families in Pune

Location and study population. This study was conducted in Pune, the second largest city in Maharashtra, India, and with a population of more than 5.9 million people. It is located within four hours of driving from Mumbai, with ever-expanding city boundaries (Kantakumar, Kumar, and Schneider, 2016). The city continues to be under the influence of rapid urbanization processes, particularly in the last decade, as is visualized in figure 3.4. Other than an expansive education sector (the city is often described as the ‘Oxford of the East’ because of its abundance of research institutes, universities, colleges and management institutes), Pune is known for hosting large industries, including automobile enterprises, hospitality, retail and manufacturing companies. After Mumbai, Pune is also the highest earning location in Maharashtra (source: CMIE http://www.cmie.com/, refer appendix A).

With regards to the middle-class, we relied mostly on self-reports from parents and students, while being mindful of several other aspects that help to define ‘middle-class’ families and children, namely: the type of school a child attends (generally private, English speaking schools), their living arrangements (relatively comfortable apartment/house conditions, affordability of things such as a car or large TV etc.) and/or professional occupation (earning between 900,000 and 1 million Rupees per annum, roughly equivalent to €13,000-€15,000) (Beinhocker, 2007).

Figure 3.4 Map of urban expansion in Pune between 1992 and 2013 (Kantakumar et al. 2016, p. 8).
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Exploratory phase: June 2013 – August 2013. At the beginning of this project, I started this research with a few initial leads and connections that were already established by members of the Athena Institute. An important stakeholder in the transdisciplinary team was, first of all, the organization for suicide prevention in youth, called ‘Connecting...NGO’, established in 2005, and at that time managed by Bobby Zachariah. Within the context of the NGOs activities, numerous team members were trained to respond to suicidality, depression and anxiety in people through their Suicide Helpline and school or community projects. Part of the NGO, as a volunteer and trainer also, was private psychologist Adithy, who was particularly engaged in the development of the activities that unfolded in the course of the research project. Another relevant initial stakeholder was the child psychiatrist Dr. Bhooshan Shukla, who shared a concern on stress in families and in children, also because of the problems he witnessed daily in his private practice. In this initial phase, I made various other connections with pre-schools, parent groups, residential communities and universities, to explore which actors were interested in engaging with the topic of academic stress in children. I attended several meetings at Connecting...NGO, started participating in some of their projects, did exploratory interviews with several school directors and parents at various public points, conducted two information-sharing sessions with parents at pre-schools together with Dr. Shukla and spoke with several mental health workers and private counsellors in the field of mental health and family therapy, to establish connections and ideas for the ‘in-depth’ phase.

In-depth and integration phase: May 2014–July 2014. The goal of this phase was to gather the perspectives, opinions and ideas of various stakeholders with regards to the scope, intensity, lived experience and underlying causes of the problem with academic stress in youth. Besides myself, Connecting...NGO volunteers (mostly consisting of students as well as parents) were involved as research assistants in gathering data from interviews with parents, teachers, adolescents and young adults in various parts of the city.

The perspectives of these different stakeholders were as much as possible integrated, through meetings with the NGO, and through three workshops that took place at a high-school in Pune, with parents, teachers and children, to gain more understanding of their dreams and visions, and how they wanted change to take place.

Two different lines then began to emerge with regards to academic stress; one focused on the stress experienced by youth, particularly adolescents and university students (Chapter 4), and another focused on the issue of parenting and parenting stress (chapter 5 and 6).

Prioritization and action planning phase: July 2014 - September 2014. In this phase, interventions were discussed and prioritized based on the integration of inputs gathered from the previous phase. At this point, we looked at the locally available resources to initiate pilot interventions, one at university level (chapter 7) and one in a school directed at parents (chapter 8). We also decided to evaluate and learn from of an already existing (for two years) peer-education program at high-school level (chapter 9). In this phase, the practical engagement of NGO-volunteers, managers at two universities, as well as the director of Kalmadi School in Aundh (mostly for the location and recruitment of parents), became substantial. Similarly, for each intervention program, various trained volunteers, as well as the earlier mentioned professionals, were highly instrumental in shaping and facilitating the intervention programs in the implementation phase. Most of this phase was organized through informal meetings, either at Connecting...NGO or Dr. Shukla’s clinic.

Implementation phase: November 2015- April 2016; Reflection and re-planning: August 2016- October 2016. In this period, two pilot interventions were implemented by three distinct research teams (figure 3.5),

2 Through my initial explorations, I came to know about middle-class parents who purposely do not formally educate their children (unschooling parents). I included their perspectives on children, education, stress and family life into this study on academic stress.
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including both volunteers and working professionals. In the university program team, we had a professional psychologist (Adithy), several NGO volunteers (mostly trained students with a psychology or social work background), as well as the principal and staff members of two universities. In the parenting program team, we had Dr. Shukla, Adithy, several NGO volunteers (some of them parents themselves) and the school director of Kalmadi school in Aundh. For both projects, an intervention protocol was developed regarding the location of the program, the length and number of sessions, the content and objective of each session, the recruitment of participants, the evaluation methods and depicted outcomes. The third case study in this thesis was based on the Peer-Education program which was already run by Connecting... NGO as part of their suicide prevention approach. It was included in this study as the intervention turned out to be highly relevant regarding how academic stress could be understood and addressed.

During these projects, results were discussed and debriefed in the respective teams. Through these reflections, the idea was developed to create a tool to disseminate some of the lessons learned with a larger group of people through video learning. This became an extension of the research project with parents (figure 3.5, 2b), as we made preparations for the development of four parenting videos, including the formation of a film research team, consisting of actors (many of them parents), script writers, Dr. Shukla and Adithy as advisors for the script, and film crew members, acquiring funding and appropriate location settings. In March and April of 2016 the films were shot, and later in October they were screened and evaluated as a part of 7 focus group sessions with parents, in order to evaluate their value and achieved responses (chapter 10).

![Figure 3.5 Schematic overview of the participants involved in each research team.](image-url)
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**Intervention design approach.** The projects were inspired by the principles of theory-informed interventions for behavioral change, which helped us to develop complex and context-fitting interventions (French et al., 2012). Based on these principles, French et al. (2012) proposed a framework of several steps to choose the appropriate theory-based components of an intervention intended on change. The steps were as found in the box below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps involved in theory-informed behavioral change (inspired by the Theoretical Domains Framework by French et al. (2012))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1:</strong> identifying who needs to do what differently? (this helps to clarify which behavioral changes are intended).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2:</strong> identifying the pathway (from the literature, and experience of the professional team, select which theories or frameworks are likely to induce change and through which pathways).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 3:</strong> identifying the intervention components (techniques and modes of delivery) to induce change (use the theory to select exercises or tools, and explore what is feasible, locally relevant and acceptable to combine).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 4:</strong> measuring change (choose the appropriate indicators of change and outcome measures, and determine how they could be measured).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More specifically, because of the complexities involved with empowering parents in the Creative Parenting Program, a Theory of Change (ToC) was developed to explicate and evaluate why and how (under which circumstances) change happens, by describing the outputs (intermediate goals) and outcomes (long-distant goals), rationales (underlying theories and beliefs as to why one particular output may lead to a certain outcome), assumptions (external conditions outside the scope of the intervention which are essential for change to happen) and indicators (measurable aspects that can be evaluated with regards to change) (De Silva et al., 2014).

### 3.3 Methods

Throughout the study I relied mostly on qualitative research methods, as well as, for the evaluation of the university intervention, a more mixed-method approach. Qualitative methods are used to understand how people make sense of social phenomena through their emotions, feelings, perceptions and interpretations (Biggerstaff, 2012). In qualitative research, the position of the researcher is recognized as intrinsically involved with the processes or subjects he or she is studying, accepting that he or she is not neutral. This way of looking at qualitative research is rooted in the ‘social constructionist’ epistemological position, in which it is believed that social reality does not exist outside of the jointly constructed meanings of people (Nichols and Loseke, 2000). As such, qualitative research helps to gain more insights into the experiences and perspectives of individuals regarding the complexities of their lives, by giving ample room for their own choice of words and meanings.

As part of these qualitative methods, I used In-depth interviews, Time line interviews (Adriansen, 2012), Focus group discussions (FGDs), notes from debriefings and collected observation write-ups. For the quantitative evaluation of the university pilot, I also used a standardized questionnaire; the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), as developed by Cohen et al. (1983). Two of the interventions were also evaluated with baseline studies (chapter 7 and 8). For more specific explanations of these methodological approaches, refer to the relevant chapters in this thesis. However, an overview of the methods and study population in the exploratory studies (as part of the first three phases of ILA) and intervention studies (as part of the action planning and implementation phases of ILA), including the Video-learning study, is provided in table 3.2.
Table 3.2: Overview of methods and participants in each study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exploration study (First three phases of ILA)</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Number of research respondents</th>
<th>Chapter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exploring stress in students (retrospectively)</td>
<td>Time line interviews, FGDs</td>
<td>20 students</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring parenting stress</td>
<td>In-depth interviews, FGDs</td>
<td>40 parents, 38 students, 12 teachers, 1 psychiatrist, 1 psychologist, 2 school managers.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring stress in the context of 'unschooling'</td>
<td>In-depth interviews</td>
<td>4 unschooling parents</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention study (Implementation phase of ILA)</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Research respondents</th>
<th>Number of participants in the intervention</th>
<th>Chapter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of university-based stress program</td>
<td>PSS (Cohen et al, 1983), observational notes and debriefs</td>
<td>University students, school management staff, research team</td>
<td>At baseline: 42 students After intervention: 33 students</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of Creative stress relief program for parents</td>
<td>In-depth interviews before and after, debriefs and observational notes</td>
<td>Parents, research team</td>
<td>At baseline: 16 parents After intervention: 8 parents 76 students</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring outcomes of Peer-education program on Peer-educators at high-schools</td>
<td>FGDs, in-depth and semi-structures interviews, documentation of PE-sessions</td>
<td>High-school students, NGO-staff, School-directors and parents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Testing of Parenting Video’s</td>
<td>FGDs</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>62 parents in 7 FGDs</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4 Validity

I used a number of strategies to ensure the credibility of this study was, as much as possible, guaranteed.
Methodology

First, as a means of triangulation, a variety of different research methods were used concurrently to scrutinize the soundness of their distinct individual data outcomes, coming to a more optimized converging result. Similarly, I aimed to look at the problem of academic stress from multiple angles by engaging various stakeholders, including parents, unschooling families, teachers, school/university staff, educational and mental-health experts, adolescents and students, to create a rich picture of the dynamic relations involved in academic stress.

Secondly, various forms of debriefing were frequently used in this study to eliminate chances of researcher’s bias, which was particularly relevant during the implementation phase. Debrief-sessions were conducted with the relevant research team after each intervention session, exploring questions related to: What went ‘well’? What did we observe? What could be improved? An important component of these debriefs was also the emotional state of each person involved. Thus we would also ask: How do you feel? This question would usually, in fact, provoke a richer account of the actual particularities that happened in- and around the development of the intervention studies. Furthermore, debriefs were regularly organized with co-researchers, my supervisors and project partners to check my assumptions, thoughts and perceptions regarding the issue of academic stress.

Moreover, as a qualitative researcher (and human being) involved as the main ‘instrument’ in analyzing the issue of academic stress, I considered it important to stimulate a sense of emancipation in myself to ‘improve’ my own research lens. I tried to improve my own reflexivity (or relative ability to remain critical and unbiased) by engaging in various self-development/stress management courses during my PhD research. I feel this sense of self-validation and reflection helped me to remain emotionally balanced enough during the many uncertainties involved in the qualitative action research, so as to ensure they did not affect the overall research paradigm.

Finally, as a form of member-checking, summaries of interviews were shared with respondents to confirm whether the researcher’s interpretations of their views and experiences were somewhat valid. Also, for all studies, the primary data was recorded and/or extensively notated. Recorded materials were transcribed verbatim for analysis and various field notes were written during the course of the research, all of which were stored at the VU University.

3.5 Ethical considerations

The studies described in this thesis did not fall under the Dutch Medical Research Involving Human Subjects act. From our study involving parents, we received a declaration from the VU University’s Medical Ethics Committee for non-WMO in 2014 (confirming that the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act does not apply to this particular study) (reference number: 2014.170). For all studies participants received written, as well as verbal, information regarding the objective, content and length of the study. Participants were also reminded of their ‘voluntary’ participation and their right to leave the study at any point in time. For all studies, verbal and written consent was also received prior to the data collection procedures. Lastly, to protect the privacy of all study participants, anonymity was always maintained by disconnecting their names to the data through the use of subject codes.
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“I had made my mind up to stay at the top of the class and [...] graduate at the head of it. [...] that was my kind of ideal. I just didn't know any better.” (Hermann Hesse, Beneath the Wheel, 1903)
Chapter 4: Stress in Indian students; connecting the dots from a life course perspective

‘Here I am again talking to myself,
sitting under red light both hands on the wheel,
how am I supposed to feel?
There’s so much running through my mind,
there’s so much confusion,
everything around me is an illusion.
so entangled in this trap,
losing out on myself,
This is the time, now I want to fly,
open up that part of me that has been hiding away.
Yes, it’s my time to rise up and shine,
forget about the reasons
That I cannot, I say “yes I can”
as it’s my time to fly.’

Poem written by a female university student, 2015
Abstract
In recent decades there have been rising concerns about the disturbingly high number of youth experiencing mental health problems in low and middle-income countries, including India. Although much is understood about the general causes of academic stress, little is known about how stress and coping is developed in individual students over the course of their academic career. More insight in this issue could help professionals develop effective interventions for students dealing with stress. This qualitative study explores how stress is experienced in Indian students from a life course perspective. In-depth interviews were conducted with some 12 university students, using time lines to reconstruct the student life-span regarding stressful life events and their frameworks of meaning. A focus group with 8 students was conducted to further validate the outcomes. Results indicate that there are at least three persistent strains that commonly induced stress in students, including 1) role transitions, 2) conflicting personal- and environmental values, and 3) migration. Social resources to mediate stress were only partially used by students. With regards to coping, three pathways of approaches were distinguished in the self-reports of students, including 1) a social vs individual approach, 2) an avoiding vs attacking approach, and 3) a denial vs accepting approach. Some students developed a sense of mastery, which allowed them to reflect on their own behavior patterns and locus of control. The results are discussed in relation to the need for psychological interventions to support Indian students, as well as student populations in other quickly developing countries.
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4.1 Introduction

In recent decades there has been rising concern about the disturbingly high number of youth experiencing mental health problems, particularly in low and middle-income countries (Patel et al., 2007; Herrman, 2013). In India, the burden is particularly observed among students of between 12 and 25 years of age, who seem to be at high risk of experiencing various socio-psychological problems such as stress, anxiety and depression over the course of their educational career (Arun and Chavan, 2009; Sahoo and Khess, 2010; Sidhartha and Jena, 2006; Verma et al., 2002). Statistics show that besides illnesses, among the main causes are ‘family problems’, ‘failure in examination’, and ‘love affairs’ in children below 18, and ‘family problems’ in youth between 15 and 29 (NCRB, 2010), pointing again essentially to problems with psycho-social distress. Overall, scholars refer to this public health concern as requiring attention and advocate needs-based interventions throughout the country (Arun and Chavan, 2009; Patel et al., 2012; Radhakrishnan et al., 2016).

According to Glanz and Schwartz (Glanz and Schwartz, 2008, p. 211): ‘understanding stress and coping is essential to health education, health promotion, and disease prevention’. However, stress, and how it is processed by Indian youth, particularly in an academic setting, has been explored only to limited extent (Waghachavare et al., 2013). There seems to be little understanding of what these events actually mean for this generation of Indian students, particularly in the period of emerging adulthood (Augustine et al., 2011). As this generation enjoys increased access to global values and knowledge (Aggarwal and Berk, 2014), these give meaning to their lives in ways that undoubtedly also shape their experience with stress. This is probably why some studies have already pointed to the issue of inter-generational conflicts between youth and parents as one of the key inflectors of stress in youth, particularly in urban areas (Chadda and Deb, 2013; Vig and Jaswal, 2008). Still, the question remains as to the nature of today’s youth values regarding issues such as family, work and friendships and how these mediate their experiences of stress.

From the substantial research that has previously been conducted on stress, it has become more obvious how differences in vulnerability, risk factors, processes of ageing and time play a significant role in why some people experience particular stressors as exerting a major impact, while others find ways to cope relatively well (Aldwin, 2007; Haggerty, 1996). Since youth is the stage where most mental problems start to develop (Patel et al., 2007), it is important to: 1) draw a more complete picture of when, how and for whom aspects of Indian academic life create stress, 2) know under which circumstances effective coping mechanisms are naturally developed by some Indian youth, and 3) see how the latter could be supported in others as well. This study therefore focuses on exploring the complex interactions between stressful events, personal values, social systems and wellbeing among Indian university students. With this we aim to contribute to the knowledge required to design appropriate psycho-social health programs for young Indian students to prevent maladaptive behavior.

4.1.1 Stress and the Life Course Perspective

Pearlin (1989, p. 241) describes stress as related to the ‘various structural arrangements in which individuals are embedded’ and ‘to be traced back to surrounding social structures and people’s locations within them’. He argues therefore that sociological research on stress should essentially aim to detect patterns of stress among people who are exposed to similar socio-economic conditions, and occupy comparable roles in these contexts. In this study, we built upon the Stress Process Model developed by Pearlin (1989) in which he describes various components of stress that can be studied in sociological research, including ‘stressors’, ‘mediators’ and ‘outcomes of stress’. Later Pearlin (2010) completed this model with important concepts derived from a Life Course Perspective on stress (Elder, 1998; Elder, 2007), which incorporates notions of time, transitions, sequence and agency. This extended model provides the conceptual framework for our study.
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First, the ‘outcomes’ of stress can be wide-ranging, including, e.g. short-term or prolonged feelings of depression (Nicolai, Laney, and Mezulis, 2013), suicidal ideation and various related psychological problems (Cho and Haslam, 2010), cognitive issues related to academic functioning (Elias, Ping, and Abdullah, 2011) or maladaptive health behaviors, including substance abuse (Arun and Chavan, 2009). Similarly, the (sudden) absence of stress can provoke a sense of psychological wellbeing (Smith and Yang, 2017). In this study, we look at the self-reported experienced of stress among students, as well as its perceived direct outcomes, to explore various outcomes that students experienced as a consequence of their stress.

Second, ‘stressors’ are circumstances, events or changes that give rise to stress, generally coming from distinct disruptive events (those which bring about an instant change in people’s lives, such as the sudden loss of a family member) or persistent strains which bring about more continuous hardship over time. From the latter, Pearlin (Pearlin et al., 1996) furthermore recognizes different types of secondary stressors, of which role strains are particularly relevant to our study. Role strains are built upon traditional and institutional frameworks embedded in various family and organizational cultures, and are often the source of inter-generational conflicts (Pearlin et al., 1996). To a large extent, the impact of stressful events is mediated by the value systems of collective cultures, which determine how individuals review certain happenings, for instance, giving birth at a young age (Pearlin et al., 1996). For students in India, their value systems might be influenced by both a collectivist tradition of interdependence and family cohesion, as well as notions of individualism introduced through increased global exchange (Baptiste, 2005; Vijayakumar, 2004).

Third, stress outcomes can be mediated and relieved through several ‘mediators’, including social support, coping strategies and mastery, each of which will be described in more detail below. Social support systems are an important resource, particularly for youth wellbeing (Maes, Vanhalst, Spithoven, Van den Noortgate, and Goossens, 2016), and in facing stressful life events. Ideally, the type and quality of the available social support responds appropriately to the type of stress that is experienced, including instrumental support when someone needs advice or direction, or emotional support when there is need for comfort. With regard to coping, many theories have been developed to understand how to define and measure it (Compas et al., 2001; Lazarus and Folkman, 1987). One definition of coping, provided by Lazarus and Folkman (1987, p. 141) describes it as: ‘the person’s constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person’s resources’. In this study, coping is perceived as a continuously evolving skill, depending largely on how people manage the meaning of events, rather than the management of the event itself. As such, we look both at personal values, as well as values that are based on being embedded in a social context, to understand how a person reviews the severity of a situation. In one cultural context, for instance, pregnancy before marriage may be regarded as reason for celebration, while in other contexts it may give rise to shame and feelings of guilt. Dealing with values often leads to two types of coping skills, according to Pearlin (1996), which may include others (through comparison and identification with peers), or prioritizing measures (where one aims to shift certain problems to lower priority, to deal with them later). A third mediator is mastery, which is something that people can develop over time, and, like coping and social support, helps to control the outcomes of stress on the person’s wellbeing (Thoits, 2006). Mastery is often addressed as a form of agency (Gecas, 2003), including aspects of positive self-concepts (confidence), locus of control, and self-awareness (Pearlin, 2010).

Finally, we look at stressors, mediators and stress outcomes from a ‘life course perspective’, recognizing that various components of stress, as described above, are unavoidably related to processes established over a period of time. The symbiosis between the life course perspective and social stress theories, as proposed by Pearlin (2010) is understood to be vital in this study, since the principal components of both frameworks overlap and have similar functions, particularly the concept of transitions, time and sequencing and linked lives. The life course perspective is especially useful for studying the lives of young people during their formal education, as young adults are likely to experience various important transitions in the domains of career, personal and social life. Transitions are described as any form of change in role, relation or personal context.
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(Elder, 2007) and often brings about some form of low, medium or high stress (Pearlin, 2010). These could include establishing as well as ending important relationships, status or career, and as such can be useful reference points or benchmarks for research on stressful life events. To understand why some transitions evoke more stress than others, the life course perspective encourages scholars to look at whether or not the transition is desired, and also at the timing and sequencing of events. Particularly whether the timing of the event is in line with social and personal norms and values, and whether it is preceded by preparatory experiences that might mitigate adverse effects. In that sense, depending on the context of where people live, it could be an advantage or disadvantage to experience certain transitions ‘off-time’ (such as death in early adulthood, in developed countries) or ‘out-of-sequence’ (such as parenthood before marriage, in some cultures. Finally, we include the notion of linked lives, which refers to the idea that throughout people’s lives, their transitions and decisions are likely to have a direct or indirect impact on those to whom they are socially related, such as friends and family (Elder, 2007; Pearlin, 2010).

4.2 Methods

This in-depth qualitative study was conducted in Pune, a large city in the Indian state of Maharashtra, which has the second highest number of suicides in the country (Mid-year, 2010). Due to the affluence of business and educational institutes, Pune attracts people from within India and abroad. Some 20 students from three universities (two private and one public) and various academic backgrounds were involved in this study. The data sampling was done through purposive snowball sampling for students between the ages of 17 and 24 years. Students were recruited through the university boards in an invitation letter explaining the background of the study. We looked for students who were generally healthy in order to understand how stress is experienced by students who have not been diagnosed with any specific disorder. The data collection was based on 12 in-depth interviews lasting between 90 minutes to two hours, as well as one three-hour focus group discussion with eight participants. All students had an intermediate level of written and spoken English and agreed to participate in the study through informed consent forms. Demographic information of the 12 students is provided in Table 4.1. Students in the focus group were all from a private university, enrolled in different bachelor’s and master’s courses, and aged between 20 and 24 years.

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3 Not diagnosed with any mental disorder or currently involved in any form of therapy.
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Table 4.1 Demographic data of respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S6</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td></td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S7</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S8</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S9</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S10</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>S11</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S12</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.1 Methodology

For this study, we relied on the input derived from time-line interviews (Adriansen, 2012), which are used to conduct life history research, and can be useful to explore and visualize key events in someone’s life, as well as to evoke the intangible values, and lessons related to these events (Adriansen, 2012). As such, time lines could be useful to track the development of young adults, the personal and social context in which important transitions have occurred, and which say something about how stress is experienced (Kolar and Chan, 2015). This method has also been applied, for instance, in research on the development of suicidality, as it helps to pinpoint difficult patterns of live events across time (Rimkeviciene, O’Gorman, Hawgood, and Leo, 2016). The interviews were conducted by an independent researcher, who would first aim to build rapport with the student, explaining that there were no ‘wrong answers’, asking if the student had understood everything or

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4 Public university
5 Private university
6 Bachelor’s
7 Master’s
8 Doctoral
9 Business Administration
10 Business Management
11 Computer Applications
12 Economics
13 History and Music
14 Male
15 Female
16 Has migrated from another state to study in Pune
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still had questions. The researcher would also explain the process of drawing the time line together, exploring their life from the age of 16 (10th grade) up to the present.

As shown in Figure 4.1, the student would be asked to indicate important life events (potentially disruptive events, and/or persistent stressors, such as ‘break-ups’, ‘graduation’, or ‘family conflicts’) that occurred in their life since 10th grade, and indicate how these events were experienced as stressful (step 1). The students could also rate their stress from 1 (not at all stressful), 2 (moderately stressful), to 3 (very stressful), which would be substantiated with their own comments. Students were asked also to elaborate on the thoughts, feelings and body sensations they felt during these events. From these questions, we could gain the students’ cognitions and values regarding events, to understand why they were considered stressful or not. For the second step, we looked at the way students coped with stress, if, when and from whom they would seek help, and which personal capacities were developed to deal with stress in the course of their student life. We also asked them to reflect upon the effectiveness of their coping strategies. For the last step, the interviewer would ask the students to look back at their life to see what lessons they had learned regarding their overall mental wellbeing, and towards the future if there are still things they would like to learn in order to deal with current stressors as well as those anticipated in the future.

Figure 4.1 Visualization of the time-line interview process.

To validate the results gained from the individual interviews and to better understand how students were currently experiencing stress, a focus group discussion was held in a reserved classroom. Two facilitators supported a joint elaboration regarding 1) the most important causes of stress, 2) the most effective coping skills that were used to deal with stress, 3) what personal and/or social assets they would like to gain in order to maintain/improve their mental health. The focus group followed a diamond shape, going from broad themes towards clustering and prioritizing most important aspects, which was supported by interactive tools such as drawing (e.g. drawing one stressful event from your life), and joint brainstorm sessions involving post-its, chart paper and stickers (for prioritization).

4.2.2 Analysis

Data was analyzed through a collaboration between the first and second author using MAXQDA, version 12. Interviews and focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then read and
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reread independently by the first and second authors, and later discussed. For the analysis, the transcripts then independently read in order to look for themes, concepts and phrases from the data. From this initial process, the researchers drew up a coding list which was then discussed and compared, leading to a joint coding list of themes. This coding list was used to conduct selective coding, and so making links and comparisons between themes and integrating these into categories and sub-categories (Walker, 2006). The interpretations of how experiences, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors seem to be inter-related, as well as connected to the notions of time and transitions, values, social networks, and coping resulting from this analysis were discussed with all researchers in order to develop a storyline that contains all these connections as truthfully as possible (Strauss and Corbin, 2008).

4.3 Results

We present the results in two sections. In the first part, we elaborate on the life events and persistent strains that seem to evoke stress in students at various moments in time, including role transitions and migration. In the second part, we look at mediating factors, including specifically the social networks, various coping styles and mastery, to show how the students process their stress response.

4.3.1. Life events and persistent strains

Role transitions. Over the course of the students’ lives, from the moment they pass 10th grade and go to college, until the point of obtaining a graduate degree, most respondents experienced several life events that cause considerable stress. Some of these events are deeply personal and unexplained by any commonly shared factors, such as a sudden death or loss of a family member (experienced by students 1 and 3), some severe health incidents or injuries (students 3, 4, 5 and 12) or financial setbacks (student 6). Such incidents are expected to create stress because of their disruptive and often unanticipated nature. The stress an event generated in the students does not always directly reflect its ‘severity’ (as you would expect a death or loss in a family to create more stress than a conflict with a peer), but instead is often substantiated through several cognitions and beliefs held by the students. As such, some events seemed to create more persistent strains, often connected to the role students saw for themselves, as well as their beliefs regarding their own abilities.

For instance, the financial set-back was particularly stressful to student 6, as he believed that he should help his family by graduating faster and repaying the investment made in his studies. He felt that it was his role and responsibility to start a good career as soon as possible and then support his family. Finally, he regarded his own ability to study as limited, thus adding to his continuous feeling of stress:

"I’m not good at academics, so I don’t deserve, and can’t pay back the investment that my parents are making for good education. This makes it continuously very stressful. Also, what will the rest of my joint family think if I can’t provide for the family? (s8)"

This sense of responsibility for taking care of the family emerges in many of the students as they grow older. This change of position is reflected in many of the students’ stories. One said:

"I used to share everything with my parents. Now it’s like they have their own issues, and I am at the age that I can’t put my problem to them anymore. Instead I should support them. (s6)"

Another student explained her role in the family, making a connection also to her gender role:

"Being a girl makes it more difficult to take care of my family, because I will marry and move out of my family’s house. I don’t have any siblings to stay and take care of my family, particularly to care for my dad. The financial situation is not perfect either, so how will I make sure they are fine? (s1)"
At times, these role transitions would result in conflicts with the rest of the family, as the student’s perspectives were sometimes regarded as futile or childish, and their concerns were not (fully) considered.

**Personal and environmental values.** Life events were meditated through various factors, such as the student’s individual values and how these would agree with those of the environment, revealing more persistent strains. When student 3, for instance, was hospitalized due to a severe typhoid infection, she was most disturbed by the lack of visits by friends as she felt this reflected a lack of care. As such, the event added to her distressed feelings about her friends and her ability to maintain relationships, particularly with the other sex. She said about this:

> It was stressful that I was going through this typhoid period and he (her friend) never turned up once at the hospital to meet me. I thought he was one of my best friends. I felt that he should have come, and he could have in this bad situation. The thing is, girls are shy, and if he wants to come and perhaps has good feelings towards me, then he should come and not just leave our friendship.

It should be noted here that many of our respondents frequently experienced conflicts in both friendships and love relationships. Mainly, these conflicts had to do with issues of trust. Students tend to talk about their friends and peers in terms of loyalty to a noteworthy degree, and it somehow seems that a friend is regarded as an asset that should be lasting by the virtue of having invested in it. Once one has taken an interest in you as a friend, it is expected that this person is constantly able to ‘be there for you’, understands and responds to your needs, and will certainly not break the friendship or love relationship. One student said, for instance:

> There is this friend I have and we are both in BBA and now he has got his friends, priorities are changing and I don’t like that. … Once I make friends I prefer keeping them for life time. Once I get attached with someone I expect that person to also understand me but he never makes any effort and I hate when I am taken from granted. They can’t ignore me, if they start ignoring me, I get mad at them. (s8)

This somewhat rigid stance towards friendship often leads to disappointments. In the first place, because others may suddenly leave the friendship or do something incomprehensible to upset you. Second, students themselves at times feel trapped in their friendships or unable to be honest about how often they would like to spend time with them. Hence a lot of time is spent on keeping connections with others, either through social media or by hanging out, which sometimes also leads to declining academic results. For instance, one student felt depressed and stressed in a period when her social relations upset her balance with school and family.

> Basically, the guy I dated, he didn’t have much to do or anything to study. Anytime he used to have free he called or just came to my college and then I used to hang out with him, go out with him. I didn’t study properly….So I had to study for my 12th, I had to maintain my relation, plus I had my family and other friends. Everything came together and I couldn’t manage it. It became very stressful. (s3)

Any other life events, particularly academic incidents (e.g. taking an important test, or receiving disappointing results), would be influenced by the value systems of the student and others (mainly family). Most of the stressful life events happened during their 12th grade (these results largely determine which university a student could go to), as well as approaching graduation (when students are applying for internships). The severity of the stress response would be influenced by a variety of factors, including 1) the student’s beliefs about the decisive value of exams to predict their future career path, 2) the student’s beliefs regarding the value given to academic achievements by their parents and the wider society, 3) the student’s beliefs about their aptitude and the value they give to being successful and the best, and 4) the intrinsic meaning students
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gives to the subject matter (as well as freedom they feel to choose an alternative path). These factors, sometimes also reflecting a fear of failure, are illustrated by the following quotes:

*I want to prove myself and show that I can do better than my family did. I will do what I need to do, make a time-table and follow it strictly, study hard, to make sure I will be the best, and be profitable in the future.* (s9)

*I felt bombarded by the expectations and pressures of my family. Sometimes I felt good dreaming about the appraisal I would get if I would succeed and make my parents proud. Other times I would feel so depressed thinking about not meeting the bar, that people would criticize me and say I didn’t do my best enough.* (s7)

*I’m happy with what I’m doing, but then I see my friends…. some of them are at Stanford, already getting paid and being able to purchase a car. So I feel like, why can’t I do that? That time, I try to push myself.* (male student, 22, FG)

*I must say, which makes it harder.* (s2)

Some students also felt insecure about what they want themselves and how these desires could fit the career system around them. They hope that finding more direction in their career will bring a certain stability in their lives that they are longing for. Students from the focus group said about this:

*Nowadays there are actually many opportunities to get into, but there is also extreme competition. So when you don’t know what you want, and you don’t become good at something specific, you may end up not meeting the level you need to compete, and then people become depressed.* (male student, 21, FG)

*If you have a stable good-earning career, you will have a stable life, and more chances at getting a good girl, as they will look for what your status is.* (male student, 22, FG)

Finally, we see a similar sense of confusion reflected in the students’ individual narrations:

*What should I do according to me? I am so confused what to choose for me and that is the main thing. All I decide now is going to shape my future and life. This is the crucial stage now, as industries start recruiting for trainees soon. I have only 2 to 3 months to decide what should I do and how should I do. So it is kind of a big step and I don’t want to refute the mistake I have made in my life.* (s6)

*And everyone around me seemed very sure about what they wanted to do and … I didn’t know what was I doing and what should I do. I believed that when I have taken up the subject, I can’t change by going back.* (s12)

**Migration.** Finally, about half of the students experienced moving to a new place (mostly for studies after the 12th year) as a stressful event. It marked in students a transition towards adulthood, leaving behind the safe and caring parental nest to live alone in a new city, independent and having to manage many new things. Most respondents had experienced migration as a challenging period, or were currently still discovering how to navigate their more independent lives, sleeping in dorms, sharing with other students, cooking their own food, academic schedules, transport to university, as well as their social agenda. The transitions may be even harder for students from a rural background, as explained by a focus group participant, particularly when they are not fully proficient in English. Learning all these new lessons created a sense of insecurity, bad habits, and sometimes depression in the students. One female student said about moving to Pune:
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So yes, ahh after coming to migration I had to deal with many new things like adjusting in the new place and new people, dealing with all types of situations alone because my family was not here with me to help me anymore. I had a thousand questions in my head as to when to sleep, who to trust, where to eat. I must have lost a lot of weight in this process, because I felt unable to deal with all of this. (s7)

She also touched upon a sense of nostalgia that was similarly expressed in the stories of other students, describing how the emerging independence brings in elements of confusion, and sometimes rivalry and conflict with her parents, as they start to feel more distant and less supportive:

Because during that time I had constant fights with my mum, especially mum, so I used to feel so sensitive and start crying every time during such situations, and go back to the memories which I and mumma had spent very beautifully in the past.

4.3.2 Mediating factors; social network, coping strategies and mastery

Social networks: peers, friends and family. From the interviews we saw that horizontal connections (e.g. relationships with peers and friends of similar age) are becoming increasingly important in the students’ lives, particularly, and somewhat unfortunately, around the time where exams and academic studies equally start to demand more attention and concentration (with special reference to the 10th and 12th standard tests, but also during the first year of university). Naturally, the dynamics of making and keeping friends, and slowly exploring (often in restricted fashion) the possibility of love, causes the students feelings of insecurity and considerable distress. Most notably, a general sense of loneliness or disconnection with others is what prevents students from gaining emotional support from their friendships. Students mention that everybody seems to be busy with their own problems, and friendships are typically developed in superficial get-togethers around food and partying. It seems that friendships are usually created around the notion of status, distraction and entertainment, which leads students to feel even more lonely when they are in distress. One student said:

Who could I really talk to? One of the reasons why I was unhappy is because this is a place where no one is interested in what you are thinking or feeling. Nobody wants to have a conversation which is about something real, people just wanted to go for a drink at the end of the day and be done with it. I just find it so dissatisfying. (s11)

In some cases this disconnection drives students to feel particularly desperate and more alone in their friendships. One student described that after having tried to seek out nurturing friendships, yet getting lost in maintaining them just for the sake of it, he broke down in a state of resentment. Two students further explained:

I guess that is one of the biggest reasons I don’t want to with people anymore is that even in a place where there are hundreds of people but I still feel like nobody is there like me, I end up feeling more lonely. (s9)

I started having thoughts of dying alone. Then I try to rationalize things to a very pathetic extent to convince myself that I have just not met the right people or have not been in the right relationships yet. Right relationships should also not take so much work and lead to all these stupid defence mechanisms. (s10)

For most students, parents were very important (one student said that: ‘God cannot be everywhere, so he created mothers’), but not always as supportive as they might like. Students particularly lack the conviction
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that they could talk openly to their parents about their real concerns. They sense that parents are often just concerned about one thing, which is their social status and academic attainment. Equally, they feel that whatever is important to them, including issues related to love and marriage, will not be received openly and truly accepted by their parents. A generation gap exacerbates this feeling, which one student describes as follows:

The thing is, the orthodox thing comes in between all this. So it is really hard to interact with your parents. See, I stay in an urban metropolitan city, and it is hard for me, a girl like me to talk to my parents. In India, you can’t even tell your parents that you want to marry this guy. Even that is decided by them. You have to be with this person or you have to be with this person. (s1)

Coping. Students use a variety of different coping skills to respond to stressful life events and strains. Depending on personal as well as environmental factors, we see that students (sometimes unconsciously) distinguish between three sets of behavioral paths to deal with stress, choosing between: 1) a social vs individual approach, 2) avoiding vs attacking (problem solving) and 3) denial vs accepting. A variety of these three paths were seen throughout the student’s life, where the student would usually opt for one approach as opposed to the other.

Individual vs social: First, from the 12 interviewees, about five students described themselves as being shy, introverted and/or closed-off, particularly at the beginning of their student life. These characteristics lead them to sharing less and may prevent them from seeking help from other people. In other cases, the social resources were (experienced as) less available for students to share their problems in an effective manner. Subsequently, such students describe numerous occasions where they applied a more individual coping approach to deal with stress, involving various strategies such as listening to music, crying, going for a walk, taking advice from books or internet, or sitting alone in their room or in a park. However, we see that most students, when they start to feel more confident and secure in their relationships (usually towards graduation), will start to look to their friends for support. One student explained:

Talking out to people helps. Whenever I am stressed I take my phone and call everyone who is close to me and share it with them. Sharing with them, reduces the burden for me. At the most, I go and talk it out with my sister. (s8)

Avoiding vs attacking (problem solving): Secondly, the distinction between ‘avoiding a stressful trigger’ versus ‘applying a problem-solving approach’ was reflected in the student’s stories on their own coping behavior. These differences also arose between students. The level of stress, but particularly personal factors, as well as time, seem to influence their use of flight or fight strategies. Personal factors, such as the student’s confidence and self-esteem, influenced the ability to actively deal with the causes of distress. Again we see that at the start of their career, students tend to lack the experience and reflective strengths to believe their efforts could help to improve the situation. For instance, in cases of distress about school work, students need to believe that they are able to work (harder), but also that these study efforts could lead to better results. In absence of such convictions, avoiding strategies were generally adopted, including drinking, smoking, (in some cases) taking drugs, watching TV for hours, going out with friends, and using social media. Skipping classes is another coping strategy often applied by students who are just starting university, often resulting in their self-confidence regarding studies to spiral down further. In other cases, a problem would feel somewhat out of their control, for instance, when dealing with other people’s distress, leading again to avoiding tactics. One student explained how she dealt with her father’s distress about her grades:

I don’t go home. So, I don’t see my dad for a long time. Also, he is depressed and sad because of it (her grades). So, looking at that makes me feel worse. So, I try not to be at home and not be in that environment which makes me more depressing. I go home more late, I hang out more with
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friends, or if I go home I keep watching series or I read books. It helps me not getting involved in this. (s1)

Also time and experience, as we see in the students’ histories, allow for more active problem-solving approaches. We see that towards graduation, students tend to apply more problem-solving approaches regarding relationship issues or study/career problems. One student had gained work experience before he continued his university studies, which seemed to have given him both an intrinsic motivation (he chose his course himself), as well as the confidence that he would be effective in his studies. His work experience had given him that sense of self-esteem as a lot was demanded of him there. He said about this:

I worked 12 hours a day for six months. This exposure made me feel confident, more understanding of the industry and knowledge wise. After that graduation and post-graduation was not such a big thing, only a positive experience. Then I wanted to be admitted to a university in the US. I concentrated on that, worked hard, kept myself busy, exam by exam, and now I have two options in New York.

The importance of having small experiences of ‘getting it right’ was also discussed during the focus groups. One student commented:

You have to evolve yourself, but that is not easy because you’re not a robot. When you need to present for instance, and you are low on confidence, often you will spoil it. That makes you feel lousy about yourself. But if you get your first success, and people applaud or endorse you, you realize that you can actually do it, which is necessary to feel less stressed and develop. (male student, 23, focus group)

Denial vs Acceptance: Third is a denial versus acceptance approach. One phenomenon that often came up during the interviews is when the students would convince themselves they were fine as they were dealing with heartbreak or relational conflicts. Perhaps in order to avoid feeling the pain, and to rationalize the tension between their hopes and values and the reality of their friendships, a remarkable number of students made a cognitive decision regarding the importance of either the other, or themselves. The two quotes below illustrate students’ tendency to disregard their emotions, and to adopt a less caring attitude towards the person who hurt them:

I realized I was giving importance to the wrong person. I learned that if a person doesn’t give importance to you, then he is not important enough to hurt you. (s2)

Everyone is not what they show, they pretend. You are not supposed to trust people, they are not worth your attention. But now I’m thinking, why give someone the chance to hurt you? (s1)

Now I give importance only to myself, more than anyone. For me first is myself. I am the best person to give company anywhere. (s5)

Only a few students were able to look at what may have caused a mutual misunderstanding in the relationships, and come to a more understanding and accepting place, including their own weaknesses. Two students, for instance, remarked:

I learned that, from inside I know that I can adjust to people, we can adjust to people. I will be able to mix up with people and try to be with them. Whatever the way they want to be with me, I know I can be fine with that. (s3)
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I think we need to accept our failure and the mistakes that have happened. Realize your role in it and make sure it doesn’t happen again. (female student, 22, FG)

**Mastery.** During their academic career students learn to use coping skills more consciously, effectively and more appropriately in each situation. Particularly students who have (almost) graduated seem to be more aware of when they use coping responses that actually help to release tension, anxiety and on the whole make them feel better. As one student said:

> See, what I have understood in this period of time is that everything, every situation needs a different coping strategy. If I have to deal with friend, that coping strategy won’t work with my dad. Or vice versa. So basically with friends, I have tried to figure out ok what will help me in being less stressful when I am with them. With this I realized I don’t have to talk with them much, or do this, do that. In fact, I know myself better. (s10)

Most importantly, some students started to change their **locus of control** by reflecting on themselves, instead of seeking the source of distress outside their sphere of influence. This has to do with a sense of agency and the idea that people could somewhat shape the direction of their own life. These few students seemed to be able to reflect upon their own emotions, thoughts and actions, which set them apart from those who seemed to react more impulsively to the events happening in their lives. For a few students this meant that they were able to see value in, for instance, learning to be less angry, to plan and organize better, to accept themselves more, or sometimes ask others for advice. More importantly, some students were talking about becoming better equipped to articulate and defend their own life choices to the somewhat traditional environment they frequently encounter. As one student mentioned during the focus group:

> It’s all about us, how able we are to convince others, like family and relatives, to make them listen and accept. This is also about prioritizing and creating balance in for instance your career, so that your parents can see that you can actually manage your own life. Then they won’t find societal notions more important than you. (male student, 23, FG)

Again, these examples were still rather few compared to at least seven of the respondents for whom current stressful events were interpreted as quite overwhelming and for whom it was still difficult to interpret and process stress effectively. Some of those students were reluctant to talk to a counselor or find professional help, mostly because they felt that a stranger would not be able to understand their issues. This could be a significant hurdle for some students in distress, as they end up fighting the battle alone. One student actually wanted to seek help, but eventually decided against the idea:

> A year back I thought about seeing a psychiatrist because nobody understood me, not even my family. And I had all these really big issues, which they knew inside out, but still they did not acknowledge there was something wrong... after some time passed I realized no one could better help me than myself, as no one knows me better than me. (s9)

### 4.4 Discussion

From the self-reports of the students in our study we gathered that the majority suffered quite serious stress at various points in their lives. From the time-line interviews we found that particularly the periods around the 12th standard exams, as well as the last phase of the bachelor’s degree, causes stress in students in varying degrees. Besides numerous personal life events, we understood that at least three key life strains were experienced by students, including: 1) **role** transitions from ‘being cared for’ to ‘being responsible’ for family members, 2) conflicting personal- and environmental values regarding friendship, academics and career paths, and 3) **migration** and settling down in a new place. Regarding mediating factors, we saw that students are
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often limited in using their social environment for emotional support, either due to personal factors (self-esteem, level of openness, communication skills, etc.), or the absence of ‘good friends’ and ‘accepting parents’ in the prevailing culture. For some students, a sense of disconnection led to feelings of loneliness and depression. In terms of coping, we distinguished three separate pathways of approaches in self-reports of students, from which they (implicitly) choose: 1) a social vs individual approach, 2) an avoiding vs attacking approach, and 3) a denial vs accepting approach. Finally, we witnessed that some students had developed a sense of mastery, which allowed them to reflect on their own behavioral patterns and cognitions, and change the *locus of control* from an external cause of stress to anything inside themselves that could help to improve the situation.

The life course perspective furthermore helped us learn how and when there were both positive and negative changes, and how intervention programs could perhaps enable students to gain more control over their mental wellbeing at an earlier stage. First, the concept of ‘transitions’ appeared relevant to study. As mentioned, students make an important leap into adulthood particularly when they start university, in which they take up numerous new (family) responsibilities. This could be explained by the fact that young people in India accept such duties as criteria for adulthood, in which ‘taking care of the family’, but also ‘gaining control over your emotions and actions’, seem to characterize a mature person (Seiter and Nelson, 2011). This process of emerging independence can undoubtedly be stressful in itself, but seems to be particularly problematic for those students who come from regional towns, and face additional problems, such as, a lack of English proficiency or understanding of the cultural habits of their study environment (Brown et al., 2017). Second, the concept of *sequencing* is relevant because we see that only few students benefited from experiences before resuming their studies. Many students, when they start, have insecurities and doubts regarding their career path and how they should organize their studies to meet their future needs. The relatively rigid university system, in which students are pressured to make decisions (for instance, regarding which course to follow), contributes to their distress, particularly for those students who are not ‘ready’ yet. Students’ ideas regarding such decisions is that they are irreversible, and bear a huge risk of regret in the future. This was also found in a study on emerging adulthood in Tamil Nadu conducted by Seiter et al (2011, p. 525) who said: ‘Students choose in their late teens what they want to do and then are set into an educational track that does not allow for changes to a different track of major’. In our study, we found that one student felt more secure about his future studies after having worked in a company for some time. In India, however, there are also few opportunities for young adults to gain work experience before or during their studies. Higher education, for those who can afford it, is a primary focus for families in India, and most parents look down on the jobs or internships which are available for uneducated youth (Luthar, Sawyer, and Brown, 2006). In view of this, schools and universities could ensure that students receive more preparatory guidance, or at least gain more exposure to industries and social organizations, perhaps even promote voluntary work, to help students gain a broader perspective on life.

We will also briefly reflect on the notions of *time* and *linked lives* to understand how this cohort of students can relate to the value gap that exists between them and their parents. We know that this generation of students was born in a socio-economic context that is very different from the previous generation (Chadda and Deb, 2013). A few important changes, such as the liberalization of the economy in 1991 (slightly before most of these students were born), the spread of internet and social media in the late 1990s, have made some of the country’s traditional norms and values more permeable to alternative (often referred to as Western) ideas (de Groot and van der Horst, 2014; Luthar et al., 2006)(de Groot and van der Horst, 2014). Andy Furlong, a prominent researcher in the field of youth studies, explains that an increased focus on individual accomplishment can, in itself, create anxiety (2009, p. 3):

*I shall argue that the instabilities of life course stem from the tension between uncertain life chances and the culture of individualism which expect that people actively shape their biographies. At the level of cultural expectations, there is a double-edged sword message: perform*
your transitions and pathways according to market opportunities and institutional regulations, but do this according to your individual, self-determined timing.

For countries like India, the widespread change that has occurred since these economic shifts is still only a few decades old. It seems therefore furthermore acceptable to think that today’s youth in India is somehow sandwiched between two paradigms of thinking – one which promotes a sense of belongingness, responsibility and interdependence (Baptiste, 2005; Chadda and Deb, 2013), versus one which stimulates individualism, choice, authenticity, autonomy and perhaps more meritocratic beliefs regarding status and position (Gupta, 2008). This may explain the fact that students struggle to bring these two worlds together, and share their true aspirations with the family they love and respect.

Similarly, it is worth discussing how and why many conflicts seem to occur between peers in this particular cohort. One idea could be that with the uncertainties students feel regarding the clash between their family-based values and the constant influence of modernity, there is an increased desire in students to rebel and live out aspects of their ‘modern self’ with their peers (de Groot et al., 2014). As such, de Groot et al (2014) explain that concepts of ‘escape’ and ‘authenticity’ are lived out by young people coming together and ‘having a good time’, drinking and taking trips to tourist places such as Goa (some of our students also talked about going on a trip to release stress). Somewhat paradoxically, however, such endeavors undertaken by Indian youth to affirm their individuality and freedom, are marked by repetition and routine (essentially everybody doing and saying the same things) and are probably less instrumental in facilitating authentic engagement with each other. Students hope and expect to find long-term solace in the other, yet without really knowing who they are, and with the additional modern risk of losing someone to a different or ‘better’ version of themselves, potentially fueling more disappointment in peer relationships.

Based on these last results we recommend that a form of stress management, preferably held in universities (Latha and Reddy, 2007; Nguyen, Dedding, Pham, Wright, and Bunders, 2013; Patel et al., 2007a) should be available to students as a form of preventive public health. Such interventions should ideally incorporate at least three essential components. First, we feel that a program for students should somehow relieve the fear of failure, and stimulate a more creative ‘growth mind-set’ regarding success. The latter is an idea developed by psychologist Caroline Dweck and brings in a love for learning and appreciation for dedication that lead to real success (Dweck, 2015; Masters, 2006). From this mindset, failures or mistakes are not regarded as a proof of one’s lack of talent or abilities, but as an opportunity to learn something new. From our study, we saw that students gain more pleasure and temporary ‘confidence’ when they experience certain moments of ‘getting it right’, which is natural in a system where students’ performances is commonly validated by standardized external procedures, which adheres to an ‘entity theory’ (fixed mindset) towards learning (Masters, 2006). A growth mindset, moreover, will allow students to feel a more authentic connection to their own learning process, with less stress on adhering to a fixed norm of success. Similarly, studies show that programs involving mindfulness to help students meet academic challenges with curiosity instead of fear, can help to relief stress in students (Hjeltnes, Binder, Moltu, and Dundas, 2015).

Second, any intervention program must find a way to help students to 1) understand their own emotions and needs, 2) listen openly to the experiences of others, and 3) communicate more effectively about sensitive topics. We feel that approaches such as Non-Violent Communication, developed by Marshall Rosenberg, could be valuable additions to any intervention program (Rosenberg, 2003). Third, intervention programs could help to stimulate a sense of agency in students, particularly as they are battling with the generation gap. We feel that this generation of students has ample opportunity to give direction to their own lives, yet only few seem to be fully aware of this, for various reasons. To help students navigate their lives, balance priorities, and stand up for themselves when necessary, interventions could perhaps bring in an element of inspiration, either through arts and poetry or through referring to role models who non-violently challenged the status quo of their time. These three elements could be combined with simple stress-relief techniques, such as mindfulness,
drama exercises, etc., to support students (Rones and Hoagwood, 2000b). In addition, we would suggest professionals introduce interventions to students in a way that feels playful and inviting enough to effectively deal with the stigma associated with counseling (Patel et al., 2007).

This brings us to our final point, which is the need for programs in which students can learn about stress management together. This is important, first, as students (particularly those with insufficient social skills) tend to feel lonelier (Maes et al., 2016), which could be somewhat relieved in programs that bring communal trust and support in what Strömback, Malmgren-Olssen andWiklund (2016) call a ‘social oasis’ or a ‘supportive social context’ where young people can feel empowered. Second, group programs will be more useful than individual counseling, as our study shows that stress it is not just an exceptional case in India. We would like to urge social workers and other professionals to respond to this mental health need by considering the student’s unique strengths and needs that this study reveals.

4.4.1 Conclusion and implications

There were a few limitations to this study. First, during the recruitment process we paid attention to finding students in different phases of their studies, enrolled in various courses in two different institutes. It would have been valuable to differentiate students based on their demographic backgrounds. The student’s experiences of stress are likely to be influenced by where they were born and how this differed from their current study context. Also, although we allowed students to share any financial struggles in their family, we did not ask them specifically to identify their socio-economic status. It is likely that such information could have been used to clarify the variations in students’ experiences. Nonetheless, we feel that this in-depth qualitative study provides a rich picture of the diversities and commonalities that occur in the trajectories of Indian students during their studies. The contributions could be considered by practitioners and policy-makers who are concerned with supporting students in urban India who are experiencing stress, and perhaps other rapidly developing (Asian) countries (Aggarwal et al., 2014).
Chapter 5: Understanding parenting in rapidly changing contexts; a qualitative study on parenting stress in Pune, India.
PART 1: Understanding Academic Stress

Abstract

In India, anxiety in school-going youth is often associated with high parental pressures, yet little is known about the nature of these parenting practices. This study explores the various contextual factors that contribute to the development of parenting stress in middle class families in an urban setting in Pune, Maharashtra State, India. Primary data was collected using qualitative methods: focus group meetings were held with 18 parents, 38 high school students (aged 12-18 years) and 12 teachers; and interviews were conducted with parents and experts in the field of parenting, education and psychiatry. There are three important underlying factors pertaining to parenting stress in Pune: the education system; the generation gap; and the increased social emphasis on autonomy and individualization. The article concludes by providing suggestions for future family interventions to support parents in rapidly developing contexts, such as the use of creativity, Mindfulness, and joint discussion groups to stimulate reflective parenting.
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5.1 Introduction

Recent studies indicate that stress and anxiety are a significant mental health concern among youth in India, particularly in the urban, middle class population (Deb et al., 2015; Verma et al., 2002). For a number of young people, stress is taking on particularly severe forms, such as prolonged depression and suicidal ideation, which can ultimately lead to various maladaptive health behaviors (Arun and Chavan, 2009; Sidhartha and Jena, 2006; Waghachavare et al., 2013). While a wide variety of causes are associated with this matter, problematic parent-child relations, parental pressures and unrealistic parental demands have been found to be important risk factors for mental distress in Indian adolescents (Bhasin et al., 2010; Deb, 2010; Joshi et al., 2012; Krishnakumar, Geeta, and Riyaz, 2011). Children and adolescents often describe high parental expectations as a burden (Joshi et al, 2010). In many South-Asian countries, but also particularly in India, children are exceptionally devoted to their parents, and grow up with the notion to honor their parents for the efforts they are making to secure their future (Patel et al., 2016). The duty or responsibility to take up your role in life (dharma) plays an important role in India, increasing the pressure on children to feel and behave in certain ways (Gupta, 2008; Patel et al., 2016; Sharma, 2014). Equally, Indian parents are exceptionally committed to their children’s future success, investing much in private tutoring and extra-curricular activities (Deb et al. 2010). Results from an HSCB study, for instance, showed that at least 71 % of the parents were willing to go into debt to finance the studies of their children (HSCB, 2012). Many studies therefore associate anxiety in children with parental pressures and features of parent-child relationships (Raphee, 1997; Verma et al., 2002; Vig and Jaswal, 2008).

Parents, however, do not live in a vacuum (Kotchick et al., 2002; Morett and Paled, 2014). Especially middle-class parents, living in urban areas, are increasingly exposed to significant changes in their environment in terms of preferred family structures, time management, urbanization, life style and cultural/religious traditions (Aggarwal and Berk, 2014; Carson, Chowdhury, Perry, and Pati, 1999; Natraj and Thomas, 2002). One implication, for instance, is seen in what scholars describe as a weakening of hierarchical structures in society and family ties altogether (Natrajan et al., 2002; Singh, 2009). To indicate, joint families in the cities have been largely replaced by nuclear family structures (the extended, joint family now holds up only about 20 % of all households) (Tung, Sandhu, and Singh, 2010), urban divorce rates have gone up (Sonawat, 2001) and dual-earning couples have increased, which changes how parents relate to family roles and the use of time (Henry and Parthasarathy, 2010; Sonawat, 2001). For some of these families, particularly those who have migrated to the cities to establish better career- and life opportunities (Tung et al., 2010), the societal transitions have been rapid and disruptive, which makes them more vulnerable to stress and mental health problems (Natrajan et al., 2002; Henry et al., 2010). Stress in parents, however, is likely to induce less supportive parenting behavior (Kennedy, 2012). This study therefore poses the question how we can understand the concerns and causes of stress in middle-class parents, particularly in the context of continuous societal change?

5.2 Parenting stress

Parenting stress is commonly perceived as a response to the demands of being a parent, as well as the demands that relate to the broader range of functions that parents occupy in their lives, such as work or relations within the extended family (Rodgers, 1998). Abidin’s ecological theory of parenting stress is often used to describe parenting stress (Abidin, 1992), and emphazises a multifactorial explanation. It argues that parenting stress is the result of a set of appraisals that parents make in the context of their role as parent, and which can be functional in motivating them to utilize the resources available to support them in this role (Abidin, 1992). Parenting stress therefore increases when fewer resources are available to respond to the perceived demands. In Abidin’s theory (1992), three domains are believed to be important contributors to parenting stress: ‘parent characteristics’, ‘child characteristics’ and ‘situational/life stressors’ (Abidin, 1992). Parent characteristics refer to the factors unique to the parent, such as parental attachment, sense of
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competence, and depression. Child characteristics are related to the unique qualities of children that might impact the parent-child relationship, such as developmental problems, temper and the extent to which the child is demanding. The last domain, life stress, relates to circumstantial factors that are often outside the direct control of the parent, and connected to their social-ecological environment, such as poverty, discrimination, socio-economic status and social support (Kennedy, 2012).

It is generally acknowledged that stress in parents can be passed on to children in various ways (Vaughan, Feinn, Bernard, Breerton, and Kaufman, 2012; Deater-Deckard, 1998). Numerous empirical studies have shown that parenting stress is an important factor in poor parenting behavior and can negatively affect children’s emotional and behavioral health (Kennedy, 2012; Vaughan et al., 2012; Moreland, Felton, Hanson, Jackson, and Dumas, 2016), particularly when stress is shared in the private sphere of the family. Stress in parents has been associated with negative effects on children and young people in clinical and non-clinical settings, either directly or mediated by varying parenting styles (McPherson, Lewis, Lynn, Haskett, and Behrend, 2009). Parenting stress has, for instance, been linked to more punitive parenting styles and less warm/affective ways of parenting, resulting in emotional and social problems in children (Rodgers, 1998; Nam, Wikoff and Sherraden, 2015). Anthony et al. (2005) provide a detailed review of literature that discusses the impact of parenting stress on parenting behaviors, including disciplining and nurturance, and explain that parenting stress is related to outcomes of children’s behavior in pre-school settings. Their study shows that elevated parenting stress influences social competence and can negatively affect internalizing and externalizing behaviors in children (Anthony et al., 2005). Moreland et al. (2016) also found that parent internal locus of control is increased when parenting stress is reduced, which positively effects various child outcomes.

While the impact of parenting stress on children is evident from the literature, fewer studies have been done to explore how parenting stress is influenced by broader societal changes (Kotchick and Forehand, 2002). This study first aims to contribute to the understanding of parenting stress among urban, middle class parents in India, by exploring how parenting stress is affected by shared environmental factors (as opposed to focusing on specific individual characteristics of parents and/or children). As such, we focus largely on the third domain of Abidin’s theory on parenting behavior, which looks into ‘situational/life stressors’ to understand parenting stress (Abidin, 1992). With regards to these environmental factors, the social-ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1976; 1994) is used to grasp the distinct micro- meso, exo and macro-system factors of political, cultural/ideological, economic and social nature that may influence how parents experience their world. The micro-level factors could relate to the immediate environments of parents, such as the school of their children, their family and friends and the neighborhood. This micro-level is further embedded in a broader system of meso-exo and macro-level institutions. At the meso-level, microsystem actors are interacting with each other, which can involve more than two persons at the time, such as, for instance, the relationships between their child and their teachers, neighbors, extended family, etc. The exosystem involves institutes and organizations that more indirectly affect the parent, such as e.g. their partner’s work environment, the quality and availability of children daycare, local political systems, industry, and religious institutions. Somewhat even more indirect, the macrosystem affects parents through the broader economic system, legal/political frameworks, and most importantly the norms and values that are commonly created in the shared culture of, in this case, middle-class urban families. Finally, the concept of time is also included in the model to consider the influences of changes that happen over time in each of the environmental levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Furthermore, parallel to Abidin’s theory on parenting stress, this study builds upon the theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) of the general stress reaction. From this theory, three important concepts help us understand parents’ experiences with stress, which are formed by their interpretations of the environment (Abidin’s third domain for understanding parenting stress). First, unique life events as well as ongoing strains that parents experience in their shared environment are considered. Life events are distinct happenings with a clear onset,
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such as a loss of a family member, and are likely to be more personal. Strains are enduring problems, threats or conflicts that evoke constant stress in a person, as they continue to pose an unresolved demand (Couch and Coles, 2011). Second, we look at the commitments or values (ideas about what should happen), and beliefs (ideas about what will happen) parents commonly exhibit, that impact their primary appraisal of experienced events. Both these commitments and beliefs are largely influenced by the knowledge and experiences parents have gathered during their childhood, which have shaped their internal working models. These internal working models are instrumental in the automatic thoughts that are formed about the situation (Kennedy, 2012), indicating whether something is a threat or not. Finally, the secondary appraisal regarding parent’s perceptions of what could be done about it, and of the resources they exhibit to cope with the situation, is explored. Both concepts of primary and secondary appraisal are useful in understanding why and to what extent parents respond stressfully to events in their direct- and indirect environment. In this study, we furthermore focus on parents of children in the adolescent age, because this is the age where most stress is also experienced in Indian youth, according to studies (Deb et al. 2010).

We finally pose the following research question: What are the perceived social-ecological factors/ processes that cause parenting stress among urban, middle class parents of young people aged 12-18 years in India?

5.3 Methodology

5.3.1 Research setting

This study had a qualitative, transdisciplinary research design. In transdisciplinary research, the experiential knowledge of actors that are involved or affected by an issue is considered valuable input to understanding the issue better (Pohl and Hadorn, 2008). This study therefore included teachers, children, parents and professional mental health workers, to reflect on (and ultimately find solutions for) stress in youth and parents. The research was conducted in Pune, the second largest city in Maharashtra, India. Similar to other emerging high-growth economies, India has experienced significant economic and political reforms in the last decades that undeniably encouraged change in several parts of the country (Kim and Singh, 2004; World Bank, 2010). These economic reforms and increased international trade have led to accelerated economic growth rates, democratic policies, urbanization and a rapidly expanding middle class (Pritchett, 2009). In Pune, such processes are abundantly visible. Rapid industrialization and market liberalization have opened up social life to the rest of the world (Bari, 2007). Pune is also often seen as the ‘Oxford of the East’, due to its leading position in the educational industry and its relative abundance of research institutes, universities, colleges and management institutes (Barua, 2012).

5.3.2 Data collection

The participants who were involved in this study are shown in Table 5.1. To establish a comprehensive perspective on our research inquiry and to improve the validity of our research, we used triangulation of respondents (Olsen, 2004). For the recruitment of respondents we worked with a non-governmental organization (NGO) for suicide prevention in Pune, through which discussion groups were organized, including in total 18 parents, 38 high school students (aged 12-18 years) and 12 teachers. We organized one session per group of participants, including a maximum of 8 participants in each group.

Each focus group lasted for about 2.5 hours, including a break of 30 min. These focus groups were sequentially designed. First, we asked children to reflect on their own experiences with stress and present them to each other on flip-charts. We also asked them what they their dreams were and what would need to happen to experience less stress in their lives. The resulting flip-charts were used as input for the focus groups with parents and teachers. We asked the participants to reflect first on the flip-charts of the children (which were not their own children, but represented a general picture of what children were experiencing in schools and
in their homes), after which we asked parents to work in sub-groups to draw out what impacted their own stress-levels, which parenting questions they faced, and what should change to experience less stress. A similar structure was used with the teachers, who would reflect on the children’s flip-charts, but also on the work of the parents. The resulting discussions were facilitated by a team of experienced, independent researchers, as well as one psychologist. The resulting data from these focus groups were used as first indications on the possible factors influencing parents and their mental well-being in their parenting process.

**5.3.3 Methods and analysis**

The methods were set up to derive answers to open-ended research questions from different perspectives. First, homogenous focus groups were chosen as the methodological approach since these are helpful in revealing perceptions, attitudes, ideas and emotions on a topic related to a homogenous group experience (Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub, 1996). In the focus group discussions, children, parents and teachers were supported in articulating their ideas on the causes of parenting stress and the extent to which they were manifested in society. Several types of exercises were used to evoke such reflection, including drawing and

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Data collection</th>
<th>Sample (total)</th>
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| Parents        | • Parallel focus groups were held with 7 fathers and 11 mothers in a public high school, conducted and facilitated in groups of 8.  
• 10 in-depth interviews were held with 6 mothers and 4 fathers  
• An explorative questionnaire filled in by 4 fathers and 8 mothers | 40 parents.     |
| Students       | • Parallel focus groups were held with 38 students in subgroups of 8 students. | 38 students     |
| Teachers       | • 1 focus group was held with 12 teachers in a public high school               | 12 teachers     |
| Expert consultation |  
| Psychiatrist   | 3 in-depth interviews were held with one child-psychiatrist in his private clinic | 1 psychiatrist  |
| Psychologist   | 2 semi-structured interview were held with a psychologist in the NGO            | 1 psychologist  |
| Education professionals | 2 in-depth interviews were held with professionals working in the field of education in Pune, India | 2 educational professionals |

After these focus groups, in-depth interviews were conducted with a various other actors. First, interviews, each lasting about 2 hours, were held with 10 middle-class parents. Secondly, we held interviews with several experts in the field of parenting, education and psychiatry, working in Pune. Among these were three in-depth interviews with a child psychiatrist. We also conducted interviews with two education professionals; one director of a large private high school, and one director of a Montessori school in Pune. Finally, two semi-structured interviews were held with a psychologist working for the aforementioned NGO to reflect on the causes of parenting stress in middle-class urban India.
mind maps (Mierlo et al. 2010). The in-depth interviews were conducted by the principal researcher, and 4 trained psychology graduates, using several qualitative research exercises that are considered useful in deriving perceptions and accounts of people’s lives (Biggerstaff, 2012). The tools used in these semi-structured interviews were the life- or time lines, to understand how aspects of their lives that were considered stressful were related to contextual factors, and how these changed over the course of their lives (Adriansen, 2012). This helped us understand which particular changes in society played a role in shaping the unique life events, as well as how the parents appraised these events. This tool is also particularly useful in bringing up deeply rooted processes that cause stress in parents, by asking out the thought patterns (including commitments and beliefs) related to stressors, including, for instance, the homework of their children, which could be again influenced by their environment. Of the ten interviews, six interviews were conducted in English, while four were conducted in Pune’s local language and translated from Maharati to English by an independent translator.

5.3.4 Analysis

Questions in the interviews with professionals were more focused on supporting meta-reflection to understand and identify the dynamics that exist in the broader context of middle-class parents based on Bronfenbrenner’s social-ecological model (1994). All the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through open and axial coding by two independent researchers with qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA 11). The resulting coded data were discussed and amended to come to a list of categories and subheadings which were used in the phase of axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). The emerging patterns were discussed with the co-authors, before writing the results.

5.4 Results

In this section, we discuss the most important outcomes of our study. The focus of this study was on finding common causes for parenting stress. So while several other concerns were brought up, such as e.g. individual financial burden, personal losses or conflicts, and specific child related issues, we discuss the general patterns found among middle-class parents. Specifically, we elaborate on three domains that proved to be generically important causes of concern to most parents: 1) the increasingly competitive education system; 2) a widening generation gap (and new societal risks); and 3) emancipation in society. For each of these topics we allow the different actors to reflect, particularly regarding the beliefs and values that are shown in parents as well as the extended society.

5.4.1. The education system: values and beliefs

Concerns regarding the education system. When we asked parents about causes of stress in their lives, the educational career of their children was generally one of their biggest causes of stress. Quality education was considered top priority to almost all parents we spoke with, as parents believed that only good schooling (and getting good marks) was a prerequisite for any career opportunities in the future. A father of two daughters, explained during an interview:

‘The only thing is that we want them to study more, give more importance to studies. It’s becoming more competitive, so relative they need to go further ahead, so they must study more. They do not put in their best efforts yet. They are very smart, but they don’t put their best efforts. So when I ask them, have you done some exercises today? So, they don’t have done it. They have 24 hours in a day, so they could put more exercise and practice in that. So even for example even if it’s a holiday, we say, do spend some time on something constructive. Brush up some skills or math.’

During the interviews and in the focus group, parents also emphasized their wish for education that would allow their children to be happy, whilst preparing them for a successful career. Often, in the context of the current education system in Pune, these two aspirations were a source of conflict, and therefore distress in
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parents. When reflecting on this further, parents expressed to being worried about the burden that is put on children to do well in school. The majority of parents in the focus groups, for instance, did not approve of the excessive amount of homework that children receive, and were discontented with the amount of weight children had to carry (books) to school. Parents pointed at external forces, particularly the school, to explain pressure placed on their children. Two parents said that they had moments in which they had to withdraw their children from other important activities, such as volleyball and dance, because school had become too demanding at certain points of their educational career, particularly during examination periods. Parents also often referred to the amount of homework projects schools are demanding the children to complete and the competition that surrounds these projects as major burden. In some cases the pressure gets particularly excessive when homework assignments are unclear and too difficult for children to even accomplish. One mother said about this:

‘The schools give projects the children just can’t do! They should explain it better, give them a clear picture. And if anything, the schools should allow children to finish their work at school itself, not outside the schools’.

One father expressed his concern with regards to current patterns in education:

‘We used to enjoy going to school in our time. Yet nowadays, children do not enjoy it much. They have exams, grades to pass, high expectations and they even start younger now. We used to start writing at 6, now it’s at the age of 3 years old. Children carry along heavy books in their bags, even the young ones. I’ve seen this as well and it shocked me a bit that small children are carrying such heavy bags’.

Are parents adhering to a race that is forced upon them? Private tuition17 proved to be a point of discussion. About 70% of the parents with school going children were also sending their children to after-school private classes, offered by companies that are taking advantage of the education fever in India. Parents feel this is necessary because of the low quality of the education. One father: ‘Our child is also going for some private tuitions. Cause it does make a difference, if we do this. If you ask them to just focus in class, then definitely it is not enough.” While most parents in the focus groups felt additional tuition was imperative to compensate for poor educational quality in the schools, teachers were highly frustrated by the number of students that were having extra tuitions.. Teachers referred to it as a plague and stubborn trend among parents that were involved in a competitive race with other parents. One teacher commented:

‘Private tutoring is a fashion nowadays and it makes no sense. Students pay no attention in our classes because they have tuitions. They are so tired from all the classes and homework that they end up studying nowhere. It is impossible to concentrate for so long, but parents force them to.’

Societal pressures: importance of ‘not falling behind’. When asking parents and students about the need for additional tuition, they often referred to societal pressures from family and friends. The children’s study progress is a subject of major importance to many people in India and seems to function as an object of comparison among family members, neighbors and friends. One mother commented:

17 Private tuition refers to tutoring outside the school, in which subjects are taught, that have already been covered in school.
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‘It’s everywhere. Everywhere you look, you will see competition. So even if you’re playing along with the game, it happens. So we are comparing, I admit that. But it’s also because of friends and family. They are always asking how is your kid doing in studies? Or shouldn’t your kid be studying?’

The constant judging and comparison of children’s marks causes stress for both students and parents, particularly driven by the fear of failure or lagging behind.

Anxiety over their child’s chances of lagging behind was apparent in other parents too. One mother during an interview explained: “because there is so much competition I encourage them to do extra work so that they are not left behind. I feel they should be strong and do whatever they are capable of. Then the sky is the limit for them.” The director of a Montessori preschool in Pune explained that the majority of parents send their children to schools that start to teach writing skills from the age of three years old. In his own school, where children start writing at the age of six, parents are hesitant to commit to the philosophy of a longer playing-period for their young children. Even the parents that do place their children at his school, tend to reconsider this decision by the time their child reaches the age of three, and make a late switch to schools at which children learn to read at a younger age.

The high-school students in our study also felt pressured by their parents (Box 2), which would usually build up during the exam period around the 10th and 12th grade.
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Box 2: conversation with students during a focus group session, August 2013.

Senior 1: ‘I’m trying to convince my family that I am studying. In the weekends, I study all the time and when I want a break, my parents and grandparents immediately start asking me, what am I doing, why am I not studying. At times I feel I can’t cope with the pressure but mostly I’m confident. My parents compare me with other students. This gives me stress when they do that.’
Facilitator: ‘Do parents know that you don’t like it?’
Senior 1: ‘I talked about it to them. I tell them I don’t want this pressure and that all children have different abilities. They stopped for 2 weeks but then they started again.’
Facilitator: ‘How does this make you feel?’
Senior 1: ‘It is ok, because I know that what my parents want from me is the best for me.’
Senior 4: ‘We have high expectations on our shoulders. I wake up at 7 to start studies at 7.30. It makes us not being able to concentrate because we study too much. We study something today and we forget about it already tomorrow. We need some time for the information to settle. We also need play time.’
Facilitator: ‘Why do you think it is that your parents want you to study?’
Senior 1: ‘My parents fear for me that I will have a blank future if I don’t pass grades and recognition for a degree.’

Macro-level influences on educational concerns. For each topic, we asked professional experts to reflect on the causes of parenting stress. During an interview with the director of a high school in Pune, he shared his views on parenting stress as a result of increasing liberalization in the education market:

‘To some extent, parents have already become part of the competitive system themselves, even when they essentially want to protect their children from it... The reason for this is realistic: supply and demand. And especially in today’s scenario, there is always the few of the majority of people trying for very few available positions, jobs, colleges whatever you want name it, scholarships. So at any rate there will be stress. This partly also has to do with the fact that we are living in a liberal economic system, in which parents and students struggle to get a placement in one of the best schools.’

The psychiatrist in our study clarified that there often seems to be a paradigm shift at work in which parents are increasingly led by values inherited from contemporary societies in the West, particularly the USA. He hereby refers to the different ideologies found in Eastern religions and Western religions, and the different approaches to life that they demonstrate. While Western monotheistic religions often regard life as providing one opportunity for success, Eastern religions are based on multiple Gods and multiple life chances in which you built up Karma for a better status in the next life. In such religions, gratification is delayed, while modern societies focus more on instant gratification, quick gains, competition and self-promotion. Through industrialization, globalization and urbanization in Pune, such capitalistic norms are increasingly being adopted in Indian society. As the psychiatrist explains:

‘Children are seen by parents as individual property nowadays or as extension of themselves, in which they invest and expect returns, while we should regard them as independent entities. The parenting premise here is that education will provide the best prospects for success, while the system that we live in, and therefore our children’s futures, actually becomes more and more unpredictable.’

5.4.2 Generation gap (and new societal risks)
Parents beliefs and values regarding their child’s environment. In the focus groups and individual interviews, parents expressed to feel stress because they experience an increasing disconnection with their children. Although they acknowledged that during the adolescent phase children normally tend to be less connected to their parents and more interested in their peers, most parents suggested that the gap was particularly worrisome, resulting from the increased access to information and global ideas. During one of the focus groups, a father explained that Pune has changed rapidly in the past decades, and that the place in which they grew up was dramatically different from the world in which they are raising their children (box 3). Parents worried about what is going on in their children’s minds. One mother explained: “Children today are so sharp, especially on modern technology. And even this helps them to be so much exposed to all sorts of information and knowledge. So they are in a way much more advanced than I was. This makes me feel I can’t keep up.” The constant overload of information and increased interconnectedness of the world through new social media is something that concerned parents. It has become particularly difficult to oversee the social network of children when they are connected through applications such as Snapchat and Instagram.
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Box 3: Father about Pune, July 2013

When I was born, about 40 years ago, Pune hardly had any infrastructure or traffic. We could just ride our bicycle in the streets every day without looking left or right. In that time, there were hardly toys to play with but we invented games ourselves. Or I would stare out of the window for hours, just wondering about the world. I feel sad that my children live in a world that is so different and faster, in which they don’t get the time to develop like I did.

The internet has also become a large source of stress and concern in parents, as they feel less in control of their child’s communication and relations with others. These worries are enhanced by stories that parents hear (also often through social media!) about children sharing nude pictures with strangers online, leading to dangerous situations and public humiliation. This phenomenon does not only result in parental stress; it also causes stress in children. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Orkut and Twitter (but also more recently Snapchat and Instagram) have expanded tremendously in the last decade, and teenagers are often spending several hours a day online (Meena, Mittai and Solanki, 2012). Through such developments, cyber bullying has come up as a relatively new strain for Indian youth, which is particularly hard to catch because of its anonymous character. Some 10 children in the student groups mentioned that they had been bullied online or had been called names on Facebook. In some cases, special websites had even been set up to victimize students. Students said that such websites are hurtful and lower their self-esteem. During the focus groups, parents also asked questions with regards to how to prevent their children from being negatively impacted through new social media platforms.

Raising children in an increasingly complex world. Interestingly, about the generation gap, as well as the new issues their children are facing, some parents mentioned that they should have a different attitude to child rearing; one that stimulated the autonomy of the child. During the interviews, for instance, one father said:

‘I would like to understand the mindset of my child. How I can change myself to understand her. If I am lacking something, I need to change. This is most important, that he or she is able to grow because of my guidance. You know, we have to keep up with this generation, and that is difficult for us parents today’.

We see that parents want their child to be able to face a world that poses many different challenges, choices and responsibilities, and make the right choices, such as deciding whether to take part in online social networks or not, but also with regards to increasing influence of the fast food, technology and fashion industry. One mother explained this by saying:

‘In our time we would do things that our parents told us without questioning. But now children are not like that and they should feel comfortable. Now they say ‘you think in a different way and we think in a different way’. They feel we do not understand. Sometimes we don’t know what answers to give them, like for certain religious traditions, they ask why we need to do them and they ask us why we never questioned it. We were told to do it, so we did it without questions. Now children ask a lot of questions.’

Parents do not find it an easy task to stimulate autonomy in their children. A mother in the focus groups said: “Children today want more privacy and space than we feel comfortable providing them [with], yet we also want them to become independent and ready to face the realities of today’s world.” During an interview one mother explained that her parents never allowed her to be unsupervised or alone outside. Because of these restrictions, she felt insecure at the beginning in facing situations with which she was not familiar. About her own daughters, she says:
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‘It has become a trend among kids to talk to each other about information they receive through TV and internet, so they talk about the actors, the drugs they take and the people they date. I don’t want my daughters to be carried away by the Western culture, but I also don’t want to restrict them too much from reality. I want them to have healthy relations with others.’

Macro-level influences on the generation gap. The psychologist considered the issue of internet use by children as something that is first steered by common biological needs:

‘So there is a need for connection and a need for autonomy... and they play with this, trying to find a balance... So if you’re talking about the adolescent child... nowadays, every adolescent child has a gadget, through which they connect to the internet and that is why they are most connected with their peers... and based on this they decide what is good and bad. And it makes sense for these adolescents to do this, because biologically there is a need for connecting with peers. Yet, the process of individualization is probably increasingly influenced by a much larger, extended group of peers, and over larger distances, because of the access to others through the internet. This is of course scary for parents’.

Parents are not that keen on giving up the control over their child’s development and what they are exposed to. This is partly because parents hear many stories about relationships, often online relationships, that cause children to do things they later regret, as explained by the psychologist. The psychiatrist commented: “I think the biggest challenge is to make parents understand that children need to experiment. They need to make mistakes. And unless that is facilitated, nothing good will happen.” In that sense, parents can be more open to multiple outcomes of development, with input from their children because these children are growing up in a fast-changing, highly unpredictable world.

5.4.3 Emancipation

Career ambitions vs. parenting guilt. During the focus groups, teachers and parents brought up the issue of ‘double earning’ and the fact that, increasingly, both parents are working. The demands of work outside and inside the home can cause stress, particularly for mothers. Most mothers with jobs were happy that they were also able to work outside the home, in addition to being a mum. However, feelings of guilt, and concerns for the development of their children are a burden that is relatively new. One mother, who works in a bank, explained during the interview: “I am very happy to be able to work and earn my own money. I feel however that my boys may need more attention from me, especially the youngest one, who has more difficulties with learning.”

During the focus groups, teachers complained that parents no longer spend enough time with their children, leaving most of the childrearing to teachers: “Parents have less time for their children nowadays and they expect us to bring values and morals to their children. We are teaching children rules now that they should already learn from their parents.”

To parents, the constant juggle between demands at work and demands at home creates stress. While fewer fathers commented on this issue, mothers were open about the consequences of emancipation. During the interviews, mothers said that they wanted to be something more than a mother, partly because they see other mothers working. To either have a job or at least a meaningful hobby, has become far more important. This view was shared by all mothers, who shared that, these days, even some months after delivering a baby, mothers are struggling with the idea that they should also go back to work soon. One mother, who did not work, expressed it in this way:
'If you ask me what gives me stress, and what I often think of, it is the fact that I do not have a job. I would really want to make myself useful other than being a mum. Before it was okay to just be a housewife, but I see around me that more and more friends are doing something else as well. So now I would really want to have a job again. I am thinking about that too often'.

Also working mothers experience obstacles, both at work and at home. Many mothers shared that, although fathers and men are slowly changing and picking up more responsibilities in the household, still most of the caring responsibilities are shared by them. A working mother explained how she was criticized by her husband:

'He feels that I should always be at home... but that is not possible for me because I am a working female and I am out a lot. So that makes me to be... you know... be stressed. I cannot take... it should not create a problem, so... but the shared interaction is not there'.

Another mother expressed during an interview:

'There is an internal battle, because we have expectations of ourselves that do not match reality. It’s a vicious cycle in which you reflect upon yourself (negatively) and alter your actions, and when it doesn’t work out, you feel more insecure and do more introspection. It gives an unsettling feeling, the idea that you’re not good enough'.

Changing family structures. When asking about stress, parents also often talked about their own role as a parent, particularly the limited freedom they have had to develop their own parenting skills. Parents who wish to stimulate independence and autonomous thinking in their children seem to feel somewhat limited due to their own upbringing which was more focused on co-dependence and respect for hierarchy. Not only the upbringing of parents (in the past) but also the current living situations of many parents continue to restrict their autonomous decision-making powers, particularly for those living in joint families. The joint family is a form of patrilineal extended family which is the traditional form of household formation in India. In this family form, the couple commonly lives with the father’s extended family (Shah, n.d). Again, it was mostly the women in the focus group and interviews who reflected on this issue. In the focus groups, one mother explained:

'You see, I am living in a joined family, and that is a very big problem. Somehow it gives me a lot of pressure because I am pointed at my ways of parenting, by my in-laws. They keep telling me what I do wrong, how I should do this and that, and I get the feeling that I am not good enough and that I am not in control.'

Another mother recognized that:

'Even I have lived in a joined family for ten years and now I am in a nuclear family. And I have noticed a huge transformation in my kids and in me. In the joined family, my children did not display any form of independence or decision making, because I didn’t either. Now there is clarity and a dramatic shift in our personalities, both physically and mentally'.

It seems that the impact of traditional power relations is especially stringent for parents that live with their elders in a joined family. In such cases, it seems to be more of a challenge for parents to raise their children to become independent adults, and to communicate with them in an open and reflexive manner under the daily supervision of their elders. Similarly, it must be mentioned that couples with children also gain a lot of support and wisdom from their elders, particularly in dual-earning situations. Such support is perhaps somewhat under threat due to the slow decline of the joint family structure in Pune.

Macro-level influences on emancipation concerns. Underlying the concerns regarding emancipation are perhaps the shifting roles in society, and the activities, duties and values that are underlying people’s self-
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esteem, which are changing as well. In modern life, mothers are not solely responsible for the household chores and taking care of the children; married women are increasingly contributing to the family earnings (sometimes even more than the husbands), and fathers are also starting to do their part in the child-rearing arena. Along with these transitions, intense insecurities, feelings of guilt and sometimes internal conflict arise in both men and women. The psychiatrist explained:

‘You see, the gender roles were more clearly demarcated I suppose.. the man as the bread winners, women are the child rearing... and to have that going, there will be ‘goodness’ associated to those roles. You’re a good woman if you’re staying home, and raise the children.. you’re a good man if you’re the breadwinner and you’re taking care of the family. But these ideas are not sufficient anymore, creating tensions in individual parents, and in the overall family dynamics’.

The psychiatrist considers that it might take some time before parents of this generation, both men and women, can fully internalize newly formed values. This is reflected in an interview with the psychologist:

‘What I have seen is that Indian parents themselves didn’t have the freedom, also educational freedom, to do what they want, to take the courses they wanted, if at all they were allowed to have education. Especially women. Then, I have heard them say that I didn’t have it, so I want my children to have it. I want them to have that freedom. But at the same time, they don’t know how to give that freedom; to trust that it will be alright’.

5.5 Discussion

Our aim for this study was to contribute to studies on parenting stress from an ecological perspective in a middle class setting in Pune, India. In this section we will discuss the findings, particularly in relation to processes of liberalization and modernization in India.

5.5.1. Concerns with education

First, one communal life strain and source for parenting stress were concerns related to the education of their children. Our study shows that these pressures are mediated through parenting stress resulting from social tensions, and the fear of lagging behind in a highly competitive system. This competitive system, enhanced by a general lack of good quality education in India (Altbach, 1993, 2009), puts increasing pressure on students to excel in board examinations in order to secure their place in a high-ranked institution. Similarly, capitalist, free-market policies in India, in which institutions and people are focused on quick gains and self-valorization, stir up high expectations and demands in parents that increasingly hard to realize in the current economy (Agarwal, 2009). Interestingly, our study also shows that many parents actually feel ambivalent towards the pressure that is put on their children to succeed academically, also through schools itself, as they realize the negative influence on their children’s creativity and mental health. Still, when it comes to making decisions for their children (regarding, for instance, the starting age for formal schooling, or the amount of homework to be done), parents tend to conform to external pressures.

Our conversations with professionals point to several contextual factors that may have enhanced the emphasis on academic progress in India. From their perspectives, parenting stress was explained by a Westernization of norms and values, with a focus on quick gains and positive return-of-investment. Often in capitalist, liberal states, such as in India since the market transformation of 1991, such norms are reflected in the division of labor and competition (Rawls, 2012), and, in India, in the ever diversification of higher education (Altbach, 2009). It is in the context of economic rivalry, spurred on by profit-making and ‘meritocracy’, that people struggle to stay ahead in the game (Sengupta, 2012). In effect, there is a shortage of places for students in colleges and universities that can offer quality courses in the most favored disciplines, creating an
extraordinary sense of rivalry among students and parents (Aminoff, 2011; Altbach, 2009). In response, private colleges are set up to tap into the large pool of ‘left-over’ students who are looking for a placement in either Engineering, IT or other prioritized studies. Parents pay high fees for such institutions, while the quality of education offered is often relatively poor, leading to a large group of Engineering graduates with very little hope for a job in the future (D’Costa, 2006).

5.5.2. Generation gap and increased societal risks

Another source of parenting stress was related to the relatively newly emerging social media platforms and, consequently, an increase of information sharing and inter-connectedness between children. Particular experiences with cyber-bully, as well as stories about online sharing of pictures, enhanced these worries. At the same time, parents were reluctant to intervene too much, as they want to stimulate autonomy and resilience in their children. As such, parents were concerned about how to encourage independency in their children in a society that looks unsafe to them and over which they feel very little control. Their internal doubts were born from their own traditional upbringings, which did not equip them with the knowledge and experience on how to raise children more democratically.

These are interesting contradictions and insecurities in parents, which we might explain against the background of changing societal norms due to globalization (Giddens, 1991; Sinha, 2014). Through processes of globalization and modernization, societies become increasingly horizontally, rather than hierarchically, organized. In India, aspects of modernization (such as e.g. individualism) have only partially impacted the Indian mindset (Wright et al., 2015). leading to a complex reality for most families (Mishra, 1998; Sinha, 2011). While some of the traditional Indian values and patriarchal structures have been held up strongly amidst the wave of modernization, other norms regarding parenting and family life have undoubtedly changed under the influence of education and democratization (Kashyap, 2004). As such, the collectivistic Indian family norms, which bring a sense of belonging and safety in exchange for unquestioned loyalty, are partially exchanged for the individualistic norms of ‘looking after one selves’ and establishing personal goals (Hofstede, 1999, p.51). According to the parents in our study, children nowadays demand more freedom and independence to explore their identity against those of peers. Online social media platforms are both an instigator for, as well as a response to an increased desire for inter-connectedness among horizontal groups of youth to independently construct one’s sense of ‘self’. (Giddens, 1991; Wright et al., 2015). This explains why new social media, despite the possibility of being bullied, remains incredibly important to adolescents (Wright et al., 2015). Incidentally, a cross-cultural study including China, India and Japan, conducted on cyber-aggression shows that the relatively higher level of individualism in India is also associated to a higher level of cyber-violence when compared to the somewhat more collectivist cultures of China and Japan, making it perhaps indeed more hazardous for Indian youth (and likewise youth from Western countries, such as the USA) to be involved in internet communication (Wright et al., 2015). The stress arising in parents therefore relates to the pedagogical question of raising children to stimulate obedience, restrain and dependence (which requires more authoritarian parenting) versus independence and autonomy (which is stimulated through authoritative parenting) (Sondhi, 2017).

5.5.3 Emancipation

Finally, we looked at parenting stress deriving from the parenting role itself. This study showed how emancipation in society brings up positive implications (such as, e.g. more education and career possibilities for women), but also changes in family roles and parent-child dynamics, leading to feelings of guilt and stress. This was the case for women who were working, but also for women who were not working, and questioning their value as stay-at-home mother. The concept of dual-earning couples is still relatively new for many families, placing this generation of parents in the midst of a transition, in which interpersonal relationships (e.g. between spouses) become more egalitarian (De Sengupta et al., 2012; Kashyap, 2004; Kim and Singh,
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2004). Similarly, along with increased opportunities for education, perceptions of what defines an ‘effective’ woman (and only to some extent what makes an ‘effective’ man) have started to change (Kashyap, 2004, p. 346), creating new aspirations and expectations of life. In this, there is a risk of women carrying a ‘double burden’, as the traditional duties attached to mothers as main housekeeper are changing too slowly to support the added responsibilities of having an outside job (Singh, 2015).

Singh (2004) explains how family systems are also changing under the influence of industrialization, globalization, modernization and urbanization. Authority, which is traditionally in the hands of family elders (Karta in Hindi), is increasingly shared with the respective sons and daughters-in-law. Under the same processes, traditional joint families are slowly waning among the middle class, while nuclear families are becoming the cornerstone of Indian society (Singh, 2004, page 139). While the implications of such changes are complex and difficult to generalize (Kashyap, 2004), we could at least say that the changes are profound. In our study, we saw that parents experienced both positive changes (more liberty to choose their own parenting ways) as well as negative changes (less protection and support from their elders).

5.5.4 Limitations and future directions

The methodological approach in this study was exploratory and does not empirically study the impact of contextual factors on parenting stress. Still, our transdisciplinary study provides a thick description of how multiple actors look at the problem of parenting stress, and how macro-societal processes can play a role in this. Through these explorations, we have seen that changes in the broader context can contribute to the experience of parenting stress. These findings have implications for the need for programs that can support parents and reduce stress in families. Kotchick et al. (2012, page 266), for instance, argue that “Clinical interventions designed to enhance adaptive parenting have paid little formal attention to context and (...) has yet to fully embrace the broader ecology of parenting.” Our study shows indeed that, how parents perceive their own efficacy and level of control as a parent, which are important contributors to parenting stress (Abidin, 1992), is inherently related to the changing context in which these parents live. As such, any type of intervention requires facilitators who are ‘aware of the macro realities and gain a better understanding of the environment in which their clients live.’ (Kashyap, 2004, p.349).

First, our study has implications for the possibility of parenting support programs for middle-class parents. Natrajan et al. (2002) found that middle-class parents in Madras were reluctant to the idea of changing (even though they felt there were unresolved parenting needs), which they described as: ‘Their mind is already closed and resistant to the concept of change...This makes it a very challenging job for the therapist to focus on change’ (2002, p. 499). In our study group, we actually saw that there was a lived desire in parents to improve themselves and find new ways of parenting. This might have resulted from the unique research methodology of triangulation in the focus groups, in which we sensitized parents with the stress that is commonly experienced by children. The idea of confronting parents with the lived world of children, in any form, could perhaps be considered as a helpful starting-point for family practitioners to open up a discussion with parents, and create initial willingness to reflect and change.

A second contribution is related to the design of parenting support programs in India. We agree with Natrajan et al (2002) as well as Kashyap (2004) that there is a lack of support services for middle-class parents dealing with complex modern questions, who require more attention either from community health workers, or governmental institutions. Like Natrajan et al (2002), we feel that any program should empower parents to take responsibility over their own learning process. As such, parents should somehow be invited and encouraged to take a more open perspective towards possible solutions (which are ideally not provided by the therapist) for commonly experienced problems. For this, we see the value of stimulating creative thinking, or, as referred to by Slade (2007) as ‘wonderment’, in parents, both as a protective mechanism to stress and anxieties, as well as a way to alter unreasonable expectations (Virginia and Sparks, 2010). A sense of creative
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wondering happens when the parent’s reaction shifts from anger or fear, to becoming interested and intrigued by their child’s experiences of the world (Slade, 2007). This might be especially helpful when parents are facing unpredictable situations, such as the uncertainty of having your child placed in a highly-ranked university, or wanting to go out on a date. Additionally, and in order to facilitate creativity, reflexivity and wonderment in parents, it is important to ‘put the parent first’, and allow him or her to first work on their own emotions and needs (Slade, 2007). As such, incorporating elements of Mindfulness could help parents in their ability to remain conscious, calm and curious during the process of change (Bögels, Lehtonen, and Restifo, 2010).

Finally, programs that enhance social support in parents, and the exchange of knowledge between parents might have a positive effect on parental well-being. When we reflected with parents on their experiences subsequent to the focus groups, we discovered that parents had experienced positive effects from the focus groups. By participating in the focus groups, several parents said that they had learned valid, key lessons in relation to how to cope with their own thoughts and concerns, and with regards to parenting. Toumbourou et al (2002), as well as Day, Michelson, Thomson, Penney, and Draper, (2012), demonstrate the effect of parent peer-support on parenting and how building relationships can stimulate mental wellbeing in parents and adolescents. We therefore propose that parenting interventions simultaneously aim to strengthen the social networks of parents, while working on their own reflective parenting practices, particularly in quickly changing settings such as Indian cities.
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Abstract

India’s education system has often been critiqued for aspects of rigidness, competition, work overload, hierarchic power, and lack of creativity, resulting in feelings of stress and anxiety in students. Interestingly, alternative education approaches have come up in the past few decades in response to formal education, including the rise of unschooling. In this article the self-reported journeys of three unschooling parents are analyzed to bring insights into 1) what role stress and anxiety might play in the decisions of Indian parents to choose unschooling, 2) how key advantages and disadvantages of unschooling are shaped and recognized by unschooling parents, 3) how personal experiences of ‘stress’ are appreciated and experienced in Indian unschooling family contexts, and 4) what distinctively different processes are evident in the upbringing process of unschooled children, compared with those existing in formal education systems. Results reveal that a sense of tedium in formal classrooms, as well as a problematization of stress, motivates parents’ decision for unschooling. Social pressures and challenges are experienced, yet also welcomed by parents as part of the unschooling journey. ‘Stress’ is differently framed and experienced in the stories of unschooling parents, emphasizing the stress which is evoked through unrestricted self-governed learning processes, as opposed to ‘distress’ experienced in systems of directive and sometimes coercive learning. Finally, this article reflects on aspects of ‘trust’ and ‘self-agency’ which were found meaningful in unschooling and how to potentially encourage such notions in formal education settings to prevent mental health issues in children and youth.
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6.1 Introduction

Much has been written about the effects of high parental pressure, and overall academic stress, on children in India and many Asian countries alike. Most strikingly witnessed in countries like China, South-Korea, Japan and India, education is often treated as an indispensable vehicle to personal- and family success, abiding to learning systems in which children are evaluated against fixed standards, and ranking lists which encourage comparison and competition among peers (Anderson and Kohler, 2012; Dandy and Nettelback, 2002). To illustrate the academic fever in India, according to an HSBC study (2015), 71 % of parents were willing to go into debt to fund their child’s higher education, preferably in the direction of Engineering or Business. The same cross-cultural study found that parents in India were the least concerned with their child’s ‘happiness’ (49 % of the parents) in comparison to other countries, and in comparison to other objectives such as ‘being successful in their career’ (HSBC, 2015). The implications of such pressures are noteworthy. In India, rates of stress, anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation among students are strikingly high when compared to other developed and developing countries (Arun and Chavan, 2009; Pillai, Andrews, and Patel, 2009), with apparently more than 20% of students having one or more mental health problems (Iqbal et al., 2015; Sahoo and Khess, 2010). Research also suggests that many high-school and university students in the Indian population experience moderate levels of stress, depression and anxiety at some point in their academic career due to fear of failure, and a lack of self-direction and esteem (De et al., 2012; Verma et al., 2002; Waghachavare et al., 2013).

Interestingly, alternative movements have begun to emerge as critical response to the high expectations regarding children’s learning processes in India, of which unschooling is one and on which we will expand a bit later on. We present the journey of three middle-class unschooling families in Pune, in the context of ever increasing concerns regarding the mental wellbeing of youth in urban India; their difficulties growing up in a rapidly changing society, the burden resulting from the rigid education system and competitive job market and tendencies towards experiencing anxiety and depression (Iqbal et al., 2015; Nazeer and Sultana, 2014). In this in-depth study, we set to explore what role (the anticipation of) stress and anxiety in children and families plays in the motivations of parents in India to choose unschooling as an alternative to the formal education system. We also aim to understand how unschooling is framed by Indian parents in their own context, and what advances or disadvantages they experience in their unschooling journey. More specifically we aim to gain in-depth understanding of how personal stress is recognized and lived in their everyday lives. Ultimately our objective was to discover key issues that emerged from the unschooling families’ educational journey so far that could be considered distinctively different from those commonly existing in more formal education systems, particularly with regards to how mental health issues exist and develop over time.

In India, high expectations have often been associated with mental health problems among children and students (Bhasin et al., 2010; Deb, 2010; Joshi et al., 2012; Nazeer and Sultana, 2014), particularly (as commonly highlighted in research) unrealistic expectations with regards to academic achievement (Aggarwal and Berk, 2014; Vaughan et al., 2012). Similarly, schools and universities are often criticized for being hierarchical and ‘top-down’ by nature, as well as inflexible regarding their structure and content, evoking various forms of tension and stress in youths (Kaul, 2006). In one of the few studies on Indian education taking into account the voices of young students, as well as that of teaching staff, an overwhelming lack of autonomy and freedom was experienced by young students, resulting in feelings of helplessness, stress and frustration (Council, 2014). Overall, the culture of examination and assessment within India’s education sector is seen to inherently reproduce inequality, segregation and, in turn, overly competitive or unhealthy relationships amongst fellow classmates (Iqbal et al., 2015).

Hence, mainstream education has received much critique in India, and alternative ways of schooling, parallel to the increasing commercialization of ‘normal’ formal education, have slowly started appearing over the past
few decades, as well as various forms of ‘home-schooling’ and ‘unschooling’ (Augustine and Brahme, 2014). Indeed, as Tharakan (2016, p. 5) explains:

‘Homeschoolers in India use a wide variety of methods and materials including their own methods. Though there is no actual data available, most prevalent methods in India are Montessori method, Unschooling, Radical Unschooling, Waldorf education and School-at home’.

‘Swashikshan’ (The Indian Association of Homeschoolers), for example, is also a growing and active movement that supports, and collaborates alongside, homeschooling and unschooling families (Jain and Akomolafe, 2016). Although this movement typically involves the urban middle class, there are many rural and indigenous families similarly prioritizing their own traditional (and more ‘unschooling’) learning processes across India (Augustine and Brahme 2014; Jain et al., 2016).

Furthermore, as well as growing numbers returning to these less formal and more child-centered learning strategies in the home environment, India boasts many recent ‘alternative’ schooling strategies. For instance, ‘Swaraj’ University (in the city of Udaipur), meaning ‘recovery/harmony’ of the self, began in 2010, inviting college – and university-aged young people into two-year self-determined learning programmes (Jain and Akomolafe 2016). Moreover, ‘Digantar’ schools (now a non-profit society) continuously practice and search for new alternatives in primary education with an ethos of ‘joyful’ and ‘creative’ learning across three school centres in the city of Jaipur (Chopra and Chabra 2013). Indeed, whether through an increasing awareness of the creative, independent and free-thinking capacities of their children (see Pell, 2013) or wide-scale global trends to return to more unstructured community- or home-centred learning environments (Ricci 2012; Rolstad and Kesson, 2013), Indian parents are becoming increasingly aware, and conscious, of how and in what ways they themselves might relate to and educate their children.

Unschooled learning, however, interestingly has rarely been documented and quantified, although there are online platforms and physical conferences organized in India, suggesting that at least some thousands of families in various parts of the country are indeed experimenting with ways of unschooling in the context of their family life and children’s upbringing (Indian Association of Homeschoolers, n.d.). These movements are certainly noteworthy, as there seems to be an implicit suggestion that unschooling could potentially be a more healthier, joyful and natural way to learn and develop as a child (Holt et al. 2013). In this given context, the questions of interest involve the rational and emotional processes that lead middle-class parents in India to renounce formal education altogether, including guided home-schooling. In other words, in a context where the societal norm is to formally educate one’s children, pay to provide extra tuition and various extra-curricular activities (Deb et al., 2010), and where parental pressures on children to academically succeed are ever-increasing, what stimulated these parents to take an alternative route? Further questions relate to how these parents conceptualize unschooling in the context of their own lives, and what the experiences of their parenting journey are, bearing in mind the resistance and doubts that could no doubt arise from their direct socio-cultural environment. Especially in the context of mental wellbeing amongst youth, there is a need to learn more about the self-reported advantages, and also challenges, that alternative ways of schooling can pose for children, and how we might understand their relevance for both formally schooled and unschooled children. In conclusion, this study explores how, and in what ways, unschooling might be perceived and proven, by the lived experiences of three unschooling families, to support a more stress-free and conducive learning environment for children in India?

6.2 Methodology

The study was conducted in the context of a larger study on stress and anxiety in Indian students (see de Wit, Bunders-Aelen, and Regeer, 2016), for which the researchers worked and stayed in Pune for a spell of eighteen months between 2013 and 2017. Pune is a large city in the state of Maharashtra and often considered ‘Oxford
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of the East’ due to its abundance of educational institutes. Through their colleagues in Pune, the researchers got introduced to Monica, an important figure in the fields of community co-creation and development, parenting, and education in Pune. She and her husband have unschooled their three children (a girl of 23 years old, and two boys of 19 and 15 years old) from the very beginning. In the earlier years of their children’s upbringing, there were very few families making the same choices, making them (in a sense) pioneers and a valuable source of experiential knowledge and inspiration for other parents across India. They agreed to take part in this in-depth semi-structured interview in order to explore the aforementioned questions together.

After, Monica made a referral to two more unschooling parents; Nidha, a mother of two children (a girl of 15, and a boy of 9 years old), who is now divorced and raising her children largely by herself, and Reshma, a mother of two young girls (5 and 3 years old) who lives together with her husband in a joint family home, and had – at the time - only just begun unschooling her children. In the period after the interviews, the researchers stayed in close contact with these families, meeting each other often through community events and other various gatherings at their homes or in the city, helping to derive more meaning and understanding towards the questions posed in this study.

Methods and analysis

In-depth interviews were used to explore various open-ended questions with the parents, based on a semi-structured topic list, including the following items: 1) history and experiences with education in India, 2) motivations for starting the unschooling journey, 3) concepts and explanations of unschooling, 4) experiences with (social) challenges as well as opportunities with regards to unschooling children in India, 5) important lessons learned throughout the unschooling journey, 6) cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual outcomes for their children relatable to unschooling, including concepts of stress and anxiety. The interviews lasted approximately 2 hours each and were held in the participants’ living rooms. The interviews were then recorded and transcribed verbatim, and an open coding technique was used by two of the researchers to independently analyze the transcripts and derive distinct concepts and sub-categories from the data. These were later discussed, after which a joint coding scheme was formulated and used to analyze the data a second time in order to find relations between concepts and sub-categories (axial coding). These were then discussed again amongst the researchers before writing up the results (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Overall, a descriptive- and explanatory-research style was used to describe the individual life narratives of each parent, highlighting the significance of certain events, insights and challenges in the form of three family stories (see Results), in order to give answer to the main research questions regarding how these families came to arrange their lives around unschooling (Sandelowski, 1991).

6.3 Results

6.3.1 Monica and Paul’s story.

For both Paul and Monica ‘school’ has always been a problem. From their own direct experiences, and those of some of their friends and family, the whole structure and philosophy of school seemed both unnatural and ineffective. So ‘unschooling’ began as a somewhat intuitive, self-learned awareness of the limitations of regular education, and therefore the potential of some other learning process, in whatever form that might take. Monica:

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18 All names of participants in this study have been replaced with pseudonyms so as to protect confidentiality.
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'I didn’t know at the beginning that there was a thing called ‘unschooling’ or ‘home schooling’. I was just saying clearly that I know I’m not sending the children to school’.

Paul and Monica were parents that, despite receiving traditional education themselves, had become critically aware of common, ‘ordinary’ forms of schooling and actively encouraged some other alternative – and what they felt were less restrictive - means for their own children. Monica herself had worked as a teacher in various schools, including mostly alternative schools, but still felt she would never send her own children to school and ‘submit them to what she thought might be important’. Indeed, this awareness is exemplified by Paul’s observations of other members of his family throughout their school lives:

‘I had many nephews and nieces and I used to notice that when they were born they were so full of life... they knew who they were, they knew what they wanted to eat, they knew what they wanted to learn... and the moment they got into school, within a few years, that energy level just tapered off’.

Interestingly, their gradual journey into what only later they found out to be ‘unschooling’ moved Monica towards exposing their 3 children to what she herself admits was only really important according to her, and from what she had derived and accepted from her environment as important concepts to study. Indeed, as she comically explains: “If the child said ‘why is it important?’ I really didn’t know.”

Naturally over time, Monica, who was the pre-dominant stay-at-home parent while Paul worked long hours in dentistry, moved from this realization to openly accepting that she really did not actually know what was best for herself, let alone for her children. Thus, a more open appreciation of each of their momentary desires and needs was fostered. As she humbly explains:

‘In unschooling we learn from the children all the time, which is different from any type of schooling, even homeschooling, where you more or less replicate the school situation at home. In unschooling, we just find that we are so stupid, we find that we really have so much to unlearn, we have no clue what’s good for you, we really have lost touch with what’s good for us... so I started really appreciating what each child, and what each person, wants to do in each moment, and our lives have become like that’.

Their ‘unschooling’ journey started to take shape in a form that Paul describes as ‘encouraging the individuality’ of their children and themselves. Their diets, sleeping patterns, hobbies and general everyday rhythms and activities became unique for each member of the family, while they developed a ‘kind of radar’ to be sensitive to what each of them wanted.

Monica: ‘We had 5 different breakfasts, 5 different lunches... everyone had their own activity, their own pattern, their own rhythm... apart from funny sleeping behaviors, funny eating times, the children had funny behaviors also’.

This greater allowance of their children’s unique needs and motivations even began to regulate itself all on its own over time. The personalities and character of the family members became more apparent and flourished, as the individual processes – emotionally, academically and physically – were allowed, to a large extent, to take their own natural course. In the case of their daughter for example, Monica explains how she’d developed a remarkable ability to ‘self-observe’ her own emotions and stress as they arose within her, helping her to effectively cope with them better:

‘Because of being unschooled, at a very early age, 13, 14, 15, she had already developed a self-watcher. So she could watch a sense of jealousy arising in her, and she could talk about it. And she could see it as something, it didn’t consume her. All of her emotions, they don’t consume her’.
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Equally prevalent in their ‘unschooling’ process were the difficulties they experienced through such years. Monica and Paul encountered countless challenges when excitedly trying to engage their children enough with other environments outside of the home in particular. Indeed, as Monica details, it was hugely challenging to cope with the whole family at home every day, and equally as tricky finding suitable, nourishing and (what they felt to be) ‘unschooling’ environments in the wider world:

‘I would be excited to teach them things, or follow up some reading, or I would hear that an alternative school has come up and that would interest me... because it was very tiring. So I would look for classes or some nice creative things for them to be involved in... but mostly I found that no adult would be sensitive to the inner being of a child. There was a sense of over-teaching, and not allowing the child to be’.

With regards to the cognitive, social and mental development of their children, Paul and Monica shared that there were various moments where doubt or insecurity would come up. Being aware of the social ‘norms’ and how the behavior of their children sometimes clashed with those norms, was difficult. For instance, about their son, they shared:

‘When our son was young, and we’d have visitors, and he would sometimes just suddenly turn on the TV, or say something loud. I would feel very embarrassed and the need to correct it. And I feel that this is a violence on the child at that age. He hasn’t felt the need yet to learn how to deal with that situation in a socially acceptable way. So, I’m not saying whether people should or should not do it, that’s not my problem. I’m just happy that we didn’t have many people visiting at that time!’

Reading and writing the children learned all at different stages and in various ways or order (her daughter at the age of 8, who learned letters and their shapes before reading, and the boys at the age of 4 and 2). Also, it was the children’s own desire to learn how to read (for instance, to be able to read independently about the cosmos) that kick-started the process, showing their ability to acquire new skills quickly once the interest had naturally arisen.

Finally, in relation to the children’s emotional growth, Monica said: ‘it’s not that because they’re unschooled that they have it perfect’. In fact, her older daughter went through some phases of depression, something she wrote and published poetry about later, but Paul and Monica explain that it’s more likely that the stress she experienced was something clearly connected to her human being, and not taken away or clouded by societal pressures. About this, Monica shared something about what her son had said to her:

‘My son told me that for him, what becomes more clear in unschooling is that, when you do this, it is your responsibility. You want to do that, then it is your responsibility also. All is up to you. He felt that around his 12th year, he had more stress than school going children because of the burden of responsibility. But later, that reverses and it’s a struggle for people that are educated to not take that responsibility’.

6.3.2. Nidha’s Story

Having two children, one daughter and a younger son, Nidha’s ‘unschooling’ journey began when personal past experiences, as well as her daughter’s initial early experiences with school, led to serious doubts about the ethical and holistic nature of school education:

‘I myself share my own stress and inputs on the lack of creativity and the lack of deep engagement that I was observing in schools as I was a teacher myself (Nidha taught German languages in Delhi before)... and at a Parent-teacher meeting the teacher told me (about her daughter) “she gets bored and she’s looking out the window, looking at the trees”. I said “if you teach her ABC every day she will get bored.'
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*She is perhaps a more imaginative child which you are not seeing.* "...I was feeling more and more restless and unhappy'.

After what she describes in her own words as, “devouring” a book entitled ‘radical parenting’ by Brad Blanton (2002) that her husband at the time had brought back from the US, Nidha decided to ‘home-school’ her children, following the same curriculum that was otherwise taught in the local schools around Delhi. This however immediately felt insufficient and incompatible with how they felt learning should instead be taking place:

‘I started just following whatever was being followed at her school. But both of us were struggling with that. I was finding the material I found so irrelevant... lacking creativity. I also didn’t see much sense in what was there and being taught. I started doubting myself. I could sense the resistance to learning in her body language also and it was becoming stressful. Her inability to grasp and learn’.

Nidha and her husband heard about Paul and Monica online and traced them down through a phone directory. As Nidha stresses, meeting them was really the turning point towards a more ‘unschooling’ approach to parenting; different educative methods that immediately felt more truthful, honest and reflective of the direction she intuitively felt they should be heading:

‘She gave me some ideas to what she thought was unschooling. Something inside told me: “okay, this is something that I need to explore”... how I could use other forms of learning, such as media. Seeing everything in this world as a learning tool. That is when I slowly started experimenting’.

Her children responded immediately and together they embraced new ways of spending their time together and engaging in what felt like meaningful conversation topics and activities. In Nidha’s case, television and the internet in particular became common and incredibly valuable learning resources for them as a family:

*I always found my children very deeply engaged. And they would often discuss with me things they had seen. They would question me, share with me. And I also would sit and watch (the television) a lot with them too. And I have seen they have a unique taste for the electronic media.*

As Nidha details, their ‘unschooling’ environment has allowed for various learning topics to grow, deviate and prosper as her children desired, with her facilitating the process along the way:

‘My son started wanting to see more about trains. He wanted to see more books and pictures of trains. We would sit for hours and draw trains. He himself wanted each bogie to be a different colour... This is how naturally he learned the colours. And naturally learned the shapes... circles, squares, stuff like that’.

Nidha also experienced significant internal challenges around their use of media as a family, finding other parenting advice and communities to be strongly against her positive experiences of using technology in such a way; or as she words it, “looking at this electronic media like it’s an evil devil”. They also were somewhat unique in their choosing of diets that Nidha felt were most natural for themselves as individuals; a process that started to reveal itself once Nidha opened up, to a greater extent, to whatever else ‘unschooling’ might mean for them as a family:

‘Something that is healthy for me might be poison for someone else. But I don’t think anybody gives you the chance to see your metabolism, your energy levels, how your body processes certain foods. So that was another huge learning for both my kids and me. Once I let go of my need to control everything they were eating I saw clear distinctions in their tastes’.

Also, with regards to emotions, Nidha embraced a sense of exploration and acceptance:
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‘What I see is, there is room in our family for all forms of emotions. No emotion is considered bad or to be done away with. To be suppressed. For us it has also been a huge learning in that area. We allow ourselves, and each other, to feel our emotions. Whether it is jealousy or anger (and so on)... so emotions have been an integral part to our learning. As a family and as individual’.

Indeed, as Nidha explains, this had been a huge shift for her as an individual, compared with the way she had previously learned and got used to appreciating her different emotional states, largely she feels because of her past school teachers, school mates and parents. In this sense, it was as much about ‘unschooling’ herself as with her children:

‘As a child, I think I never got the chance to understand my emotions properly... emotions are judged heavily by society, by your teachers, your parents, your peers. You need to be ‘happy’ all the time - these are the only ‘favorable’ emotions. That’s been the greatest thing about this journey so far: I’ve been able to understand myself as a human being, far more than I ever did before. The whole thing is not really about my children you know... it’s been more about me’.

Their life together as a family has been full of these periods of new, somewhat chaotic and challenging moments, and Nidha aims to accept these phases to the best of her ability, without too many distractions or support systems, often seeing valuable results regarding their children’s (and her own) self-knowledge and ability to deal with their own emotions:

‘I see my children are having mood swings... I see that. And sometimes they want to sleep a lot. I have gone through these phases... I still do at times. When it happens I recognize it not as ‘stress’ but rather as a state of unknown; a creative chaos... an internal journey of transformation.’

Now, Nidha’s daughter also became aware of the question of career and of contributing something to society, and so has naturally begun to explore along with Nidha how best to prepare herself for work which might be meaningful for her in the future. Similarly, her son found his own personal reasons for learning to read and write; skills he previously had seen no value in, despite many other schooled children his age having begun years before:

‘He uses the internet a lot and he is asking me or his sister to find things for him, and it’s not always possible because we are busy or out, or she is out playing with her friends. He finds that a handicap. So I suggested that maybe he should learn to read and write now, that might empower him and allow him to do things on his own. And he said, “okay, I would like to learn to read and write.”

As Nidha, in her own words tells us, “I think that this is really the core of humanity. I don’t know whether to call it ‘unschooling’ or ‘education’ or anything. It is just ‘life’. For me it’s all about life - learning to live life.” This acceptance of ‘life as school’ means that there are always new situations arising in their lives, testing and improving their intellectual, social and emotional qualities. Some of these, as Nidha admits, are not always easy to see as necessary and good, and can be incredibly challenging and unpredictable, but so far they are continuing to move through them in their own unique ways, away from schools or any other formal learning systems:

‘Learning and education for me, personally, is to develop the skills, the emotional balance, the integrity and the strength to be able to embrace life with all its challenges and conflicts and struggles. And its share of happiness, whatever. Life is not one dimensional. It’s multi-dimensional. There are dimensions we don’t even know of!... At least by living the way some of us are choosing to live now, we are experiencing more dimensions than those who still choose to live 1 or 2 dimensional lives.’
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6.3.3 Reshma’s Story

Reshma’s two daughters never went to school. Despite much social pressure from local teachers and other parents, Reshma and her husband had always felt that it isn’t, and shouldn’t, be their decision to make, but the child’s instead. As Reshma explains, freedom of choice is an opportunity for her children and something that wasn’t an option when she herself was at that younger age:

‘I never had the choice... we didn’t know that school could be a choice. It’s just something you have to do. I was told every morning that I had to go’.

This surprising choice that Reshma and her husband made for their family – in their own words being “free play all day” for the children – meant that their days began with ignoring any structural system of formal learning; including no set time periods or compulsory subjects of any kind. In Reshma’s own words, she describes her children’s development as “learning from everything and anything... every minute is learning... there is no time”. Consequently, even the somewhat traditional and previously opposing mother-in-law over time began to see the potential benefits of their ‘unschooling’ process, although admittedly there were still times when things got particularly chaotic and difficult to cope with:

‘It’s not something she (the mother in law) would have naturally thought of but I think she is slowly understanding it... she is starting to see how happy the children are at home.’

Regarding her children, Reshma maintains a willingness to allow learning to naturally take place in her children. Otherwise there are pre-determined, fixed targets that she encounters from her friends and their children; targets which she feels are often too forced and also irrelevant:

‘Her friends already know all of the numbers and I feel like there is so much pressure to learn all this at a certain age. But we forget that we all grow up and none of us ever remember all of the things that we all had to learn... What people don’t know, is how to navigate the world. What I would want for myself and her is this non-stop need to be curious about information. How to learn and how to be...’.

As such, Reshma’s household is one of ‘freedom of choice’ and, serves the constant development of her two children as they express themselves and learn each day. Reshma at times gives them advice or help but feels often dumbfounded and confused herself with what each hour of every day is demanding from her and her children. This chaotic learning environment, she feels, is however not one of panic, stress or expectation, but curiosity, reflection and acceptance:

‘What I can do is offer her choices... I’m giving her the choice that if she wants to join the system she can join. If she wants to stay out of the system she can stay out.’

Her daughters’ hobbies and sports do bring up dilemmas for her as a parent, as to the extent of influence and pressure that may or may not be helpful for her child’s learning. Reshma:

‘I tell her you do whatever you want... sometimes I wonder ‘should I push my child?’ because if I ask my child ‘do you want to go on stage?’ she says ‘no, I don’t want to go’.

‘But then I always think, ‘you know she has a choice’. If she wanted to do it maybe she can do it next year, then I can help her. So I have to remind myself often that I’m not really ‘stopping’ her doing anything’.

This trust and freedom that Reshma allows her children, comes from the fact that she herself felt pushed to do things from a young age, and has developed over time a tremendous ‘fear of failure’. This journey with
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unschooling, as describes herself, is in remarkable ways, bearing fruit in the seemingly tireless and enjoyable swimming of one of her daughters for example. Indeed, this setting has shown itself as the stage for her daughter’s incredibly joyful and self-driven love for something she herself has chosen and continues to feel benefits from:

‘She knew she wanted to swim so she’d been going to the pool every day. I see the other parents saying ‘go swim 5 laps’, and they say ‘I don’t want to swim anymore’. My daughter, if anything, I would have to ask her ‘do you want to come out of the pool?’. ‘No no, 3 more lengths’, she will say!’

However, as Reshma admits, this ‘unschooling’ approach is “so difficult to practice” and so there are times when she even sees herself her own conditioned ways of thinking interfering with her children. Moreover, many other people and family members from the community are failing to understand or accept their ‘unschooling’ lifestyles. More specifically, as she highlights, Reshma is taking her children on an obvious detour away from her family’s academic norms, resulting in much scrutiny from several close relatives:

‘Traditionally our family members are very very educated. In my family I have 2 doctors, 5 engineers, 2 double post-docs, 3 research scientists, the rest are in research in organic chemistry or banking. So that level of academic achievement is so so high. And I myself, I have a masters, trained abroad, so coming from there I feel judged many times. My Mum especially feels I have achieved everything but I’m not going to let my children have that, and that’s not true, though sometimes I feel that’s how they think of me - that I’m stopping them achieving.’

Reshma’s story is therefore one of accepting the vast possibilities the world has to offer her children. This, evidently, even includes the relevance and potential worth of school education within a certain family context; one that may even becoming the reality for her own one day.

6.4 Discussion

Through the gathering, and understanding, of these three unschooling family stories, and particularly through the parents’ perspectives on their children’s education and wellness, the lived experiences of, and responses to, ‘mental health issues’ such as stress and anxiety in unschooling contexts can be intricately seen. As such the experiences of stress among the children (and their parents) revealed in these stories will be discussed, as in line with the objectives of this research, through the following four questions: 1) what role might stress and anxiety have in the decisions of Indian parents to choose unschooling, 2) how are key self-reported advantages and disadvantages of unschooling shaped and recognized by unschooling parents, 3) how are the personal experiences of ‘stress’ appreciated and experienced in Indian unschooling family contexts, and 4) what distinctively different processes are evident in the upbringing process of unschooled children, compared with those existing in formal education systems,

Firstly, regarding growing public concerns being raised about the mental health of young Indian students, especially regarding stress and anxiety, the parents from our study further supported the way in which, as developed from their own previous negative and stressful personal experiences of schooling, that formal education can perhaps be incredibly limited and even harmful for a child’s learning and development, certainly when compared with the unschooling family environments they’d later created for themselves. Indeed, many authors have similarly described this commonly scrutinized and outdated form of classroom education, with its required homogenization of rules and curriculum (Kaul 2006; Council 2014), as well as its limited space and opportunities for spontaneous and self-directed life experiences (Catanzarite and Robinson, 2013; Rinaldi and Howe, 2012; Goodlad 1984; Robinson 2011), As specifically highlighted by the parents themselves, it was this culture that to a large extent motivated them to deviate from formal classroom settings to a hopefully more opportunistic and less-restrictive educational path for their own children and, in turn, themselves also.
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Robinson (2010), through his TED talk on creativity and the norms found in formal schooling institutes for example, reminds us of such concerns:

‘We are getting our children through education by anesthetizing them. And I think we should be doing the exact opposite. We shouldn’t be putting them to sleep, we should be waking them up to what they have inside of themselves’.

Hence, as Pusha and Urmila especially attested for, it was perhaps not the challenging and self-responsible emotional journeys that their children (and often themselves) were seen to deeply experience, but instead the suffering – or ‘stress’ – of boredom, inactivity and self-neglect that is of real concern when examining the apparent mental health of young Indians today (Goodlad 1984; Chopra and Chabra 2013; Jain and Akomolafe 2016). As evident from the study, this could understandably become a key motivation for Indian parents to choose the ‘alternative’ approach of unschooling for their own children; especially if these forms of ‘stress’ are problematized by parents, and – as Nidha, in the study exemplifies – when other educational options are increasingly made explicit and available to them.

Indeed, it is perhaps after all the role of any form of education, and equally of (unschooling) parenting practices, to expose children to their own infinite spectrum of growing emotional, physical and cognitive capacities. As Chopra and Chabra (2013) remind us, “the hearts and minds of children and young adults are wide open to the wonders of learning and the fascinating complexities of life”. When applying this to the subject of formal or informal education, the study more than anything essentially stresses the importance of trust and, as such, the willingness or ability as a parent or educator to be open to, and thoughtful towards, multiple educational choices and outcomes, accepting that there may not even be a single and recognized ‘correct’ way of doing things. Equally, to make decisions for and neglect a child’s natural tendencies through their educational environment, and as such dictate a singular, outdated method of formal schooling, is perhaps the most likely route towards an Indian child’s suffering stress, anxiety, and perhaps, over time, other more severe mental health difficulties.

Secondly, however, and most expectedly shown with relevance to current existing unschooling literature (see Gray and Riley 2013), was the parents’ shaping of the numerous advantages and challenges prevalent within their unschooling family journeys. The most consistent and perhaps largely unavoidable of these was the struggle for parents in finding an accepted role or identity within one’s family and community. Evidently, these unschooling families experienced initial struggles towards finding an accepted place in their own intimate arenas of family and close-community, as mostly emphasized by Reshma’s experiences in having to ‘win over’ her Mother-in-law and Nidha’s difficulty in negotiating her children’s interests in multimedia amidst a culture of intense stigma and warning against it. It seems that the very act of ‘unschooling’, and therefore inherently avoiding more conventional schooling structures and activities, itself brings a challenging and somewhat stressful process of having to negotiate how best to ‘fit in’ or effectively ignore potentially detrimental aspects of society. Such feelings of being unaccepted or an ‘outsider’ is not uncommon within numerous Indian contexts, and particularly those of intensely competitive academic contexts (Iqbal et al., 2015; Gupta et al., 2015; Kaur and Sharma 2014). Also, in one of the few existing studies on alternative schooling in India, Gray and Riley (2013) found equally prevalent challenges for unschooling parents, involving the overcoming of social criticism and pressure from culturally-dominant and traditional ways of thinking about education. That being said, such a process was shown to be relatively fruitful as well, with numerous benefits of these families, such as ‘positive attitudes’ towards learning and feelings of closeness, harmony and freedom within the family.

Furthermore, somewhat advantageously, and as explained by unschooling educators as well (Hauseman 2011; Ricci, 2012), unschooled children as depicted by the parents in the study are offered, at least to a much larger extent, the freedom to learn through life situations, play and social interactions with the community and world around them. They are rarely forced or encouraged towards behaving in specific ways by other subjects of
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influence (parents or otherwise), but instead mostly behave according to their own intentions (also in Holt, 1981). The families in our study were certainly shown to permit such self-governed behaviors by differentiating their daily routines, as particularly exemplified by Paul and Monica’s periods of 5 different meal times and Nidha’s children’s changing diet and sleep patterns, based on what each individual desired. Indeed, through numerous facets of all the subjects’ lives, this continuous process of autonomous decision making and self-negotiation was clearly evident within their unschooling journeys so far, and one that can clearly be facilitated to the benefit and ongoing growth of children and young adults outside of formal institutions through unschooling.

Thirdly, and what is perhaps most interesting, is how ‘stress’ in itself is specifically recognized, experienced and reflected upon in this process of self-governance that has been strongly pointed to above. Paul and Monica, as well as both their daughter and youngest son for example, were shown to exhibit what they admitted to be deeply challenging and ‘stressful’ periods that still continue to persist today at times. It would seem, equally by Reshma and Nidha’s occasional fatigue, self-doubt and self-depreciation, that the autonomy fostered by unschooling lifestyles may provoke feelings of responsibility for one’s own life and actions, which in turn can become its own kind of stress or, just as equally exhibited, sheer confusion and ‘not-knowing’. Furthermore, as is common with many alternative homeschooling strategies, the parents in our study were solely responsible for the care, support and facilitation of their children’s chosen daily routines (see Hauseman, 2011; Holt 1981). As such it is perhaps not surprising that marked examples of feeling overwhelmed, mentally exhausted and doubtful existed throughout the parents’ lives especially so far. Unschooling may therefore in itself be an intensely self-confronting and responsible adventure for children to undertake, and equally so for unschooling parents (Grunzke, 2010; Morrison 2007).

It should be noted, however, specifically how the ‘qualities’ or ‘characteristics’ of these mental health challenges are experienced by the unschooling families in the study. Where as much research, for decades now, points to the remarkable neglect and subordination of young people’s minds within schooling structures worldwide (see Chopra and Chabra 2013; Robinson 2011), with teachers dictating or ‘engineering’ their learned behaviors, the type of ‘stress’ or ‘difficulty’ expressed by Monica’s younger son, for example, could perhaps be seen as one of ‘negotiating power’, Nidha’s daughter one of ‘purpose and direction’, and Reshma’s daughter one of ‘choice’. As such, this study interestingly points to the important intricacies of terms such as ‘stress’, and in turn many other somewhat indefinable vocabulary used around mental health (see Taylor and Brown 1988; Norcross, Beutler and Levant 2006; Keyes 2002). It suggests that unschooling homes might be an arena in which a potentially helpful or empowering type of ‘stress’ can be fostered; a ‘stress’ that inherently is, and should be, a part of any self-directed and autonomous human life, and one that works to responsibly navigate that life towards it’s desired purpose and direction. It is therefore through the parents’ remarkably accepting attitudes towards what their children themselves have recognised as ‘depression’, ‘stress’ and painful emotions such as ‘anger’ and ‘jealousy’ that perhaps these children were able to embark on a journey of self-discovery at a younger age than most children in India, as well as other parts of the formally educated world. As many authors and our findings express, their lives indeed may naturally be inclusive of intense periods of stress, anxiety and depression, as well as those of excitement, joy, self-fulfillment and so on (see Chopra and Chabra 2013; Ricci and Pritscher 2015).

Lastly, what seems most vital, and distinctively different from those children in formal education systems perhaps, is the development, first and foremost, of a sense of agency, essentially to diverse, fluid coping approaches to navigating themselves healthily and effectively in the world. It is argued that the self-determination stimulated by unschooling parents, through the bold choice of unschooling in the first place, as well as daily facilitative methods, despite their children being so young and still somewhat dependent, evidently allow for extraordinary capacities in children to act through their own individual will, conscious freedom and choice (see Kumpulainen and Mikkola, 2015; Borkar 2016). Children need rather not learn how to ‘cope with’ or blindly ‘react to’ life’s circumstances, but develop their psycho-social abilities in order to
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make relevant and empowered choices (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2001). The latter especially might be considered a key consideration when improving formal educational approaches in India, ensuring that children develop a sense of responsibility for their lives and that their sense of self-value is derived from what was observed in this study as ‘critical self-reflection’, independent of comparative and external evaluation measures. One way to establish this philosophy, for instance, could be to create platforms for meaningful exchanges and continuous reflection among teachers, parents and children whereby this aim of self-learning can be reiterated. What is promising for the future, in this respect, is that such platforms are already being seen in numerous alternative schools across India (Vittachi, Raghavan and Raj, 2007). If parents (and indeed educators alike), are able to provoke in children this sense of self-discovery, regardless of its educational format, it is perhaps less likely that experiences of anxiety or stress in youth – particularly those mentioned above as being somewhat unavoidable, natural and even healthy - should necessarily lead to more severe and restrictive mental health concerns.
PART 2: Addressing Academic Stress through Niche-interventions

‘His small fragile ship had barely escaped a disaster; now it enters a region of new storms and uncharted depths through which even the best led ... cannot find a guide. He must find his own way and be his own savior.’ - (Hermann Hesse, Beneath the wheel, 1903).
Chapter 7: Reducing Stress in Youth: a Pilot-Study on the Effects of a University-Based Intervention Program for University Students in Pune, India.
Abstract

Mental health problems among youth have become important public health concerns for many low and middle-income countries. As part of a research program to improve mental wellbeing in Pune, India, a university-based intervention was developed for students of two educational institutes. In one month, 39 students (age 18-22) participated in a series of 2-hour sessions in which they were stimulated to learn better coping skills to deal with stress and anxiety. The interactive sessions were facilitated by a psychologist and volunteers of a suicide prevention NGO. Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) approaches were used to help students identify stressors and find alternative thought patterns towards the stressor. Playful exercises, such as theatre, dance and poetry, were used to develop self-esteem, self-expression and a better sense of control in students. Throughout the program, relaxation methods, such as Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), were practiced to help reduce stress in students. To study the impact of the intervention, data were collected, before- and after the intervention and in an eight month follow-up with the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), in combination with open questionnaires and field notes. Preliminary results show a significant decrease in average stress scores in students after the program in comparison to before the intervention (p-value is 0.044<0.05). Students reflect upon the program as helpful and specifically emphasize the role of poetry, dance and EFT as main contributors. In follow-up tests perceived stress scores remained lower than at base-line, although not significant. Booster sessions are suggested to sustain the benefits. Overall, the results of this pilot study show that low threshold, university-based interventions, could be useful in stimulating psychosocial well-being in youth.
7.1 Introduction

In November 2011, the Times of India ran a story titled: 'Student suicides soar 26% in 5 years, education system blamed' (Mukherji, 2011). The article discussed the rapid increase of student suicides in the large cities of India caused by the ambitious academic culture and failing support systems. Indian students are often caught in a system of competitiveness, which leads to stress, anxiety and depression (Bathla et al., 2015). Internationally, mental health problems among youth have become an important public health concern for many rapidly developing countries, including India, China and Eastern European countries (Kim and Singh, 2004; Sidhartha and Jena, 2006). Research suggests that in India, more so than in high-income countries, psycho-social stress plays a significant role in suicidal ideation among youth (Jacob, 2008; Vijayakumar, 2004). In India, 21% of suicides seem to be motivated by illnesses (including mental disorders) (NCRB, 2007), while many of the remaining issues reveal deep structural concerns in Indian society and the social pressures people face (Radhakrishnan et al., 2016). Stress seems to be a real cause for concern in here, particularly among academic students (Augustine et al., 2011; Pillai et al., 2009).

Students and young adults are particularly vulnerable when failing exams, or experiencing stress from life events, such as conflict or negative social interactions (Joshi et al., 2012; Radhakrishnan et al., 2016). Another notion, which is less well explored, is that young people struggle to reconcile traditional values with modern life, which causes distress (UN, 2003). The increasing exposure to global ideas and values impacts the way young people evaluate and give meaning to their life (Aggarwal and Berk, 2014; Hendin et al., 2008). Inter-generational conflicts with parents and other family members may add to personal distress in young adults, particularly for those who are living in the cities (Jiloha and Asia, 2009; Vig and Jaswal, 2008). Patel et al. (2007), in their article on mental health of young people, warn therefore that the economic gains that are brought about by the rapid economic growth, should not come at the cost of the wellbeing of India’s youth.

Students seem to be highly prone to develop stress and anxiety during their studies, as demonstrated by studies among, for instance, medical students in Maharasthra (Supe, 1998) and students in West Bengal (Gupta et al., 2015). Various studies among high-school and college students reveal high levels of distress and anxiety in cities such as Ranchi, Delhi, Hyderabad and Chandigarh (Arun and Chavan, 2009; Augustine et al., 2011; Sahoo and Khess, 2010). Fewer studies are available on the presence and influence of stress in the context of university students, although in Maharashtra, students in various disciplines were found to experience high levels of stress (in 27.7% of female students and 20.4% of males), related to academics and lifestyle factors (Waghachavare et al., 2013). Causes of stress were found to be related to factors such as low quality education, long college hours, transitions in learning environment (often more impersonal and rigid), conflicts with peers and cultural conflicts, moving away from home and social support systems etc. (Kumar and Kumar, 2009; Cherkil et al., 2013; Kumar, 2009). Other important factors related to stress are long and frequent board exams, competition and the fear of failing, stimulated by high expectations and pressures to perform (Nazeer and Sultana, 2014; Shukla et al., 2013). Jacob, 2008 argues therefore that only identifying suicidal patients based on psychiatric diagnoses for severe mental illnesses will not do enough to prevent suicidal ideation on a larger scale in India. Multifactorial strategies need to be combined to combat high suicide rates, including population-based interventions to provide psychosocial support for people with social distress (Jacob, 2008).

Population-based interventions, such as in school-settings, may be particularly useful for young students who are dealing with commonly faced issues, also because mental-health services catered to youth are relatively scarce in India (Latha and Reddy, 2007; Prince et al., 2007). According to various statistics, only about 4000 psychiatrists are available in the country to serve a mentally ill population of 50 million people (Mohandas, 2009). Although the Indian government launched a mental health program to provide universal access to mental health, partially in response to the high suicide rates, it will take a lot of time and financial investment before the mental
health care system can respond to the demand in India. In the meantime, alternative population-based strategies are needed which can reduce the need, and the costs of individual counselling (Neil and Christensen, 2009). It is argued that mental health interventions should ideally work within the school/university-environment, as they form a natural setting in which students learn, interact and develop (Latha et al., 2007; Neil and Christensen, 2009; Rones and Hoagwood, 2000; Regehr, Glancy, and Pitts, 2013). Patel et al. (2007) also argue that schools and colleges offer a unique place for early identification, reduction of risk factors and promotion of coping strategies in youth. Schools and universities have the necessary infrastructure to reach out to youth, capable teachers who can facilitate elements of helpful processes, and the credibility within the direct social network of students to roll out effective interventions (Latha et al., 2007). Finally, health seeking behavior among young adults and students is often low (van Heusden et al., 2009). School-based programs can herein help to stimulate preliminary health-seeking behavior, which is often lacking due to time or transport barriers, stigma and unawareness, or the belief that stress is normal and/or not serious (Regehr et al., 2013).

7.1.2 Mental Health Interventions at schools

Internationally, school-based programs have been effectively used to respond to various mental health needs, including depression, stress, substance abuse, conduct problems and emotional/behavioral problems, involving multiple stakeholders (such as teachers, parents and community members) and various program designs (Rones et al., 2000). Schools are perceived as places associated to learning, which enables the acquiring of new skills (Rambaldo, Wilding, Goldman, McClure and Friedberg, 2001), including healthy coping skills and stress control (Rones et al., 2000). Neil et al. (2009) describe three forms of prevention and intervention programs, including universal, selective and indicated programs. Universal programs focus on the whole population to enhance general mental health, regardless of any symptoms or indicated risk factors, while selective and indicated programs tend to pre-selected students. The latter seem to be more effective, probably because of the greater probability of change in indicated students (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, and Linkins, 2009).

Interventions in schools, universities and colleges that focus on reducing suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety, stress or overall wellbeing in students often involve methods derived from Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), psycho-education, relaxation techniques, Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Poetry, and/or Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (e.g. Rones et al. 2000; Neil et al., 2009; Gould, Greenberg, Velting, and Shaffer, 2003; Shapiro, Brown, Thoresen, and Plante, 2011). Interesting examples of interventions provided at universities have been implemented in the past decade, among others in Connecticut, USA, where 43 students were taught to practice Transcendental Meditation (TM) over the course of two semesters and showed decline in self-reported stress, anxiety and perfectionistic thoughts (Burns, Lee, and Brown, 2011). A study by Hammerfald et al. (2006) successfully used Cognitive Based Stress Management (CBSM) techniques to reduce anxiety and somatic symptoms in economy students in Switzerland. Finally, a study by Mohammadian et al. (2011) in which poetry was used to reduce anxiety, depression and stress in female students in Iran also showed promising results.

Such intervention programs to improve general mental health among University youth are relatively scarcely documented in India. A combination of tools could be used to prevent problems in students at an early stage, and could relieve the still developing mental health structure in a cost-effective manner. The focus should herein probably lay on, besides psycho-education, a combination of creative, playful methods, allowing students to express themselves in a way that counteracts the disciplinary and competitive nature of the education system. In this pilot study, a stress-management program was introduced at two universities in Pune, India, and evaluated with regards to how it reduced the stress-levels and improved the overall mental wellbeing of students.
PART 2: Addressing Academic Stress

Case description: A university-based Stress Management Program in Pune, India.

This program was initiated as part of a broader project to reduce suicidality in Pune, India; it started in 2013 in collaboration with an NGO working in the field of suicide prevention and researchers of the VU University in Amsterdam. During early explorations in the city of Pune, causes of stress were explored among university students. Their needs were articulated through focus groups and questionnaires. The students expressed experiencing problems with self-esteem, fear of failure, relationships and studies. Based on this input, the team developed a program for students in response to:

- Low self-esteem and fear of failure: For most students, academic pressures, parental pressures and comparisons among students were causes of anxiety and stress, among others including high expectations, perfectionistic thoughts and fear of failure. Some students also reported having self-destructive thoughts with regards to their appearance.

- Friendships, love and relationships: Creating bonds and relationships at the university was important for students, but also difficult. To express and share emotions with peers was considered difficult, and even more so with the opposite sex. Issues with peers and lack of communication made some students feel lonely and isolated. Being far removed from home also added to the feelings of loneliness for some students.

- Study-related struggles: Stress was also caused by factors related to the practice of studying, both at the University as well as beyond. This involved examination periods and class attendance, which are highly controlled at the Universities, and frustrations with the hierarchical structure of the university. Some students also expressed having little confidence in the non-partiality of teachers, or in the quality of their teaching. Stress was also caused by the financial and organizational implications of studying, for instance, commuting to the university (in many cases students had to use scooters, and petrol prices are high), living in poor conditions at the student hostels, or planning studies in order to avoid backlogs.

A combination of research-based tools was introduced to lower psycho-social distress in students and improve their overall well-being. In this pilot study, three sessions were set out to 1) improve self-esteem and reduce fear of failure 2) to improve self-expression, connectedness with oneself and with others, and 3) to lower the stress around study-related topics. In each session, stress-reducing tools were used to teach students how they could relax themselves in times where stressors would be piling up high.

To improve self-esteem and reduce fear of failure, the Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) approach, a form of CBT developed by Albert Ellis, was used to help students evaluate their own thought and belief patterns with regards to important stressors and their emotional responses to this, based on the A-B-C model (Ellis, 2003; Ellis and Dryden, 2007). This simplified psychological model explains the interaction between external and/or internal Activating events (or triggers), the Beliefs of the person, and the Consequent emotions and behaviors (Ellis et al., 2007). Students would, for instance, be encouraged to look at their own beliefs when faced with a mistake or an examination failure, and how they would usually respond to this stressor. The students were invited to perceive certain ‘failures’ as valuable and essential learning moments that can help someone to grow. The latter is also referred to by (Dweck, 2009) as going from a fixed mind-set to a growth mind-set.

Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) was used in accordance to heal the emotional response to the stressor. EFT is a non-invasive meridian therapy, which is helpful in stimulating moment-to-moment processing of emotional responses. EFT is accessible as it can be taught to participants to self-administer tapping on various acupressure points (Boath, Stewart, and Carryer, 2013). It makes use of the sentence: ‘even though, I have this …[e.g. fear of failing in my exam]..., I still deeply and completely love and accept myself’. This sentence, can be altered according to the stressor and will be repeated while doing several tapping rounds, until the emotional response
level is reduced to zero. It has been used in several settings (among others for phobia’s, depression and stress reduction) and shows promising results, particularly because it is a cost-effective therapy approach (Church, De Asis, and Brooks, 2012; Church, Yount, and Brooks, 2012; Brattberg, 2008; Bougea, Spandideas, Alexopoulos, et al., 2013). A variation of EFT was used which involves tapping on the karate-chop pressure point and saying the sentence three times, and then putting the palms one over the other at the center of the chest - just below the collar bone – and taking seven deep breaths. This is a variation of what was taught by Dr. Neeta Yuvraj of California Hypnosis Institute of India.

With regard to the second topic raised by students, which involved relationships with others, playful exercises as well as dance were used to cross (gender-related) boundaries, improve sharing and bonding, and overall connection between the participants. Such exercises were derived and adapted from Interplay (www.interplay.org), a body of work which involves storytelling, physical movement, vocal play, and improvisation, for healing and bonding. Examples of such exercises are communicating in gibberish, building up dramatic scenes together as a group, or dancing exercises in which people mirror each other and follow each other’s lead. Play is considered a strong antidote to stress, partly because it increases joy, stimulates bonding and friendship building, and improves emotional regulation (Gray, 2011). Play is therefore also increasingly used in therapies in various settings, including schools, to improve mental health (Cattanach, 2003, p. 135-187; Reddy, Files-Hall and Schaefer, 2005).

With regard to the study-related stressors, the aforementioned methods of REBT, EFT and play were considered useful in enhancing positive thinking and to empower students to respond differently to certain stressors. In addition, poetry healing, as described by John Fox (1997) was used to enable people’s self-expression, which can help to relieve stress. Poetry therapists use poetry to increase emotional resilience and mental well-being in patients by providing ways to voice their emotions. In several studies, the use of poetry reading, as well as individual poetry writing, to improve mental health has been shown (Mohammadian et al., 2011; Tegner et al., 2009). Finally, Mindfulness-Based stress exercises, such as guided meditation, were used in each session to help students center themselves and lower their stress (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

7.2 Methodology

This pilot study aimed to explore the possibilities of implementing a research-based program to reduce the psycho-social distress of healthy university students in two educational institutes in Pune. In this study we evaluated the implementation process and outcomes for students with regard to their self-reported stress levels. For the first objective, we explored the feasibility and appropriateness of the program based on the qualitative feedback of students, the research team, and the school management. For the second objective, we relied on quantitative questionnaires to study the impact of the program on self-reported stress immediately and then 8 months after the intervention. The program itself was implemented as a universal intervention as it generically invited students to participate without selection or indication process in advance (Seligman et al., 2009).

Recruitment strategy and study population

The research team worked together with the management of two private institutes affiliated to one university, which were chosen for their openness to initiate and organize the program around their academic agenda. In the first institute (institute X), we worked together with students studying in the department of management and organization. In the second institute (institute Y) the sessions were conducted with students from Engineering Studies. A letter was sent out to invite students throughout the departments to take part in parallel focus group sessions in advance of a Stress-Management program. The letter explained that there would be an introductory session, exploring causes of stress in students (including questionnaires), after which a program would be offered to improve stress management and mental well-being. In total 110 students turned up for the
introduction, after which 42 students decided to take part in the program. These students agreed to participate in this study by signing a letter of consent. Of this group, 33 students completed the entire program, 18 of institute X and 14 of institute Y. The average age of the bachelor students was 20 years old (SD:1.15) Of the participants 56% was male and 46% female.
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Table 7.1 Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Institute X</th>
<th>Institute Y</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean age (SD)</td>
<td>19.72 (1.18)</td>
<td>20.38 (1.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19.87</td>
<td>20.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19.50</td>
<td>20.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of male participants</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of female participants</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Measures

For this study we used a mixed-methods approach. First, all students completed the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), which is a validated psychological instrument developed by Sheldon Cohen and colleagues (Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein, 1983). It is internationally used to measure people’s perception of their own stress levels and evaluates the degree to which situations in one’s life are appraised as stressful. It also questions to what extent people feel that they are capable of handling stressful situations. Items assess the degree to which participants feel they experience certain thoughts or feelings on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from (0) ‘never’, to (3) ‘sometimes’ to (5) ‘very often’. The potential range of outcome on the PSS varies from 1 to 40. Although the scale is not meant for diagnosing stress in participants, approximate mark off points for low, moderate and high stress are suggested (Cohen et al., 1983). Scores between 1 and 13 are considered low stress, between 14 to 26 to moderate stress, and scores of more than 26 points are associated to high stress.

The PSS scale was combined with qualitative methods. During the introduction session an open questionnaire was used to allow students to write out personal situations that were causing stress, in order to explore the source of stress and the types of issues the students were experiencing. Both the open questionnaires and the PSS scales were filled in before- and directly after the last session, as well as in the eight-months follow up.

Documentation was used as a method to carefully observe and reflect upon the experiences of students during the program. Two volunteers from the NGO team were present at each session to make notes about participative attitude of students, their mood and enthusiasm, and other group dynamics. After each session, the team that delivered and documented the program, debriefed to discuss what elements went well, what the challenges were, and what could be learned from these challenges.

Finally, after the intervention, we reflected with students on their experiences. Open questionnaires were sent to all students in which they could reflect on their experiences with the program; whether it was helpful for them, which elements of the program were most useful and which elements were less beneficial, how they were using the lessons they learned, how the program could be improved, and if they would recommend the program to other students. Similarly, the university management was asked to reflect on their experiences with the program. These reflections were used to study concepts related to the feasibility (program acceptability and practicability) and appropriateness (cultural and contextual fit) of the program (Booth et al., 2015). For this we asked questions related to how both students and staff experienced the program in terms of planning, use of conducive space, length of the program, appropriateness and relevance of the program and exercises, connection with the facilitators and communication methods, throughout several stages of the program.

Procedures
Participants at the two institutes attended the program sessions after university classes for three sequential weeks. The three sessions all lasted 2 hours. In collaboration with the management of the institutes, it was decided that students could follow this course at the beginning of the semester during the time for non-academic activities. The sessions were led by a professional psychologist, who administered and explained the exercises, as well as a trained research assistant and 2 volunteering assistants from the NGO. The intervention was facilitated in English, which was well understood by all students. The intervention space was conducive for physical activities, such as drama, dance, ice-breakers as well as individual exercises. Tables could be easily placed and removed when writing or reading was required. Questionnaires were administered before in a separate introductory session, for 110 students. After that, those students who wanted to participate followed the program and were administered with a questionnaire right after the program ended as well as eight months later. Students were explained that their responses were processed anonymously and they had the right to quit their participation at any point of time during the program.

Data analysis

**PSS scores** The analysis was done through IBM SPSS 21. The total stress scores were normally distributed with Z values for Skewness and Kurtosis respectively before the intervention (0.0265/-0.933) and after the intervention (0.96/-0.45). The means of the total perceived stress scores before and after the intervention were compared using a paired samples t-test. A p-value below 0.05 was considered significant. Follow-up tests were used to evaluate the development in the student’s PSS scores.

To look for possible effect modifiers, the differences in PSS scores between males and females, as well as between institutes were evaluated using independent samples t-tests to see if there were any significant differences in outcomes between these groups.

**Open questionnaires and qualitative feedback:** The responses to the open questionnaires about causes of stress were digitized and independently coded by two researchers to interpret the reason for the students distress. Before and after the intervention, questionnaires were compared to evaluate the overlap and gaps. Furthermore, we took note of whether some stressors were mentioned less after the intervention. Emerging codes were compared and one list of codes was constructed and used to evaluate the data again.

Open questionnaires administered to students and school-management, as well as the documentation notes were coded independently to abstract emerging themes and common responses with regards to the efficiency, acceptability and overall experience of the program.

### 7.3 Results

In this section the results are displayed. In the first part of the results, the objective regarding the feasibility and appropriateness of the University-Based Stress Management Program in two institutes in Pune is described. In the second part, the impact of the program on Perceived Stress scores of the participants is evaluated.

#### 7.3.1 Feasibility

Both from the field notes as well as the post-interviews it appeared that students were eager and enthusiastic to participate in the program. This first had to do with the urgency of the problem and how this was experienced by most students. Stress and anxiety were very much felt by most participants. This is illustrated by a student from Institute Y, who mentioned that ‘it is so important to have such programs, because engineering students like us are very stressed, and this program was needed to give me some ideas on how to handle this’. Another
student came up to the facilitators after the first session and expressed how she wanted to emphasize how much this program meant to her and how happy she was that something like this was available. Another student from Institute X, said: ‘I thought the program was very needed, because in this era of high stress it is very relevant to find stress busters’. The majority of students reported that they would recommend the program to their peers or friends as they see that they are tensed about life events as well. Some students also took the availability of the program as an opportunity to express their need for more personal support, which could be provided right away by the NGO, indicating the relevance of such interventions in Universities to stimulate help-seeking.

This program started off as a universal program, accessible to any student who was interested in participating. However, when comparing the PSS scores of those who completed the whole program (N=33), with those students who were only there at the introduction (N=76), a difference in their average PSS scores was found, perhaps indicating a larger intervention urgency in the participants. Average PSS-scores of non-participants was 17.94, which was 1.572 points lower than the average PSS-scores of participants (mean average: 19.52). This difference was insignificant (p:.177>0.05), yet noteworthy.

With respect to intervention attendance for the students that remained after the introductory session, 9 students dropped out during the program (5 at institute X, and 4 at institute Y), leaving 33 students to complete 100% of the program at both institutes. We understood that this had to do mostly with inconvenience of certain timings, and sometimes lack of adequate communication from the institute management on the timings and locations of the next sessions. In general, the staff members and the volunteers in the program experienced some difficulties in assuring that every student was aware on the presence of the program and the fact that it was freely accessible, despite the call and the introductory session.

7.3.2. Appropriateness

In the post-interviews we asked students to reflect on their experiences, right after the program, but also eight months later. First, we will reflect upon the core elements of the program, as to whether they were experienced as useful and appropriate by students, such as poetry, drama and play, self-connection, and EFT (Figure 7.1). Specific lessons the students took from the program and in what ways this has helped them in managing their stress, will also be described. Finally, how the school management reflected on the appropriateness of the program is shared.

Overall responses showed that students experienced the program as interesting, fun and helpful in managing their daily hassles. For some students, this meant that the program, firstly, was a welcoming break from their usual way of dealing with academic matters and the communication with each other, as well as, for some students, a first introduction to self-introspection. Three students commented, for instance:

‘This was just awesome, I think every student enjoyed it, it was nice that for once there were no boring sessions or lectures, but there were games and there was space to express our feelings. It was just three hours to keep me away from stress. I found it very interesting and enjoyed every second of it’. (Male student, institute Y)

‘I felt so lucky to be part of this. I gained awareness about myself and how I usually cope with stress. Every session left us with a thought to ponder upon’. (Female student, institute Y)

‘I enjoyed the drama elements of the program. I went back to my childhood’. (Female student, institute X)
The volunteers of the team also noticed a change in attitude of students during the program. We saw that for some students, at first, it was difficult to release the notion that they were required to follow certain regulations, which could potentially lead to grades or corrections. Here, the playful exercises helped them to abandon this academically induced rigidity of the settings they were in. One volunteer reported:

‘The students started off being hesitant, and more ready to obey or follow, as they are taught to do so in usual classes. They barely dared to move and stood in straight lines! But after some time, and the first warm-up exercises, the students opened up, and seemed to enjoy first of all the ability to play. They were highly engaged and there was space for laughter’.

With regard to the elements of the program that students enjoyed most, we asked the students to share whether they felt separate exercises or sessions were useful or not, based on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from ‘disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’. The elements that were used in the questionnaire were derived from earlier recollections of the students on what they considered important elements of the program. In figure 7.1 the responses of students are visually displayed.

Figure 7.1 Evaluation of core-elements according to students

‘Celebrating failure’ was the theme of the first session, in which elements of drama and play, as well as REBT were used to reflect upon the idea of failure and the fear of failure. We celebrated how certain mistakes in life could lead to creative ideas or important lessons and we practiced with overcoming fear by dramatic exercises. Students who wanted to could share their stories of mistakes in the group, while the group would supportively celebrate their experiences, regardless of the element of failure in it. Students showed enthusiasm in this, and shared stories related to their academics, love issues, peer-relations as well as occasionally more serious issues, such as crime and violence. In the figure we see that students find this a moderately important element, and play and drama relatively more important. Qualitative feedback of students suggests that they derived valuable learning from this. Students mentioned for instance:
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‘The reason for my stress was exams. I had a phobia for results. It was very difficult for me to cope with them. I used to sleep for hours and hours so that I could never think of them. But this wasn’t a solution that worked for me. After the session, I am able to cope with them more, to deal with the idea that results are also just a momentous reflection and not a definition of me’. (Male student, Institute X)

‘The program helped me cope with my stress in several ways. For one, it was helpful for building up my confidence, overcoming internal fears, to stand alone in front of people fearlessly’. (female student, institute Y)

‘I felt this helped me in overcoming fear. I found creative alternative ways of looking at this and this relieved my stress’. (Male student, institute Y)

Playful exercises, such as drama exercises, dancing activities and ice-breakers were observed to work well in the program. Through these exercises students were able to let go of their usual routine, and to become more engaged. We saw that it became easier for students to express difficult emotions when they were alternated with expressions of laughter and humour. Volunteers noted that these dynamics between laughter and serious topics worked well to stimulate learning in students.

Another important element in the program was poetry. Both the students and the volunteering team reflected upon this as a very powerful experience. Students were introduced with the idea of poetry by briefly discussing the value of poetry and what poetry contains. We particularly looked at poems from contemporary authors, such as Charles Bukowski, who display less stylistic regulations and therefore more freedom of expression. We discussed the poems in the group and what the author meant to express through these means. Then the students were invited to express their own emotions freely in the space of 15 minutes on a piece of paper. The time was deliberately limited in order to reduce the probability of critical reflection on their own work. This exercise resulted in beautiful poems, in which students reflected on various topics in their lives, such as relationships with their parents, academic pressures, insecurities, love, personal losses, the context of India, hopes of the future, and religion. The sense of pride and surprise the students found in the poetry was experienced as highly stimulating for most students. It was interesting to see for instance that a majority of students, including those who were generally more shy, wanted to share their poems with the group. Examples of such poems, each written by one female student and one male student are provided in the two boxes below, which reveal the depth of meaning in the writer’s expressions.

**Box X: poem by a female student, 17-07-2014**

_In the lonely earth and the beautiful sky_  
_I am just alone, and I’m too shy_  
_I walk ahead, but return with a good bye_  
_who am I, why am i..?_  
_before realizing it, I can’t die_  
_Creatures cry, as it nowadays rain’s dry greenery is nearby, but where’s the human who was the holy guy_  

**Box X: poem by a male student, 17-07-2014**

_Around the corner.. I have a friend_  
in this great city_  
_that has no end.._  
The days go by and weeks rush on_  
and before I know it, a year is gone_  
I never see my old friend’s face_  
Again a life is shifted into a terrible race_
Reflection of the students during the course of this exercise showed furthermore that students enjoyed this way of expressing themselves. Students reflected:

‘I remember the poems that we were encouraged to write. It was the only way I could ever express my emotions and what was in my mind’. (Male student, institute X)

‘This program has helped me in various ways. For one, I discovered a poet in myself. So at times I write a poem now, and feel happy about myself’. (Male student, institute X)

‘It helped me to voice my feelings in front of an audience and that helped me to feel good for days after the program was over’. (Female student, institute Y)

The element of sharing and bonding was rated relatively high, and also mentioned as an important factor during the program. For many students, the program helped them realize that some of the issues they were facing were shared by others, and that this commonality and sharing with others could be a way of coping with the stress. One student reflected:

‘This session brought us together. We worked on it together as a team. The facilitators who guided us during the sessions never discriminated between people but stimulated us to come together. This program didn’t work just for girls or for boys, for instance, it worked for us’. (Male student, institute Y).

Relaxation tools that were administered during the program, such as small meditation exercises before and after each session, as well as EFT were evaluated as helpful. During the program, some students would ask for additional information on EFT and how to administer it for different problems, after which they shared they thought it was useful for them. A male student mentioned about this: ‘I thought the various techniques for relaxation and processing emotions was useful and it helped me to gain more mental stability’. Students also reflected that, although the causes of stress were not eliminated, they found more tools to handle them. This was illustrated by two students who mentioned:

‘I have improved a great deal at coping with stress. There are times when I break down and things seem utterly hopeless, but for the most part, I have changed my approach towards these situations and have learned to deal with them a bit more calmly as opposed to being flustered and reckless’. (Female student, institute X)
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‘I particularly remember the line we were taught to use: ‘Even though ... I still deeply and completely love, accept and forgive myself’. This helped me a lot’. (Female student, institute X)

Finally, students were also asked what elements they did not like or what they would like to see improved. A majority of students thought the program was too short and should last longer. Some students reflected that theoretical explanations (for instance, on REBT) were less useful, indicating that some students prefer the more implicit, practical way of learning certain ideas. However, the group was somewhat divided on this, as some students enjoyed the theoretical background and suggested it could even be increased. Finally, staff members reported that the playful character of the program was something which could only be brought into the university from outside. According to a female staff member from the management board: ‘It is wonderful to see how the students are encouraged to dance, express and even to see how both girls and boys can interact with each other. This is truly working wonders and we see that it works well actually. However, it is difficult to even imagine us doing similar things with the students, because we would lose our face in front of the students, which cannot happen’.

7.3.3 Perceived Stress

For the second aim, we compared post-intervention PSS scores with the average PSS scores of participating students before the intervention. Because the scores of the institutes together were distributed normally at both test points, the final model shows the difference between the pre-intervention and post-intervention PSS scores for the entire study-population. The researchers had to eliminate one respondent from the study, as his PSS scales were not filled in completely, leaving a study population of n=32 students. The pre-test internal reliability in this study was $\alpha=0.735$. At baseline 12.5% of the students fell in the category of low stress, 62.5% in the category of moderate stress, and 25% of the students had scores related to high stress. After the intervention, a considerably larger number of students had scores associated to low stress, accumulating to 30.3% for this category, while 54.5% were associated to moderate stress and 15.2% to high stress (Table 7.2).
As displayed in Table 7.2, a significant difference is found between the PSS scores before and after the intervention (p-value is 0.044<0.05), which reflects a moderate effect size, with r= 0.4 > 0.3. The average score dropped from 20.16 to 17.55, which is a difference of 2.61 points (Table 7.3).

Furthermore, we see some differences in terms of stress reduction between the two institutes (Figure 7.2). Institute X started off with higher stress scores and reduced in stress relatively more than institute Y with -3.75 points versus -1.66 points respectively (however not significant with p:.145 > 0.05). Between males and females there are also differences observed with regards to their PSS scores (Figure 7.3). In general, females started off with significantly more self-reported stress than males, with PSS scores of 21.06 versus average PSS scores of 19.06 for the male participants (p = .029 < 0.05). This is a relevant finding to consider in further impact studies around this program, but we will not elaborate on this for this pilot study.

Table 7.2. Student’s average PSS scores divided in categories of low, moderate and high stress.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low Stress (1-13)</th>
<th>Moderate stress (14-26)</th>
<th>High stress (26-40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-intervention</td>
<td>12.5 %</td>
<td>62.5 %</td>
<td>25 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-intervention</td>
<td>30.3 %</td>
<td>54.5 %</td>
<td>15.2 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.3 PSS: Perceived Stress Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean-score</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-intervention</td>
<td>20.16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post- intervention</td>
<td>17.55</td>
<td>.044</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 7.2 Average PSS scores according to differences between the two institutes
Finally, we were interested in whether the PSS scores would change over time. Follow-up measurements were conducted eight months after the program had ended. Unfortunately, the sample size was now reduced to 21 students, as many had left for internships during the time of post-measurement. The data was still normally distributed with Skewness and Kurtosis values of .127 and .771 respectively. The average PSS scores at follow-up were two points lower than those at baseline but higher than right after the intervention (mean PSS score at follow-up: 18). There was no significant reduction detected anymore in comparison to the average scores at baseline (p:.206>.05). This shows that the effect of the program on the perceived stress levels of students was not contained over the course of the 8 months after the intervention ended.

**Figure 7.3** Average PSS scores according to gender differences
7.4 Discussion

This was a pilot-study to evaluate the feasibility, appropriateness and impact of a university-based program to reduce stress and improve mental well-being in healthy students. To our knowledge, this is the first university-based program to be implemented and recorded in urban university settings in India. Overall, this study suggests that a research-based response to the specific needs of a student population is feasible to implement and likely to be beneficial to students. Our results further suggest that university-based programs that aim to reduce stress are likely to benefit from methods derived from Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) to encourage positive self-reflection in students, as well as relaxation and emotional processing methods such as Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) to teach students self-healing. This study did not inquire whether students were still using EFT in their daily lives, but found that several students reported on EFT as a useful skill that they learned to reduce their stress levels. This relates to a study conducted by Church, de Asis and Brooks (2012), with 38 college students dealing with depression. After EFT the students were significantly less depressed in comparison to a control group (Church et al., 2012). A different study by Church, Yount and Brooks (2012) found psychological distress symptoms to be significantly reduced through a one-hour EFT intervention, indicating that EFT can be a cost-effective method to help people process their emotions.

These research-based methods were combined with exercises to encourage self-esteem and expression in students, such as drama, dance and poetry. Our findings suggest that these exercises are vital elements to include for various reasons. First, it increased the enthusiasm of students. The students also felt more comfortable to share and playful exercises stimulated a sense of group-bonding. It was also considered an important break from the overall seriousness often associated with university-level learning. These effects are also described in Vygotskian sociocultural theory, where playfulness is considered to be an important mediator for learning, as it facilitates ‘zones of proximal development’. In such zones, where people ‘act beyond their general behavior’, learning is more likely to occur (Sullivan, 2000, p. 123). Playfulness has therefore often been used in therapy settings to enhance self-awareness through expression, universality, feedback and self-discovery in the therapeutic process (Adelman and Castricone, 1986). We see that this worked particularly well in the setting of this study, because the university setting in India does hardly allow for spontaneity or creativity in the learning process (Froumin, Divakaran, Tan and Savchenko, 2007).

The researchers were furthermore surprised by the intricate power of poetry, which not only helped to stimulate self-expression, but also worked through in the self-reported self-esteem of students and the overall dynamics of the group. Particularly female students who were relatively shy and insecure throughout the program, were eager to recite their poems, thereby sharing relatively personal statements. Carroll, 2005 describes this phenomenon in his paper on the healing power of poetry, particularly for cancer patients in the US, as ‘finding the words to articulate a traumatic experience can bring relief’ (Carroll, 2005, p. 161). We see that poetry provides a sense of safety in people, which allows them to express personal experiences.

For our second objective we looked at the perceived stress of students before and after the intervention, and found a significant decrease of stress, right after the program (two-tailed p=.044< 0.5). This means that, based on these measures, overall, the intervention was of use for students. There is no official cut-off point in the PSS to indicate when people are at risk for developing more severe mental health problems. However, averages of 20 points are usually considered moderately high (Cohen, 1983). We saw that the intervention led to considerable improvements, with more students scoring less than 13 points on the PSS during post-measurements (30.3% compared to 12.5% at baseline measurements). Also, less students had scores that fell in the category of high stress after the intervention (15.2% compared to 25% at baseline). For many students, their perceived stress score was brought down significantly, which might make an important difference with regard to how healthy these students feel. The overall results were furthermore more robust for female students and
for students at the first institute as they started off with higher PSS-scores at baseline (however, not significant) and showed therefore a relatively greater effect of the intervention. We also saw that students from the first institute show higher PSS-scores and also relatively more stressors at baseline. This is in line with what we regularly hear from students who have studied Engineering before taking up Management in India, that the study of Management is a more competitive, demanding and therefore stressful field. It would be interesting to explore how the setting of the students in different universities influence their experiences with stress. We would assume that factors such as fee structures, quality of education, proximity to the university and uncertainties regarding future job prospects per study field impact student’s experiences (A. Gupta, 2008), which is something to consider in further research (Heckman, Lim and Montalto, 2014).

The follow-up measures show that the stress reduction was not maintained significantly, although average scores were still considerably lower than at baseline. This is a common phenomenon with such short interventions and could be related to the fact that the triggers for stress are changeable and not eliminated. It would therefore be advisable to conduct an extra booster activity several months after the program, to refresh certain lessons learned (Barry, Clarke, Jenkins and Patel, 2013). It also shows again the importance of integrating certain elements of the program in the continuous curriculum of the university, such as space for creativity and self-expression. Nevertheless, the students of the program were now introduced to the fact that they were not alone in experiencing problems and there was always support (gatekeepers) available. These, as well as positive memories people have from former ‘supporting’ events, are important concepts in preventing someone from committing suicide when they are feeling desperate (Wilson and Deane, 2001).

7.4.1. Limitations and suggestions

There were several limitations to this pilot study. Due to the small number of participants we were not able to perform more rigorous tests to evaluate confounding effects due to characteristics such as gender, and university setting, that are likely to bias the intervention outcomes. Limitations in the research field, with regards to resources and time, also prevented us from including other interesting background information on the students, which would have strengthened our analysis, such as social economic status (SES) or religious backgrounds of students and time-tables of students including exam periods. In this study, theoretically related items were also not assessed quantitatively yet, such as overall well-being of students or academic functioning of students. Finally, there was no control group which would be a good suggestion for further studies on this program.

Based on this study, we propose several improvements for the program. First, our study shows that many stressors experienced by students are academically related and could be combatted concurrently with the management of the universities. Although this program provides some relief for students and tools for students to handle their stress, it would be more sustainable if certain low-threshold and accessible elements of the program could be discussed and integrated in the curriculum and the overall academic system of the universities. This would entail perhaps certain reforms in areas such as the public comparison of student grades. Although some of the academic rigidities in the Indian school systems are regulated through national agreements, university managements could think about the message they would like to promote among the students with regard to concepts such as success, which could cause certain beliefs and subsequent stress in students. In the long run this could create a more healthy environment also for staff members, since they expressed that they experience high stress and pressure as well in the current system. Finally, we propose that in the future the program could encourage students to continue supporting each other over a longer course of time, for instance, through peer-education (Zachariah et al., in process). Similar activities could be used as in this program, but students can also be empowered to think of their own ways of addressing the issue of stress. This should still be supported by a team of experienced volunteers to maintain the connection with the professional field, but it
starts with the premise that young people are capable of caring for each other. Peer-education, in itself, can induce important effects for mental wellbeing in people, such as self-care and leadership qualities. This would be an important element to consider in further studies on this topic.

7.5.3. Conclusion

This study shows that a cost-effective, accessible mental health intervention at universities can be a good solution to respond to the growing need of young people in emerging countries such as India. In collaboration with community-based health organizations, dedicated professionals and school-managements, a large group of young healthy people can be supported in relieving stress and finding ways to handle life-tensions. Such programs can also help to increase help-seeking behavior in people with more severe problems. More research should be done to evaluate if such interventions work to prevent more severe mental health problems, such as suicidal behavior, in a population.
Chapter 8: Learning about parenting together: a programme to support parents with inter-generational concerns in Pune, India
PART 2: Addressing Academic Stress

Abstract

Rapid developments in the last few decades have brought about dramatic changes in Indian social life, particularly affecting new middle-class families. Inter-generational conflicts, high academic pressures, and modern anxieties lead to stress both in parents and in children. There is a need for parenting programmes that respond to these specific concerns, in order to reduce parenting stress and improve family well-being. This study aimed to develop and evaluate a parenting programme in Pune, India, based on a ‘theory of change’. In this pilot programme, parents were encouraged to learn in a group format about fostering autonomy in children, promoting academic potential in a stress-free manner and remaining in connection with adolescents. Facilitated by a psychologist, parents participated in four sessions involving ‘creativity and play’, ‘self-awareness and bonding’, and ‘communication’. The intervention was based on validated psychotherapeutic approaches and parenting methods to support parents in their learning. Some 16 in-depth interviews were conducted with parents before and eight interviews after the intervention to understand their learning experiences. Additional feedback was gathered from observation notes and debriefings after each session. The results show that the attention for playful quality time helped parents to (re)gain a more creative and flexible attitude towards spending time with their children. Second, parents learned to reflect on their frameworks of meaning (rooted in their own upbringing), listen attentively and communicate more mindful with their children. Furthermore, this study shows that an activity-based approach, connecting parents in co-creating new parenting paradigms, while supporting them with stress-reducing tools, is a useful way of engaging this target group. The study concludes by offering new perspectives for counsellors working with families in countries undergoing rapid change.
8.1 Introduction

Parents clearly play an important role in fostering their children’s well-being. Safe and supportive home environments, and positive parenting styles, are generally considered to have a protective influence on children’s mental health (Bögels and Brechman-Toussaint, 2006). In contexts such as urban India, where children and young adults are increasingly dealing with psycho-social issues such as substance abuse, insecurity, stress and anxiety, and sometimes suicidal tendencies (Arun and Chavan, 2009; Patel et al., 2012; Radhakrishnan et al., 2016), protective home environments may be crucial (Arun and Chavan, 2009; De et al., 2012; Verma et al., 2002). At the same time, parenting is likely to be experienced as more complex, counter-intuitive and taxing in countries, such as India, which are undergoing rapid societal transitions (Chadda and Deb, 2013; Natrajan and Thomas, 2002).

Parenting is perceived as increasingly challenging for families living in modern environments with higher workloads, reduced social support and greater daily stresses (Long, 2004). Results from a study in 16 industrialized countries, conducted by Gauthier, Smeedeng, and Furstenberg, (2004) show that parents continue to spend more time on parenting, despite the fact they often also work more. In India, for example, the number of two-income couples increased by 58% between 1979 and 1996 (Indian Bureau of Statistics, 1997). Similarly, societal norms increasingly emphasize parents’ obligation to be actively involved in every aspect of their children’s social and psycho-educational development (Furedi, 2008), putting pressure on parents and also on children, who experience increasing parental intentions and control (Lee and Bristow, 2010; Natrajan et al., 2002). Subject to these norms, parents are intensively involved in their children’s education, closely monitoring their food intake, school bags, teachers, homework projects, and results (Lee et al., 2010; Deb et al., 2013), while also worrying about protecting them from harmful practices on the internet and monitoring their relations with peers (Manijkian, 2016, p. 9). For instance, Natrajan et al. (2002, p. 491) describe how middle-class parents in Madras (now Chennai) worry about their children receiving too much information, exposing them to more ideas than when they were young, making it harder for them to ‘keep up’.

In India, parents appear to be putting pressure on their children to do well academically, comparing grades and emphasizing the importance of exams and career paths (Deb, Strodl and Sun, 2015; Deb, Chatterjee and Walsh, 2010; Natrajan et al., 2002), filling children’s ‘free time’ with extra tuition (Sharma and Sidhu, 2011). An additional problem is that children receive different information than their parents and hold more Western notions about how to live and express their individuality. This can lead to parent–child conflicts, particularly when parents place high values on family relationships and patriarchal control (Albert, Tromssdorf and Mishra, 2007). Chadda and Chowdurry (2000) note that conflicts often occur when parents insist on monitoring their children’s social behavior while, at the same time, modern adolescents are continuing to seek out new ways to meet up with peers, experimenting with relationships and sexual intimacy. The concept of inter-generational conflicts in India was described back in 1970 by Gangrade (1970, p. 925), as: ‘the difference, gap, distance or conflict of values between the adult and the adolescent generations’. It seems that countries like India are encountering acculturation problems similar to those in families that migrate from one culture to another (Chadda and Deb, 2013; Fitzpatrick and Garcia, 2016; Butts, Thang, and Yeo, n.d.), as demonstrated also in cross-cultural studies from the USA and Europe (Farver, Xu, Bhadha, Narang, and Lieber, 2007; Kumar, 2007; Baptise, 2005). India’s sustained economic development over the past few decades, as well as processes of individualization, urbanization, intensification of mass media use and modern communication, have thus created acculturation challenges for both children and parents (Carson et al., 1999; Jiloha and Asia, 2009; Carson and Chowdhury, 2000; Chaudhary and Joseph, 2010). This transition has led to a generation of parents

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19 In India there is a trend of complementing formal education with private tuition in order to support and improve children’s academic development (Sujatha, 2006).
who tend to feel lost regarding their role, not knowing when to ‘push’ or when to ‘let go’. It seems that the quickly rising group of ‘middle-class’ Indian parents is especially affected and yet there are too few holistic parenting programmes (Natrajan et al., 2002).

Domestic factors also play a role in modern parenting, related to the increasingly blurred image of Indian family life and how household members relate to each other. An increase in the number of nuclear families (couples living alone with their children, without the extended family), and ‘transitional’ households (nuclear families that still live with their extended family but with more autonomy for the parenting couple, for instance, financially), could be causing what Chadda et al. (2013, p. 301) call ‘temporal compression’:

These changes, which include a shift from joint/extended to nuclear family, along with problems of urbanization, changes of role, status and power with increased employment of women, migratory movements among the younger generation, and loss of the experience advantage of elderly members in the family, have increased the stress and pressure on such families, leading to a greater vulnerability to emotional problems and disorders.

Parenting stress is known to have a negative impact on children’s development. When people are stressed or anxious they are less able to acknowledge the perspective or emotional state of the other, which is necessary for empathic interactions with a child (Johnson, 2009; Luthar et al., 2013; Bögels, et al., 2010). Indeed, numerous studies reflect on the adverse outcomes of parenting stress on children’s development (Deater-Deckhard, 1998; Kennedy, 2012; Vaughan et al., 2012). These studies show that stress in parents, as an important mediator, should be taken seriously in any parental support programme, particularly in challenging contexts. Patel et al. (2007) argue that young people’s mental health is supported by strengthening the fundamental nurturing qualities in the family, including the well-being of parents who are dealing with inter-generational challenges. Instead of focusing on correcting maladaptive parenting or providing particular parenting advice, scholars advise first working on understanding and then relieving parenting stressors (Kotchick and Forehand, 2002; Baptise, 2005).

In sum, there is a great need for more mental health services available to middle-class parents in India (Natrajan et al., 2010), particularly to address these issues that have been created by rapid socio-economic changes. Hence, in this study we pose the following question: How can a parenting programme help to relieve stress, as well as support parents facing various inter-generational challenges? As such, we explore what parents may have learned from the programme, as well as the parameters that contribute to such learning effects.

8.1.1 A Creative Stress-Relief Programme for parents: developing a Theory of Change

To guide the study in responding to the above question, a ‘Theory of Change’ (TOC) was developed, for which we followed the process described below. In a small team, including a child psychiatrist, a psychologist and two researchers, the core principles for a weekly parenting programme, the Creative Stress Relief Programme for Parents, were developed, involving four sessions. The core principles of the programme were chosen as a means to reduce parenting stress (and in turn the stress and anxiety of their children). The content was further developed in response to specific parenting questions that were articulated by the participants in our study (see methodology for further explanation on this Participatory Action Research (PAR) process). Based on this exploration, three main parenting concerns were identified:

A: How can we, as parents, help our children attain their academic potential, while shielding them from too much societal pressure, and without becoming too stressed or burdening them?
B: How can we remain better connected with our children as they grow up in this new era that is unfamiliar and sometimes daunting to us?
C: How can we help our children to become independent and autonomous individuals without risking physical or mental harm?

The above questions are inherently complex, requiring a flexible, interactive learning approach, as well as research-based principles to bring about change. A TOC was employed as it explains how to work backwards from a desired, communal goal to understanding which actions and principles could contribute to achieving this goal more effectively, in a particular context (Anderson, 2005, p.4):

"A group of early and intermediate accomplishments sets the stage for producing long-range results. A more complete theory of change articulates the assumptions about the process through which change will occur, and specifies the ways in which all of the required early and intermediate outcomes related to achieving the desired long-term change will be brought about and documented as they occur."

The approach of studying both the impact, as well as the conditions under which benefits are achieved, is particularly useful in India, as studies have shown that there may still be some stigma and resistance towards participating in family therapy programmes, leading to various cultural challenges (Natrajan, 2002). The TOC, including the core principles, indicators of change, and desired outcomes, is shown below in Figure 8.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core principles (input)</th>
<th>Indicators of change</th>
<th>Envisaged impacts</th>
<th>Final desired outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creativity and Play</td>
<td>Parents will think more creatively about the concerns</td>
<td>Better ways to solve parent-child conflicts while remaining connected</td>
<td>Parents feel supported in coping with inter-generational problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness and Bonding</td>
<td>Parents will be more open to spend more playful, quality time with their children</td>
<td>Parents will remain better connected to their children as they grow up</td>
<td>Improves children’s well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Parents will do more introspection, and understand their own mental frameworks</td>
<td>Parents will be able to reflect better on their own emotions and recognize them easier in their children</td>
<td>Parenting will be more focused on stimulating autonomy in children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation space Centering exercises EFT</td>
<td>Parents will be able to see the link between emotions and needs, both in themselves as in their child</td>
<td>&quot;Turning into their children’s needs, will create more open dialogue styles&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PART 2: Addressing Academic Stress

Figure 8.1 Theory of Change for parents in inter-generational contexts

Regarding the core principles of the programme, three important antidotes to stress were considered, namely ‘Creativity and Play’ (session 1), ‘Self-Awareness and Bonding’ (session 2), and ‘Communication’ (sessions 3 and 4). These principles formed the basis of the sessions and many of the group activities, thus stimulating parents to become more playful in their personal habits and expectations, reflective on their own Internal Working Models (IWMs), and to look at important aspects of parent–child communication. The arguments for these principles are presented in Box 1. Additional components of the programme were Body–Mind Centring (BMC) approaches, psycho-education about triggers and stressful responses, as well as Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT). BMC is often used in therapies to help participants ground their awareness in the present (Miller et al., 2011), and is a technique associated with mindfulness approaches, such as body-scanning or meditation, which can improve the regulation of emotions, bonding and attachment in families (Gambrel and Keeling, 2010; Bögels et al., 2010). EFT is a non-invasive ‘meridian’ therapy, which is helpful in stimulating the moment-to-moment processing of emotional responses. EFT ‘tapping’ (using one’s own fingers) is accessible as it can be taught to participants for self-administering on various acupressure points around the body (Boath, Stewart and Caryer, 1999).
Box 1: Core principles of the Creative Stress Relief Programme.

Creativity and Play: Creativity and play are useful principles for three main reasons. First, they allow a sense of joy, aliveness and spontaneity and can therefore help to stimulate a positive and engaging atmosphere within a group. In such a setting, people may find it easier to share their stories and explore difficult emotions (Jennings, Cattanach, Mitchell, Chesner and Meldrum, 1994, p. 16–20; Richards, 2010; Carson et al., 1999). Second, creativity can be seen as an important antidote to fixed educational expectations that do not necessarily bring joy through learning (Robinson, 2011). Creative thinking can also promote liberation from pre-defined goals (e.g. ‘I want my child to be an engineer’) often witnessed in Indian middle-class families (Natrajan et al., 2002). Finally, creativity is known to stimulate problem-solving and relieve stress (Stuckey and Nobel, 2010; Plucker, Beghetto and Dow, 2010). Play should be appreciated here as a broader concept than actual ‘game playing’ and as a way to be playful, creative and humorous in everyday situations, including the disciplining and education of children. Stimulating play can also help to improve the quality of interactions between parent and child (Justen, 2014).

Self-Awareness and Bonding: Parents can find certain interactions with their children difficult (for instance, open dialogues about sexual feelings), which could be due to fears derived from their own childhood and an unresolved attachment state of mind (Lionetti, Pastore and Barone, 2015). In attachment theories, these anxieties are often described as rooted in individuals’ IWMs. These cognitive frameworks form the foundation of parents’ expectations of their children and reactions to their behavior (Kobak and Esposito, 2004). In India, this is seen, for instance, where mothers felt they were not given enough freedom of choice and trust as they were growing up, making them more hesitant and less confident towards life in general (Singh and Bhayana, 2014). In this programme, parents were invited to explore parent–adolescent bonding, particularly by focusing on their own IWMs and secure attachment narratives (Bowlby, 1973). To facilitate part of this session, the psychologist used techniques that are at the basis of trauma-healing theories (such as, for instance, Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR)) to facilitate the exploration of parents’ own thoughts, beliefs and feelings (Shapiro, 2001). Negative cognitions such as ‘I’m not good enough’, ‘I’m not safe’ or ‘I am not in control’, rooted in parents’ own upbringing, were analysed together and ‘healed’ by Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFTs).

Communication: Professionals considered communication as a key aspect to be included in the workshop, as inter-generational communication tends to be a notable challenge for middle-class Indian families (Natarjan et al., 2002). The methods used in other parent–child programmes were regarded as useful in stimulating positive parent–adolescent communication, such as derived from Faber and Mazlish (2006), authors of How to talk so teens will listen, and how to listen so teens will talk, and Non-Violent Communication (NVC) by Marshall Rosenberg (2003). Central to such approaches are the focus on tuning into the child’s emotional state, without aiming to consult or change it directly, and to support the child in communicating their current emotional state (Havigshurts et al., 2009; Schrod, Ledbetter and Jernberg, 2009). In the group, a combination of such approaches was used to explore fictional as well as real-life situations of parents and children.

The programme was furthermore designed to engage parents intellectually, physically, socially and spiritually, thus creating a holistic balance by combining different exercises. Each session started with some Body–Mind Centring exercises, a warm-up task and reflections on the previous week’s homework. Then the facilitator would continue by providing psycho-education (in 20–30 minute presentations) on that week’s topic, sometimes including a video or relevant theories such as described in Table 1 (below). After this, the parents would work individually or in groups, either further exploring the chosen topic, or practising new skills in the weeks to come. Moreover, there was time and opportunity for negotiation with the parents regarding some parts of the programme. Parents were encouraged to share their experiential knowledge during all sessions, and their input was used to adjust the sessions accordingly. This approach was meant to help build the parents’
trust and self-confidence in taking an active part in the programme (Natraj et al., 2002). Table 8.1 offers a more detailed overview of the content of each session.
### Table 8.1 Overview of programme sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Activities/ Explorations</th>
<th>Home exercise suggestions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Session 1:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity and Play</td>
<td>- Mind–Body Centring exercise</td>
<td>- Find new ways to be playful with your family, thinking about when (for instance during dish-washing or dinner) and how (following the initiative of your child, or starting something yourself).</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Getting to know each other with an improvisation game and music.</td>
<td>- Write a few sentences on what new outcomes were imagined about the relationship and how it felt to be creative and open about the direction of the interaction between you and your child.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- First exploration round: <em>what concerns do we have regarding the parenting of our children? Reflecting on feelings, thoughts and body sensations.</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Psycho-education on ‘play’ and the value of ‘creativity’</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Group exploration: *what do you do for fun/quality time with your family? What excited you as a child?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Group activity: in small groups, designing together a variety of games based on given props (scarf, newspaper, etc.).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Closing reflection on use of creativity and play with adolescents</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Session 2:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Awareness and Bonding</td>
<td>- Mind–Body Centring exercise</td>
<td>- Continue to explore what happens when you connect with your child in various contexts during the week. - Reflect on what emotions you recognize in them, and how this makes you feel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Troubleshooting: how did the ‘take home’ exercise go?</td>
<td>- How do you usually respond? And what happens when you pay more attention to your own internal processes?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Drama therapy exercise for bonding and relating. <em>‘A dialogue with the back’, (Pendzik, n.d. p., 3).</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Psycho-education on Bonding.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction to the Still Face experiment video (Tronick, 1975)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Individual activity: reflecting on own childhood, ‘safe attachment’ with parents and IWM (in what ways were we nurtured vs. hurt?)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) to learn as a self-healing technique.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Closing round of reflection: <em>what are the ways in which you connect with your child?</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Session 3:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication 1</td>
<td>- Mind–Body Centring exercise</td>
<td>- Hand-outs on the subject of ‘emotions and needs’ (NVC). Practise by silently tuning into the emotions and needs of your child in the coming week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Trouble-shooting and reflection on process so far.</td>
<td>- See if you can sometimes make an educated guess about what your child might need in certain situations.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Introduction to <em>Communication: NVC and Faber and Mazlish.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Group activity around universal emotions and needs (Non Violent Communication (NVC))</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Group activity with vignettes: act out</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**PART 2: Addressing Academic Stress**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenes and break down communication patterns through role-plays (Faber et al., 2006).</th>
<th>- Closing with EFT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Session 4:**
Communication 2 + Closure

- Mind–Body Centring exercise
- Final Trouble-shooting session
- Continue with practising different *conflict* scenarios by incorporating creativity, bonding and communication in problem-solving behaviors. Parents bring in hypothetical *real-life conflicts* with their children, and are guided to use what they have learned to introspect, act and reflect in better ways.
- Closure of the programme: *what have we learned and what do we look forward to?*

| No take home exercises. |
8.2 Method

8.2.1 The research context

The study took place in Pune, a large and rapidly developing city in the Indian state of Maharashtra. The research team comprised mental health professionals and volunteers who had previously worked together in other projects that aimed to improve young people’s mental well-being under the umbrella of a suicide-prevention non-governmental organization (NGO) in Pune (de Wit, Adithy, Bunders-Aelen and Regeer, 2016). Pune has changed drastically over the course of the last 30 years due to market liberalization and rapid economic growth (Barua, 2012). To recruit parents, the NGOs project team collaborated with a private secondary school. The school’s Principal was also concerned about the stress facing parents and young children, and was willing to offer her school as the location for the parenting intervention. During a presentation at the school, parents were informed in detail about the programme. We looked at ways to frame it in a way that would be sufficiently inviting for parents to participate, deliberately avoiding words such as ‘therapy’, but emphasizing the issues that are commonly experienced in middle-class Indian society. For this reason, a video was shown, called ‘Race to Nowhere’, developed in the USA as a response to excessive academic pressure (Trip, 2004). We particularly addressed the nature of the programme, informing them about what Natarjan et al. (2002) describe as ‘taking responsibility’ in creating change, to avoid too much reliance on the psychologist for solutions. Parents and researchers decided together that the programme would be implemented during four three-hour sessions held every Sunday, and take place in a large classroom.

8.2.2 Research methods

The parents who signed up for the programme agreed to participate in semi-structured, in-depth interviews before it started. In the pre-interviews, parents were questioned about challenges in their parenting practice, and which questions they would like to explore and gain answers to during the programme. The most commonly reported parenting questions that were abstracted from these interviews were used as input to further develop the parenting programme, as part of an Action Research (AR) cycle (Regeer et al, 2009). Each semi-structured interview was conducted by independent researchers and lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. These researchers were volunteers from the suicide-prevention NGO who had a background in psychology and had been trained for two days to conduct the interviews with parents according to a common topic-list. Both the pre- and post-interview topic list included *main parental concerns, *parent–child communication, *coping strategies and *expectations from the programme. The post-interview expanded on *the experiences of parents during the programme (likes, dislikes, emotional processes and suggestions for improvement), *the lessons learned, *how these lessons were integrated into their daily lives and *in what ways they looked forward to their future parenting. The post-interviews with eight parents who participated in at least three of the four sessions lasted 45–60 minutes each.

It was also considered useful to capture the key lessons about the intervention itself – its success, relevance and potential weaknesses. For this purpose, the parenting sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Two researchers made observations during each session, based on an observation guide. Observations about parents’ participation level, interaction patterns and attitudes were noted and used as data for this study. In addition, there were ‘deb briefings’ with the facilitators and independent researchers to discuss each session. To guide these deb briefings, we asked such questions as: ‘What do you feel went well?’ ‘What were the outcomes?’ and ‘What challenges did we face?’ Minutes of these debriefing sessions were then used as data for this study.

8.2.3 Analysis

A qualitative, grounded theory approach was used for the analysis. As Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.40) explain, explorative qualitative research is particularly valuable when aiming to understand the experiences of
participants regarding a particular intervention. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Some 16 pre-intervention and eight post-intervention interviews, as well as the field notes, were first read by two researchers, after which they were initially discussed. Then two researchers undertook a process of open coding to identify, name and categorize certain themes that parents found important during their participation in the programme, and in their subsequent parenting. Following this phase, the researchers developed a common coding list for selective and then axial coding (Table 1, in the Appendix), aiming to discover categories, sub-categories and the elements of the programme that may relate to these, along the line of their shared or related characteristics and dimensions (Straus et al., 1998; Charmaz, 2000). Emerging patterns were then identified that directly answered the research questions. These were then discussed with the co-authors before writing up the results.

8.2.4 Ethics

Interviews were conducted, subject to the parent’s wishes, in their own home or in their children’s school. A declaration from the VU University’s Medical Ethics Committee for non-WMO (confirming that the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act does not apply to this particular study) was obtained in 2014 (reference number: 2014.170). All participants were informed about the objectives, that their participation was voluntary and their right to leave the study at any point, for which they signed informed consent forms.

8.3 Results

Here, we first briefly reflect on the demographic backgrounds of the participating parents and the setting of the parenting programme. We then describe what the parents learnt about their questions before attending the programme, namely:

A: How can we, as parents, help our children attain their academic potential, whilst shielding them from too much societal pressure, and without becoming too stressed or burdening them?
B: How can we remain better connected with our children as they grow up in this new era that is unfamiliar and sometimes daunting to us?
C: How can we help our children become independent individuals without risking physical or mental harm?

Two important findings surfaced in relation to these questions. First, we found that the exploration and practice through both the ‘creativity and play’ and ‘self-awareness and bonding’ sessions (weeks 1 and 2) helped parents to understand and do things differently in order to strengthen their connection with their children, particularly by becoming more conscious of the need for family quality time (question B). Second, we found that the ‘communication’ sessions (weeks 3 and 4), and particularly the emphasis on internal working models, positively influenced the interaction patterns between parents and children, which became more dialogical in nature (question A and C). Both findings are substantiated in depth below. In the final part, we reflect on the ToC by explaining which principles seemed to have contributed to learning among parents, and how the programme helped to reduce parenting stress in general.

8.3.1. Programme setting (timing, place and gender differences)

After the presentation in the school, some 16 parents (seven men and nine women) initially expressed interest in participating. Of these, 12 parents attended the first session, and 8 (three men and five women) eventually completed at least three if not all of the sessions. Of these parents, some 10 reported themselves as middle-class and two as upper-middle class, with their occupational backgrounds in business (N=3), law (N=1), management (N=2), teaching (2) and engineering (N=1). Nine of the parents held a (post-)graduate degree, while three mothers managed the household and did not continue their studies beyond college. Most parents had a good command of English (speaking and listening), although three women were less confident in English.
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These women were offered translation services but decided to drop out after the first session. The majority of parents signed up in couples, although three women came and stayed without their husbands. Seven of the parents lived in nuclear families, while five lived in joint households with an extended family. Finally, most participants were relatively young, aged between 33 and 45 years.

Regarding the setting of the programme, it was noticed that ‘time keeping’ was somewhat challenging. Most parents had a full weekly schedule, so attending a three-hour programme every Sunday was seen as an extra investment of time. This led to some last-minute ‘no-shows’, as well as parents sometimes arriving relatively late. Such occurrences somewhat disturbed the dynamics of the group process at times. We also saw that there was a slight overrepresentation of women in most of the sessions, and that mothers were also typically more open to being vulnerable. One of the research assistants mentioned in the debrief of session 2, for example: ‘In a way I feel we should pay more attention to the men that were there. They are more silent and find it more difficult to express, so they might need some more encouragement’.

8.3.2. Quality time: an important reminder

The idea of spending more quality time with children turned out to be an important take-home message for many respondents in the post-interviews, particularly because parents had previously viewed this as less important as their children grew older. One mother, who had previously said that she found it difficult to connect with her son because he did not confide in her easily, said in session 2 (one week after the session on ‘creativity and play’):

‘I am not so much of a playful mum; I really don’t like to play games. But I realized now how often I actually said ‘no’ to my child’s requests and that I was missing out on something vital here. So last week he came home from school, and it was raining outside. He asked me: ‘Mum, let’s go and dance in the rain!? My normal response would have been: ‘No! Of course not, you will be dirty.’ But I had the exercise in my mind and actually thought to say ‘Yes’ for a change. And I even said I would go with him. His face was glowing then, and it made me feel good as well.’

In the post-interview, this mother mentioned that finding a balance between saying ‘yes’ and ‘no’ had really worked for her. She now tries to say ‘yes’ at least half of the time to such playful opportunities for a quality connection. These are not just formal games but can be any time spent together. As one father mentioned after session 2:

‘I tried to do this thing this week, but I thought at first the whole while that I did not have time. And also, I thought that perhaps he doesn’t want to play with me anymore, since he is also getting older now. But then I just brought him to bed again for example. I hadn’t done that for a while. And it was nice, because even if it’s not playing it’s connecting in the small moments you have.’

Other parents mentioned that it was helpful to work with other parents on finding different ways to create quality time with their children (through, for instance, the exercise with different props). Parents practised with these ideas and shared their experiences in the following sessions. About half of the participants mentioned that they would more often interact playfully with their children, or find more ways to spend quality time with them, particularly by using daily events, such as ‘dinner time’ or ‘doing dishes’, as opportunities. Still, this was not easy for all parents. One mother found it difficult to let go of the habit of focusing on more serious matters with her children. She said: ‘The thing is, my oldest is always ready to play but I hardly am, because I always refocus her on her studies. So I am aware now that I would rather do things differently, but the common reaction often comes back.’
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With regard to the topic of ‘self-awareness and bonding’, and fostering the connection with adolescents in this particular generation, parents felt they had gained valuable insights during the programme which they used in their daily practice. First, for some parents, it was very revealing to become more aware of the impact of their own emotional state and responses on the parent–child connection and the children’s well-being. The programme reminded parents that children are highly receptive to their parents’ responses and accordingly make a mental note, for instance, on whether to share something that is important to them. In this ‘self-awareness and bonding’ session, parents were familiarized with the concept of ‘secure attachment’ through a video illustrating a well-known ‘still-face experiment’ by Edward Tronick (1974) in which a mother’s facial expressions lead to either comfort or confusion, and sometimes even distress, in a young child. Afterwards, parents were asked in an exercise to reflect on their experiences of how their children commonly respond to their emotional state and vice versa. During this reflection, one mother said:

‘For me, quite a lot of my life I have dealt with stuff like feeling low, or depression most of the time, so for me it was a big eye opener about how it really affects a child if a parent is like that. I realized that even though you are there physically but not really there, the child gets frustrated. I’ve noticed that it does make a big difference to a child if you are actually spending quality time, and that playing in any sort of way, or fooling around or anything, does make them really happy, that is for sure. I have been trying to make an effort to do that.’

A father of an adolescent boy also shared his reflective learning:

‘What happens sometimes is that we don’t think that what we do or what we don’t do makes any difference to them. But children pick up very quickly from parents and we should be more attentive of this. So I end up turning on the TV instead of doing something fun with my children. Like when we discussed the question, “when was the last time you played with your child?” I remembered how long ago it was and that it would be nice to get involved with that more. So I’m more aware, and I think this affects my daily relationship with my child.’

8.3.3 Connection how? A practical learning example

During the second (‘self-awareness and bonding’) and third (‘communication’) sessions, parents explored various ‘when’ and ‘how’ challenges that would surface in remaining connected with their children. One of the most commonly experienced challenges was children’s use of the internet. Parents would often feel fear and despair when they considered that their children spent too much time online. During the sessions, the psychologist would lead the parents through a sequence of questions to discover together what particular thought patterns, emotions and needs were underlying their instinctive responses to their children’s ‘internet use’, and how this could affect their parent–child connection. After such explorations, one father explained, for instance:

‘I feel that what is stopping me to react warmly is that I feel as a father I have my responsibilities and I have to do certain tasks within the time frame I am given. I think that comes from my childhood, where I was too much pressured to perform myself.’

After such introspection, parents were invited to tune into their children’s emotional state while being in conflict about, for instance, their use of the internet. Role-plays were used to discover what difficulties the parents faced in interpreting the situation clearly. Afterwards, EFT was practised to heal emotional and cognitive blockages regarding the situation (Box 2).

Box 2: Illustration of Intervention: Issue of ‘internet use’ [Session 3]
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Father 1: I have a situation as well that I would like to put in the pool. There is a big challenge with internet. It’s a constant battle to try to control the time that they spend on internet and computers and to make sure they don’t get too influenced by the internet.

Mother 1: Yes, I am struggling with that as well.

Psychologist: ‘Let’s try this by acting out a role play.’

One father and one mother played an adolescent child and a parent. The father in the role of the child would be stuck on his computer and not listen to any warnings of the parent to get off the internet. During and after the role-play, the group reflected on what happened.

Father 1: The child is very stubborn and wants to stay on the computer, and when such things happen, we say: ‘don’t do this, don’t do that.’ We immediately go into that mode of talking. We become agitated and we get into a conversation of firing words, back and forward. So how do you handle this situation, when you’re getting agitated and you’ve got a child who maybe doesn’t react even to what you are saying? So then the frustration builds up.

Psychologist: I see, so we see that there is quite some learning to be had together because, as a parent in this, when a child usually doesn’t respond, and he is group chatting on the internet, it does something to us as a parent. And that can stimulate an emotional response within us. First, though, as a parent, could you tune into what the needs might be of that child? What do you think?

Mother 1: He just wants to chat.

Mother 3: He might have the fear to not be part of the group? To be left out?

Psychologist: Right, so you’re seeing that he’s trying to connect with other peers, which is very age-appropriate behavior. So when we are thinking of that, what happens to our initial emotions about the situation?

Mother 1: I’m just thinking, at the beginning when a child answers to you in a certain way, you will not know how to respond to it because you would first think: ‘Hey, I would not have dared to talk like that to my parents!’ And you feel that he’s disrespecting you...

The role-play continued on from here, and participants used the NVC guidelines to tune into the child’s situation, and also to share why they had certain concerns, or regarded certain principles or parenting rules as important. The rest of the group would follow the role-play and reflect on how much the communication with their child had to do with their internal communication simultaneously. Much of this had to do with the thought of not being in control, or not being good enough as a parent.

The psychologist helped parents to conduct a process of self-healing regarding such fundamental blockages (‘I am not in control’), through performing self-administered EFT. This is a technique where stressful emotions or thoughts can be processed through a sequence of tapping with the fingertips, while pronouncing the sentence: ‘Even though I ... (fill in the blanks, for instance: I feel small when my child does not listen to me), I still deeply and completely love and accept myself.’ Through these role-plays, parents reflected on their children’s needs as they are growing up: an increasing need to relate with their peers, the need for privacy and the need to be independent while also feeling supported. Parents returned after the third session with examples of how they used these insights in their parent–child interactions. One such example is shown in the Box 3 below:

Box 3: Reflection from a parent after the session on ‘Self-awareness and bonding’
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Mother 3, reflecting on her son: ‘Yesterday, I had a parent–teacher meeting. And my eldest scored very low on his maths test. And he knows what kind of mother I am, that I will go straight to the teacher to ask: “Why does he have such a low mark?” But now I think my son was feeling embarrassed and afraid because he did not even go into class when his mark got declared. And the idea that I would talk to the teacher was making him very nervous. So this was the first time I actually asked my child: “How are you feeling, what do you want me to do?” I tried to tune into his need for trust and safety. So, after that, I didn’t feel it would be good to seek for the answers from the teachers on why he got less marks, but we looked at it together. This made my son also feel good and more confident. He had a different expression on his face.’

8.3.4. Parent–child communication: what’s in ‘me’, affects ‘us’

During the programme, there was a strong emphasis on parent–child communication, specifically in the third and fourth sessions. The purpose of this was to respond to the questions of parents on how to help their children become autonomous thinkers and independent actors. We hoped the sessions would help to reduce the anxiety parents experienced regarding certain objectives they had set for their children, not by neglecting the objectives, but by understanding the need behind them. Such processes can be quite revealing and offer an opportunity for parents to change their habits so that they are increasingly deliberating matters with their children as they mature rather than just trying to get things done.

For instance, parents would talk about why they found it so important to make sure their children studied hard. They indicated that it has to do with their desire to see their children safe and happy, and this is the way they strategized the ‘how’ (e.g. putting a lot of emphasis on achievements, school work and results in their daily interactions). In the sessions, parents talked about what it would mean if this need were fulfilled in other ways, and if that would bring up feelings of fear. We also looked at the potential needs of the children themselves. In role-plays, parents practised tuning into their own – as well as their children’s – needs, and how to recognize and help express these needs in their children. Some of these imaginary situations were derived from the parenting book of Faber et al. (2006), including various relevant conflict scenes between parents and children. One example is a scene of an adolescent girl asking her parents if she can go on an outing with her friends (an idea which particularly fathers were against even considering at first).

During the post-interviews with parents, all said they had learned valuable lessons with regard to connecting and communicating with themselves and their children, although the learning differed from parent to parent. In relation to parent–child communication, we perceived it as functioning on a spectrum, ranging from a closed, one-way communication style, towards a more dialogical, two-way interaction. Parents began to take various steps in the direction of more dialogical communication styles (Figure 8.2). First, it seems that some parents had become more aware of the needs of their children, but still used one-way interactions with their child to get things done. This is reflected in examples of some parents who seemed to use the learning from the programme mostly to make sure that the children understood why they, as parents, make certain decisions for them. A mother explained, for instance, about her daughter’s autonomy:

‘There are changes in a positive way. About how I feel my daughters should manage and control themselves, how to maintain a distance to boys and why it is important. I learned to tell them why I feel worried. Now the generation is such that they feel there is nothing wrong in building relationships. So I have shared some experiences of my own with her, some other ones also that were bad, and now she understands that her mother is worried because of the risks in society. So it is good from that point of view that she understands now how to behave and what to do and what not to do.’

At the other end of the spectrum, some parents discovered ways to support autonomous thinking in their children, without jeopardizing their own parenting objectives or neglecting their genuine concerns. This
essentially requires parents to, at least for some time, let go of fixed objectives of what the interaction should achieve, such as: ‘by the end of the conversation, I want my son to clean up his room immediately.’ Several parents showed examples of this. One mother, who had many concerns about her daughter’s studies and used to focus on making her study, said during a post-interview:

‘What I have realized is that most of the time I used to have one-way communication with my child that comes from just making her do things. Now, I am trying to create space where I can spend time with her talking differently as well. Not as preacher, or having always a goal or achievement in mind. But communication that is nice in itself. Now I also see that she will do things on her own, needs to have space to decide when she wants to do these, and that we can actually give her a bit more space. We can channelize, but we can’t do it for her or force her. You can give her a plate, but she has to decide whether to eat it.’

Another mother explained:

‘One really nice thing that I learned was about communicating, where we did a small act about how it is when someone says, “This happened to me” and you say “Oh big deal! You’ll get over it.” Instead of doing that, if you can get down to that level and think about what it must be feeling like for the child at that time, and say “I understand, I know.” No one can actually solve your problem but if they just show compassion towards it, it really makes them feel that they can do something about it themselves. That is something I really try to do.’

Finally, for some parents, the programme meant that they became more aware of their own upbringing, fears and thoughts, which have a fundamental impact on parent–child interactions. This turned out to be valuable for many of the participants. As one mother explained, for instance:

‘For me, I was kind of going through a period of growth myself. The facilitator had said that it was also about looking into your own self. For me, that made a lot of sense because, when you’re going through that, many things come to you, of how you perceive and see everything in a clouded way. If your child comes up to you and says: “You don’t do this well”, instead of dismissing it, you actually delve deeper into it and see why it hurts you. And as these clouds start to clear, you don’t see it the same way any more. So that was one of the things; that you react to events because you’re seeing it from a perspective, which is not necessarily true. That was a great insight for me.’

These parents now use these insights to empower themselves, and consequently their children. Furthermore, one mother noted that the programme not only changed communication with her children but also with her husband (Figure 8.2):

‘It’s the way of looking that is different... I respond less aggressively to my husband now because I can shift the focus from my own frustration to what it is that I need and what he needs. It becomes clearer. Earlier I used to think that I am suffering so much from this person but I get less caught up in this way of thinking now, and it helps the communication. That leaves a nice energy for us.’

8.3.5. Useful stress-reducing principles

We hoped that the explorations in the sessions would help parents to feel slightly better or less stressed about elements of their parenting practice. The topic of their children’s schooling was very much an integral part of all the sessions, and many practical examples were derived from parents’ experiences with their children’s education. Over time, however, parents became more relaxed in their high expectations because of their joint discussions (Figure 8.2). On several occasions during the post-interviews, parents would refer to peer support as a significant contribution to ‘the whole experience and as lessening the burdens that they’d previously
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Parents found it comforting to know that certain personal concerns were shared by other parents, creating a feeling of togetherness that was supportive and healing in itself. Regarding this, one mother said:

‘It was nice that in this group we were with parents who acknowledged that there were concerns about education and wanted to do something about it. And trying to do things differently together: that is important. To jointly see if we can be a bit more relaxed about it all.’

Through learning about parenting together, new ideas and ways of handling situations were brought up. Some parents said that sharing experiences and reflections among the group members had given rise to some important eye-opening experiences and had brought them new insights (Figure 8.2). As one other mother said: ‘I found it such a comfort to notice that when I did not know the answer, I could get it from someone else.’ This was witnessed in the programme as parents would often smile and sigh in recognition of each other’s stories, but also help each other get to important lessons and bring them into practice. In the third session, for example, parents shared their worries about not being able to get their children to study and tell them about what happened each day at school. When one parent raised the question of how to deal with this, an interesting discussion started, leading to the idea that the child’s ‘not listening’ was an indicator for themselves to start listening more and tune into their children’s need for privacy. About this, one mother said: ‘Some things we kind of know, but it’s mostly that you’re sharing it with other parents and other parents are doing the same thing, which helps to improve.’

Parents also felt it was valuable that there were many role-plays and exercises to practise with the material. One father suggested that there could be more role-plays or that children could be included if there were more sessions. One mother said:

‘I really liked the activity-based approach, because we can read ample things on the internet, but this way everyone was actually feeling it and working with it. This is good, because we Indians take time to open up and because of this we did open up to each other.’

Finally, during the programme, if intense emotions or thoughts surfaced among participants, the psychologist would help the parents process these through self-administered EFT and ‘centring’ techniques. This helped parents to relax during the sessions, as well as in the following days. Parents, for example, would usually arrive in the mornings in a rushed state but often linger about calmly after the session was finished (Figure 8.2). Each session started with a centring exercise, to which parents responded as a helpful and supportive element. For some parents, these exercises were not new as meditation and mindfulness are common in much of Indian culture but they were no longer practising them as much. Now, these exercises were helping parents to relax and be more fully attentive to the situation, which according to their self-reports reduced the stress in their parenting experience.
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8.4 Discussion

It is notoriously difficult to measure the impact of an intervention on the behavioral changes of participants, as these are embedded in social contexts and dependent on various interacting social conditions De Silva et al., 2014. As such it is advisable to evaluate the mechanisms through which interventions might work, or ‘the resources a program offers to enable their subjects to make them work’ (Pawson and Tilley, 2004, p.6), before testing the long-term effects in a controlled setting. In this article we reflected upon participants’ learning experiences and how they perceived the Creative Stress-Relieving Programme. First, it was gathered that most parents gained valuable lessons regarding the importance of quality time, play and creativity with their children. This is a significant change in a context where there is little time for play or free exploration in the schedules of many Indian children, and parental attention is largely focused on studies (Deb, Chatterjee and Walsh, 2010; Deb, Strodl and Sun, 2015; Natrajan et al., 2002). For some parents, it was slightly unusual but also a relief to act playfully, make up games, and connect with others (parents in the programme, as well as their children at home) in an unanticipated way. Deb et al. (2015) describe how Indian parents often validate their existence by making sure their children are successful, leading them to repeatedly encourage children to study, at times even removing televisions, opportunities for socializing, or any other forms of entertainment.
from their children’s daily life. Competition, high expectations and ‘over-pressurizing’ are acknowledged as a growing problem in Indian middle-class families (Natrajan et al., 2002). The focus on play and creativity in this programme allowed parents to re-evaluate their developmental goals, as well as the value of quality time they spend with their children, apart from the daily chores and other responsibilities. Most parents felt they found a new balance in relating to their children and more often said ‘yes’ to opportunities for quality time, making themselves and the children happier and more relaxed.

Parents reported other lessons about ‘communication for autonomy’. Indian culture is often characterized as more collective and hierarchical or vertical, promoting social cohesion and interdependence, rather than autonomy (Baptise, 2005). However, such dynamics are changing quickly (Chadda et al., 2013). In middle-class families, conflicts between parents and children increasingly occur as a result of the clash between traditional culture and the increasingly individualistic nature of modern society (Natrajan et al., 2002). The parent–child communication is understood here as a spectrum from ‘closed communication’, which fits the demands of traditional society, to more ‘dialogical, open communication’ under the umbrella of ‘stimulating autonomy and independence’ in children (Chadda et al., 2013). In our study, some parents took various steps towards more dialogical communication styles and learned to disclose their own thoughts, fears and feelings underlying certain behaviors. Some parents also made efforts to empathize with their children’s context and practised allowing more negotiation. They learned from the programme to reflect on the underlying reasons for their fears, the needs they prioritize, and the strategies they usually use to protect these needs with regard to their children. The NVC exercises also stimulated them to connect to the needs their children may have in different stages of their life. For some parents, this improved their relationship with not only their child but also their partners because they responded less impulsively to stressful events. Although not many interventions for parents, including NVC training, have been studied with regard to their effects, programmes with other target groups have shown that NVC can improve empathy (Nosek, Gifford and Kober, 2014), increase emotional verbalization and reduce feelings of distress (Wacker and Dziobek, 2016) and, ultimately, improve interpersonal relationships (Marlow, Nyamathi, Grajeda, et al., 2010). The fact that parents slightly changed their attitudes and communication styles in response to this programme shows that, in relatively few sessions, the connection between parents and children, as well as between parents, can be improved. Through the qualitative data was found that some parents felt the programme had also stimulated an improvement in the relationship with their partner. Such improvements could potentially help to further reduce parenting stress, as was found in other studies (Lionetti et al., 2015). On the whole, such interventions are rarely described in the context of inter-generational challenges, but endorsed by other scholars who state the need to pay more attention to efforts to influence family practices (Sonawat, 2001; Singh et al., 2014).

But there were also parental questions that were less resolved, according to data from the post-interviews. Parents still expressed difficulties in dealing with the societal pressures on their children to be educated in a rigid and competitive school environment, knowing that this will only increase when their children enter the job market. This is a genuine fear most parents experience and continue to foster when sharing their children’s successes, shaming failure and comparing each other’s progress, nurturing and maintaining a culture of competition rather than a sense of playful learning in society (Deb et al, 2010; Rao, 2009). At the same time, we see that things are changing slowly, and that more parents accept their children studying subjects such as the arts and psychology, and not just engineering or medicine. The programme helped parents to explore jointly and build a different perspective on their communal culture, hence forming a stronger stance against such societal tendencies. Such processes are often witnessed in AR approaches (Lewin, 1946; Kemmis et al., 1988; Ferrance, 2000), which focus on stimulating both personal and social development in the group setting, creating theme discussions that touch upon all facets of society (Bergold and Thomas, 2012). Bergold et al. (2012, p.1) describe this positively reaffirmed aspect of such participative group processes in AR as:
'The participatory research process enables co-researchers [participants in the study] to step back cognitively from familiar routines, forms of interaction, and power relationships in order to fundamentally question and rethink established interpretations of situations and strategies.'

Finally, we reflect on the theory of change to understand if, and how, this parenting programme helped parents. Quite remarkably, after only four sessions, parents did say that they felt calmer, mostly through having recognized that other parents are not only experiencing similar dilemmas but that they also share an interest in changing certain patterns in their parenting practice. The strength of using a theory of change in this context lies in the fact that we could evaluate why, how and for whom the programme such results came about (Connell and Kubich, 1998), which could be useful for programme designers and facilitators aiming to foster similar results in other contexts. We saw here that the activity-based approach, including a wide range of role-plays, interactive games and discussions, helped to create a safe space for parents and induce a genuine culture of change. We would also argue that the accessibility and feasibility of this programme was key here, even though there were some struggles in implementing this programme, and doubts remain as to whether it managed to reach the right parents. Participants may have dropped out as a result of their beliefs regarding family therapy, as well as the role of a counsellor (Ingoldsby, 2010; Natrajan et al., 2002). As Chadda et al. (2013, p. 305) sensibly argue in their article on the use of family therapy approaches in India, the therapist needs to be aware of and considerate towards the cultural issues that may arise, particularly when hoping to successfully bridge inter-generational gaps. Chadda et al. (2013, p. 305), for example, explain: ‘Directive approaches might be more suitable for traditional families, as the therapist is often looked upon as charismatic, authoritarian and in control of the session.’

Here, we found that some parents expected more directive guidance from the facilitator, and showed some confusion and resistance as a result of the interactive character of the programme. Some parents may even have decided not to participate for this reason alone. Natrajan et al. (2002, p. 500) explain that Indian parents often think of therapy ‘as a process where they were active participants responsible for their own healing’. This is something to consider when designing future programmes for parents who have particular difficulties in negotiating modern issues with their children, as they are also most likely to drop out (Ingoldsby, 2010). However, we would still argue for a balance between bringing in more directive approaches and encouraging parents to engage actively in re-creating their parenting practice through a process of self-reflection, questioning and experimentation, especially for this generation of parents.

8.5 Limitations and final considerations

To our knowledge, this is the first study to report on a programme that deals with inter-generational challenges experienced by middle-class parents in India (or other rapidly developing countries). This study thus provides new perspectives on how to engage such a target group in exploring their parenting questions in an interactive setting, thereby reducing parenting stress (and in turn improving the well-being of their children). Furthermore, a TOC perspective on programme design, such as employed in this study, could help other professionals to make their assumptions explicit, which could support the implementation and impact of similar programmes elsewhere (Breuer et al., 2016). There were, however, some limitations to this qualitative study, as we did not measure (long-term) outcomes, such as parenting styles, communication patterns or parenting stress, or mental health-related outcomes in children. We hope that in the future more rigorous studies (including real-life observations and validated scales, for example) could be undertaken to validate the self-reported changes found in the research. This study does, however, show that it is feasible to fill the mental health gap for middle-class families by implementing low-threshold, culturally sensitive programmes through community efforts and school networks. We encourage other mental health professionals to bring together the basic resources required to develop and study similar interventions for families, in order to improve parent–child relationships in other parts of the world that are undergoing rapid change.
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Chapter 9:

What is in it for them? Understanding the importance of a Mindfulness-based Suicide Prevention Peer Education Program for Peer Educators
Abstract

Youth suicide is a public health problem in India and much psychological burden is experienced by school-going youth, particularly in the adolescent age. Prevention programs, involving Peer Educators, have shown to be useful strategies to address this problem. However, the impact of such approaches on involved PE’s is less well understood, particularly in India. This qualitative study aims to explore the changes that are witnessed in PE students who were involved in a ‘mindfulness’ and ‘Support / Appreciate / Listen / Team’ based Peer Education Program to address suicidal behavior in Indian school students. Method: 114 students were trained as PE’s in 6 different high schools in Pune to identify and respond to the needs of students in distress. By listening to the narratives of the PE’s, their parents, school authorities and the associated NGO team, we reflect on perceived social, emotional, behavioral and cognitive changes in PE’s. Four important themes emerged. The PE’s demonstrated enhanced caring for those in distress both inside and outside the school by improved listening skills, self-awareness and care compassion and empathy. Furthermore, the program had a positive impact on their broad emotional intelligence and PE’s expressed more ownership for life, taking action and seeking support where needed. The study concludes that mindfulness and ‘Support, Appreciate, Listen, Team’ based Peer-education programs are valuable for involved PE’s. This could be used to motivate PE’s to volunteer in such programs. Other results are discussed and additional research areas are suggested.
9.1. Introduction

Globally, suicide is the third leading cause of death among youth (WHO, 2012). A large proportion of these suicides occur in low- and middle income countries, particularly in developing countries. In India, suicides are the number one cause of death among youth (Aaron, Joseph and Abraham et al., 2004), and the past decade (2002 to 2011) has seen an increase in suicide rates by 22%, of which about 34.6% of the victims are young people (NCRB, 2013). In the year 2014, 1720 children below 14 years and 9230 below the age of 18 years died by suicide (NCRB, 2014). Numbers of youth suicides are found to be even higher according to other studies. In a study by Patel et al. (2012), the percentage of youth suicide (age: 15-29 years) was 56% and 40% among women and men respectively, adding to a total of about 187,000 deaths in the year 2010. Other suicide-related behavior, such as Deliberate Self-Harm (DSH), are also commonly practiced among Indian youth (Aggarwal and Berk, 2014) revealing the prevalence of distress in many young people.

This disconcerting pattern is often explained by the rapidly changing socio-economic environment, with an increase in potential risk factors and a decrease in protective factors in family structures, lifestyles and social norms (Aggarwal et al., 2014). The rise of nuclear, double-earning families combined with decreasing parental attention is one of the fallouts of modernization often mentioned in relation to distress in youth (Arun et al., 2009; Aggarwal et al., 2015; Bor, Dean, Najman, and Hayatbakhsh, 2014). In general, youth suicides, besides mental and physical illnesses, are often associated to increased pressures and competition in the school system, parental pressures, relationship problems, inter-generational conflicts, mental and or physical abuse and fear of failure (Arun et al., 2009; NCRB, 2013).

Schools undoubtedly play a crucial role in influencing the mental health of youth. Within the school-setting, youth seem to be both protected as well as more exposed to risk factors for self-harming behavior (Patel et al., 2007). School education equips students with skills that help them compete for jobs, acquire better incomes and social security (Radhakrishnan et al., 2016). This embedding in a social school setting may protect them from stressful life events (Patel et al., 2007). However, school-going children, particularly adolescents, are also more vulnerable to experiencing psychosocial stress and self-inflicted harm (Arun et al., 2009; Joshi et al., 2012). Besides academic pressures and fear of examination failure, there are various risk factors connected to the school environment. It is often at schools where children try out new forms of identity and social status in groups that can lead to emotional disturbance and maladaptive health behavior (Tung et al., 2010), as well as violence and abuse (Patel et al., 2007). Adolescents go through several important transitions, from one school to another, as well as from being a child to becoming an adult, wherein they encounter various new responsibilities and situations that belong to this age (Hussain, Kumar, and Husain, 2008), while not necessarily possessing the coping skills to deal with these challenges. These stresses are further enhanced in more individualized, capitalist contexts, such as in the larger cities of India, where students are exposed to rapid globalization and the new value-system it begets (Joshi et al., 2012; De Wit, Adithy, Bunders-Aelen, and Regeer, 2016). This is witnessed in the prevalence of other risky health behavior among Indian youth, such as unsafe sex, tobacco, alcohol and drug use, which could partly be explained as response to the conflicting messages from a globalizing world and the home environment (Tung et al., 2010).

Adolescence is furthermore a period where parent-child relations are actively restructured and peers become more important for the person’s development (Moretti et al., 2004). Horizontal relations with peers are progressively used by adolescents to explore their self-value and find out who they are. Social networks and peer affiliations are forged in the school-setting which play a pivotal role in determining the mental and emotional well-being of those involved. Social exclusion and bullying are a frequent and ugly flip-side of these social networks, and a major cause of stress and anxiety among many adolescents. Whether positively or negatively, peers play an important role in the lives of adolescents, and nurturing and positive relationships among peers could undeniably function as means of protection against various life stressors (Capuzzi and Gross, 2014). The WHO-based collaboration for research on health behavior in School-aged Children (HBSC,
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2014) therefore reports that: ‘Peers are valuable social contacts that contribute to young people’s health and well-being’ (HBSC, 2010, p. 7) and that ‘family, peers and schools can provide social supportive environments for healthy development’. Other studies show that students in distress often first seek out their peers for help, and suicidal students often tell a friend or other high-school students about their anxieties and suicidal ideas (Drum, Brownson, Denmark, and Smith, 2009; Eskin, 1993; Kalafat, 2003).

9.1.1 School-based suicide prevention programs

Adolescents spend a significant amount of time with their peers at school or in school-related settings (Garofalo, Siegel, and Laub, 1987) and this environment plays a considerable role in shaping their (mental) health. Schools possess the infrastructure to reach out to students, and the credibility and trust of parents to roll out learning programs (Latha and Reddy, 2007). Patel et al., (2007) therefore argue that schools provide a unique opportunity for the early identification and reduction of suicide risk factors. School-based suicide prevention programs are also widely recommended by various other researchers (Gutierrez, Watkins, and Collura, 2004; Mazza, 1997; Miller and DuPaul, 1996; Reynolds, 1991; Shaffer and Craft, 1999). There is evidence, for instance, that building awareness of warning signs of suicide, and training of life skills to address distress can lead to self-efficacy, problem solving skills and self-reported suicide vulnerability (Miller, Eckert, and Mazza, 2009). Furthermore, suicide prevention programs have proven to be much more effective when carried out by peers, i.e. fellow students. As Wyman et al., (2008) note, based on their RCT trial, less than one fifth of 8th and 10th graders with a recent suicide attempt indicated they would talk to a counselor or another adult at school if they needed help (Wyman et al., 2008). Peer-education programs1, which empower students to respond to peers in distress, are internationally used in suicide prevention and show promising results (Guo, Harstall, and Harstall, 2002). Kalafat and Elias, (1994) based on their research in Israel note that PE programs can increase suicide awareness in the population and increase the likelihood of suicidal students to be identified in time. Orbach and Bar-Joseph, (1993) detected lowered suicidal inclinations in four high-schools, after implementing PE, particularly among women. Finally, a study conducted at 18 high-schools in the US, shows that PE programs can increase suicide awareness and the inclination to seek help from adults among students (Wyman et al., 2010). Overall, these studies as well as the overall endorsement of international actions such as UNAIDS (Kerrigan et al., 1999) show the relevance of school-based peer-education programs to combat issues such as suicide and distress in youth.

What is less well understood, but is still an important question, is how these programs benefit the large and growing group of students that take part in these programs as Peer Educators (PE) or in other words the volunteers that are on the lookout for potential peers in distress. Any PE program first and foremost focuses on the recruitment, careful training and continuous monitoring of PE’s. As such, a considerable amount of focused attention is provided for (and specifically in the case of suicide prevention) the psycho-social development of these volunteering individuals (Ebreo, Feist-Price, Siewe, and Zimmerman, 2002). It is therefore suggested that the impact of PE programs on educators, through the psycho-education, personal attention, and life-skills trainings they receive, could be considerable (Ebreo et al., 2002). Indeed most PE teams are set up to teach PE’s relevant life skills, such as being attentive and compassionate to others and to oneself, to learn to initiate action and seek help, which in themselves contribute to a person’s development (Drum et al., 2009; Ilakkuvan, Snyder, and Wiggins, 2015; Wyman et al., 2010). Some studies have shown that PE programs can induce positive outcomes on the lives of PE’S, such as improvement in academic performance, ability to solve school work problems, enhanced social development (Topping and Whiteley, 1993; Vijayakumar et al., 2005), improved communication or social skills (Pfeffer, 2001) and enhancements in their self-esteem (Vazquez, 1990). PE programs in various fields also give educators a boost in social status due to their new role (Vazquez, 1990; Ebreo et al., 2002). In the specific field of suicide prevention, an American study shows that PE programs can positively change PE’S’ attitudes towards suicide and reduce stigma, while improving their relationships with other students and their engagement in school work (Wyman
et al., 2010). However, relatively few studies have been conducted to study the social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral and attitudinal changes that PE’s go through in the setting of suicide prevention. How does a peer-education program contribute to, for instance, friendships and other relationships (social development), self-esteem or sense of self-identity (emotional development), cognitive development, and/or ways of coping with schoolwork, drugs, tensions (behavioral development)? Particularly in the field of suicide prevention, the impact on PE’s has been insufficiently studied.

We considered this an important field to explore, especially since PE’s are key figures in preventing suicides. They are often seen as the ‘eyes and ears’ of the program. Understanding what the participation in Peer Education programs actually brings about in PE’s is an important topic in itself (Ebreo et al., 2002); but it may also lead to more insight on what sustains the intrinsic motivation of volunteers, and subsequently contribute to the existence of Peer Education programs in the future. The quality of peer education is related to the intention and intrinsic motivation of the PE’s (Backett-Milburn and Wilson, 2000; Klein, Sondag, and Drolet, 1994). Otherwise, poor motivation can obstruct the effectiveness of PE programs (Svenson, Burke, and Johnson, 2008). Thus, the impact of Peer Education program on the development of peer-helpers, as well as their motivation to continuously participate requires deeper understanding. To clarify, this study is therefore not focused on understanding the impact of PE on other peer-students in distress, but on the participating volunteers.

Objective of the study

The current study aims to explore the impact of peer education programs on the social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral and attitudinal changes among PE’s (read: the volunteers in the program) in the context of suicide prevention in India. We were interested in understanding the changes that they went through, with an aim to encourage and strengthen peer education approaches in the future.

9.2. Peer-Education: theoretical background and current intervention

The working mechanisms of Peer Education programs, including the training and monitoring of PE’s, are well established in literature on Peer Education. These programs have been implemented worldwide since the 1960’s in various forms for a variety of objectives, and particularly, in the last few decades, to address mental wellbeing in school children (Weare, 2015). The notion of peer education is reinforced by many social theories (Catanzarite and Robinson, 2013). Among the important ones being the social learning theory of Bandura (1977) which posits that students, when provided with accurate training and encouragement, can be successful in inducing positive change in their peers’ lives (Catanzarite et al., 2013). Freire’s theory of Participatory Education (Freire, 1970) is another important theory on which PE is grounded, with its focus on the empowerment of people to participate in learning and social change. Peer education is herein grounded in the observation that many people make changes not based on what they know, but on the opinions and actions of close and trusted peers (UNAIDS, 1999). Peer education is, finally, as Drum (2009) proposes, also a ‘problem-focused paradigm’ for suicide prevention, in which suicidality and its ‘submerged elements’ are perceived as inherent to many features of the school context, which therefore need to be shared and addressed by the whole school community. Therefore, as (Ilakkuvan et al., 2015) the challenge is not to determine whether peers should be involved in suicide prevention strategies, but rather how they can be effectively involved.

Definitions on what peer education involves vary across programs and the specific topics. PE programs can range from informal to more professional structures, but the main focus is to use the interactions between peers as vehicles to delineate problems, induce help-seeking behavior, provide a listening space and, if needed, professional support to peers (Ilakkuvan et al., 2011). For most PE programs, having a clear vision, as well as training, supervision and support, are essential guiding elements. Trainings should objectify clear
cognitive, affective and behavioral outcomes concerning the learning goals of involved PE’s.

In the context of suicide-prevention (Capuzzi, D., and Gross, 2014; Catanzarite and Robinson, 2013, 2013; Ilakkuvan et al., 2015; Taub and Robertson, 2013), such outcomes generally involve increased knowledge on suicide warning signs, skills to respond to peer-students in distress, empathy and active listening skills, increased communication and/or presentation skills, an understanding of their role and the boundaries of their role (e.g. awareness on the limits of their aid and knowing when to consult a professional), non-judgmental thinking with regards to others, increased self-care and an awareness of when to protect their own well-being. ‘Attentiveness to students in distress’, ‘empathic listening skills’, ‘leadership qualities’ and ‘seeking self-assistance’ are key elements of a successful PE training (UNODC, 2006). In such guidelines, it is also stressed that trainings for PE educators be facilitated by professional mental health workers (including psychologist and social workers) to ensure that life skills are taught effectively and the well-being of PE helpers is monitored. Such considerations are imperative to ensure that PE’s themselves are in a good mental state and capable of responding skilfully to the needs of others in distress (Capuzzi, D., and Gross, 2014). Hence the relevance of this study’s main question with regards the development of PE’s is reinstated.

9.2.1. Peer-Education in Pune

The basic philosophy supporting the working mechanisms of the PE programs in this study is the ‘Human Capacity for Response’ (HCfR), also understood as the ‘Community Life Competence (CLC)’ Framework (Lamboray, 2016). Globally, the HCfR approach has been used to address a wide variety of issues including HIV (Campbell and Rader, 1995), malaria (Malaria Control Tools - A Midterm Evaluation of the Malaria Community Competence Process in Nine African Countries, 2009), polio (Chu and Norman, 2014) and psychosocial support for communities after disasters (Hosford, 2006). As a theory, the HCfR has not been well established academically, yet its roots are found in the Strengths-Based approach otherwise practiced and recognized in social work. The strength-based philosophy essentially celebrates the resources, resilience and agency individual people and communities exhibit (Rapp, Saleebey and Sullivan, 2006). It also builds on the positive psychology of hope and optimism regarding the ability of people and situations to transform, particularly when various actors work together (Rapp et al., 2006; Gray, 2011). Furthermore it has a future oriented focus, empowering communities to establish clear goals and visions for the realization of improvement. Perhaps most distinguishing element of the strength-based approach is the notion that persons are not problems that require a distance between ‘helper’ and those who receive help. In that sense, it moves away from the deficit-model, and emphasizes strengths and people’s ability to help themselves as well as each other (Gray, 2011).

Similarly, the HCfR framework reflects the belief that people have the capacity to care, change, hope, lead and belong to a community (such as a school community, in our case), and that communities can harness these capacities to collectively address challenges (Lamboray, 2016). The vision behind the PE-education program, ‘to create a caring and compassionate world where everyone is connected to life,’ was also born from this. To make the HCfR more explicit, the notion of ‘SALT’ (Support-Appreciate-Listen/Learn and Transfer) is used as a means to articulate and train volunteers effectively in line with this approach. SALT is therefore systematically embedded in the PE-program structure.

With regards to the actual intervention, this PE program is focused on creating an effective network of volunteers that are compassionately engaged with their direct environment, including, mostly, their peers at school. This means that the program follows a cycle of 1) recruitment of PE volunteers, 2) training of PE volunteers, and 3) continuous monitoring of volunteers and reflecting on their goals and ‘work’ as volunteers. This process is guided by professional psychologists, as well as trained adult volunteers. The personal development training of PE volunteers is based on a guidebook developed by Sandy Dias (Clinical psychologist in Pune), which incorporates exercises aligned with the SALT approach, principles of Mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), and Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), which is an non-invasive method to analyse and heal negative emotions.
(Scott, 2008). Throughout the year, PE’s come together weekly under guidance of adult volunteers in their own high school to learn, openly share and support each other. PE’s are encouraged to share their experiences, and support each other in recognizing and responding to distress in others. Overall, PE volunteers are systematically trained in:

1. recognizing distress and warning signs of suicidal ideation in others.
2. active listening skills
3. mindfulness
4. facilitation skills and leadership
5. SALT-approach
6. Self-healing techniques (including EFT).
7. referring peers in acute distress to the appropriate professionals when required.

The SALT approach is further supplemented by Dream Building, Self-Assessment, Action Planning and Self-Measurement of Action Plans (Rabia, Kamasua, Zachariah, and Kampe, 2009), which help PE’s to feel empowered and able to reach their own goals regarding the earlier mentioned vision.

9.3. Methodology

9.3.1 Research context and recruitment process

This study was implemented in six high schools in the municipality of Pune, a large city in Maharashtra State with a population of about three million people, of which more than 0.5 million are in the age group of 10-15 years (Census Data, 2011). Pune receives national attention as an educational hub for its abundance of academic institutions and foreign students. In this situation, the competition and stress among youth is high and the need for adequate interventions to prevent mental health problems is a relevant topic.

Connecting..NGO20, a volunteer based suicide prevention and survivor support organisation, is the organizing force behind the PE programs. After various discussions with school authorities to address the concerns around suicidal ideation, self-harming behavior and emotional distress among students, Connecting commenced the PE program in 2012 in 8 different schools (two schools quit the program after some months, due to lack of time in the school curriculum). For the recruitment of PE volunteers, information was sent out to both the children and the parents, inviting them for an informative presentation, which was held subsequently in the schools. Letters of consent, both from the children and the parents, were obtained from each participating PE volunteer. Meanwhile, adult facilitating volunteers were trained to guide the students in aforementioned topics in four-day trainings at Connecting, before being assigned to a high school in their respective proximity. Throughout the year such trainings would be held to increase the number of trained adult facilitators along with the growing number of participating schools.

Subsequently, over the course of 8 months each year, weekly meetings of 45 minutes were organized within the school environment and within school hours. The latter was required to make it easier for volunteers to join and prevent too high retention numbers. During sessions, PE’s were encouraged to share their
experiences of reaching out to those in emotional distress. These experiences were processed in the group to facilitate joint learning.

**9.3.2 Methods**

The questions guiding this research were focused on understanding the emotional, behavioral, cognitive and social changes the PE volunteers underwent by participating in the PE-program for at least one school year (which includes a complete cycle of PE training). For the study we relied on mixed qualitative data collection methods, including focus groups, semi-structured interviews and open questionnaires (Creswell, Shope, Clark, and Green, 2006). A variety of sources were included to derive answers to the proposed questions, including parents, school authorities, the PE’s and Connecting volunteers. Furthermore, a careful data triangulation approach was adopted to make sense of the data that was gathered (Mathison, 1988). Responses to questions were compared and adopted as valid when they were brought up or confirmed by at least one other actor (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, and Sechrest, 1966).

First, PE’s who were involved with Connecting for at least one school year were invited to fill in an open ended questionnaire with topics that helped them report on self-observed changes that, according to themselves, resulted from participating in the PE program. Students were asked to elaborate on the influence of PE participation on their development in relevant fields (Seiffge-Krenke, 2009), including school, future, parents, leisure time, peers, romantic relationships and self-related concerns. Secondly, focus group sessions were organized with 24 parents in total to reflect upon the changes they had observed in their children after having participated in the PE program. The focus groups lasted approximately two hours and were facilitated by the main author and assisted by two Connecting volunteers. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour were conducted with school authorities to reflect upon the observed changes in PE volunteers, also in comparison to students who did not participate in the PE program. Similarly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven PE volunteers (4 female and 3 male) who were involved in the program for longer than one year (two years), as well as four program facilitators (2 male and 2 female). Questions were raised regarding the impact of PE program on the lives of PE’s. These included the reason for volunteering, their role as a PE, their emotional state as they listened to the distress of others, methods of dealing with own emotional distress and the self-reported changes in PE’s. Finally, continuous data were gathered from the adult PE’s including their reflections on the sessions with volunteers throughout the year. For this gathering, the online documentation tool Formstack (www.formstack.com) was used to systematically organize the data. The documentation included details of the performed activities, lessons learned by PE’s and their experiences with the program so far.

**9.3.3 Data Analysis**

This study was explorative and inductive. Hence we used an open and axial coding approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The audio tapes of focus groups and interviews were transcribed verbatim. The answers to the questionnaires were digitized. All data were imported into MaxQDA software for analysis. The data from PE’s questionnaire were analysed by first and second author independently by comparing answers to questions and abstracting distinct themes until no new themes could be discovered (Grove, Burns, and Gray, 2015). This provided a preliminary idea of what influences the program had on the PE’s, both positive and negative, and which categories might be useful to analyse the data. Subsequently, we looked for patterns and categories that were present in the rest of the data sources to specify these categories further, make more distinctions if necessary, find properties, dimensions and observe relations between the various categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Axial coding was then used to further distinguish categories and the interactions occurring within these categories (Grove et al., 2015). The resulting categories were cross checked by the third and fourth authors and final refinements were made to distil the results from the analysis.
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9.4 Results

In this section, we describe the changes of a total of 76 PE’s (20 girls and 56 boys) who filled in the questionnaire, which is about 67 % of the total of 114 PE’s who were involved in the program between 2012 and 2015. The results are divided into two parts. First, we will briefly touch upon the changes that were expected to come up as they were trained in the sessions, and which were required for their role as PE volunteers. Secondly, we will describe the changes that were more indirect, and the unanticipated changes that were mentioned by the respondents as an effect of the PE program. More specifically, we reflect on the students’ ability to take on systematic challenges through the acquired skills which are described in the first part.

9.4.1 Caring for others

What generally came forward from the analysis was the increased self-reported motivation and ability of PEs to care for others, as well as a development of skills that this requires. The themes that emerged are the PE’s increased ability to 1) recognize distress in others, 2) reach out to people in distress 3) use listening skills and non-judgmental approaches and 4) conduct the activities as a team. These skills were all trained during the PE- sessions in the schools.

Recognizing Distress in Others. The capacity to detect and understand emotions (particularly distress) in other people was enhanced according to PE volunteers themselves, as expressed by one student as: ‘I learnt how important each and every individual is and how people feel about certain topics and how important these feelings are.’ And another student described it as:

‘I noticed that a friend looked sad and not attentive. I decided to just ask him what was wrong. He told me his situation. He was feeling very low because all his old friends were no more in contact, or left because they had a fight. And he was confused about his life’.

Parents of PE’s also acknowledged the increased ability of their children to understand negative emotions and recognize them in others. School authorities shared that PE’s on the whole learned how to share their feelings and were more able to analyse and discuss their emotions and behaviors in various settings.

Reaching out to others. Besides becoming more aware, PE’s also reported to be more confident in their ability to reach out to others and respond to their needs. Most students felt they had had an opportunity to practise SALT in their response to others, which included a variety of people who were experiencing different levels of distress. Among them were 10-15 people in medium distress and six who had already contemplated suicide. The means used by the PE’s to support these people included listening and accompaniment, and sometimes advising, until the risk alleviated. A female peer-educator shared an experience as follows:

‘One of my friends was in such distress that she was contemplating suicide because she was thinking that she is worse than others. I noticed her and listened to her. She cried and told me what her problem was and why she was thinking of killing herself. I then dealt with her using the SALT approach, explained her to trust herself and have guts to confront life’.

However, not all students have applied their learning. Some PEs expressed their hope to eventually reach out, though they did not feel confident to do so yet now.

Application of Listening skills and non-judgmental attitude. The PE’s used a variety of approaches in reaching out to students. A higher order skill aimed by the program is to express care by active listening and not interrupting with suggestions and advice. About half the students reported their ability to listen and practice
their active listening skills, by probing, summarizing, appreciating and supporting those in distress. A student reported:

‘My friend was going through stress. She was upset because of some personal issues and studies. When she approached me, I listened to her and at that moment she trusted me a lot. So, I just motivated her to speak further and I appreciated her for what she shared.’

On the other hand, there were several examples in which students showed eagerness to provide advice and find solutions, as is also witnessed in some of the stories displayed earlier. For instance, a student mentioned:

‘My friend was feeling bad because her family had problems, and I explained to her that everyone had problems and she could just overcome it.’

**Team work and bonding.** The Peer Education program itself provided a listening space where the PE’s could trust each other to share their personal- as well as PE volunteering experiences, be supported and learn together. During these sessions it was noticed that PE’s themselves actually experience various moments of distress due to academic and parental pressures, conflicts in their social and romantic life, or issues related to their self-identity. Through the weekly sessions with the whole group students learned to discuss issues that they were concerned about. The students also contacted each other for personal issues, for instance, as seen by a student who said, for instance:

‘I was feeling very distressed because of my brother. He didn’t trust me anymore and the relationship was not good. For the solution, I talked to the other PE’s in my school. They supported me in handling the problem and build my trust back with my brother’.

Counsellors also reported development of belongingness and a sense of association in the PE’s:

‘Among the PE’s, when they are sharing something, they realize what is being shared is similar to what they are going through and they are able to receive wisdom by hearing the analysis of the situation. They feel that they are not the only one who is rejected and broken at times. Being in a group, they related and belonged to each other. This belongingness helps them – same age group, similar kind of issues’.

**9.4.2 Deeply embedded lessons**

In the previous section, we briefly reported the changes that were noticed in PE’s that were expected outcomes from the training they received. In the following part, we will reflect on two changes that were reported by various actors, that show a secondary learning effect that PE’s used in broader life settings. First, we reflect upon the increased emotional awareness of PE’s and the way they have matured in their emotional intelligence. Secondly, the increased independence in PE’s and their sense of agency is described.

**Emotional intelligence.** What became very evident from the responses of parents, PE’s, as well as counsellors is that the emotional awareness of PE’s has grown. This includes the ability of students to introspect and patiently explore which emotions and sensations are experienced by them. One PE said about this:

‘I had a lot of anger issues in my pre-training, but after the training, I have calmed down a lot, the connecting NGOs tricks have helped me to become aware of what the current feeling is, and in trying to find out the root cause of why I feel what I feel. My patience has developed in me immensely.’
This increased emotional awareness is helping the PE’s to initiate actions to regulate themselves, for instance through the use of certain mindfulness tools. One PE shared:

‘I became responsible in my life and started having confidence in myself. I became more patient. I learned to remain calm and not allow my emotions to overrule me. When needed, I use the skill of ‘centering’.

This increased mindfulness in students, also positively surprised parents who repeatedly mention the relatively quick increase in emotional maturity in their children, and how a more accepting, understanding attitude also improves their relationships. Parents particularly noticed a difference in how much their children started sharing with them, which is an interesting phenomenon, as adolescents usually tend to disclose less to their parents at this stage of their development. This had to do with the increased ability of the PE’s to understand their own emotions, as well as those of their parents. One parent explained, for instance:

‘My daughter has changed a lot, particularly in her talking to me. She’s become polite, she tries her best to understand me. She understands now that I am a doctor and I cannot give her the same amount of time as other mothers give to their children. She complains less about this now. And because she shares her own thoughts more, we have become better friends’.

Another mother explained:

‘My daughter has started to do a lot of writing since she participated in the program. It makes her calmer and the maturity that has come in my child has also improved my approach towards her. So, a lot of open discussions have come into the house.’

Counsellors also reflect on the students ‘emotional development and how they have grown. One counsellor explained:

‘Because they need to relate to the emotions of their peers, they have started to develop an awareness of their own emotions. We could see this development happening from session to session, as their emotional maturity was reflected in their discussions. It really empowered them to look at their own feelings, to analyse them. They do self-inquiry on why they are stressed, which they wouldn’t have done if they weren’t first aware of their emotions.’

Similarly we saw an increased feeling of self-worth as well as self-care. A Connecting facilitator remarked how this has helped in building confidence and changed the way they are building friendships:

‘For many PEs, their involvement in the program has changed the way they think about their own worth. This is reflected in their relationships with their peers. They now try to find new friends, who are more trustworthy and caring about their secrets.’

They start realizing the value of human beings, particularly the value of their own life and how they live their lives. Several students reflected on this, explaining how through the PEP they have become self-reflective. Students said things like: ‘I have solved the problems of my thoughts, which changed my behavior’, or ‘I noticed that I have different feelings in different situations’, and ‘It helped me to take away stress and tensions’.

Finally, the increased emotional awareness is witnessed in the way they bond with others and build relationships. A male PE volunteer remarked:
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“When people really come up to me asking for help I really feel responsible; I also feel that I am worth something and when they express their problems I just listen to them and not judge them. I don't hold any preconceived notion about people anymore.”

Counsellors noticed that students that were part of the PEP program feel more secure and self-reliant as well. Another counsellor mentioned:

“The self-confidence of these students has been built in the months that they were participating, as well as their ability to deal with their stress. For instance, there was a student with quite severe anger issues, which she resolved mostly after joining the PEP by having a constant ability to share what was happening with her.”

Taking ownership over the world. For many students, the involvement in the PEP has meant a change in how they reflect on themselves, and also on the world around them. They have become more independent, more critical and active in their approach to change aspects of their context which they don’t agree with. This is reflected in most of the actors. Parents for instance, explained that after joining the PEP their children have become more confident in speaking to people, in seeking knowledge and understanding, and taking decisions, sometimes even beyond their parent’s expectations. PE’s have taken up several issues as their responsibility to confront including conflicts between their own parents, conflicts between neighboring parents and their children, conflicts between siblings and supporting peers who were being bullied. To do this, the PE’s have used a combination of skills to find a solution, including noticing distress, approaching people, listening to them, negotiating and involving others to find a solution.

When asking PE’s themselves how the PEP has changed them, they also show increased sense of ownership and agency. One student expressed about her development:

“I have a cousin of mine, who liked a guy and wanted to marry him but her parents were against the marriage and were forcing her to marry a boy of their choice. She talked to me about this matter and I decided to talk to their parents. In an understanding and polished way, I explained the situation to them. And at first, they were against it, but then they were ready to change their position. And the girl got married to the boy that she wanted to be with. And this was the biggest achievement of my life! It was a great feeling to achieve something like this.”

The parents also mentioned that the academic approach of their children has changed, as they have become more independent. They are willing to seek out help when needed. And the things they learn, they would like to transfer to others. Finally, the PE program has opened their eyes to social injustice and the will to do something about this. A parent shared, for instance:

“I am very happy that my daughter wants to do good to the society. I will refer to an incidence. A friend of my daughter (though this is not a really close friend), approached my daughter and confessed about her family’s domestic violence. As a mother, I felt that my daughter was definitely not mature enough to deal with this matter. But, I was wrong! She stood as a pillar of support to this family. She supported her, she boosted her friend’s confidence and she stood by her so that it did not affect her schooling. With good supportive counselling that girl is in a good school now, regardless of her parent’s marital separation. I am proud of my daughter, who I thought way too young to respond to such a situation.”

The teachers who teach the students also notice changes among the PE’s. One teacher shared her experience as follows:
PART 2: Addressing Academic Stress

“I notice lots of changes among the PE’s. Whenever I am teaching, the students tend to just look down and don’t interact with me much. But over time the PE’s have changed. They have started thinking more critically and asking more questions. They are looking at me and interacting more”

Finally, PE volunteers report better understanding of their academic challenges including being stressed, a need to take greater interest and a need for better management of their schedule. This understanding coupled with stress management and seeking help when required is helping them to take steps to handle them.

“Before this session, I was stressed due to lagging behind in studies. Everyone was teasing me due to my poor marks. After this session, I learned to manage my anger and stress. And I have also improved in studies due to better concentration. And my thinking power has increased because of meditation.”

9.5 Discussion

This study was conducted to explore the potential impact of a Peer Education program on PE’s who were involved in a school suicide prevention program for a minimum period of one school year. To our understanding, the impact of such a program on the PE’s itself remained understudied in the context of India and in the academic literature, which motivated this current study.

We first found that participation in the Peer Education program had an impact on four distinct areas of skills. PE volunteers developed supportive attitudes and skills in the areas of identifying distress in people, reaching out to those in distress, supporting them by way of providing active non-judgmental listening, and improving the teamwork and bonding among PE’s. We considered these skills as first order learning or single loop learning, as these skills were necessary to respond to distress within the existing setting, without necessarily challenging the norms of the system (Argyris and Schon, 1974; Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch, 1974). Argyris et al (1974) explain that these single loop learning skills are necessary means to serve an established end. This means that through single loop learning, the learner is able to use skills in pre-imagined situations and for a particular outcome. The envisioned objective in this case would be to prevent suicidal ideation/ distress/ negative emotions in peer students through the SALT approach. These lessons were expected and we see that PE’s were able to pick up these required skills in recognizable settings, such as a distressed student in the classroom or an emotionally disturbed friend. Still, with regards to PE’s listening skills, students varied in their ability to postpone judgment or advice giving, as we could see from their self-reported stories which involved giving any form of support to another person. Some students would perhaps provide a suggestion or solution to the distressed person a bit too early. We know that, even though taking the person in distress seriously and actively supporting him or her in finding better ways to cope can be useful, giving advice too fast can lead the person to close down and feel misunderstood (UNODC, 2016). The skills of active listening, asking clarifying questions and showing non-judgmental concern, however, are not easily obtained, even with training, and require therefore continuous practice (Cross, Matthieu, Cerel and Knox, 2007).

Secondly, it was interesting to note that the PE Program had an impact on the emotional development among students by way of increased emotional awareness and patience, feelings of self-worth, practice of self-care and building friendships, which were unintended learning results, and benefits which the students indirectly gained from the program. We refer to these lessons as double loop learning, described by Argyris and Schon, (1974) as: ‘Not merely seeking out alternative actions to achieve the same ends, but also the appropriateness and propriety of these ends’ (Greenwood, 1998, p. 1043). In this sense, the goal to prevent suicide through SALT was expanded by the students in their critical reflection on their own well-being and the well-being of their broader surroundings, and in making active attempts to change this, which are lessons that they can apply in various other contexts throughout their life. For instance, since participating in the program, PE’s had also become more open to sharing their concerns with their parents, resulting in better communication, opportunities for dialogue and understanding, and improved relationships at home. These results are similar
PART 2: Addressing Academic Stress

to those exhibited by an HIV PE’s program where the PE’s became more open to sharing their risk behaviors with their parents (Ebreo et al., 2002; Pearlman, Camberg, Wallace, Symons, and Finson, 2002). Allen, Philliber, and Hoggson (1990), argue that participation in PE programs may shape youths’ prosocial competence and reduce problematic behavior. The growing independence displayed by reduced dependence on parents and teachers while handling own issues are indicators along this line. These results are somewhat similar to the outcomes from a HIV PE’s program (Strange, Forrest & Oatley, 2002) and an HIV, sexual health, drugs evaluation project (Backett-Milburn and Wilson, 2000), which reported that the PE’s had experienced ‘increase in self-awareness’ (Hamilton and Fenzel, 1988), increase in confidence, were able to ‘understand both sides of the argument’, ‘able to express thoughts and opinion’ and ‘not shy of expressing what they want’ from a relationship. All these are important life skills for adolescents to learn and practice in their life.

9.5.1 Implications and suggestions for further research

When embedding these findings into the larger objective of understanding what could motivate PE volunteers to engage in suicide prevention for a substantial period, we feel that at least two important considerations arise. The first point relates to the envisioned target group of PE for suicide prevention, which could be considered a vulnerable but also somewhat elusive group. Children in the adolescent phase are known to undergo important social, cognitive and emotional transitions that can at times cause major distress (Hussain et al., 2008). It is within these social turbulences that suicidal behavior, often impulsively, can arise (Daniel and Goldston, 2010), yet it is difficult to determine which individuals are at risk. In our study, and through the observations/ narratives of respondents, we found that, although none of the participants showed immediate suicidal tendencies, many of the distressing risk factors related to youth suicide in India (such as e.g. distress due to relational conflicts, academic stress, parental pressures, anxieties around self-images (Radhakrishnan and Andrade, 2012), were also experienced by the volunteers who participated in the PE programs in Pune.

This is perhaps not surprising. It is reasonable to consider that people who dispose an interest in topics related to psychology often deal with psychological issues themselves, which they may hope to understand better through their participation in mental health work. Several studies, for instance, show that psychology students and practitioners experience high levels of anxiety, depression, and/or even suicidal ideation (Gilroy, Carroll and Murra, 2002; Kleespies, van Orden and Bongar et al., 2011). Other research suggests that mental health workers are significantly more likely to have experienced psychological distress and dysfunctional dynamics in their childhood, including childhood trauma, than other professionals (Elliot and James, 1993). The participation in a PE program could therefore be particularly attractive to young adolescents who experience distress, as it offers a tool to understand themselves, and it provides a sense of purpose as they are beginning to explore and develop their own identity and value (Daniel eat al. 2009). Stepping out of a single-minded focus of mental burden may help especially those individuals who bear a risk to develop suicidal tendencies (Shneidman, 1996), and for whom this PE program may surely pose an answer; not as receiver of help, but as active participant in the volunteering program. Daniel et al., (2009) therefore also posit that ‘encouraging adolescents to participate in activities that involve helping other people (e.g., volunteerism) in an effort to help adolescents to gain perspective on their problems, develop their assets or strengths, and to foster ‘meaning in their lives’ (2009, p. 260). We feel that our study confirms that such purpose is given to the participating volunteers, and might be a preventive and healing measure on its own for an otherwise concealed group of potential sufferers.

Secondly, and somewhat related to the first point, is the earlier described outcome showing that PE volunteers had an accelerated emotional maturation, and along with that, a sense of empowerment and agency. This is an important aspect to look at, particularly in relation to adverse effects that might arise from working with and listening to people in distress, such as ‘fatigue’ or burn-out (Lewis and Manusov, 2009). It is suggested that the level of individual responsibility felt by listeners can cause listeners to feel more distress themselves (Lewis et al., 2009). It is therefore important to ensure that volunteers are made aware of the limits of their personal
responsibility with regards to all that happens in the world around them; for them to deeply know that, while they may be concerned, they are not accountable for any suffering they witness. More importantly, the focus of any PE program should be on creating a notion of shared responsibility and working as a team. The current study indicates that the mutual bonding and sharing between PE’s was well established in the group dynamics of the PE networks. Debriefing sessions that were conducted as a part of the program probably played an important role in facilitating sharing and increasing the bond. We therefore suggest that PE programs can maintain the wellbeing and sustainability of volunteers, when debriefing sessions are incorporated as a part of the program.

This study furthermore did indicate that PE volunteers acted as listeners even outside the school boundaries, and felt a larger sense of ownership over the complex inequalities and sufferings in the world. This opens up possibilities for their involvement in future suicide prevention programs in further educational institutions (such as universities), as well as work placements. Using a panel study of high school seniors who were re-interviewed in their mid-20s and again in their early 30’s, Janoski, Musick, and Wilson (1998), show that volunteer work undertaken in high school has long-term influence on volunteering in middle age. It would be interesting to see if their commitment to the cause will indeed extend beyond their high school years, which can be utilized by other initiatives. Seeing that engagement in such activities reaps benefits for PE volunteers in several fields, including social and academic gains, a win-win situation could be created where both the volunteers, as well as potential suicide victims are supported in their lives.

Finally, this explorative study was not equipped to systematically measure the pre-post changes in students against a control group. The study relied partly on self-reports, which for various reasons are likely to be somewhat biased. Nevertheless, the careful triangulation approach with various actors helped us distinguish which skills and changes in PE volunteers were indeed highly likely to have been induced through their participation. Future research could take our findings further by introducing a base-line and include various psychometric scales to study outcomes related to emotional awareness and agency particularly. Similarly, further research could focus on substantiating these findings in a larger sample, in different schools, and in different geographical contexts, as well as in other thematic areas of peer education, such as HIV programs, or drug use, sexual health, etc. In this way, schools can contribute to complex challenges of our contemporary society, beyond the boundaries of the school as an educational institute.
Part 3: Addressing academic stress through learning and upscaling

“Never had the river looked like such a pure, blue-green mirror, nor had it held such a blindingly white roaring weir. All this seemed a decorative newly painted picture behind clear new glass.” (Hermann Hesse, Beneath the Wheel, 1903)
Chapter 10: ‘How can they stay so calm?’: Using transformative learning videos to stimulate learning and therapeutic effects in parents living in urban India
Abstract

Introduction: Parenting in rapidly modernizing contexts, such as in parts of urban India, can be challenging and stressful at times. This qualitative study addresses how short videos can be used to stimulate introspection and learning among parents to promote healthy family life. Methods: For this study, four storylines were developed, based on the principles of vicarious learning theory, for parents with children in age brackets 0-6, 6-12, 12-18 and 18-24 years. Each video deals with a commonly experienced stressor. Seven focus groups with an average of 10 parents were conducted in Pune to reflect on the impact of each video. Results: Results show that, first, the use of a storyline, depicting transformative experiences and dialogues, stimulated parents to reflect upon their own parenting practice, and second, the increased sharing among parents led to a sense of both optimism and comfort, as well as new parenting knowledge. Conclusions: Videos may be an efficient tool to stimulate and empower parents in the context of inter-generational challenges.
PART 3: Learning and Upscaling

10.1 Introduction

Can someone learn from watching someone else learn? This question has led most of the research related to social learning theory, or ‘vicarious learning’, originally started by Bandura and colleagues in the 1960s, and further developed by various other scholars (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Bandura, Lindzey, and Runyan, 2007; Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Kolb, 1983; Myers, 2015). Vicarious learning, or learning from other people’s experiences, has since then gained popularity as a powerful approach to learning (Huber, 1991; Manz and Sims, 1981; Nathan and Kovoor-Misra, 2002). Through new social media, vicarious learning is also used to promote social change, as is witnessed in many interesting initiatives, including the video ‘Girls at Risk’ to help improve reproductive health in South Africa (Perlman, Usdin, and Button, 2013) and ‘The race to nowhere’, which teaches parents and educators about academic stress in the USA (Abeles, 2010). Given that about half of the global population (3.7 billion people) has access to the internet (Internet World Stats, 2017), modern technologies play an increasingly important role in proliferating knowledge across various fields and disciplines, including parenting (Stern, Cotten, and Drentea, 2012). This is particularly true for countries with large, fast-growing populations, such as India and China (Gulati, 2008), which together account for almost half of the current global internet usage (Internet World Stats, 2017).

Short videos are useful in reaching people who are dealing with common challenges, which ideally require transformation, either in the mind or physical behaviour or both (Gregerson, 2010). Such interventions would, for instance, be likely to assist urban parents facing stress. Various studies have shown that the socio-economic environment of urban Indian families has shifted rapidly in the past two decades, leading to new challenges for parents (Carson et al., 1999). In such contexts, many parents struggle to find effective responses to social challenges, including the emergence of technology and the internet, changing norms concerning sexuality and love, shifts in traditional households, and high educational demands, while being grounded in traditional norms and values. Inevitably such stressors can also affect their children, as many studies have shown (Bhasin et al., 2010; Joshi et al., 2012; Deb, Chatterjee and Walsh, 2010). Several scholars have therefore argued that it would benefit parents and children if parents adopted more reflexive attitudes towards their children’s development in their ‘modern-day’ environment (Baptiste, 2005; Kapadia, 2008; Natrajan and Thomas, 2002).

Currently, there are insufficient preventive parenting programmes or institutional responses available to help parents address these challenges, or learn about their parenting practice and children wellbeing (Scott and Gardner, 2015), which in some cases leads to undesirable parenting practices and pressures (Chadda and Deb, 2013). Although there have been previous initiatives to support parents in a physical setting, often through non-government organizations (NGOs) (Chadda et al., 2013), these programmes are often time-consuming, difficult to organize and sustain, and typically fail to reach a larger number of parents. As such, Scott et al (2015) endorse the idea of studying the underlying messages or mechanisms of change within parenting programs, and spreading this knowledge to a wider audience of parents. Fictional videos, which embrace the complexities of modern Indian society, and display various thought-provoking messages, could perhaps support the diffusion of reflexive parenting ideas among Indian parents, filling the unmet demand for more knowledge and family support (Pillai et al., 2009).

10.1.2 Cinemetherapy

The use of video to educate or disseminate knowledge is not new, and was originally coined as ‘cinemeducation’ by Matthew Alexander (Alexander and Waxman, 2000). Since then videos have been used to educate students in the medical profession (Darbyshire and Baker, 2012), nursing (Cappiello and Vroman, 2011; Darbyshire and Baker, 2012; Oh, Kang, and De Gagne, 2012), education (Decoster and Vansieleghem, 2014; Díaz Membrives, Icart Isern, and López Matheu, 2015; Rondina and Angelucci, 2012), counselling (Higgins and Dermer, 2001; Gary and Grady, 2014) and various other disciplines (Adams and Hall, 2009). Videos are also included as learning tools in family studies and related therapeutic counselling professions (Alexander...
PART 3: Learning and Upscaling

and Waxman, 2000; Berg-Cross, Jennings, and Baruch, 1990; Hudock and Warden, 2001; Kuriansky, Vallarelli, Del Buono, and Ortman, 2010). Fiction has the unique advantage of transmitting a rich, holistic narrative, including emotional aspects, diverse informational content, dialogues, and different angles on a situation, which helps to train flexible, autonomous and more responsive thinkers (Oh et al., 2012; Hudock et al., 2001). The realistic nature of videos helps to create a safe, open environment and stimulate deep introspection and discussions among viewers (Adams et al., 2009).

Videos are also used in therapeutic settings (psycho-education) and for stimulating awareness in clients and families. Many mental health professionals endorse their therapeutic use (Lampropoulos, Kazantzis, and Deane, 2004; Powell and Newgent, 2010; Sharp, Smith, and Cole, 2002) as they can awaken new important insights, potentially leading viewers to adjust deep-seated, fixed, limiting assumptions and expectations (Mezirow, 2003). Dermer and Hutchings (2000) for example explain that ‘cinematherapy’, a term first introduced by Berg-Cross, Jennings and Baruch (1990) to describe the use of popular culture (books, music and films) in psychotherapy, can be useful within the realm of individual, couples and family therapy in particular. Videos enable people to reflect upon universal concerns, as well as those specific to a group, culture, class, sex or sexual orientation (Lappin and Hardy, 1997). Furthermore, although the evidence is limited, there are indications that cinematherapy or group movie therapy (GMT) may also have therapeutic benefits, as shown in a study undertaken with parents of children with mild mental retardation by Abedin and Molaie, 2010, in which parental stress was reduced significantly.

10.1.3. Transforming parenting through video.

For this study, four films were produced to stimulate parents to shift their worldviews, generate new ideas or generally learn about relevant challenging topics that were revealed in previous research regarding parenting stress in urban India. Storylines were developed for the narrative content of the parenting films, including dialogues and role models undergoing transformation (Klobucar, 2016; Taylor, 2000, 2008), to optimize parental learning. At the heart of transformative learning is the emergence of ‘a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action’ (Mezirow, 1997, p. 162). Transformation refers here to the notion of change in how a person interprets and responds to the world around them. Stories, which embody change in a way that is emotionally and cognitively followed by the viewer, could stimulate learning (Korth, Michael, and Cranton, 2014). As such, it was hypothesized that incorporating vicarious principles would create a learning benefit for the parents in our study as well.

Vicarious learning principles. In order to build narratives that inspire vicarious transformative experiences, various preconditions or principles have been acknowledged over the years. First, Mezirow (1997, 2003) describes empathy and relatedness, or the ability to connect with the person in the storyline by observing lifelike qualities and experiences, as essential to promoting vicarious transformative learning. To this end, first-person narration helps to create access to the intense emotional world of the characters in the story, hence supporting the viewers’ identification with them (Taylor, 2008; Wilson, Blake, Taylor, and Hannings, 2013). Another important component here is the role model, or hero, who experiences challenges but shows certain strengths and abilities in order to acknowledge and deal with the situation (Wilson et al., 2013). In this case it also helps if the strengths that are reflected lead to some ‘successful’ outcome in the story (De Wit, Van Veen, Zweekhorst, and Regeer, 2016). In addition, there is the notion of the narrative being sufficiently rich and complex to allow the viewers to decipher their own learning from the story, often known as ‘thick description’ (Wilson et al., 2013; Geertz, 1973). This has to do with the idea that the story should first and foremost stimulate introspection, reflection, and then ‘appropriation’ of knowledge’ (Harré, 1984), meaning that the viewers can deconstruct information from the narrative and integrate it with their own reality.

Second, to create learning in the viewer, the story should contain a dramatic change, which is reflected in the mental frameworks and actions of the people in the story. Hence, quite naturally, the principle of
transformation is seen as vital to the story (Taylor, 2007). Cranton (1994) reflects furthermore on the importance of authenticity in the story, which allows viewers to meet and transcend certain fears. When the ‘educator’ or story is able to meet specific fears in an honest, raw manner (this includes thoughts, emotions and dialogues), it provides a platform of vulnerability from which alternative strategies are more likely to be considered and produced (Elsey, 2010). Again, it also helps if the story ends on a positive note, demonstrating the potential positive effects of change, hereby instilling hope in the viewers of being able to achieve similar effects in their own practice (de Wit et al., 2016; Berg-Cross et al., 1990). These principles or ‘instrumental factors’ that formed the basis of the videos in this study, as well as the focus point of our analysis, are reflected in Table 10.1

**Table 10.1 Principles of vicarious transformative learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vicarious learning principles</th>
<th>Intended effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Empathy/relatedness</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters with whom parents can identify, are in similar situations as, and are experiencing similar challenges</td>
<td>Stimulating parents to engage with the whole storyline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Role models</td>
<td>To stimulate engagement with main character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Strengths and weaknesses</td>
<td>Creating identification with the characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- First-person narration</td>
<td>Creates a more holistic understanding for the viewer, and appropriation of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Rich and complex stories</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Thick description</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Transformation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The storyline portray deals with a new direction or change, which is reflected in the actions and mind-sets of the people involved.</td>
<td>Allowing viewer to be receptive to considering new ideas/actions/strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Authenticity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Showing vulnerability and expression of fear</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Successful outcome</td>
<td>Creates positivity and hope, and stimulates alternative action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For this current case study, four videos were developed based on narratives that reflect common parenting dilemmas in urban India. These issues were drawn from an in-depth study on parenting stress including parents, health professionals, children and school authorities, conducted in 2014-2015 (de Wit, Adithy, Bunders and Regeer, submitted). Four lessons from this preliminary study were that: parents have difficulties maintaining a work-life balance (addressed in Video 1, see box 1), encouraging their children’s educational development without burdening them (Video 2, box 2), dealing with their children’s sexual development in the age of the internet, social media and other changing norms (Video 3, box 3), and letting go of their controlling role as a parent (Video 4, box 4). As much as possible the videos adhere to the instrumental factors (vicarious learning principles) earlier discussed, and will be studied in relation to their effects on learning and therapeutic benefits in parents.
PART 3: Learning and Upscaling

Box 1: ‘The first steps’ (age 0-6)  Url: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hAPazjKIoandt=3s

Topic(s): Emancipation, double earning families, children’s day care (the ‘topic’ in each of these 4 boxes needs to be either underlined, or not)

Challenge: This film responds to a challenge often encountered by new parents in urban India of managing both a family and a career when both parents have a career. Due to positive emancipating influences and decreasing gender bias in education and work opportunities in India (Poducal and Poduval, 2009), double-earning families have become more accepted. More women wish to combine having a family with pursuing a career, yet in many cases there are concerns about leaving a young child in day care. Often, parents find it difficult to agree when discussing these topics, which causes distress (Poduval et al., 2009).

Storyline: This video portrays a young couple (mother Meghana and father Vikrant) and their two-year-old son, Vedu. Meghana has been taking care of Vedu since he was born, but feels restless and at times bored with her life at home. She has been thinking about and hoping to resume her career. She explains to her husband her wish to start working again, but he doesn’t agree. She decides to look into children’s day care and also finds a place where she could resume work. She feels anxious about leaving Vedu at the children’s day-care centre, especially because her mother is also against the whole plan. In the video we see that the Meghana’s family turns around slowly and Vedu enjoys being in day care. Vikrant also starts to support Meghana by taking a week’s leave to take care of Vedu.

Key features:
- The dialogues between Vikrant and Meghana go from denying each other, towards seeing each other’s needs and listening.
- Other mothers at the children’s day-care centre support Meghana’s decision, by explaining that children can form warm bonds with more than one or two persons in their lives.
- Meghana has a tough time defending her wishes to her mother but sticks to her plan. She feels guilty and sometimes fearful that she has done the wrong thing, but still follows her instincts. Eventually this works out well.

Box 2: ‘The butterfly project’ (age 6-12)  Url: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBNALNg5wa0andt=5s

Topic(s): Didactics, learning anxiety, school projects

Challenge: This video responds to the challenges many parents encounter concerning their children’s education. Many parents pressure their children to perform well, which leads to full schedules of homework, tuition and often continuous monitoring of the learning curve through marks and projects. There is parental peer pressure, which stresses both parents and children (Deb et al., 2010).

Storyline: The video depicts two families with a 10-year-old son. The children have a project to finish by the end of the weekend. We see that the two mothers approach the project differently. While one stimulates her child to pick up the project, helps him initially with finding an idea that excites him and supports him to get started by probing and providing certain materials, the second mother feels the time pressure, and quickly takes over the project. In each case the husband is supportive from a distance. The second mother gets increasingly anxious also about the presentation her son needs to give about the project, which he can’t seem
PART 3: Learning and Upscaling

to memorize. This scares her, because of the competition and the marks, but she does (with the help of her husband) turn around, telling her son to make a presentation in his own words.

**Key features:**
- Both the families love their child and want the best for them.
- The dialogues between each couple show their concerns, doubts and beliefs regarding learning and competition. For the second mother, these beliefs change a little after working on the life-stages project, and through the dialogue with her husband.
- The video depicts certain realistic modern features, such as the gadgets the children play with and the lack of concentration they can foster.

**Box 3: ‘The permission’ (age 12-18)**  
**Url:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CYMsYwKrMj4andt=21s

**Topic(s):** Sexuality, protection of the child, gender interactions, adolescence

**Challenge:** This video responds to Indian parents’ anxiety regarding sexuality and the increasing access of adolescents to the internet, along with more liberal ideas about relationships (Netting, 2010). Although Indian parents realize there are now more open ideas about youngsters dating before marriage, many still fear that their children may become engaged with the other sex in some way. Girls and boys are therefore often segregated throughout puberty, and there is a lack of healthy discussion between parents and their children about sexuality (Chakraboty and Thakurata, 2013).

**Storyline:** This video depicts a family consisting of a father (Sanket), a mother (Shilpa) and their 15-year-old daughter Avani. It deals in detail with the challenge facing the family when the daughter is in the early stages of a relationship with a boy. The video depicts how the parents respond in terms of controlling Avani’s behaviour and choices. Slowly the parents allow for a little more freedom and also address the issue of sexuality with her. The video shows that Sanket and Shilpa are proud of Avani when she learns to set her own boundaries and also to be honest about what happens in her life.

**Key features:**
- The father starts off rejecting his daughter’s wish to go on a trek with her class, but after introspection and dialogues, changes his mind.
- The mother has more confidence and trust in her daughter’s abilities, and expresses this.
- The father brings up the issue of sexuality with his daughter, shows an ability to share his concerns from a personal perspective and also shares his trust in her to make her own decisions.

**Box 4: The path (age 18-24)**  
**Url:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0HHscC4KzQandt=11s

**Topic(s):** freedom of career choice, independence

**Challenge:** As explained earlier, many Indian parents worry a great deal about their children’s education. This often doesn’t end until the child has found a job at the right company (and even, at times, after that). The challenge is therefore: ‘when to stop parenting, and to allow children to make their own mistakes?’ This can be confronting and challenging for parents, also when so much time, money, attention, care and love has been invested in their children’s future.
Storyline: This is a story about a 21-year-old (Yash) who is about to complete his Engineering studies. He just has one exam to clear, before taking up his job in a successful company. He is unhappy, however, and actually wants to write a novel. He’s been working on it secretly, when he should have been studying. His results come and he has failed for the first time. His mother (Shobha) is completely appalled and refuses to see him for some time. Yash also becomes more insecure and depressed as his novel is not accepted anywhere for publication. His father (Yogesh) is the only one who supports his decision to do something different on his own. He’s fearful too, but he also understands they must have done something right as parents to have encouraged their son to take such risks. Yogesh and Shobha have many dialogues with each other, and with Yash, in order to discuss what this means; and finally Yash decides to work for some time, move out of his parents’ home, and discover what he wants.

Key features:
- Deep emotional reactions are expressed by the parents, such as fear, disappointment and anger.
- Open and intense dialogues, including a little humour; listening and questioning help the family move through this difficult period.
- Equality between both parents and the young adult is slowly emerging, highlighting an important transition.

10.2 Method

10.2.1 Research setting

The aim of the study was to gain insight into how videos, based on important vicarious learning principles, can encourage learning and other therapeutic benefits in parents. The question guiding the research was therefore, as follows: ‘how can transformative stories, captured in videos, stimulate learning in new generation parents in urban India?’

Subsequently, both the factors that could lead to learning and other benefits in parents (which we refer to in the results as instrumental factors), as well as the actual outcomes (learning and therapeutic benefits), were addressed. A qualitative approach was employed to explore the parents’ initial responses after watching the parenting videos, through seven focus groups following a standard focus group design (described below). The focus groups were conducted in either a residential setting or club house of one of the many apartment blocks in Pune; one was also organized in a university, and another in a conference hall reserved for this purpose.

Parents were recruited through various mediums, including email networks for parents, as well as a number of schools, which were contacted through an NGO dedicated to suicide prevention in Pune. Pune is a large city in the state of Maharashtra and is often referred to as Oxford of the East. It hosts a large number of educational institutes, and has changed substantially in the last few decades in terms of social-economic, geographic and industrial development (Kantakumar et al., 2016). Parents were also informed about the research objectives beforehand, and asked for their consent to participate in this study. In each focus group, one video was presented after which a discussion lasted for approximately an hour. Otherwise, as the case with one focus group held in the university, all videos were presented at once, taking two hours to complete. In this case, the discussions were shorter, while more parents were present, and so we regard this last session as a final verification of how the videos were received overall.

The participants’ details are provided in Table 10.2 below. All participants were parents of generally healthy children (with one or more children in the age range as indicated by the video). All parents were from urban, middle-class backgrounds of which the majority had followed post-graduate education in various fields, living in residential areas generally occupied by middle-class families (Deshpande, 2003). All parents were fluent in English, except for two parents in focus group 1, whose English proficiency was just sufficient to follow the
videos and express their opinions with support from interpreters. Generally, mothers were overrepresented in all of the discussion groups, perhaps creating some gender bias in the results.

**Table 10.2:** Participant number and video per focus group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group number</th>
<th>Fathers (N =)</th>
<th>Mothers (N =)</th>
<th>Total number</th>
<th>Video watched</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>N = 15</td>
<td>Video 1: First steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>N = 7</td>
<td>Video 1: First steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>N = 15</td>
<td>Video 2: The Butterfly project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>N = 14</td>
<td>Video 2: The Butterfly project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>N = 14</td>
<td>Video 3: The Permission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>N = 10</td>
<td>Video 4: The Path</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>N = 16</td>
<td>All videos in one session</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**10.2.2 Methods**

Focus groups are a relevant choice of method in exploring or discussing issues to gain understanding on people’s views or personal experiences regarding this topic (Krueger and Casey, 2000) and can also be useful for gaining feedback from a representative group, to enquire about how certain processes are experienced and what could be improved (Braskamp, Ory, and Pieper, 1981). Moreover, when learning is a relevant concept, it is possible to shift the focus from analysing a certain issue to what participants are trying to learn or how they are (re)conceptualizing the issues under discussion (Wibeck, Dahlgren, and Oberg, 2007).

The focus groups for the study were designed to reflect upon and learn from one video at a time, following a short explanatory introduction. While parents watched the videos, two researchers took notes on verbal and non-verbal expressions, such as laughter, short comments, frowns, tears, or other indications of emotional experience. After the videos, parents were asked, in a relatively unstructured sequence (allowing the discussion to flow as naturally as possible), about various processes, whilst probing for their learning experiences, until the data was felt to be saturated: Initial responses (asking parents for initial feelings, thoughts, sensations); topic-related (asking parents to reflect back to the mediator what they thought the story was about); emotional reflection (asking parents what moved them in the video); relating (asking parents how they did or did not recognize parts of the video); initial learning (asking parents whether the video provoked certain insights, revealing moments or distinct lessons); more specific learning components (asking parents to reflect upon what specifically in the video supported or obstructed their learning experience); other benefits (asking parents about other beneficial or discomforting effects the videos may have had on them).
10.2.3 Analysis

The data resulting from the focus groups was then transcribed verbatim and analysed by two researchers. They independently read the transcripts to become familiar with the data. After this, an open coding process commenced with the support of a qualitative data analysis software called MAXQDA 12, after which a joint coding scheme was drawn up, including various core themes and distinct codes, which was further applied to analyse the data in processing of topic-related and then analytic coding processes (Morse, 2005; Morse and Richards, 2004). The theoretical background was used to support the development of the coding scheme, and to link emerging themes to the existing wider literature, particularly supporting the categorization of instrumental principles. In order to make relations as to how the videos provoked learning – as well as therapeutic effects in parents – we made use of the fact that there were four different videos, with slight differences in structure, content and instrumental features. By comparing the results of each video, we could infer what worked well and what did not. Similarly, we used the variety of focus groups to notice any differences in how parents perceived any particular video (see table 10.3). Finally, the analysis was discussed among the authors before agreeing and writing up the results.
## Table 10.3 Overview of coding scheme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video Item and outcome categories / Instrumental factors</th>
<th>Categories (e.g.)</th>
<th>Sub-categories (e.g.)</th>
<th>Interview illustrative quotes per focus group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*relatedness</td>
<td>*Structure of story line</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*familiarity</td>
<td>*Use of language and emotion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*engagement</td>
<td>*Character-istics of the hero</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*role models</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* context</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* transformation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. First Steps
   - Learning
   - Sharing/ co-creation
   - Therapeutic gains
   - Extra

2. The Butterfly Effect
   - Learning
   - Sharing/ co-creating
   - Therapeutic gains
   - Extra

3. The Permission
   - Learning
   - Sharing/ co-creating
   - Therapeutic gains
   - Extra

4. The Path
   - Learning
   - Sharing/ co-creating
   - Therapeutic gains
PART 3: Learning and Upscaling

- Extra

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PART 3: Learning and Upscaling

10.3 Results

In this section we reflect first on the instrumental factors that parents said helped them become and remain engaged, stimulated them to learn, or gain any other benefits. As expected, several vicarious learning principles were reconfirmed as instrumental, while our study also brought up new insights. Similarly, opposite effects, and reasons why the videos may have been less effective, are discussed. In the second part, we reflect upon the types of effects that were witnessed, and reflected upon by parents, including specific lessons learned and therapeutic gains.

10.3.1. Instrumental factors

Relatedness. The concept of relatedness, described earlier as the process of recognizing life-like qualities and experiences, turned out to be important. Parents could either find themselves easily in the context of the story, or slightly less so, which affected directly their engagement with the video. For instance, during the screening of ‘First Steps’ (Video 1), both fathers and mothers consistently expressed signs of recognition, appreciation and empathy regarding the storyline, as reflected in a remark of a father, who said:

“This is super recognizable, haha. Very common, the dialogues and the discussions. We had exactly the same process, me and my wife. So you can feel when you see it, the same process. My wife stopped working after having the kid ... very common.’

Role models. We looked at what contributed to this sense of relatedness parents experienced in the videos. First, parents’ engagement was enhanced if the role model responded to the challenges, through their emotions, thoughts, and behaviours, in a way that adhered to the parents’ frames of reality. The majority of parents expressed feeling less engaged when the character’s behaviour did not align with their understanding of what was ‘normal’ or even possible. This appeared to be particularly true for Video 4, where the father throughout the video remains calm and poised in handling the situation of his son dropping out of college. One mother said about this, for instance:

‘I don’t think it is that simple that one parent is so empathic and so understanding. I don’t think ... It is very rare, that a parent will be able to see beyond the fear of what will you do, how will you live, how will you make money, who will marry you ... These are the questions that we encounter, that’s why we put pressure on the children.’

A few other parents discussed that the father indeed ‘responded very wise, very compassionate’, but that this could only happen in ‘very educated, higher social status families’, showing a sense of dismissal or rejection of the main character’s legitimacy as a parent to whom they could relate.

In the first three videos, parents could better relate to the various role models, although some mothers disagreed with how a parent in Video 2 was not updated on the child’s homework schedules, after which one mother remarked:

‘What you see in the video is that the children did not share whether some project is pending to be done. I feel that the mothers should ask also, much in advance, if something is to be done. Then she can give them some instructions. So instead of the other mother to have to inform the mother, by accident, but she’s busy with cooking and all that, even though she should have been asking her child.’

Relatedness to the role models was enhanced particularly when emotional responses were clearly revealed through the monologues in the video. This was seen in Video 1, where parents were particularly engaged with Meghna’s story. As one mother reflected afterwards:
PART 3: Learning and Upscaling

‘I also dropped our child in day-care, and it was difficult. I always had feelings of intense guilt and doubt, and that was always there. And you can see how she (mother in the video) struggles with the same feelings. It was nice that you could follow her thoughts in the monologue at the beginning.’

In one focus group, many parents were reduced to tears because of their recognition of the struggle of the mother in Video 1, accentuated in the emotions and thoughts displayed through Meghana’s monologues. The display of strengths but also weaknesses in one character played an important role in creating enough parental engagement. Nuances and subtleties created more depth and complexity which parents found more realistic and human, as one father, regarding Video 3, said:

‘The way the father in the video is talking about the balance, about guiding them but also letting go at times is nice. But also nice to see that it’s not easy, especially with distracting gadgets around.’

Contextual detail. Second, through the data it emerged that parents related better to videos in which the contextual details were directly translatable to their own life setting. Inclusion of small details; for instance, children playing on and being distracted by gadgets (in Video 2), or a mother who starts cooking when she feels distressed (Video 4) – made parents laugh, look at each other and point or make small remarks, allowing them to enter the lives of the characters in the video. When the video did not meet these criteria, it was noticed that parents made efforts to contextualize the videos better for themselves, thereby sketching a more complex reality. In Video 1, for instance, parents particularly explained that this problem would only occur in cases where the family was living in a nuclear household, or other forms of support were lacking:

‘What you see in the video you pretty much see everywhere. But sometimes parents are fortunate to have parents in law where they can draw support from. So then you don’t have the question of children day care. Like my wife, she also started working again after six months. And my daughter bonded very well with my parents.’

One mother also said:

‘I could relate to the video as well because I resigned from my job and till date this question is in my mind all the time, whether I can take up a job already or what do I need to get a job. And now I’m eight years further but I can’t take up a job because we don’t have enough support. My husband is working a lot, even for weeks on end at times. So it’s my context that it is just not allowing it.’

Similarly, parents scrutinized other videos on their contextual validity. Video 2 was well received in terms of relatedness, but parents still added social dimensions to contextualize the story better. For instance, several mothers reflected on the social pressures existing in real life, which makes it harder for them to adopt a relaxed approach to their child’s studies.

Transformation. The level of transformation in the characters was related to how much parents were able to receive the message of the video and learn from it. There were various responses, for example, depending on the unique experiences and frames of mind of the observer. In some cases, the parents had already (and often recently) gone through a similar type of transformation, in which case the video helped them to reaffirm, in hindsight, the lessons they had previously gained. In other cases, the good results that some of the main characters gained from their transformation at the end of the story empowered parents to consider similar changes. For instance, after Video 1, a mother said: ‘It seems that she became happy as she found a suitable solutions for her son. It gives me the feeling that such problems can be solved’. Another mother confirmed this by saying: ‘We can actually do this, as we see in the movie, sometimes we’re not happy, and we need not compromise necessarily’.
We looked at what contributed to this principle of transformation and how it enhanced parents’ learning experience.

**Leap too far.** First, the level of transformation, or how much the characters changed in the video, influenced the viewer’s sense of acceptance, or ability to remain open to new alternatives. Some of the videos portrayed a transformation that, to some parents, was ‘a leap too far’ or ‘too far stretched’. This happened particularly in the case of Videos 3 and 4; parents admired and appreciated the mind-sets of the main characters, yet also regarded them as too idealistic and again devoid of reality at times. Accordingly, reflecting on Video 3, one mother explained:

‘How this father, I mean ... let her go finally. I see around here also, and understand also, how they want to protect her, when he knows she’s attracted to a boy ... they just don’t want to let her go ... and then the decision that he took! And then the response later also is really great. Haha. I would not be able to do that! If I were in that place I would be sooo angry. What?? But it’s so really great that he controlled his emotions and mom also. So that’s so great.’

Parents discussed afterwards how they would have a hard time remaining calm, and would not necessarily be open to accepting their daughter’s quest to go trekking in a similar situation. Interestingly, the conversation did, however, open up about the underlying fears and anxieties around this topic, the potential therapeutic benefits of which are discussed later.

**Parallel story lines.** Second, it was noticed that perhaps using the principle of transformation, not one storyline, but two parallel stories, would work well to help parents learn. Video 2, which displayed two frames of mind (in two different families) in parallel, instead of one narrative of transformation, had a positive effect on the parents’ continuous openness to new alternatives. Although both families in the video underwent some form of transformation, it was easier for parents to keep a link with the ‘old’ frame of mind, while slowly transitioning to a newly adopted one. At any point they were able to safely look back upon how some obstacles might send them back to the old mind-set, without losing sight of the narrative of change. This freedom, evidently, seemed to help. One mother, said about this:

‘I could very much relate to the second family, because that happens to me. Because I know that sometimes in the stressful moments I am like that. I am a teacher also and can tend to be a bit more ambitious and perfectionist and I want it to be perfect. But now while watching this video I observe that when the child is telling you something, so many details and all, you should just follow their ideas, not your own. Give them some freedom to explore and follow their own creativity. I feel that I want to learn from this video’s first family mostly now.’

### 10.3.2 Impact

We now look at some of the outcomes that were generated in parents after watching the videos. Specifically, we reflect upon the learned lessons or ‘take-home messages’ that were brought up as a result of the four videos, as well as their therapeutic impact.

**Learned lessons.** Parents expressed having learned various new ideas because of the videos, partly as a direct result of the videos and partly due to the discussion among the parents afterwards.

**Eye openers.** First, there were several ‘eye-opener’ moments experienced by parents in all the focus groups. Video 1, for instance, gave parents a sense that ‘it takes happy parents to bring up happy children’, which is indeed an important message. This means that compromising your own needs too much for the sake of the whole family, something that is culturally a reality for mothers especially, could be unhealthy for both parents.
and children. Although some parents thought it was difficult to personally break through the social barriers to enact the transformation seen in the video itself, parents did start to reflect upon alternatives to create more balance in the caregiving of their child. One mother even affirmed that she would try to use the video to sensitize her family members on the matter:

‘I would really like to show this video to the other members of my family, my in-laws particularly. The thing is, I would be open to keep my child in day-care, or with others, and now I feel I want to, but they would be scared or insecure. But if they see this video, then maybe they can also see that there are people that mean well, can teach good habits and manners, and actually bond with the child!’

Similarly, lessons were learned regarding the second video. Parents thought it was very interesting to see that children often can have less need than their parents for competition and for ‘being the best’. Instead, most children wish to be unique and express their individuality as they grow older. For parents to support this process, not by telling them specifically what to do but by motivating them to meet the challenge, is something parents were more open to after watching the video. One mother said:

‘Well actually now I realize that my children indeed ask for that space ... and I find that very difficult. Parents think it’s about me, me, me, but see now I need to respect their individuality. Whether they are doing something correct or not, it’s clear they want to be doing it themselves.’

With regard to video 3, parents considered it a lesson to try and take into greater account the child’s perspective, as well as to initiate open discussion about important topics such as sexuality. This is something that was rather difficult for most parents, but they started to see its importance after watching the video – particularly from how the father in the video engaged with his daughter. One father explained:

‘Like in the video, I feel I want to connect with my children and not get trapped into the ‘parent perspective’. In the video, we see that at first the parents are thinking from their own perspective ... like ooh, who is this guy and what will happen, and they may get into sex too early..! And that happens with me also. But then the parents were able to handle the situation, with some trust and balance, and then things worked out fine. So I definitely take that home with me.’

Knowledge co-creation. Second, parents seemed to feel stimulated in co-creating new knowledge. Much discussion took place after some of the videos, to create new ideas on how to tackle certain issues. For instance, parents thought of ways to better motivate their children to take responsibility for their own learning. Interesting ideas, such as breaking through an initial difficulty in which the children might ‘fail’ or hand in homework late, before they would start taking up responsibility, arose, as well as when (e.g. which age) to start allowing this. In relation to sexuality, parents deliberated on ways to begin discussing this with their children, as the father does in the video, and which of the parents would take on which role, and when. Such discussions were therefore helpful to co-create knowledge and deepen their learning. Accordingly, it is perhaps useful to create such a set of questions that can be asked to parents after the videos, in order to help them reflect more deeply.

In some cases, the intended learning didn’t happen, such as after video 4 (‘The Path’). Parents related to the subject and its importance, but seemed to be less impressed by the characters and the storyline. They considered it too idealistic to be so considerate and liberal, and although they saw the value of ‘autonomy’, they took a slightly different lesson from the video. Most parents in fact concluded that any children should first establish certainties and take care of their needs first, before paying attention to their other desires or passions. One mother, for instance, explained:
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‘The reality is that in this world you may want to apply cherry on the cake but you then first need to want the cake also. You have to try for that cake first. That’s the reality’. Another mother: ‘I still feel you should only follow your passion when the basics are in place’.

Therapeutic impact. The videos, moreover, seemed to have several interesting therapeutic effects.

Sharing personal stories. First, parents were more open to sharing personal stories, including on sensitive topics, after the videos, perhaps more so than they would otherwise have done. The researchers found parents to be particularly open about certain failures and/or weaknesses that they felt were a part of their parenting. Parents shared numerous personal stories after all four of the videos, but some especially explain this vulnerability. One mother shared a personal story, for instance, after the video 2:

‘One time, the school of my son had arranged a drawing competition. I was doubtful about it, so I made one of the women draw it for him. Because my son cannot draw a globe really well. My son submitted, but the teachers did not accept it. The teacher said, a child cannot do this type of painting. And the painting that actually got selected was really bad. In this case, the teacher did think that doing it yourself was more important. So that was difficult for me, but I think it’s good overall.’

In Pune, there are small enterprises of women who offer to do children’s homework. The fact that parents are sharing somewhat vulnerable stories, showed how relatively quickly the videos enabled a safe environment for parents to open up about what was happening in their lives. This effect is also useful in terms of evolving our knowledge on these topics, as gaining such additional input helps the research community to further understand the context of parental stress.

Priming for change. A second outcome was that the videos led to introspection in parents and brought them to consider their own fears, pains and parenting questions, in other ways, priming them for change. In a relatively simple way, it prepared the ground for deeper reflections on how parents usually respond to certain situations, and why they did so. Parents saw, for instance, that some natural responses come from an innate fear of pain, first for their child, whom they want to protect at all times, but also indirectly the pain they would experience themselves. Other times, but in a similar fashion, external pressures led them to respond in ways that were not necessarily based on their own values. The fear of losing face in society, for example, was still an important factor in many parenting decisions, which is something parents became more in touch with after the videos. To illustrate this, a small part of a discussion that happened in one focus group after Video 3 is provided as follows:

Mother 1: I think we don’t want our children to get hurt. That is the basic thing. That drives us mostly that we don’t want something to happen, because our son may get hurt our daughter may get hurt. And that hurts ME. More than anything else. So that’s the first thought that comes to my mind, whenever something.. I say no, because I don’t want him to go out or something.

Mother 3: Yes, as a parent we just want to protect.

Father 2: Apart from children getting hurt, a major point is also that how societal people will say to me, if something goes wrong. And that’s also an important point. It would mean that I have earned some prestige, some reputation, and if something goes wrong to my kid, they will just look at me and gossip.

Mother 2: For me, it seems like it something like. My kid is getting hurt, and then it is disturbing the way I have thought about an upbringing I would like to give for my kid. And I’m not ready for it. So I’m also not sure
about my reactions. It’s why all these things come up and we scare away from it because we don’t know how to face it.

Mother 5: If there’s a bad experience and the child gets hurt, you can’t anticipate it, but we do need a way to handle it. We need a way to cope up with this situation so that we do not ADD to the hurt. But I don’t know how. I REALLY don’t. Obviously we can read up on some things, but it doesn’t tell you how to cope up later on, and that’s the scary part. That you don’t want the children to venture out.

After bringing parents to this awareness, where it is seen that their actual parenting is not aligned fully with their parenting values, but more with a fear of getting hurt, parents were open to finding different ways of dealing with the situations.

Sense of comfort. Finally, in certain ways the videos in themselves helped parents to feel more comforted in their parenting. This was reflected in many of the responses parents shared after watching the videos. Parents felt supported by the knowledge that they were not the only ones facing such dilemmas. One father, for example, said: ‘This gives me a lot of comfort that what I’m, or we are facing, is not something unique, but experienced by so many others, it seems. It feels good I’m not the only one struggling’. One mother suggested that the video should be watched by many other members of society and the family, as it would ‘free them up... give them some comfort’. Finally, some parents shared that the comfort afforded by these videos was something that was not easily obtainable through other means, such as socializing, as they generally do not so easily bring up such deeply sensitive issues.

Table 10.4 Principles of vicarious transformative learning derived from the current study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vicarious learning principles</th>
<th>Intended effect</th>
<th>Outcomes of this study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Empathy/relatedness</td>
<td>Stimulating parents to engage with the whole storyline</td>
<td>This was found to be an important instrumental factor in stimulating engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters with whom parents can identify, are in similar situations as, and are experiencing similar challenges</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Role models</td>
<td>To stimulate engagement with main character</td>
<td>In addition, role models need to be ‘human’, so audience can still relate to them. The display of ‘weaknesses’ also helps, whereas a ‘too perfect’ role models impede engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Strengths</td>
<td>Creating identification with the characters</td>
<td>And particularly monologues help to create engagement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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- **Rich and complex stories**
  Creates a more holistic understanding for the viewer, and appropriation of knowledge
  More specifically, videos require carefully integrated details that fit the context of the audience.

- **Thick description**
  Creates a more holistic understanding for the viewer, and appropriation of knowledge
  Also found useful in this study. In addition it is suggested to create two parallel storylines, instead of one, transformative one.

### 2. Transformation
The storyline deals with a new direction or change, which is reflected in the actions and mind-sets of the people involved.

- **Authenticity**
  Allowing viewer to be receptive to considering new ideas/actions/strategies
  This study also shows the importance of authenticity to help parents ‘transform along’ with characters.

- **Showing vulnerability and expression of fear**
  Allowing viewer to be receptive to considering new ideas/actions/strategies
  This study also shows the importance of authenticity to help parents ‘transform along’ with characters.

- **Successful outcome**
  Creates positivity and hope, and stimulates alternative action
  It is particularly important to consider the level of transformation to prevent ‘dismissal’.

### Extra:
- Including questions either during or after the video for deeper reflection supports all intended outcomes, and could be used to ‘prime’ viewers for change.

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**10.4 Discussion**

Our intention with this study was essentially two-fold. First, there was a practical consideration in developing these parenting videos, directed at supporting parents in rapidly changing contexts such as urban India. Parenting stress is a factor often overlooked in therapeutic intervention, particularly stress that is caused by social parameters rather than personal challenges, such as, for instance, mental or physical disabilities in a family member (Kotchick et al., 2002). As described in this study, contemporary parents in urban India are confronted with questions that are inherently complex. We wanted to support parents on a larger scale, by developing videos that respond to the specific challenges commonly faced in such contexts, which has not often been attempted and studied before (Abedin and Molaie, 2010).

Second, we intended to learn about how videos can stimulate transformative experiences for parents through vicarious learning. Although the results are tentative, as in this pilot study we relied on self-report measures, we consider the findings to be useful in understanding how videos can be introduced to help parents learn. From here, this form of intervention would benefit from being further assessed in studies with larger samples, in a more controlled setting and with additional study methods. In addition, our study sample included mostly mothers, which is often the case in such undertakings (Abedin et al., 2010), and which may well have influenced the outcomes of this study to some degree.

However, based on the parents’ reports, it could be concluded in terms of the study’s objective, the videos indeed created value for most parents in various ways. An increased sense of sharing took place among parents who had not met each other before, including personal (and at times distressing) stories that
other wise usually require a great deal of safety to be established in group sessions (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005; CSAT, 1999). This effect was also seen in studies using video in order to enhance self-esteem in adolescents (Powell et al., 2006) and in therapy with psychiatric inpatients (Yazici et al, 2014), showing that stories can indeed encourage a sense of comfort, universality and openness in groups (Hadfield and Haw, 2012). Parents also felt comforted by the fact that they were not the only ones experiencing certain dilemmas; an effect often seen through interventions in which stories are used (Baker, 2006). We would argue that establishing means (whether through online platforms or physical spaces) whereby people may feel understood and part of a group can, in and of itself, be a powerful healing process, perhaps even more so for parents living in modern and more isolated societies (Chadda et al., 2013). As our study focused mainly on the effects of video on parents in a group setting, it would also be interesting to study the effects of videos on individual viewers (outside a group setting) to see how such healing benefits could be maintained.

In terms of the attributes of the videos that led to these results, this explorative study found that the level of relatedness a viewer experiences towards a story is particularly instrumental (Lampropoulos et al., 2004). Based on this study, we would emphasize further the role of monologues and rich description of emotions, as well as contextual detail in each story. Also, balancing the strengths and weaknesses displayed in a story’s main character, and thus ‘humanizing’ the hero, seems important to stimulate the identification process further.

Regarding transformation, the data also suggests that the importance of ‘getting the distance right’. Nichols and Schwartz (1998) explain that ‘underdistancing’ happens when the viewer is too emotionally charged to remain reflective, while ‘overdistancing’ leads to a lack of involvement and therefore impact. The latter particularly happens when the viewer is unable to follow the transformations or change reflected by the main character in the story and therefore decides to mentally check out. Maintaining a balance between stimulating parents emotionally, cognitively and behaviourally is therefore important in order to make sure the viewer remains reflective (Dermer et al., 2000), and ‘it reveals their individual beliefs and issues within the community that are normal, ‘taboo’, contradictory, paradoxical and ‘normalized’ (Hadfield et al., 2011, p. 313). This also has implications for working in international settings, where different cultural values can shape viewers’ interpretation of both the style/form and content of video (Niemic and Wedding, 2014). In the case of this study, it could be that the videos were also better received by this parents due to the relatively dramatic ‘Bollywood’ features, including melodramatic soundtracks, and, at times, slightly lavish scenes.

From this study it was also learned that experimenting with two parallel stories is helpful in keeping parents engaged at all these levels. Hence, learning happens, as well as co-creation of new knowledge. Similarly, what probably supported this process were the questions posed after the videos, which sharpened the viewers’ engagement with the story and allowed the discussion among parents to continue (Hersley, 1998). Sharp et al. (2002) explain that cinematherapy indeed works best when followed up with either direct or indirect questions about the content, relating to the characters, the storyline, the key problems and solutions, and how they felt during the video.

What was interestingly shown, in particular, from this study was the suggested therapeutic impact among the parents. First, the videos seemed to provide a simple sense of relief, and, second, they encouraged parents to talk about their feelings, thoughts and fears, which could potentially be a catalyst for further examination of such parameters and, in turn, stimulate a process of healing (Yazici et al., 2014). In other words, the videos seemed to have brought parents into contact with their subconscious fears and anxieties, ‘priming’ them for change. The concept of priming, used to describe the process of stimulating the emotional schemata otherwise not fully available to a person’s conscious awareness (Evans, 2009), can be helpful. This process of priming the ‘client’ for change has been described by Barker (1996) as an ‘outflaking manoeuvre’, whereby the logical or analytical parts of the brain which cause resistance to a (therapist’s) message can be evaded through stories or metaphors in films (Sharp et al., 2002). Films, through their emotional appeal and indirect way of
communication, can therefore help viewers to open themselves up to messages that they would otherwise intellectually or conceptually block (Sharp et al., 2002). Shalev and Bargh (2011) propose that priming can be used to elevate a person’s initial readiness to consider alternative ways of thinking and behaving, which is an important prerequisite to any therapeutic process. Of course, it may be too much to assume that the parents in our group, or other parents viewing the videos in the future, should change or open themselves up for counselling. However, there may be a large group of parents who will benefit from contacting the roots of such stressful experiences, and for whom these videos can help in opening up towards a different parenting approach.

Finally, this study also endorses the findings of Berg-Cross et al. (1990) in that videos can arouse a feeling of hope and optimism in clients, providing alternative ways of communicating about, or dealing with, situations and helping them to discuss otherwise sensitive issues. Some of the participants in this study certainly felt encouraged, and considered using the videos to further their learning in the family and community, or even show them to their children. Hence, there have been a number of counsellors working with parents and children who have asked to use these videos within their practice.

Conclusion

Lastly, the limitations of this study should also be discussed. First, there may have been a level of confirmation bias involved in this project, but which the researchers aimed to solve by involving independent researchers in the data analysis process. Secondly, the scope of this study inherently limited the exploration of more elaborate questions regarding the spread and lasting effects of the videos. It would be interesting to continue to follow the impact of these videos regarding their potential spread, their value in single viewer settings, and their impact on subsequent parenting. Finally, the intention in this study was deliberately distinct from methods such as ‘digital storytelling’ or ‘video feedback’, which can be equally compelling but relatively time-consuming tools, requiring a more continuous engagement with participants (Robin, 2006), and as such is difficult to establish with working parents. The study approach was therefore deliberately focused on using a minimalist, low-risk method to explore in what ways change in parents could potentially be encouraged.

In conclusion, it is suggested that transformative learning videos hold great potential in stimulating learning and/or therapeutic effects in groups of respondents, particularly when viewed in a group setting and further reflected upon with meaningful group discussions. As reflected by Niemiec (2010, p. 125): ‘at its best, cinemotherapy with international clients is a catalyst for change and at least a fun, engaging tool that if done mindfully is unlikely to harm the client’. But more so, as ever more people are reliant on distance learning to extend their knowledge, we would encourage other researchers, therapists and facilitators to venture further into these realms of intervention in order to aid and support clients facing various common, daily dilemmas.
11. Discussion and conclusion

The objective of this study was to contribute to the wellbeing of middle-class, urban Indian youth in the context of increasing mental health problems experienced by this group, including academic stress, anxiety, depression and, at times, even suicidal behavior. The main research question of this thesis was formulated as follows:

*How can academic stress in middle-class, urban India be understood and addressed from a social-ecological perspective?*

Two sets of sub-questions were formulated to guide this thesis, aimed at understanding (1a and 1b) and then addressing (2a and 2b) academic stress.

*Sub-question 1a) How do middle-class Indian students experience and cope with stress in the context of their academic development?*

*Sub-question 1b) What role does the social-ecological system play in either stimulating or reducing stress in students?*

*Sub-question 2a) What factors play a role in the development of social-ecologically sensitive interventions that help to prevent academic stress?*

*Sub-question 2b) How can the mechanisms of interventions be shared in other contexts in order to proliferate their potentially positive outcomes?*

I will first address these two sets of questions separately. Regarding the first question, I will reflect upon the events and transitions involved in students’ lives that cause considerable stress and also discuss the difficult issues involved with defining and studying the concept of ‘stress’. I will then consider the role of the social-ecological system in the experience of stress in students. With regards to the second question, I will address the idea of ‘niche-experiments’ and creating ‘protected innovation space’, derived from Transition Management theory, as a helpful study approach for social-ecological interventions. Furthermore, I will address the issue of balancing community values and adherence to local norms with the aspired change in interventions, as well as the complexities involved in facilitation of empowerment processes in transdisciplinary research. After, I will touch upon the issue of upscaling, before ending my discussion with issues of validity and suggestions for further research.

11.1 How is stress experienced in middle-class Indian students?

‘I have always believed, and still believe, that whatever good or bad fortune may come our way, we can always give it meaning and transform it into something of value’ (Hermann Hesse, in Siddharta, 1992).

### 11.1.1 Stressful transitions and generation gaps.

Our multi-stakeholder exploration provided several reasons as to why Indian students indeed experience stress, and with remarkable intensity and frequency, throughout their childhood, continuing into adolescence (particularly around the 10th and 12th standard exams) and, later, their adult lives. Some outcomes of stress, for example, were described by students as feeling depressed, crying, and having unhealthy behaviors such as over-eating, substance use and watching long hours of TV, which were also found in a review involving student stress (Robotham and Julian, 2006). Our open qualitative study approach, in which we defined ‘academic stress’ essentially as *all stress that occurs in, and as a result of, the social-ecological context of an individual*
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while he or she is attending school and/or university, helped us in finding and understanding a variety of underlying causes that are otherwise less well-explored by more quantitative studies (Robortham et al., 2006). We were able to do this, predominantly, by incorporating a ‘life course perspective’ (in chapter 4), and by talking with various stakeholders about the many factors that influence youth during the course of their studies (chapter 5, 6 and 8).

As such, in the reality of students’ lives, it was certainly not necessarily an overload of study work that would cause stress, but usually, in fact, the dynamic interplay of being scared to fail, bunking classes, getting distracted by social activities (and conflicts), and lack of self-esteem that would evoke the experiences of stress and other life strains. Students became particularly stressed during late adolescence, for instance, not merely because they had to work hard for exams, but more due to the intense external pressures put on them to attain good results (and the resulting fear of failure and avoidance behavior around studying), as well as, often, the lack of intrinsic motivation students felt towards their study, and learning in general (Deb et al., 2014). Interestingly, the latter was also found in a cross-cultural study conducted by Areepattamannil, Freeman and Klinger (2011), showing that Indian students, compared to Canadian students, are mostly motivated extrinsically, while intrinsic motivation is usually associated with less anxiety and more mastery-oriented coping, creativity and cognitive flexibility. Our interviews with school managers (chapter 5) showed that some parents begin to emphasize the importance of certain academic skills, such as reading and writing, from the young age of three years old, arguably teaching children to perform, rather than playfully acquire new skills.

I also found that, as adolescents begin to develop an increased interest in their social life, ‘hanging out’ with peers can become a major distraction from homework and studying, and that these peer interactions are often also tainted by many small, and at times more extreme, arguments and ‘break-ups’. Still, even when peer interactions involved conflicts, misunderstanding or even loneliness, the drama around such things nonetheless served as a distraction from school. Here it seems that the primary cause of stress in students is hard to grasp, because of the transactional relation between stressful events and coping; and social distraction may certainly be a commonly used coping mechanism to deal with academic stress. It would be interesting to explore whether the stress students experience, due to conflicts with peers, is perhaps partly the result of a strategy employed by them in order to not have to deal with another more severe strain derived from their academic life, as is suggested by other studies (Lehto, Park and Fu, 2014; Iwasaki, 2001). Indeed, this layered way of understanding stressful events is described by scholars as ‘stress proliferation’ (Pearlin, 2010; Ward, 2014), which describes the process in which exposure to a primary stressor can give birth to another, secondary stressor. Similarly, for instance, there may be a relation between academic stress and more problematic internet use and internet bullying, as a form of escapism (Busari, 2016). Although ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ stressors have not, to our knowledge, been specifically explored within Indian students, I feel that this current research certainly highlights the relevance of ‘stress proliferation’ in this area of study; particularly as separating these two stressors could help in identifying how stress develops into more complex and persistent problems, which are also perhaps more difficult to recover from (Pearlin, 2010). For instance, research shows that students who are stressed and less self-assured tend to have more dysfunctional relationships (Dumont and Provost, 1999). Inversely, dysfunctional relationships also tend to reduce the level of self-management and positive coping in students, hence increasing the stressful experience (Darling and Steinberg, 1993).

Our study finally showed that certain transitions, in role and in context, can evoke significant stress in students, which is also found in other related studies (Bejerano, 2014; G. Taylor and Ali, 2017; Darling et al., 1993). One such transition commonly occurs when students leave their family home (and sometimes their local town) to commence their studies at a University in the city of Pune. We saw that it was usually around that time when students also gained more responsibility as an older member of their family. Regarding this transition, students would feel particularly stressed whenever they felt that their parents had invested a lot financially into their
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studies, and wished to see this investment returned to them as soon as possible. Similarly, they would begin to feel more responsibility with regards to important family issues, such as health or financial concerns, somewhat depending on the position and role they had in their specific family order (with relation to their siblings) (chapter 4).

What is interesting about these transitions is the accountable role the students obtained during this phase of emerging adulthood, and how disruptive it could be while adjusting to it from the preceding phase, when they were still fully reliant upon their parents’ care and support (also see Darling et al. 2015). We learned through this thesis that Indian parents usually placed only one large responsibility upon their children, and particularly on their sons, which was to study (also see Medora, 2007). There are rules that need to be obeyed, nonetheless, but on the whole Indian parents will go to great lengths to comfort and support their children as much as possible, in order to preserve their energy for their most important task of studying. Understandably, this also does little to improve the child’s autonomy and independence, having further potential implications on their likely experiences of stress and their ability to effectively cope with it (chapter 5).

To some extent, this situation does not change for students at university level (who are often still sponsored by their parents), yet they do become critically aware of the fact that the lives they are leading are meant to serve a future, not only for themselves, but for their family as well. This realisation happens fast during their first study years, and becomes particularly taxing when they get introduced to the important quest of finding traineeships and, eventually, a job. Moreover, this transition of roles and responsibilities is perhaps particularly impactful when they realize that ‘just studying’ is not enough, because the world is more complex and less linear than they had previously been allowed to witness. This is illustrated by Harvey (2003, 291), who explains the reality of career paths for this generation in developing countries, as follows:

‘Young people’s transitions are to varying degrees becoming increasingly open-ended, but that open-endedness is introducing an enormous assortment of complications that are making young people’s lives more difficult than ever.’

Some students, understandably, start to doubt their study choices and begin to feel lonely at this point, for not only are their parents physically unavailable (in many cases), but even when they are together a sense of disconnection, misunderstanding, as well as feelings of self-responsibility and pride, makes it difficult for students to honestly express their worries (as is also explored by Kapadia, 2008). As such, the social support required for them to deal with the stress of, for instance, finding a job, can often not be obtained from their parents, as their way of understanding the world, as previously highlighted, might be different to what the students experience today. Similarly, parent’s ability to empathize with their children might be construed by the stress they themselves often experience due to new modern challenges (chapter 5). Regarding this issue, Kapadia (2008) explains that Indian youths are more likely to accommodate their parents’ perspectives on subject matters to resolve issues or conflicts, rather than relying on their own. Similarly, there are many things Indian students do not want to discuss with their parents, in order to avoid a likely mismatch, including their various concerns, thoughts and experiences involving love and relationships especially (Deb et al., 2014; de Groot et al., 2014).

11.1.2 Complexities involved with studying stress

Before I begin to discuss the role of the social-ecological environment on stress in students, I would like to reflect deeper on the subjectivities involved in understanding the concept of stress. Through the course of this study it became increasingly evident that the concept of stress provokes much ambiguity; not only in how it is defined (either as a creative force, such as by unschooling parents, or as a significant hindrance to wellbeing, according to many other stakeholders), but also in how it is experienced by individuals. Regarding the latter, much of the difficulty lies in the fact that a student’s ability to be reflective and aware of what is happening
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inside them (the emotions, thoughts and sensations that take place) suggests already a vitally important coping mechanism (Samaie and Farahani, 2011). Similarly, this quality could lead to misinterpretations of, what seemed at first glance, a more ‘troubled’ or severe account of stress.

We recognized this ability to reflect upon oneself, in chapter 4, as a sense of ‘mastery’ and particularly an advanced internal locus of control. We saw that some students had developed a more advanced lens with which they observed their stress, equipping them with the ability to acknowledge and take responsibility for what was causing it. It also seemed that some of these students had developed a sense of self-reflection or awareness, through which they were also more able to narrate their experiences of stress in their lives. They were able to stay with, and express, their emotions along with the particularities of their behavioral responses in a relatively rich manner, as evident from the statement of one student in chapter 4:

‘I started having thoughts of dying alone. Then I try to rationalize things to a very pathetic extent to convince myself that I have just not met the right people or have not been in the right relationships yet. Right relationships should also not take so much work and lead to all these stupid defence mechanisms.’

Naturally, it is difficult to tell whether this student, who certainly struggles with feelings of loneliness and stress, is in fact worse off than students who were less reflective of their situation, sometimes proclaiming ‘not to feel stress at all’. This student, after all, was able to fully acknowledge her feelings, and also able to somehow describe her self-depriving thoughts in that time. Research recognizes this as the capacity to reflect upon the self, which is positively related with perspective taking, openness to experiences, greater self-compassion, adaptability and recovery processes (De Silva et al., 2014; Grant, Franklin, and Langford, 2002; Travers, Morisano, and Locke, 2015). ‘Self-reflection’ is described by Samaie et al. (2011, p. 979) as ‘a way of pondering that is motivated by curiosity or epistemic interest in the self...a form of self-focus aimed at understanding the self and overcoming problems and difficulties’. Other studies often characterize self-reflection as part of ‘self-awareness’, which is defined as: ‘the extent to which people are consciously aware of their internal states and their interactions or relations with others’’ (Sutton, 2016, p. 646). Self-awareness is perceived as both a tool and a goal (Scheier, Fenigstein, and Buss, 1974, p. 522), as it actually exceeds aspects of well-being and mental health (such as the absence of negative stress) in affecting day-to-day functioning or self-mastery (Sutton, 2016). Apart from self-reflection, self-awareness is linked in studies to processes of psychological flexibility (the ability to fully embrace thoughts and feelings without trying to alter or avoid it), rumination, self-compassion and mindfulness (Gu, Strauss, Bond, and Cavanagh, 2015).

Through this research on stress, and particularly from our study with unschooling parents, I have learned that this somewhat intangible notion of self-awareness affects the way people examine stress and, hence, how it is experienced. Unschooling parents, for example, were particularly confident and trusting of the idea that emotional turmoil of any kind, when coming from the ‘right’ place, is not stress, or is at least a different type of stress: a ‘creative life stress’ that is derived from an intentional self-development process, which will naturally result in moments of suffering and confusion. As such, I would say that not only do these parents ‘trust’ their children (Gray and Riley, 2015), but they actually trust life itself as offering something beyond just ‘being okay’.

What was also clear from chapter 4, is that stressful events on their own do not necessarily lead to stress in students, yet the way students appraise their experiences dictates how their response to those events will be; sometimes surprisingly neutral to seemingly big events, such as a loss of a friend, while at other times more intense reactions towards what would generally be considered as less impactful incidents, such as a rejection from a friend. I feel it is important to make a distinction between the appraisal occurring with regards to the quality of a distinct event, as one important indicator for stress, and (on a perhaps deeper level) the framing that occurs with regards to the idea of experiencing stress or hardship at an existential level. Park and Folkman (1997), as part of their work on ‘meaning-based coping’, for instance, make a distinction between ‘global’ and
‘situational’ meaning making; global meaning referring to an individual’s more general orientation in view of many situations, while situational meaning is more focused on one event. As such, besides a sense of mastery and self-awareness, the general idea of ‘meaning-based coping’ is relevant as well, and seems to be linked to what the unschooling parents in our study explained as an individual’s trust regarding the significance and meaning of stressful experiences in their lives. When students are able to somehow give meaning to their life struggles, as something that could help them grow, for instance, without actually dismissing the evoked experiences of stress (Gu et al., 2015), something interesting occurs in their self-reports: it both expands (at first glance, because of the increased ability to acknowledge, feel and describe stress) and shrinks (because of the deeper understanding and meaning given to the experience).

This is in line with a vast body of studies that show the impact of maturity on awareness, and meaning-giving on reducing certain ego-defence mechanisms, such as denial, repression and projection (Cramer, 2015; Emavardhana and Tori, 1997; Grebot, Paty, and Girarddephanix, 2006). Similarly, this phenomenon could perhaps explain why there is still an ongoing debate regarding the question of whether self-awareness amplifies, or instead dampens, emotional experience, as it both attunes peoples’ attention to their affective states and are, in turn, more able to notice and report their emotions (emotional amplification), yet then also leads them to adjust their internalized standards (such as reactions to pain or stress), hence dampening the experience (Silvia, 2002; Silvia and Phillips, 2011). Essentially, there are inherent difficulties regarding the interpretations of various emotions and stress, which are subjective with respect to one’s internal mechanisms.

Perhaps one of the reasons why poetry worked so well in the university intervention (chapter 7) is because any form of artistic self-expression brings people to re-frame the meaning of stressful events to something that potentially creates beauty (which can also be shared with others). As such, stress and suffering may provide a certain depth required for creative originality, as opposed to something for them to shy away from, deny, or quickly solve. Other studies also found that creative writing exercises can stimulate self-awareness, acceptance and meaning-making in participants, for example, which is suggested to add greatly to their overall well-being (Sultan, 2017; Puig, Lee, Goodwin and Sherrard, 2006; Novak, Epstein and Paulsen, 1999; Warren, Morgan, Morris and Morris, 2010).

In the literature (particularly those studies involving Indian students) little emphasis is given to the idea of meaning-based coping as an important mediator in the stress appraisal process. In fact, with regards to coping, a multitude of strategies have been formulated to cluster and measure how people generally respond to stressful events, and that are regularly used to measure how Indian students cope with stressful events (Augustine et al., 2011; Latha and Reddy, 2007). Such studies provide general impressions of how students might respond to individual events, using coping strategies such as humour, distraction, self-blame, behavioral and emotional avoidance, problem-solving and religion, which offer little explanation still as to why, and under what circumstances, such strategies are used, and how they might develop over time. Through our study with students, I found that students actually employ various approaches interchangeably, and that the processes of meta-reflection, self-awareness, mastery and meaning-giving were what influenced their experiences of stress as being either positive or negative parts of their lives. Similarly, Theodoratou-Bekou (2008) explains that the, what she calls ‘psychological maturity’ (which also incorporates functions of self-awareness, meaning and mastery) of students enhances their capacity to adapt their coping strategies to ever-changing environmental demands, which she refers to as a more functional attitude towards dealing with stress. As such, I would suggest for further research, as well as program developers, to bring more emphasize to this process of maturation in students, by reflecting on how students perceive their own thoughts, emotions and behaviors in various situations.

11.1.3. How can we understand the influence of the social-ecological context on the experiences of stress in youth, given the notion that self-awareness and meaning play an important mediating role?
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Considering the relative importance of self-awareness and mastery in the stress appraisal process as brought up by this study, how can we understand the role of the social-ecological context in stimulating similar features in Indian children and youth today? From the notion that children are emotionally, psychologically and cognitively affected by their whole-learning environment and the relationships within this network (McCombs, 2015; Bronfenbrenner, 1974), which formed the base of my theoretical framework, I found that formal education, aspects of parenting, as well as social changes in India, play a shared role in promoting a common ‘fear for failure’ in children and students, and equally do too little to instil a sense of ‘trust’ in the meaningfulness of ‘stressful’ events, including those related to academics or relationships. Indeed, such events are easily condemned as the external environment is prone to label individuals along the lines of ‘failure’ and ‘success’ (chapter 4 and 5), which is also illustrated by the intense media coverage of student test results during examination periods (Rao, 2008), and the culture of comparing student results among parents. Similarly, there seems to be relatively little social acceptance for certain life-goals that are self-directed, messy, and more focused on personal growth rather than on obtaining (materialistic) ‘success’ through a steady, carefully laid out career path.

What my study shows (and which I will explain later) admittedly seems somewhat counter-intuitive with the notion of India as, perhaps, the most important birth-place of spiritual contemplative traditions and egolessness (Thurman, 2006). Indeed, old Indian scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita (as part of the Hindu epic Mahabharata) explain stress and human suffering as causes of Kleshas (ego-centric attachments to pleasure, earthly goods and cravings) and preach calmness and detachment. These old Hindu scriptures, as well as ancient Buddhist philosophy (also born in India), traditionally stimulate a belief in Karma and reincarnation, and promote in each human being a transformation from the ego-self to a ‘real’-self, which is both infinite and pure. Interestingly, this process is described as something that could be used as a sort of ‘shield’ to stress and unhappiness, as the ‘I’ is taken away from any type of work-related outcome, success and/or failure alike (Sharma, 2007). One could see that from this particular perspective, the idea of ‘stress’ is somewhat reframed by the belief in Karma and the overarching goal of Nirvana or enlightenment, but could similarly, from a Western perspective, be perceived as a form of denial or suppression, where life is more generally considered to only happen once.

This debate aside, and although indeed these religious foundations are still witnessed in India through many rituals and celebrations, scholars have also generally described Indian societies as actually (and traditionally also) greatly involved in earthly matters of materialistic gain and societal success (Singh, 1984). Similarly, in this thesis, I have often addressed the influence of other (Western) ideas as undoubtedly having made an impression on the current mind sets of many people in middle-class, urban India (see also Gupta, 2011). Interestingly enough, this influence may have led to an increased focus on material gains and safety in parents, while this generation of youth equally focuses on ‘the self’ in this life time, but more in terms of seeking, - besides material wealth-, freedom, pleasure and an expression of ‘individuality’, for instance, through partying and drinking and repetitive social practices (de Groot et al., 2014). Naturally, these tendencies also drive a wig between parents and children.

However, regarding general parental attitudes, I observed that, first, many middle-class parents today are concerned with, and increasingly invested in, their children’s academic career, and strongly believe that ‘lacking behind’ (failing or flunking) would jeopardize their future wellbeing (and probably the families’ societal position as well). Naturally, there is a huge amount of parental pressure on children to ‘succeed’, not because parents are ‘evil’ or wish their children to be miserable, but mainly because they feel this will protect, and hence benefit, their future well-being. Here I agree with de Ruyter (2007), who argues that the best parents can give their children is their interpretation of ‘objective goods’ (principles that are considered intrinsically helpful in promoting happiness), which, in today’s middle-class India, are largely equated with notions of
academia, career and eventually societal ‘success’, and arguably less so with notions of self-awareness and actual self-development.

Secondly, and following a similar line as before, parents in our study seemed to somewhat dread the idea of their children becoming more autonomous in their choices regarding their relationships and internet practice, for example, as they were strongly concerned about their safety and wellbeing, but also about the social status of the family (chapter 10). Some parents also did see the importance of such autonomy, however, which made our analysis of parental stress in chapter 5 more complicated. The former issue, though, could be explained perhaps by a fear of downward mobility, gossip, and of not finding the right prospective spouses for their children, which is explained by Dickey (2004) as a common reason for such middle-class families to ‘want to do things right’. As explained in chapter 5, it is perhaps the societal context and development history of parents that equally contributes to the pressures that parents feel to hold up a certain reputation and position, and to naturally pass on this anxiety to their children.

Finally, with regards to the influence of the educational context, we refer – in chapters 4 and 7 - to the academically induced ‘fixed mind-set’, as opposed to a ‘growth mind-set’. Within that state of being, children are measured and compared with regards to how well they are able to adhere to the standards necessary in order to stay ahead (Dweck et al., 2009) and where it is commonplace among students to often not have necessarily chosen such wishes themselves (Deb et al., 2015). On the other hand, apart from the rigid education system (including frequent examinations and selection processes), rapid social economic changes (including increased capitalistic trends, since their recent period of liberalisation), ‘individualism’ and ‘westernization’, seem to have induced an enhanced sense of meritocracy, influencing youths towards believing that they can ‘make it’, providing they have enough talent, work hard and keep their eyes focused on the future. Again, also in this context, obtaining ‘success’ (often defined in good grades) is important, while notions of ‘failure’ are increasingly condemned. As such, a reflexive attitude towards self-development is not easily obtained in students, as this requires a certain comfort around the notion of being confused or doing things ‘wrong’, whilst simultaneously not losing one’s sense of self-worth. Similarly, it creates a type of stress that is unlikely to be mediated by a developed sense of self-awareness, meaning-based coping, or self-focus, as such children learn to validate themselves only according to external factors, and in reference to goals that are not necessarily their own (McCombs, 2015).

11.2 How can stress be addressed?

‘Each one of us has to find out what is permitted and what is forbidden - forbidden for him. It is possible for one never to transgress a single law, but still be a bastard’ (Hermann Hesse, in Demian, 1919).

11.2.1 Reflections on the study approach

That there is a need for health promotion interventions which address academic stress in India was strongly reaffirmed by our various studies involving parents, teachers, mental health professionals and students. Although health-seeking behavior among students and parents is often low for various reasons, literature also shows that there is perhaps not enough support for families available to deal with modern-day challenges (Carson et al., 2009; Carson et al. 2000; Natarajan et al., 2012; Chadda and Deb, 2013). Another issue is the fact that, with regards to the structure and content of potential support programs, many questions remain as to how interventions could be comprehensive enough to embody the complex realities involved with academic stress (Chadda et al., 2013), and in a way that could also be translated to the larger community.

Our response to this issue was to develop small pilot interventions to address parts of the issue simultaneously from different angles, at the community level. Our ILA approach also helped us in first sensitizing the deeper underlying causes of academic stress, before developing population-based interventions that could, if
conducted well, be multiplied and scaled up. In hindsight, our approach therefore shows similarities with the processes of System-Innovation and Strategic Niche Management (SNM) (Geels, 2002; Raven, Van Den Bosch, and Weterings, 2010). SNM emerged almost three decades ago as a model to support innovation in slowly changing ‘landscapes’, in which ‘niche experiments’ are used to inform and advocate solutions that can ultimately penetrate the ‘regime’; with the regime being defined as a dimension that represents the established power blocks, regulations, (cultural) laws and policies which highly regulate the behavior of all actors involved (Geels, 2002). The ‘landscape’ reflects the macro-level context which, by definition, does not change much (Geels, 2002). In India the landscape refers to the broader socio-economic context of a democratic republic, rapid economic growth, population expansion, and a liberal market (Verbong, Christiaens, Raven, and Balkema, 2010). The regime, in our specific case, would be mostly characterized by the mental health, as well as the education, systems of India (figure 11.1).

In SNM, ‘niche-experiments’ are innovative ways of thinking, acting and reflecting in a protected space, as a way to counter regime practices, often in the form of pilots and demonstration projects. As such, they are essential for learning about social challenges, and instrumental in making long-term transitions at regime level (Raven et al., 2010; Schot and Geels, 2008). Some examples of SNM in India demonstrate how niche-experiments are used, for instance, in sustainability transitions, in developing and testing cost-effective and culturally sensitive solutions at the grassroots level, such as improved cooking stoves (Rehman et al., 2012) and net zero energy buildings (Jain, Hoppe, and Bressers, 2016) for example.

SNM has most often been applied in the field of technological change, but could certainly be more widely used (Raven, Heiskanen, Lovio, Hodson, and Brohmann, 2008; Raven et al., 2010). Indeed, our study shows that, because of the way SNM is rooted in psychological, behavioral and social change theory (Raven et al., 2010), this way of thinking is well aligned with the ILA approach in addressing academic stress in a social-ecological context. Particularly, in the development of interventions, I have found it useful to think of this process as developing ‘niche-experiments’ in the contexts of protected spaces (e.g. a school, university or parenting workshop), in which local knowledge and resources can be used to see how change can be evoked. Also similar to the SNM principles, the idea behind our three interventions was to be sensitive to the regime (in the sense that intervention mechanisms did not necessarily deny or contradict regime regulations) yet could potentially help to building enough ‘internal momentum’ (Schot and Geels, 2008) to eventually be adopted by the regime as innovative strategies to improve mental wellbeing. For instance, the Peer-Education Program, which was started and developed in the context of a few schools (often referred to as ‘early adopters’) could eventually be adopted by more schools until at some point its essential working mechanisms of empathy, listening, leadership and connection are entirely embedded in the minds of people who eventually help to change the education system.

With regards to the building of momentum, our sensitivity to the social-ecological context in this study helped us to deeply explore people’s expectations, values, behavior patterns, and perspectives, in order to inform us of how we could stimulate a so-called ripple of change. Particularly with one of our niche experiments (the parenting program), we looked at how the same intervention could be diffused through vicarious learning, as a simple way of scaling-up the project (chapter 10, reflected in figure 11.1 by the blue arcades).
11.2.2 Lessons learned from niche interventions

In the previous section I reflected upon the concept of SNM as a useful way of looking at designing change processes, in a way that considers the social-ecological environment. Essentially, this study shows the results of three niche experiments, and I will now reflect upon some specific lessons we learned regarding the implementing of these community interventions. Firstly, I will touch upon the complexity involved with change processes within intervention settings, particularly with regards to adhering to community values and norms. Secondly, I will briefly address facilitation skills in transdisciplinary research projects, as well as the process of linking theory to practice. Finally, I will address the issue of ‘upscaling’ and what we learned from our fourth intervention: the Video Learning project.

Adherence to community values in change processes

With regards to preventing stress in university students, individual approaches (such as student counselling) are considered most desirable and affective, particularly as they are more specifically tailored to the needs of the student (Robotham et al., 2006). Still, in the context of high need and a lack of resources to provide private counselling, Regehr et al. (2013) perhaps rightfully argue that general prevention programs, in such cases, are more suitable to addressing stress in a wider population. In their systematic review, Regehr et al. (2013) show the variety of specific techniques or theories that are employed, tested, and found effective in general student populations, including relaxation, MBSR, CBT, EMDR, bio-feedback aided relaxation, imagery and psycho-education. However, there are also critical limitations to these singular approaches in such contexts, namely their inherent underlying assumption that student populations are all similar, that a specific theory could work equally well for any student population, and that the techniques could be implemented and sustained in any locality (Merzel et al., 2003), while the sustainability of any health intervention is likely to be influenced by the acceptability of both the participants as the conducive environment. As such, it is suggested that any public health program should ideally be adapted to match the needs, values, resources and expectations of a
community, to create a more accepted and sustainable practice (O’Connell, Boat, Warner, 2009). Therefore, our approach was to serve a general population with specific needs, for which we relied upon our analysis of stress within the middle-class student population of Pune.

What we learned from our three complex interventions was mostly that, in order to evoke genuine change in participants, a delicate dance commences in which decisions are made between ‘conforming’ to local values, norms and (sometimes) regulations, and also adhering to the change theories that support the objective. As such, in our niche projects, we saw that ‘safeguarding’ the protected space of a niche experiment in social innovation projects poses extra challenges, as it involves real people, whose objectives and motivations can change from moment to moment, and context to context. Similar challenges are observed in system innovation studies where processes of protection versus alignment are conceptualized (Geels & Schot, 2007; Regeer, 2009).

For instance, with regards to the University-based program, we insisted that our program was ‘voluntary’, which was not always supported by the University management (who sometimes held the general belief that students do not attend classes, courses or events without coercion). We felt that, in an education culture where children and young adults are already often forced to follow academic regulations (Waghachavare et al., 2013), the stress program should not fall under the same such paradigm. Another example was how, during the program, a general tendency towards segregating male and female students was observed, which was also intentionally disrupted by the team, due to our analysis of academic stress proving the importance of creating a team-bonding experience involving both genders together (chapter 7). Similarly, there were also times when the team surrendered certain program principles in order to foster more acceptance and comfort among students and staff-members. These were minor things, such as changing the duration of an exercise when it was considered boring or tedious by some students, or altering the sequence of activities altogether. As such, the team would also continuously reflect alongside the students themselves as to how they were feeling with regards to their participation in the program. This ‘dancing around’ the needs of stakeholders, while also keeping a sharp eye on the targeted change and the theories underlying such change, is described by Blamey, Judge, and Mackenzie, (2002) as the ‘Achilles heel’ of complex community initiatives (CCIs), stating:

“One of the strengths of CCIs has been their commitment to inclusiveness and participation but paradoxically this may also prove to be a Achilles heel. Action that is focused and therefore potentially more effective may be constrained by the need to keep a thousand flowers/projects blooming so as to ensure that all partners stay on board. At the end of the day there is some sort of relationship between the number of actions being undertaken and the amount of research that is necessary. If real learning is to be generated from CCIs and if research resources are to be kept within realistic bounds then local initiatives have to be more tightly managed.’

Besides the importance of balancing intervention norms with the norms of the direct environment, we learned, particularly through the Creative Stress Relief Program for parents, to carefully deliberate a wide range of values and norms that occur within the context of an intervention. Essentially, and somewhat similar to the point addressed above, program designers as well as facilitators need to be mindful of the participants’ norms and values, and decide how to respond to these parameters; whether to comply to them or find ways to help participants reflect on these values, particularly if they form an essential object in the proposed change theories. To understand which of such parameters played a role in this study, we show a list of issues as already described by Carson, Jain, and Ramirez (2009) as potentially arising whilst working in Indian counselling settings (such as a parenting program), and reflect upon those that were recognized in our program (underlined in table 11.1) and how, within the intervention context, the team effectively responded.
Table 11.1 Overview of lessons learned from the Creative Stress Relief Program with regards to negotiating values and norms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues identified by Carson et al. (2009)</th>
<th>Parenting program team response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Connection, interdependence, continuity, and shared responsibility are much more highly valued in Indian society than autonomy, individual identity, and self-actualization, and individual difficulties are often viewed as disorders of relationships with other human beings and sometimes the natural world.</td>
<td>1. Increasing independence and autonomy in children was initially identified as one of the aims of the parents. However, values of interdependence were indeed found in parents as a result of their development history. As such, the response would be to communicate well in order to sensitize parents several times again, throughout the program, with their predefined objective.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Seeking help for oneself or one’s marriage during the child-rearing years may be viewed as less important than investing one’s time in the lives and vocational success of one’s children; hence, counseling may be seen as a last priority, if one at all.</td>
<td>2. Somewhat differently, this issue was recognized, as we felt that some parents were less eager to delve into their own development history or parenting fears than to learn something that they could apply in their parenting practice, so as to explicitly benefit their child’s development. This was already solved in the recruitment process, where we introduced this program as a way of learning to deal with commonly experienced daily struggles provoked by rapid change, as opposed to ‘counseling’ or ‘therapy’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Indian clients may expect that the role of the counselor is to provide them with answers or solutions, rather than involve them in the problem-solving process, and they may have difficulty accepting that they are ultimately responsible for their own healing.</td>
<td>3. This we recognized as an important issue, which would arise throughout the program as a mismatch between the expectations of some parents and the theoretical principles underlying the change process. Particularly in the recruitment phase, we aimed to be as clear as possible about the interactive structure of the program, yet this issue may have led to a lower number of participants and also more drop-outs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Age and life experience still matter greatly in Indian society; thus, younger clinicians may find that the acceptance of their role and function in counseling middle-aged and older adults takes time.</td>
<td>4. We worked with both older and younger volunteers, which did not come up as an obstacle in this study. However, having a professional psychologist and psychiatrist as part of the program probably supported the therapeutic license of the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Inter-generational relationships are being strained today because the younger generation of more educated Indians is adopting many of the values, lifestyles, and work styles of their counterparts in the West, thus posing a challenge to the stability of traditional extended family and societal (e.g., caste) structures and norms. For example, some younger generation members may no longer consider it their primary duty to take care of their parents in their later life.</td>
<td>5. This was somewhat the essence of our program, so naturally this was recognized as important. The whole objective (which affected the content) of the program was to help parents in negotiating these changes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Therapeutic intervention should be delivered in a way that does not challenge the integrity of individuals and families or cause them to lose face in their families or communities.

6. This issue did not actively occur in our program as something that needed to be specially considered.

7. Marriage in India is generally a family contract that involves a union of two families much more than two individuals, and couple and family difficulties tend to resonate throughout the entire family system.

7. We recognized that extended family members (particularly mothers-in-law) have a great impact on the freedom and practice of parents. However, in our interventions we were not able yet to respond to this issue, which could be an important suggestion for further research in India.

8. When women seek assistance outside the family, it may disrupt the marital and family equilibrium, and thus put women (and sometimes children) at risk.

8. This issue did not actively arise in our program as such, yet we found that mothers were more willing to participate in the program. We therefore tried to be particularly mindful of the expectations and concerns of fathers in order to engage them. However, the daily reality of dividing household activities in order to save time and energy also motivated parents to choose only one parent to participate (which, likely due to the patriarchal system, usually turned out to be the mother).

9. Conjoint couples therapy may be threatening to husbands because it entails being vulnerable in the presence of their wives; hence, wisdom and creativity are needed when involving men in counseling.

9. This may certainly be an issue also, although it did not come up explicitly. We hoped that, by creating a joint group of more than 1 couple, we could create a protected space for all participants involved, and a new culture of ‘vulnerability’. In our program this worked relatively well, although there were still not many participating fathers.

10. “Empty nest” wives and mothers (and sometimes fathers) may experience a substantial loss of purpose and roles, thus increasing the need for individual and/or marital counseling.

10. The children were still too young for parents to potentially be experiencing ‘empty nest’ issues.

11. Clinicians who affiliate themselves with public or private schools may increase their legitimacy and acceptance in Indian society, often reaching parents and couples through their children first. This may result in an expansion of their referral base.

11. We considered this issue when choosing our location, which was a school, and this did indeed help us reach out to more parents. The explicit ideological support from the school-director also helped in gaining more acceptance.

12. Offering parenting workshops and support groups (or other family life education programs) for parents may be a prelude to offering individual, couples, or family therapy.

12. One of the beneficial aspects of general prevention programs is the direct exposure participants get to (the idea of) professional help. Indeed, in all three interventions, this exposure stimulated some participants (as well as their relatives or friends) to seek personal help, sometimes long after the program finished. As such, we made sure that the contact details of professionals as well as the NGO were always shared.

13. In recent years, counselors, therapists, and psychologists have been trained in India to work

13. We worked with professionals and volunteers who were broadly trained in play-therapy, NVC,
A broader array of perspectives is desperately needed (systemic, experiential, attachment-based approaches, play therapy, emotion-based therapies, etc.), along with training in trauma work, crisis intervention, and the provision of adequate and available supervision and peer consultation opportunities. EFT, Mindfulness and EMDR, as well as other forms of trauma therapy. Some of the more easily translatable forms of therapy are continuously trained in volunteers who want to work for Connecting...NGO, in order to expand such locally available resources.

14. Additionally, we found that financial compensation for participating in a program would probably help to increase participants’ adherence to the program. Although no participation fee was asked to parents, we did experiment with a financial reimbursement system in Universities for the Stress Workshops (paid by the Universities), which could also help to support sustainable implementation.

What this table shows is the constant interaction between the different levels as presented in the social-ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1974) and the challenges these bring up in, not only the design, but also the execution of interventions. This requires facilitators to be trained to act bi-culturally, which entails not only establishing the new, but also being sensitive to the existing cultural values and practices (Regeer & Bunders, 2009).

Facilitation skills within transdisciplinary teamwork

As established above, the complexity of our interventions lied in the alignment of values and norms among stakeholders (which are important parameters of transdisciplinary research as to develop socially robust solutions), while simultaneously engaging in a (therapeutic) change process. We learned that this requires a set of facilitation skills that are largely different from those adopted in singular therapeutic processes, because transdisciplinary, social-ecological theory emphasizes the need for empowerment of all actors involved in order to reach a desired state (of less stress in children). This is also addressed by Ebersöhn, Ferreira-Prévost, Maree, and Alexander (2007, p. 261), who argue that in order to: ‘achieve the desired result such as empowerment and capacity building, the assets, resources and strengths must be mobilized through the employment of various strategies, of which facilitation skills constitute but one’.

Empowerment refers to a process of enhancing a person’s capacity to make purposeful decisions, which he or she can then transform into suitable actions (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). Ebersöhn et al. (2007, p. 274) argue that effective teams aim to empower all. According to Ebersöhn et al. (2007), facilitation requires an approach focused on the strengths, resources and capabilities of individuals (in their article referred to as ‘assets’), rather than deficits. They describe the following facilitation skills as being required, including: communication and leadership skills, community work skills, creative chaos skills (problem-solving), empowerment and validation skills, teamwork skills and management. Furthermore, they also mention that the right ‘attitude’ of holistic thinking, as well as incorporating a family-centred approach, are important facilitation requirements (Ebersöhn, 2007). Similarly from a strength-based approach, volunteers in the PEP program learn various skills as part of their SALT-training, including active listening, leadership, self-healing and mindfulness. We reflected
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that, the awareness of the skills volunteers acquire are highly important in understanding how, and why, volunteers remain motivated and connected to others within, and outside of, the team.

Indeed, in our individual-based university program, we aimed to empower youth directly, in order for them to make better coping decisions. However, more specifically with both the Creative Stress Relief program for parents, as well as the PEP with high school children, an underlying aim was to ‘empower participants to empower others (youths) in a process what I would term; a double loop of empowerment (figure 11.2). My suggestion would be that programs which (implicitly) create double-empowerment loops arguably require more focused attention to understand what the appropriate facilitation skills in the scenario are. For instance, according to Cohen (2004), there is a risk involved for both the counsellor (or facilitator) and ‘participants’ (e.g. parents or volunteers) when the counsellor is holding too much power and expertise, or when there is too much consensus and power-equality between counsellor and participants. Particularly, when there is a ‘double-loop empowerment’ aim involved, the above mentioned dilemma could also have implications for the ‘end-user’ (in our case, Indian youths; see figure 11.2). In the PEP, we saw for instance that some peer educators were still giving advice to peers about their lives, which generally does not help to empower the peer to understand and process his own emotions, thoughts, and actions.

As such, I feel an added skill that facilitators in transdisciplinary research teams may need to obtain is related to the effective negotiating of this balance. One way could be to not only explicate the goal of an intervention together, but to also identify the current level of understanding and attitudes of participants regarding the intervention goal (without running the risk of taking on a ‘deficit model of thinking) as a starting position. This idea was offered by Cohen (2004), based on the theory of proximal development by Vygotsky (1978), as a tool to help facilitators work with the current ‘awareness’ levels of participants and prevent having to take more than one successive step away from that level. She uses the example of exploring parenting attitudes that, according to her, vary from an ‘egocentric level’ (least aware of their children’s emotional state, and more with their own comforts) to a ‘relational-systemic level’ (in which parents are able to creatively cope with various parenting problems), which should be considered by facilitators. Similarly, such levels of ‘awareness-schemes’ could be used to evaluate the awareness levels of counsellors and facilitators, which I have witnessed being adopted in Non-Violent Communication (NVC) trainings to help facilitators self-evaluate their ability to support others consciously (see Rosenberg, 2001).
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11.2 An overview of the double empowerment-loops involved in facilitating transdisciplinary programs; based on the Creative Stress Relief program (above) and the PEP program (below). Both programs require empowered facilitators with a specific set of transdisciplinary qualities. The ‘black box’ reflects the idea that there is still more knowledge required about transdisciplinary facilitation skills.

11.2.3 Lessons learned about upscaling through vicarious learning

Considering the difficulties involved in ‘empowering all’ in the context of physical workshops and transdisciplinary research, it requires an even greater sensitivity to empower a wider group of individuals through an indirect medium, such as video. We therefore aimed to gain more preliminary insights into the requirements for stimulating vicarious learning in the specific context of parent empowerment, in order to broaden the scope of the Creative Stress Relief Program for parents. The outcomes of this study were promising with regards to the ‘eye-openers’ parents experienced, and the messages/lessons they were able to gather, based on the stories told in the videos. Similarly, outcomes indicated that there are also therapeutic benefits involved in watching transformative videos. The question I would most like to discuss, however, is whether the tool of video-learning could indeed be effective with regards to the earlier described aim and in what ways the adoption of this tool could be further spread at community-level in India.

Firstly, a number of studies involving video-taped parenting lessons show that they can indeed be as effective as similar education programs involving therapist consultation (Feil et al., 2008; Gordon, 2000). However, as raised by Carr and Fox (2009), many of these video-based programs contain a certain degree of interactivity, which is perhaps important for their successful adoption, and for effective learning to take place in parents. In our case, we relied on the assumption that transformative stories would lead to (vicarious) learning in parents, without the extra support of interactive engagement. As chapter 10 explains, many studies have in fact been conducted within the field of ‘cinemotherapy’ to endorse this assumption. However, we also decided that it would be valuable to look at ways to bring in elements of interactivity, for instance through

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**Figure 11.2** An overview of the double empowerment-loops involved in facilitating transdisciplinary programs; based on the Creative Stress Relief program (above) and the PEP program (below). Both programs require empowered facilitators with a specific set of transdisciplinary qualities. The ‘black box’ reflects the idea that there is still more knowledge required about transdisciplinary facilitation skills.
incorporating questions and additional exercises, in order to better engage parents, especially when there is no intervention or focus group setting arranged in which parents can watch the videos.

Furthermore, Carr et al. (2009) discuss the importance of the mode of delivery, by stressing how the videos should be easily accessible. Our videos, incidentally, were available online (via YouTube) and shared on several social media platforms (predominantly Facebook). Similarly, we have had requests from NGOs and parenting therapists to use our videos in their work with parents. As such, there are various ways through which such videos can be shared. I would, however, first suggest that videos should ideally be used in combination with, or as an additional tool to, existing parenting workshops that aim to effectively empower parents (see also Powell et al., 2006, p. 250); particularly as it is otherwise perhaps too soon to confirm whether such videos can, by themselves, stimulate learning in a wider audience of parents. This would otherwise require more research and probably an enhancement of the tool itself.

Finally, based on our explorative study, I would endorse the usefulness of videos in creating basic therapeutic effects in the viewer, and in enhancing a sense of comfort, recognition and social support (particularly when the videos are discussed in a group setting). Such findings are not necessarily new (as thoroughly discussed in chapter 10) but may stimulate scholars to develop videos that are directly aimed at supporting Indian High-school/University students who are in distress, or to capture and share lessons within the framework of a multi-stakeholder network, such as a peer-education program functioning at various locations. For this, I would refer to the concept of TransLearning, as described by van der Meij et al. (2016), which incorporates elements of vicarious learning in more extended collaborating networks. As such, I believe that vicarious learning could certainly contribute to the sharing of lessons across physical borders, and therefore expand the effects of single interventions.
1.3 Internal and external validity

Given the context of this action research project, in which I was involved in all of the ILA phases, leading to the design, implementation and evaluation of several stress-reducing interventions, it is important to reflect upon issues of ‘validity’. Validity is essentially concerned with the testing of any claims, arguments, or new knowledge systems that are created, based on data collection, and in view of potential bias or ‘false’ interpretations, in order to evaluate whether what one claims to study is in fact being studied. It also questions the generalizability of study outcomes with regards to a larger audience of people.

**Internal validity**

I will first discuss the internal validity of this research, including the role of researchers, and research methods. First, I feel it important to state already that I do not intend to claim that, within qualitative action research, validity, in the way that it is understood by ‘positivist’ processes of falsification and rigorous testing (Pohl et al., 2008) can actually be established. As such, the resolve has always been merely to generate, as much as possible, a sense of validation through the scrupulous testing of interpretations and actions in a real world context, and the sharing of research responsibilities within a team of stakeholders, including mental health professionals, parents, school staff, NGO volunteers (including students), as well as other research colleagues.

However, in qualitative research the researcher should certainly acknowledge the risks involved in being their own instrument, and the possibility of influencing both the collection and analysis of data in the course of their research, through the unique personal characteristics that he or she may possess (Pezalla, Pettigrew, and Miller-Day, 2012). Of course, as I mostly on explorative interview designs, observations, informal conversations, team meetings, and, in essence, human connections of all kinds, to give shape to the research process, there is no question that, at times, my influence may have caused the study to go in a particular direction instead of another. Indeed, both during interviews and other data collection methods, as well as the larger research design process as a whole, this was most likely the case.

With regards to my own role as a researcher and instrument, I display certain attributes that, without necessarily judging them, might influence the quality of a conversation; such as my natural tendency to be easily enthusiastic, empathic and sometimes intentionally transparent, which have sometimes been both celebrated (for creating rapport) and criticized (for perhaps creating a false sense of friendship and mutual understanding) (Tanggaard, 2007). I was also aware that, when other stakeholders would hold interviews with respondents, they would be somewhat differently attuned (e.g. more neutral, distant or formal), which indeed impacted the quality of the interviews in an entirely different way. To avoid bias, therefore, I chose to work together with various stakeholders during the interview procedures. For instance, during the various interview stages with parents, we conducted two workshop days with interviewers (NGO volunteers with a psychology background) in order to jointly standardize our interview guideline as much as possible, while also checking the appropriateness of certain questions with regards to the specific cultural setting. Nevertheless, the nature of each interviewer would always somewhat be expressed during interviews, which inevitably influences the level of rapport during an interview, as well as the direction of conversation, and level of disclosure afforded.

Similarly, my background as a female researcher from the Netherlands, in the context of post-colonialism in India, may challenge the research’s internal validity, as there may be implicit power-dynamics involved in the way respondents interpret their own position versus that of the researcher’s, making them feel either more or less at ease. A sense of ‘otherness’ is not bad per se, as it may make respondents feel more comfortable to share openly. Similarly, the idea of disclosing to an ‘outsider’ might make respondents feel more empowered to talk about their issues and concerns, more than if they were to narrate their story to an Indian person from a relatively more similar context perhaps (Muhammad et al., 2015). However, in order to minimize undesirable effects, I would not be present during the post-interview procedures when participants were to evaluate the
intervention; nor were any of the other team members who had been involved in designing and implementing the programs. Also, we would always ensure that, during focus groups or interviews, quite some time was spent in establishing rapport and creating a safe space for all stakeholders involved.

With regards to the process of ‘analysis’, I would like to also touch upon the issue of ‘personal experience’ involved in the study on stress. Quite ironically, a research process on stress, contains elements of uncertainty that inevitably also evoke stress in the researchers which, in my case, arose through various personal insecurities, doubts and fears, revealing the universally shared nature of the research topic. This personal acquaintance with stress may indeed increase the risk of ‘reading what you want to read’ in the experiences of others. Similarly, in a way, one can perhaps only see in another what he or she holds within themselves; reflected in the following quote by Matt Kahn, a well-renowned spiritual teacher: ‘Despite how open, peaceful, and loving you attempt to be, people can only meet you, as deeply as they’ve met themselves’. As such, I am aware that my own evolution in understanding the dynamics of stress in my personal life (and the ways I cope with it), has certainly expanded and sharpened me as a research instrument. Furthermore, although I was perhaps more limited four years ago compared with now, there is no telling as to how limited I still am today in interpreting the lives of others. The way I would, therefore, try to avoid ‘interpretation bias’ was by testing my own thoughts and interpretations, particularly with co-researchers and the interventions’ team members through frequent debriefs and analysis procedures. Also, making rich notes and descriptions of sessions, which could be read and criticized by others, helped further to sharpen the joint perspectives on academic stress in students.

Finally, I would like to comment on the ‘open’, explorative research approach, in which we deliberately chose not to directly address or seek out concepts that may have been relevant when examining experiences of stress, unless they arose naturally. As such, we did not actively attend to issues of caste and gender for example, while arguably these topics may cause important differences in how stress is experienced and dealt with (Darling et al. 2007; Brown et al., 2017). Instead, through our research approach, we used several qualitative exercises, such as time lines, mind maps, and association games to, as much as possible, create a wide net that could capture various existing topics related to stress. If, and whenever, a reference to the above mentioned topics would arise, we would simply explore that issue further through an appreciative inquiry process. However, particularly in relation to the constitutional abolition of the caste system in India, in 1950, and the sensitive nature of caste issues in the context of historical (as well as current) practices of institutional and philosophical oppression, it could be that respondents felt less comfortable to talk about such topics in the current study. Still, with regards to middle-class, urban students, notions around caste may also not necessarily be at the forefront of the pressing issues related to their experiences of stress. As such, very little was shared in relation to issues of caste, except for the fact that I observed some discontent in one or two students regarding the reservation policies, as they believed it made their own chances of getting accepted to a reputed university smaller (see also Brown et al., p. 6). Similarly in some interviews students talked about difficulties, related to geographical and cultural differences, but these were mostly only minor concerns. Concerns related to gender did also occur, which were then reflected upon with regards to ‘roles’ and ‘emancipation processes’ (mainly chapter 4, 5 and 10).

**External validity**

Although qualitative social research does not necessarily aim at generalizing data to a broader context, to truly understand and explore this topic within a unique context (Gray, 2009), the ‘external validity’ of the research was warranted through several means. As such, firstly, the total number of participants involved in this study (including 114 parents, 12 teachers, 76 high school students, 62 university students, and various mental health workers and educational staff) and, secondly, the extensive process of triangulation that occurred between these groups of people, throughout the AR design, no doubt increased the robustness of our research
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outcomes. Hence, I feel that these findings are generalizable across the context of middle-class students in Pune, India.

There are, however, many contexts in India that would, due to the vast cultural, geographical, socio-economical, educational and historical disparities across the Nation, probably show their own unique features regarding stress. For instance, although Pune is widely known for being an ‘educational hub’, there are cities, such as Kota in the state of Rajasthan, which are even more renowned for the preparation of thousands of students each year towards enrolling into prestigious Indian universities. Similarly, in other contexts of India citizens may indeed be less concerned with studies, for various reasons. As such, I would certainly caution against generalizing our findings to other contexts within India.

However, the focus on this generation of ‘middle-class’ urban students, in the context of modernization, may in fact also show some remarkably similar trends among students, even across the borders of culture, geography, language, religion etc. Our findings, also with regards to the how’s and why’s involved in the design of stress interventions, therefore might be used as valuable inputs when commencing similar research projects in other rapidly developing, urban settings. Accordingly, the various case studies employed in chapter 8 may give further insights into the unique contextual factors that helped to explain the outcomes of these programs, but could also inform professionals in other contexts on how to perhaps apply these interventions in other contexts. As such, the ToC approach, as employed in chapter 8, is useful in in creating a theory-based understanding of when and why one might expect certain outcomes within a unique social-ecological context, not only in Pune or even India, but in various other countries also. Scholars may take the ToC as developed in our study, for example, and adapt it to address the more specific concerns found in their own study context. Similarly, the action approach that led us to develop these specific University-based interventions may stimulate other scholars to adopt various of such elements that can help promote well-being more broadly in this generation of youth.
Discussion

11.4. Implications for research and practice

The focus of this thesis was on improving the well-being of students, through the development of several distinct ‘niche-experiments’, to explore how these could work in effectively improving several aspects of the social-ecological environment that were found to be related to academic stress in urban, middle-class India. The outcomes of these interventions were encouraging, not only because they seemed to impact the emotions, behaviors and perspectives of those who were directly involved, but also in the way that there were many accounts of such effects even crossing over to other relational contexts. Examples of these are shown in chapter 8, whereby some parents reflected on the improved communication with their spouses, as well as the numerous ripple-effects found, as a result of the PEP program. However, future research would be required to systematically assess the effects of the involved interventions on the wellbeing of middle-class, urban youth at a larger scale, in India and beyond. Arguably similar patterns of stress might be found in more developed countries in general, but also specifically in the context of increasing multi-cultural constellations of contemporary societies.

Furthermore, this thesis brought up several new insights that could be explored further, such as the issue of stress proliferation and the necessity to better separate primary stressors from secondary stressors. Also, a very important insight from this study is that the way people conceptualize stress and coping particularly, is not in line with the study designs of most research conducted on stress and coping today. I would suggest further research to focus more on aspects of self-awareness, mastery and meaning, to see what implications this reconceptualization could have on research designs and program designs to improve wellbeing. Finally, I would endorse research that could help answer the question regarding how the locally contextualized mechanisms of interventions could be disseminated and re-contextualized, whilst the current health paradigms emphasize evidence-based and standardized knowledge, guidelines and protocols. This kind of interactions happen at the interface of niche-experiments and regime and could benefit from the theoretical perspective of ‘reconfiguration pathways’ (Geels & Schot, 2007).

Finally, what could practitioners in the field of community-based health promotion, such as mental health professionals, educators, program designers learn from this thesis?

Without being too optimistic about such effects, I would like to further assert that the continuous attention towards relational aspects involved in personal stress, stimulated the research team to 1) explore the deeper causes of stress within students, as well as in relevant other stakeholders, 2) find and employ psychological theories that are focused on ‘individual appraisal mechanisms’ (including fundamental fears and values) that cause stress, and ‘exercises’ (based on experiential learning, creativity and play) to address stress, instead of merely focusing on providing ready-made answers or coping strategies to distinct ‘problems’, and 3) develop interventions that are easily run and based on local resources, including space, time, people and knowledge.

With regards to the first point, all three interventions essentially focused on improving features of ‘mastery’, and what scholars have called ‘reflexive thinking’ (and ‘reflexive parenting’ by Slade (2007), which stimulates aspects of independent decision making, leadership and reflection, and improves peoples’ inner compass as to how to effectively navigate themselves through the world (Archer, 2007). This underlying focus on reflexivity (as opposed to more ready-made answers or solutions) has largely to do with the fact that our study case was embedded in a context that highly reflects the current age of ‘post’-modernity (Dyke, 2009; Giddens, 1991). Indeed, Dyke (2009, p. 291) explains that contemporary modernity is ‘characterized as a period of rapid, wide-ranging change, a period in which people are forced to reflect on new information and perhaps reassess their taken-for-granted knowledge and experience of the world’. As such, she argues that a lot of stress, internal chaos, conflict and doubts can be evoked in such contexts, requiring a certain amount of reflexivity in people in order to remain connected to the world around them. Fundamentally, our analysis of academic stress in Indian students found this also, and it is likely that, in many quickly modernizing contexts (many other...
Asian countries for instance) similar issues might be encountered, and for which the outcomes of this thesis might also be useful.

With regards to the second point, our interventions sought to empower people by stimulating features of self-reflection (attention for the ‘internal working schemes’, as explained in chapters 7 and 8), self-regulation and healing (through methods such as EFT and poetry), connection with others (by exploring communication patterns, involving listening and ways of effectively expressing oneself), and overall reflexivity (essentially through experimental learning exercises and creativity). These processes were initiated from the perspective that every person already has everything needed in order to grow, learn and adapt to new situations. I believe that these theories were particularly helpful in disrupting the more rigid organizational culture of the ‘regime’ in India, regarding its emphasis on hierarchy and obedience especially (Verma et al., 2002). Particularly, features of the academic system, not yet adapted to actively stimulate reflexivity in students, were brought into the protected space of our niche experiments.

Finally, with regards to the third point, health-promotion interventions need to be sensitive to the locally available resources, including finding available entry points to effectively engage, and reach out to, people. Schools and universities have often been promoted as suitable locations for health-interventions (White, 2005), for example, which was certainly reaffirmed in this study. Still, I feel that there is a risk involved, for the academic system, if it is to recognize mental wellbeing as something distinct, and isolated, from what is considered ‘learning’ and ‘education. Indeed, school managers often recognize mental wellbeing as a prerequisite for learning (hence the willingness to adopt stress programs in schools), but not as a potential outcome of learning (Spratt, 2016). In order for the regime to effectively change and progress, I feel, it is important that the lessons from school/university-based stress programs are translated into features that could be adopted into the curriculum, examination processes, and overall structure of Educational Institutes. As such, I would strongly endorse further research that focuses on the practice of learning for wellbeing, with concepts such as ‘holistic approach’, ‘interactive learning’, ‘self-evaluation’ and ‘school-family partnerships’ as more integral, effective and sustainable solutions to stress, and other related mental health concerns, in students, not just in India, but many other contexts also.
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## Abbreviations

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AR</td>
<td>Action Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBH(O)</td>
<td>Community Based Health (Organization)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBT</td>
<td>Cognitive Behavioral Therapy</td>
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<tr>
<td>DSH</td>
<td>Deliberate Self Harm</td>
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<tr>
<td>EFT</td>
<td>Emotional Freedom Technique</td>
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<tr>
<td>ILA</td>
<td>Interactive Learning and Action</td>
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<tr>
<td>MBSR</td>
<td>Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<td>PEP</td>
<td>Peer Education Program</td>
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<td>PE</td>
<td>Peer Educator</td>
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<tr>
<td>ToC</td>
<td>Theory of Change</td>
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’Here's how to live: choose a small, simple world and try to conquer it; once you've done that choose another’ (Daniel Eagles, from 'Whispers')