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Stress And The Chinese Key Middle School

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One night three years ago, all of a sudden, I was awakened by a sharp cry from next door. I looked at my watch, and it was already 11:30. I dressed myself very quickly and went to see what was the matter. It turned out that my workmate was thumping his ten-year-old son. My colleague explained to me, “This playboy is very energetic when busy with internet games! But once he sits at his desk, it seems that he has taken a bottle of sleeping pills! You know he is going to take the middle school entrance exam! What if he can’t be admitted to a key middle school?

Other fathers of small children have similar feelings. Those enrolled in key middle schools will have a bright future.

The Chinese key middle school is different from the non-key middle school in several ways. First, the key middle school enrolls students with higher examination scores. The students study in smaller classes—ordinarily there are 50 students in one key middle school class, fewer than the non-key middle school. Accordingly, each individual in the key middle school can get more attention from teachers. Second, outstanding graduate students from advanced normal universities are assigned to teach in the key middle schools. Third, better teaching facilities are provided to help the students with their studies.

Since October 1\textsuperscript{st}, 1949, when the People’s Republic of China was founded, China has urgently needed to improve her economy. But how could she improve and develop without science and technology? It was clear that the development of social, political, and economic life in the new China could only be successful through development of education. Because middle school education represented basic education, top priority should have been given to develop this level of schooling. Yet, at that time, China was an extremely poor country with a large population, and development in different areas was unbalanced. High expenses and equipment had gone to provide shelter and food for the people. Moreover, there was an acute shortage of qualified teachers. Therefore, it was totally out of the question for the country to run well all the middle schools simultaneously.

What is more important, there were a great number of exceptionally intelligent students. These gifted students often seemed to have a bright future. However, at the same time, they could present special problems for teachers. Most importantly, they often became bored or irritated with their studies. In a sense, this was far from surprising. After all, from their point of view, things were moving far too slowly! As a result, they sometimes became both troublesome and disruptive.

Middle school teaching needed to be improved. People were required to be better educated. Gifted students were in dire need of developing their utmost potential. Then, the Communist Party of China that allowed the existence of some key middle schools adopted a new educational program.

In the early fifties, Chairman Mao proposed and the Central Party started some key middle schools in China. In 1953, there were 196 key schools in China, which accounted for 4.4 percent of all the middle schools in China. Up to 1963, the number of key middle schools amounted to 478 and accounted for
3.1 percent of the total. By 1962, the basic model of the working staff in key middle schools was firmly in place! Four staff members for every senior class, among whom three were teachers; 3.5 staff members for each junior class; among whom 3.25 were teachers. In comparison, non-key middle schools had staffs of 3.6 members for each senior class, among whom 2.6 were teachers; 2.5 staff members for each junior class, among whom 2.25 were teachers (Zhou, 1983 1986). Clearly, the key middle school was better staffed.

During the ten years’ turmoil of the Great Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, a great many key middle schools were severely damaged. After the downfall of “Gang of Four”, many key middle schools were restored. In 1978, China’s Educational Bureau issued a policy that key middle schools should continue to be strengthened and go from good to better. Since then a lot of reformation work has been done and the key middle schools have taken on a new look (Zhou, 1986)

In 1982 China’s Educational Bureau developed reforms for the key middle schools. The optimal number of classes in a key middle school is twenty four, it cannot exceed thirty six; the appropriate number of senior classes is eighteen, it cannot surpass twenty four; the suitable number of students in one class is forty, it cannot be more than fifty. By the end of 1981 the number of key middle schools reached 4016. This represented 3.8 percent of all the middle schools in China.

This key middle school program has been in use for quite a number of years. Results suggest that middle school teaching has become more and more efficient. Meanwhile the key middle schools led the non-key middle schools to improve step by step. And the key middle schools have sent thousands of students to institutions of higher learning to go on with their studies. What is more, it appears that programs in key middle schools may offer the best approach to working with gifted students. On the one hand, they permit such youngsters to use and realize their full intellectual potential. And on the other, they avoid most of the problems connected with grouping and acceleration. However, this program has also had enormous negative effects on learning. From my perspective, it has done more harm than good.

Key middle schools’ goal is to enhance the enrolling rate in the national college entrance examinations (NCEE). As a result, the overall development of the students such as aesthetic education, ideological education, and physical training has been pitifully neglected. What is worse, the students have been heavily burdened with substantial work assigned by their teachers. Students in the key middle schools have been put under tremendous stress. Consequently, their health has been terribly impaired.

Stress and Learning

What is stress? As we all know, life would be simple indeed if our needs were automatically gratified. But many obstacles, both personal and environmental, prevent this. Such obstacles place demands on us, and can lead to stress Butcher, Mineka and Hooley (2004) state:

The term stress has typically been used to refer both to the demands placed on an organism and to the organism’s internal biophysical responses to such demands. To avoid confusion, we shall refer to demands as stressors and to the effects they create within an organism as stress.

Stress is both a physical and psychological response to specific demands or stressors.
Of all situations, positive and negative, those that require adjustments are stressful. According to physiologist Hans S. Solve, “the notion of stress can be broken down further into positive stress, eustress, and negative stress, and negative stress, distress. For instance, a wedding is an eustress, while mourning is a distress.” (1984, p. 142)

Another definition of stress is offered by an American psychologist Richard S. Lazarus (1961), “stress is that stress represents some circumstance or situation external to an individual that makes sudden or extraordinary demands” (p.303).

There are three interrelated categories of stressors. They are frustrations, conflicts and pressures. I deal primarily work pressures here because they have more to do with the learning process.

Stress often stems from pressures to achieve specific goals or to behave in particular ways. In general, pressures force a person to speed up, intensify effort, or change the direction of goal-oriented behavior. All of us encounter many different pressures in the course of everyday living, and often we handle them without undue difficulty. In some instances, however, pressures seriously tax our coping mechanisms, and if they become excessive, they may lead to maladaptive behavior (Coleman, Butcher & Carson, 1984).

Pressures may originate from external or internal sources. A student may feel under severe pressure to make good grades because parents demand it, or he or she may submit himself or herself to such pressure because he or she wants to gain admission to graduate school. The long hours of study, the tension of examinations and the sustained concentration of effort over many years result in considerable stress for many students. Where a student is handicapped by inefficient study habits, inadequate financial resources, personal problems, or other difficulties, the continuing effort for academic achievement may be highly stressful.

Stress is a fact of life, and our reactions to stress can give us competencies we need and would not develop without being so challenged. Many times students are successful in making good grades or gaining admission to graduating school. Often work can be more efficient when done it under pressure. So pressure or stress can serve as a kind of motivation in many circumstances, especially in learning. This is the positive effect of stress on learning.

Stress can also be negative, as suggested by Coleman, Butcher and Carson (1984):

Stress can be damaging, however, if demands are too severe for our coping resources or if we believe and act as if they were. Severe stress can exact a high cost in terms of lowered efficiency, depletion of adaptive resources, wear on the organism, and in extreme cases, severe personality and physical deterioration, and even death (p.153).

Clearly, stress can detract from productivity, be physically draining, and spoil health.

On a physiological level, severe stress may result in alterations that can impair the body’s ability to fight off invading bacteria and viruses. On a psychological level, perception of threat brings a narrowing of the perceptual field and increased rigidity of cognitive processes, so that it becomes difficult or impossible for the individual to see the situation clearly or to perceive the range of alternatives actually available.
Our resistance to other stressors is also seriously affected by a stress. Usually students who develop tolerance for the hours sitting at a desk may show a lowering of resistance to other stressors, such as viral infections or bad news from home.

It appears that the coping resources of the system are limited: if they are already handling one stressor, they are not available for coping with others. This helps explain how sustained psychological stress can lower biological resistance to disease, and how sustained bodily disease can lower resistance to psychological stressors. Interestingly, prolonged stress may lead to pathological over-responsiveness to stressors, as in loss of hope and extreme apathy (Coleman, Butcher & Carson, 1984).

In general, it would appear that severe and sustained stress on any level leads to a serious reduction in the overall adaptive capacity of the organism. In using its resources to cope with a stressor, the organism’s buffers wear down. Some people say rest can restore us. But physiologist Hans Slyer has found that there is a constant wearing of the organism each time, and rest cannot restore us completely to the original state.

When pressure is severe and prolonged, physiological mobilization may become chronic and in time lead to irreversible pathology in bodily organs — ranging from peptic ulcers and high blood pressure to heart attacks or strokes. In some individuals, sustained or very severe stress appears to lead to chemical changes that interfere with brain functioning and seriously impair the individual’s ability to think, feel, and act in an integrated manner.

Many disorders, if resulted from maladaptive learning, often in early development, have led to persistent feelings of threat and anxiety in facing the everyday problems of living. Psychologists define anxiety like this:

There are many situations in which fear is adaptive, for example, in facilitating escape from a truly dangerous situation. Unfortunately, it appears that this “built” in fear response pattern has evolved on a human level into one that is readily learned or acquired as a response to stimuli that are not only threatening but also non-threatening. In other words, humans can easily be conditioned to fear harmless stimuli. This type of fear is called “anxiety” Lazarus (1991. p. 23).

Anxiety often originates from harmless situations. Anxiety and the individual’s efforts to control it are viewed as key factors in the development of neurotic problems. In anxiety disorders, either of these two factors — that is, the anxiety itself or the individual’s efforts to resist or defend against it — is the central feature of the clinical picture.

Individuals suffering from anxiety disorder live in a relatively constant state of tension, worry, and diffuse uneasiness. They are oversensitive in inter-personal relationships, and frequently feel inadequate and depressed. Usually they have difficulty concentrating and making decisions, fearing to make a mistake. The high level of tension they experience is often reflected in strained postural movements in the presence of strangers, overreaction to sudden or unexpected stimuli, and continual nervous movements. Commonly they complain about muscular tension, especially in the neck and upper shoulder region, chronic mild diarrhea, frequent urination, and sleep disturbances that include insomnia and nightmares. They may perspire profusely and their palms are often clammy; they may experience breathlessness and heart palpitations for no apparent reason.
No matter how well things seem to be going, individuals with anxiety disorder are apprehensive and anxious. Their vague fears and fantasies — combined with their general sensitivity — keep them continually upset, uneasy, and discouraged. Not only do they have difficulty making decisions, but after decisions have been made they worry excessively over possible errors and unforeseen circumstances that may lead to disaster. The lengths to which they go to find things to worry about are remarkable; as fast as one cause for worry is removed, they find another, until relatives and friends lose patience with them.

Even after going to bed, people who suffer from anxiety disorder are not likely to find relief from their worries. Often they review each mistake, real or imagined, recent or remote. When they are not reviewing and regretting the events of the past, they are anticipating all the difficulties that may arise in the future. Then, after they have crossed and re-crossed most of their past and future bridges and managed to fall asleep, — they dream of being closed, being shot, falling from high places, or being chased by murderers, with the horrible sensation that their legs will move only in slow motion.

Obsession and compulsions represent a relatively rare type of neurosis. An obsession is a persistent preoccupation with something, typically an idea or a feeling. A compulsion is an impulse experienced as irresistible. In obsessive-compulsive disorder, individuals feel compelled to think about something that they do not want to think about or to carry out some action against their will. These individuals usually realize that their behavior is irrational but cannot seem to control it. Even though obsessive thoughts are usually not carried out in action, they remain a source of torment to the individual.

As in the case of obsessive thoughts, most of us show some compulsive behavior — stepping over cracks in sidewalks, walking around ladders instead of under them. Most of us resort to minor obsessive-compulsive patterns under severe pressure or when trying to achieve goals that we consider of critical importance. Many historical figures have shown an “obsessive-compulsive” adherence to their goals despite discouragement and ridicule: Columbus persisted for eighteen years in his efforts to secure financial backing for his expedition, and Darwin assembled evidence for twenty-two years before he would present his ideas on evolution.

An obsessive-compulsive disorder is considered maladaptive because it represents irrational and exaggerated behavior in the face of stressors that are not unduly upsetting to most people, and because such patterns reduce the flexibility of behavior and the capability for self-direction. In general, such behavior takes place in the context of a personality characterized by feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, rigid conscience development, a tendency toward feelings of guilt, and high vulnerability to threat. People who often use their brain, such as students, are more likely to experience some degree of an obsessive-compulsive disorder. Usually before a philosophy exam, students will find it difficult to go to sleep because, once they are in bed, it is not far from easy for them to clear their minds.

A phobia is an intense, neurotic fear. In fact, the feared object or situation is only a substitute for the person’s real concerns. Take the example of young children who like to read books, especially story books: if something or someone compels them to read when they want to play outside, then some time later the children may fear or dislike books.

Sometimes pressures can cause amnesia where an individual forgets the personal details of his or her identify while remembering such “non-personal” material as the words of popular songs, or sleepwalking. Extreme pressure occasionally can be the cause of a rare reaction, multiple personality
— two or more personalities alternately displayed by an individual (Katkovsky & Gorhow, 1976).

Often people convert emotional conflicts into bodily ailments. Among the most commonly observed symptoms is paralysis of the arms or legs, the loss of sensation in some part of the body, the inability to feel pain in some bodily area, and impairment of vision, either partial or total blindness. The great English poet John Milton's going blind serves as an example.

Reactive depression is an inappropriate and long-lasting reaction to stress. There are many events in life that cause each of us to be unhappy and feel depressed. Reactive depression is different from a normal period of depression in a way that the sadness continues indefinitely and interferes with the person's everyday life.

The most extreme types of maladjusted behavior are known as psychoses. This degree of maladjustment qualifies as mental illness or as insanity.

Many people have a kind of thought distortion called delusion. This is an unrealistic belief that is strongly held and defended. Psychosis can also involve ways of speaking. A psychotic person may, for instance, engage in a rapid series of associations to a word or phrase, but then express loudly the last element in the chain. A second speech characteristic of the psychotic is the meaningless repetition of the last word that was heard. A third aspect of distorted speech is the creation of the new words (Katkovsky & Gorhow, 1976).

Schizophrenic disorders are the most common and most severe of the psychoses where in processes such as thinking and feeling appear to act independently rather than in an integrated fashion. Simple schizophrenia is characterized by apathy, indifference to surroundings, and a passive withdrawal from society. Hebephrenic schizophrenia involves inappropriate and often childish behavior, such as giggling. In paranoid schizophrenia there are bizarre paranoid delusions in which the individual sees himself or herself at the center of others' attention, often involving persecution or sexual attraction (Katkovsky & Gorhow, 1976).

Compared with all the negative effects of stress on learning, the positive effects of stress on learning can only be said pitifully trivial. No wonder the Canadian physiologist Hans schizophrenia concludes that stress has the potential to do more harm than good.

Stress and the Chinese Key Middle School

As the above descriptions illustrate, there are far more negative effects of stress on learning than positive ones. Now let's take a look at what are the stressful situations in Chinese key middle schools and how the stressful situations affect the learning process.

Students in the Chinese key middle schools are chosen from different primary schools. It is hard for these students to find many equals when they were studying in primary schools. Therefore, these students have developed a very strong self-esteem; some of them have had so strong a self-esteem that it is not inappropriate to call it vanity. They are very much afraid of being surpassed in studies by others, which never happened when they were in primary schools. It is the most humiliating thing for them to lag behind others. However, things now are surprisingly different from what they used to be in primary school in many respects. The best students from different primary schools come together;
every other can be one’s equal. Every individual can no longer have the sense of superiority as he or she had at primary school. In this way, the term key middle school can be very stressful to students. There is a severe competition among the students because every individual thinks that he or she is supposed to be the top student in the class, which was always the case when they were at primary school.

Also, the students in the key middle schools have the challenge from non-key middle schools. Because they were the best students when they were in primary schools and now they are studying in a better school, they should be better than their former classmates who now are studying in the non-key middle schools. However, this is not always the case. A number of their former classmates were not enrolled in key middle schools not because they are less intelligent or less creative than their counterparts in the key schools, but because they were not so studious or diligent when they were at primary schools. At the same time, I think there must be also quite a number of their former classmates whose minds mature slowly.

Moreover, the students’ parents and relatives add to the pressures. They expect too much from their children. To their understanding, their children’s being admitted to key middle schools means that their children will have a bright future and they will be bound to enter institutions of high learning to engage in advanced studies. That means they will have no trouble solving the problem of the rice bowl later on, namely, finding a job. All these thoughts are something non-existential that lay a substantial amount of pressure on their children, for they do not want to disappoint their parents. In addition, many parents and relatives adopt the wrong approach to educate their offspring. Some uncultivated parents like to resort to corporal punishment when they think that their children do not work hard or get low grades. One student from a key middle school in Anhui province was struck to death with an iron stick by his father because he thought his face or reputation was shamefully lost when he got the news that his son got the lowest grade in English. Other parents like to apply the so-called method of encouragement like “I am sure you can do well in your study. You can pass the exam, this is for certain.” In my point of view, this is much more harmful than “Try your best, do as much as you can.”

What is more, a lot of pressure comes from kind-hearted teachers. Teachers in those key middle schools are incredibly responsible. They dominate the speech in every forty five minute period; they give too many take-home assignments to their students; they rack their brains to set out math problems or physics problems for the students to solve which are beyond the students; they present quizzes or exams to the students with great frequency. What is worse, some teachers’ tongues never tire of hurting their students in public and for some other teachers, they are very generous with their strength in beating their students.

As a result, the students get very frustrated. They have no way out but to go to extremes. Many students stay up very late and rise very early. They do not have any hobbies. They have no rest. The only thing they are compelled to do is to memorize those useless details and solve those worthless problems. By and by their health deteriorates. Nearly all students in the key middle schools are near-sighted, some even have lost their eyesight completely. A high percentage of students suffer from insomnia. There are also a great number of students who have lowered their tolerance and patience and get irritated very easily. Some of them have developed hysteria. There are also students who feel isolated from the outside world and are unbelievably indifferent to other people, even to their families and friends. Morse there are quite a few students who have committed suicide just because they did not do well in exams.
In brief, the negative effects of stress on students are considerable. However, there are also some positive effects of stress on the students, though they are far fewer than the negative ones. For instance, their grades are higher than those of their counterparts in the non-key middle schools. Some of them have been highly motivated in the key middle schools, so that they have realized their full potential and their names can be found in the list of scientists, writers and poets.

Besides the fact that the students in the key middle schools are working under great pressure, teachers in the key middle schools are always in a state of severe stress as well. It seems that the teacher should be responsible for the students in every respect. Any kind of student wrong doing reflects on teacher. If a student is not doing well in a subject, it is the teacher to blame; if a student is not behaving himself or herself somewhere, again it is due to the teacher; in short, whatever has happened that is not good, it is the teacher’s responsibility. To others’ minds, a teacher should be omnipotent, just like a skeleton. Furthermore, the only criterion for the authority to evaluate the teacher’s merit is their students’ grades. Therefore, they have to sacrifice themselves entirely to their teaching to maintain their schools’ standards. Consequently, there begins a chain reaction, a series of family problems arise, like housework, child-caring, and divorce is not a rare thing any more among teachers. Apart from these, the heavy burden of correcting exercises, setting exam papers, and extra teaching spoils the teachers’ weekends and holidays. The overwork and high stress affect them with high blood pressure, heart attacks or strokes, insomnia, consumption, hysteria and many other mental diseases. What is worse, many a teacher died young (Ma, 2006).

On the whole, the Chinese key middle school has created too much stress. It does more harm than good on learning. I think there are no good reasons for the existence of key middle schools in China. They should be eliminated completely and immediately.

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