

## Role of Parents Education and Occupation in Parental Pressure and Adolescents Test Anxiety

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### ABSTRACT

Failure in academics is a leading cause of suicides in India. Among students appearing for Board examinations, 82 percent reported academic pressure and 74 percent experienced test anxiety. Parental pressure over academics is specific to South Asian cultures and related to parents' socioeconomic status. The present study aimed to explore role of parents' education and occupation in parental pressure and test anxiety of students appearing for Board examinations. It adopted sequential explanatory mixed method. 123 students appearing for Board exams of grade 10 from Pune participated in the first (quantitative) phase. Parental pressure was found to be a significant predictor of test anxiety ( $B = .022$ ,  $p = .000$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .095$ ). The mean scores of test anxiety and parental pressure did not vary based on education and occupation of parents. Four participants who had reported high parental pressure and test anxiety were interviewed in the second (qualitative) phase. Themes about antecedents and effects of test anxiety and parental pressure, role of education/occupation of parents in these, solutions for mitigation got revealed. The findings would aid to device specific interventions and stress free evaluation systems.

**KEY WORDS:** PARENTAL PRESSURE, TEST ANXIETY, BOARD EXAMINATION, PARENTS' EDUCATION, PARENTS' OCCUPATION.

### INTRODUCTION

India would become the youngest country in the world by 2020 with 64 percent of her population in the working age group (The Hindu, 2013). Contrastingly, India has the highest rate of suicides among people ranging from 15 to 29 (Patel et.al, 2012). Failure in examination is among the top ten causes of suicide in India accounting for 2 percent of total number of suicides (National Crimes Records Bureau, 2016). The literature identifies academics as a stressor for students. Frequency and performance in examinations was one among the stressors (Swaminathan et al., 2016). Competition in Indian educational system makes academics a stressor.

Grades obtained in 10th and 12th standard influence the choice of subjects, stream, college and career (Deb et al., 2015). 82 percent of students appearing for board examinations reported academic pressure and 74 percent experienced test anxiety (Deb et al., 2014) irrespective of the curriculum and type of school (Sasikala and Karunanidhi, 2015). The pressure may reach the extent of verbal and physical abuse pushing students to suffer depression or take extreme steps like committing suicide (Times of India, 2011). It adversely affects students' overall well being by interfering with academic, interpersonal and intrapersonal domains (Desai & Sathiyaseelan, 2017, Nair and Sathiyaseelan, 2018).

The biopsychosocial model highlights the role of social systems like family, school and community in shaping academic self efficacy of the child which is related to test anxiety (Lowe et al, 2008). South Asian countries observe a trend of parental pressure because education is considered a way to move up higher in the socioeconomic hierarchy (Gulf News, 2015). Putwain, Woods and Symes (2010) found parental pressure to be a predictor of test

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anxiety. Comparison and acceptance based on grade was prominent among traditional Asian families (Putwain, 2009). In the Indian context, test anxiety was observed to be a mediator between parental pressure and test anxiety (Nagpal & Sinha, 2016). Social derogation was salient in experiences of test anxiety Indian students they perceived failure as bringing shame to the family. They feared examinations due to disapproval, punishment and shame which might follow test evaluations (Bodas, Ollendick & Sovani, 2008). Socioeconomic status of parents influenced parental pressure and test anxiety (Chen, 2012). In India, education of parents and occupation of mother were related to parental pressure. Parental pressure was related to academic stress but not test anxiety (Deb, Strodl & Sun, 2015). However, Deb, Strodl and Sun (2014) did not find any relationship in these variables. Considering the large scale extent and debilitating consequences of test anxiety and parental pressure, detailed study is warranted.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The present study was aimed to investigate the role of Parents' Education and Occupation in Parental Pressure and Test Anxiety among students appearing for Board examinations of grade 10. It adopted sequential explanatory mixed method. Results obtained in the initial quantitative phase are explained with the aid of later qualitative phase (Creswell, 2014).

First (Quantitative Phase): Two schools following the state syllabus from Pune, India were chosen based on the convenience. School principals signed the informed consent as guardians. 123 students of grade 10 signed the assent form to participate in the study. The exclusion criteria were repeaters, physically challenged and staying away from either/both parents. Participants responded to the Demographic Data Sheet which included columns to indicate education and occupation of each parent based on revised Kuppaswamy Socioeconomic Status Scale (Oberoi, 2014), Parental Pressure Subscale (PPS) of the Inventory of Parental Influence (Campbell, 1994) and Westside Test Anxiety Scale (WTAS) (Driscoll, 2007). Participants meeting the predetermined criteria (Cut off score of 39 on PPS, 3 on WTAS) were shortlisted for the next phase. Second (Qualitative) Phase. To maintain the homogeneity, education (both parents were graduates) and occupation (either parent is employed) were checked. Participants and their parents' consents were obtained for audio recordings. Adopting Interpretative Phenomenological Approach, face to face interviews were conducted based on the interview guide which had been validated by three experts. Memo interviews were conducted based on transcripts. Member check was carried out to ensure validity. Thematic analysis revealed basic, organizing and global themes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Phase One: Quantitative Phase: The characteristics of the sample are mentioned in table 1.

$$\text{Test anxiety} = 1.685 + .022 \times \text{Parental pressure}$$

Several studies conducted worldwide (Putwain et al., 2010; Chen, 2012) and in India (Nagpal & Sinha, 2016) identified parental pressure as a predictor of test anxiety. Deb, Strodl & Sun (2014) presented evidence indicating no relationship between parental pressure and test anxiety. However, the models tested in America (Pang, 1994 as cited in Chen, 2012) and China (Chen, 2012) could explain 20 and 70 percent variance in test anxiety respectively. Bodas et al., (2008) suggested that the unique cultural setting in India allows for several influences on test anxiety which may not be applicable to other countries. This could account for the lower beta coefficients.

**Hypothesis 2. H1 Education and occupation of parents play significant roles in parental pressure and test anxiety of the student:** The education and occupation of a parent was measured using seven categories each described in revised Kuppaswamy Socioeconomic Status Scale (Oberoi, 2014). The data was regrouped into two categories each for education and occupation of each parent (table 2).

As per the results of T test and Mann Whitney U test, the mean scores on test anxiety and parental pressure did not differ when the education and occupation of each parent was considered ( $p > .05$ ). Thus, hypothesis 2 is rejected. The findings are similar to a study done Kolkata which found no relation between parents' education and exam related anxiety (Deb, Strodl & Sun, 2014). But, studies conducted in China (Chen, 2012) and India (Deb, Strodl & Sun, 2015) observed that education and occupation of parents' influence parental pressure and test anxiety. Wards of non graduate parents and self employed mothers were likely to experience more academic and parental pressure (Deb, Strodl & Sun, 2015). In the light of the mixed evidence, qualitative analysis would help us understand and explain the results obtained in the first phase.

**Phase Two: Qualitative Analysis:** Profiles of four participants interviewed for phase two are mentioned in table 3.

[PC: Participant's code, WTAS: Westside Test Anxiety Scale (Discroll, 2007); PPS: Parental Pressure Subscale

Table 1: Demographic Details of the Participants

| Descriptions | Frequency | Percentage | Mean  | SD   | N   |
|--------------|-----------|------------|-------|------|-----|
| School       |           |            |       |      | 123 |
| School 1     | 70        | 56.9       |       |      |     |
| School 2     | 53        | 43.1       |       |      |     |
| Sex          |           |            |       |      | 123 |
| Male         | 77        | 62.6       |       |      |     |
| Female       | 46        | 37.4       |       |      |     |
| Age          |           |            | 14.72 | .563 | 123 |

(Campbell, 1994); Education and Occupation based on revised Kuppaswamy Socioeconomic Status Scale (Oberoi, 2014). Thematic analysis of transcripts revealed three global themes which are presented below with its organizing and basic themes.

**Theme One. Antecedents, experiences and consequences of exam fear:** It deals with students' experience of test anxiety.

**1.1. Perception of Exam Fear:** It deals with subjective meaning of the phenomenon.

**1.1.1 Meaning of Test Anxiety:** Participants noted test anxiety to be fear of the outcome as low grades have potential consequences in future. The views are similar to definition given by Zeidner (1998), "test anxiety is emotional, physiological, and behavioural responses surrounding the potential consequences of negative evaluation on an upcoming test or exam" (as cited in Von Der Embse, Barterian & Segool, 2013).

**1.1.2 Expression of Test Anxiety:** Test anxiety is a multidimensional phenomenon having affective, cognitive and behavioural facets (Zeidner, 1998). Participants perceived test anxiety as combinations of affective (fear), cognitive (going blank) and behavioural (not writing) indicators.

**1.2 Manifestation of Exam Fear:** Three components of exam fear were explored.

**1.2.1 Affective Manifestation:** Students reported to be 'tensed', 'scared', 'nervous' before exam but relaxed after the same. Academics related activities in India are associated with experience of negative states (Verma, Sharma & Larson, 2002).

**1.2.2 Cognitive Manifestation:** Participants mentioned apprehensions about other's reactions to their grades, especially parents. Going blank, getting confused

and performing lower than desired were experienced frequently during exams. Bodas\*, Ollendick & Sovani (2008) concluded that Physiological symptoms dominate the presentation of test anxiety among Indian students. The current study falls short to conclude it.

**1.2.3 Behavioural Manifestation:** Participants experienced sweating, inability to write and hence kept on studying till the last moment. Bodas, Ollendick and Sovani (2008) found that 59 percent of Indian students preferred studying harder to deal with test anxiety and stress. Academic procrastination, a way to escape anxiety was seen as a self harming behaviour (Nair and Sathiyaseelan, 2018).

**1.3 Antecedents/ Contributing Factors:** Perception and preparation of academics, parental pressure and board examinations were found to contribute to test anxiety.

**1.3.1 Perception and preparation of academics:** The dislike of students towards studies or a subject was seen as a reason of fear by them. Putwain, Woods & Symes (2010) noted personal beliefs as a contributor to test anxiety.

**1.3.2 Parental Pressure. Parental pressure was found to be a predictor of test anxiety (B= .022, p=.000):** In students opinion, parental expectations, repetitive nagging and exaggeration of Board examinations made them fear exams. Hill and Wigfield (1984) noted that unreasonable expectations and derogation after failure pressurizes one to perform beyond one's capacity. Test anxiety and poor performance form a vicious cycle by influencing motivational dynamics.

**1.3.3. Board Examinations:** Performance in Board exams is crucial for admission to colleges and streams of career. The scarcity of good colleges leads to cut throat competition (Deb, Strodl & Sun, 2015). Students cited the same reasons.

Table 2. Frequencies of Regrouped data regarding Parent's Education and Occupation

|                     |   | Description of Categories                  | N   | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------|---|--|-----|----------------|
| Mother's Education  | 1 | Graduates and above                        | 85  | 69.1           |
|                     | 2 | Intermediate/high school diploma and below | 38  | 30.9           |
| Father's Education  | 1 | Graduates and above                        | 86  | 69.9           |
|                     | 2 | Intermediate/high school diploma and below | 37  | 30.1           |
| Mother's Occupation | 1 | Profession, semiprofession                 | 22  | 17.9           |
|                     | 2 | Clerical, workers and unemployed           | 101 | 82.1           |
| Father's Occupation | 1 | Profession, semiprofession                 | 90  | 73.2           |
|                     | 2 | Clerical, workers and unemployed           | 33  | 26.8           |

Table 3: Profile of participants in qualitative analysis phase (phase two)

| PC | Age | Gender | Scores in Phase one | Education | Occupation                |                           |            |                 |
|----|-----|--------|---------------------|-----------|---------------------------|---------------------------|------------|-----------------|
|    |     |        | WTAS                | PPS       | Mother                    | Father                    | Mother     | Father          |
| P1 | 15  | Female | 3.4                 | 39        | Graduate or Post Graduate | Graduate or Post Graduate | Unemployed | Skilled Worker  |
| P2 | 15  | Female | 3.7                 | 51        | Graduate or Post Graduate | Graduate or Post Graduate | Unemployed | Semi Profession |
| P3 | 15  | Male   | 3.0                 | 42        | Profession or Honours     | Profession or Honours     | Unemployed | Profession      |
| P4 | 14  | Male   | 3.4                 | 40        | Graduate or Post Graduate | Graduate or Post Graduate | Profession | Skilled Worker  |

**1.4 Consequences of Exam Fear:** Exam fear had implications for the individual, her surroundings and academics.

**1.4.1. On self and surroundings:** Participants highlighted that exam fear affects their health, routine and surroundings like family environment marked with stress and tension.

**1.4.2. On preparation. Exam fear interferes with exam preparation and studies:** Due to exam fear participants faced non completion of syllabi, intruding thoughts and longer time to learn. It corroborates with finding that students with high test anxiety experience encoding difficulty (Hembree, 1988).

**1.4.3 On performance in exams:** Hembree (1988) stated that test anxiety could have facilitating as well as debilitating consequences. Same opinion was expressed by participants in the present study. Participants experience confusion, uncertainty of answers and increased chances of silly mistakes. These tend to lower their performance in exams.

**Theme Two. Parental pressure and relevance of parent's education, occupation to it:** Campbell (1994, 1996) defined parental pressure as the amount of pressure parents exert on their children to achieve high levels of academic performance (as cited in Wei, 2008). The theme attempts to explain role of parents' education and occupation in parental pressure.

**2.1 Changes in parents after commencement of child's 10th grade:** The year of board examination brought changes in parents' behaviour.

**2.1.1 Dynamics within parents:** Three participants mentioned that the changes were more dramatic with their fathers and one opined for mother.

**2.1.2 Emphasis on studies:** Often, parents expressed dissatisfaction over child's study and repetitively instructed to study harder. The pressure exerted by parents over academics could go to extremes making them get glued to study tables (Times of India, 2011).

**2.1.3 Token offered:** Parents offered reinforcements like buying a phone, vehicle or threats like cutting of television connection. Bodas, Ollendick and Sovani (2008) found fear of punishment and disapproval as causes of test anxiety.

**2.2 Expectations of parents from students:** The theme allows inferring about implicit assumptions of parents noted from parents' expectations regarding academic.

**2.2.1 Overemphasis on grades:** Parents had stringent criteria about grades and considered that to be the sole indicator of academic progress. Parents were not satisfied thought students scored the said grades.

**2.2.2. Expression of parental pressure:** Parents were reported to make comparison of their wards with toppers, classmates and insisted on following the same schedule to study. Traditional Asian families tend to compare their wards with other high achieving individuals (Putwain, 2009).

**2.2.3 Implicit assumptions and discrepancies:** Parents equated grades in exams as an indicator of successful life. Securing higher grades was associated with number of hours of study. While insisting on grades, the learning aspect was ignored. But, the emphasis on academic achievements did not translate to active involvement of parents. A participant complained that parents valued academic performance more than any other achievements. This could be attributed to cultural factors in South Asia where education in considered to be a way to move up in socioeconomic hierarchy (Gulf News, 2015).

**2.3 Involvement of parents in academics:** This theme explores parents' involvement in academics.

**2.3.1 Extent and Manner:** Parents got involved in academics only during the exam time. Direct involvement (aiding in academics) and indirect involvement (maintaining conducive environment) were reported. However, a participant complained about the involvement being not authentic indicating that parents did not share the responsibility over academics with their children.

**2.3.2 Responsibility of studies:** Parents attributed the responsibility of academics to the child and his/her teachers, guides etc.

**2.3.3 Students' reactions to involvement of parents:** Students explained positive as well as negative sides of academic involvement of parents.

**2.4 Approaching disagreements or failures of students:** The theme elaborate how parents handle failure of children.

**2.4.1 Reaction of parents to disagreements or failure of child:** Parents would express their disappointment by cutting rewards, not talking or shouting at them etc. The observations corroborate with the finding that academic performance of the child is a condition of acceptance (Putwain ,2009). However, participants clarified that their parents would also encourage them to study better.

**2.4.2 Role of other parent:** In cases of disappointment over failure, parent and child are at conflict. The other parent could exacerbate or minimize the severity of conflicts.

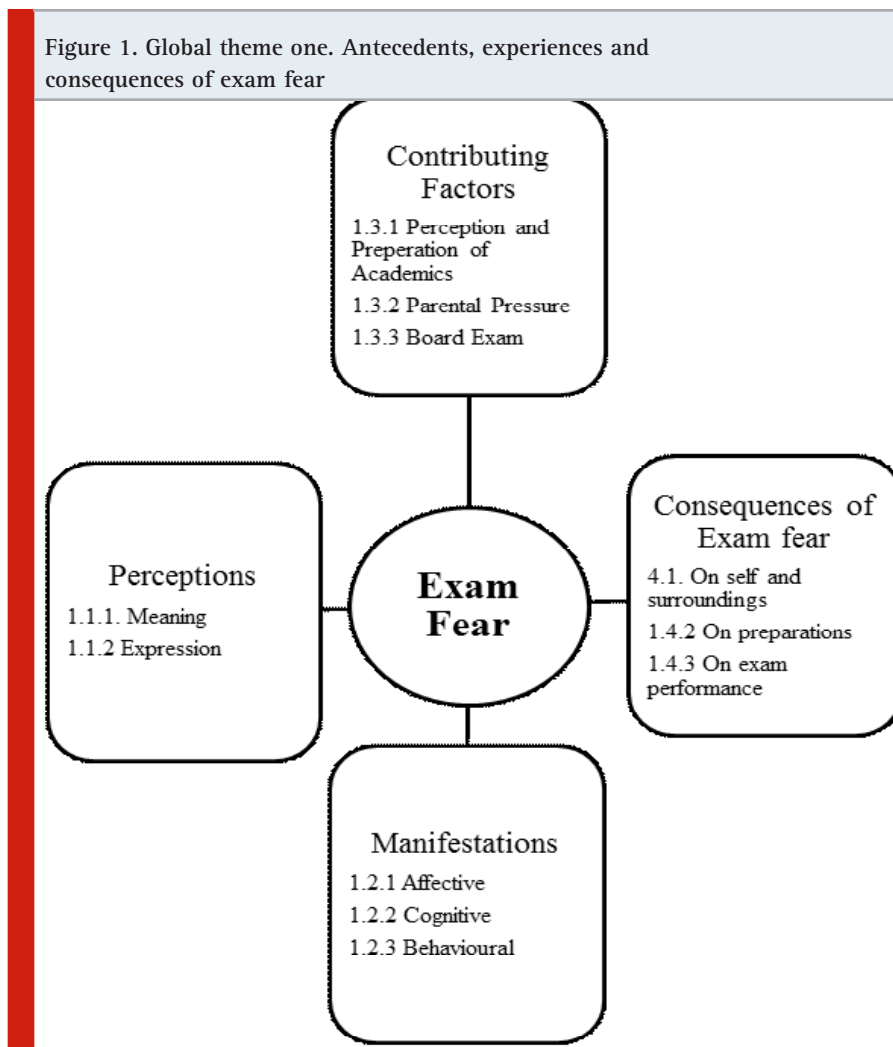
**2.5 Influence of parental pressure:** Parental pressure impacts physical, psychological health (Times of India, 2011) and academic performance (Nagpal & Sinha, 2016). Findings here corroborate with the same.

**2.5.1 On students. Participants perceived parental pressure to be a usual phenomenon:** It influenced students' schedules i.e having no time to play. The Social Cognitive theory emphasizes the role of environment in shaping of an individual (Bandura, 1977). Hence, it is vital to note that parental pressure has potential to influence students' affect, behaviours and cognitions.

**2.5.2 On parent child relationship:** Students' reaction to parental pressure had potential to influence parent child relationship as well as family environment. Desai and Sathiyaseelan (2017) have summarized influences of parental pressure and test anxiety on overall wellbeing.

**2.6 Role of Parents' education and occupation in parental pressure:** Students noted several influences of parents' education and occupation on academics.

Figure 1. Global theme one. Antecedents, experiences and consequences of exam fear



**2.6.1 Effect on students' lives:** According to the participants, advanced education of parents contributed to better understanding and respect.

**2.6.2 Influence on academics:** Occupation of parents influenced the time they could involve in their child's academics. To the contrary, homemaker mothers were said to monitor student's schedule. Besides the allotment of time, education and occupation acted as a resource in academics. Deb, Strodl and Sun (2015) found non graduate fathers and mothers in business as more pressurizing. It can be argued that parents with higher education (graduation in this case) were seen as a resource rather than pressure. Homemaker mothers were seen as support due to their availability and involvement in studies.

**2.6.3 Influence on expectations:** Nair (2014) asserted that parents see children as a tool to fulfil their dreams. Here, parents would insist on selecting careers they had chosen and expressed negative attitude towards other disciplines. Cultures where academics is seen as matter of family glory, pride experience trend of parental pressure (Chen, 2012).

**Theme Three:** Proposed Solutions to Exam fear and Parental Pressure. Participants explained how they manage their exam fear and the desired changes in parents' related to academics that would help reduce parental pressure (figure 3).

**3.1 Coping with exam fear:** Participants tried to manage anxiety on their own and occasionally sought support.

**3.1.1 Managing on own:** Participants resorted to changing study strategies or taking time off studies. In order to avoid poor results, they try to write the little they know. But, failure to do so may increase their anxiety. It is important to note that students did not try to deal with the fear directly. Rather, tried to minimize its impact on the exam performance.

**3.1.2 Support seeking from parents and other sources:** Bodas\*, Ollendick and Sovani (2008) discovered that only eight percent Indian students with high test anxiety sought support from parents or professionals. All participants mentioned of discussing it with parents and some sought help of friends or counselors. But, negative reactions from parents like blaming discouraged students. The nature of support was limited to sharing only.

Figure 2. Global theme two. Parental pressure and relevance of parent's education, occupation to it.

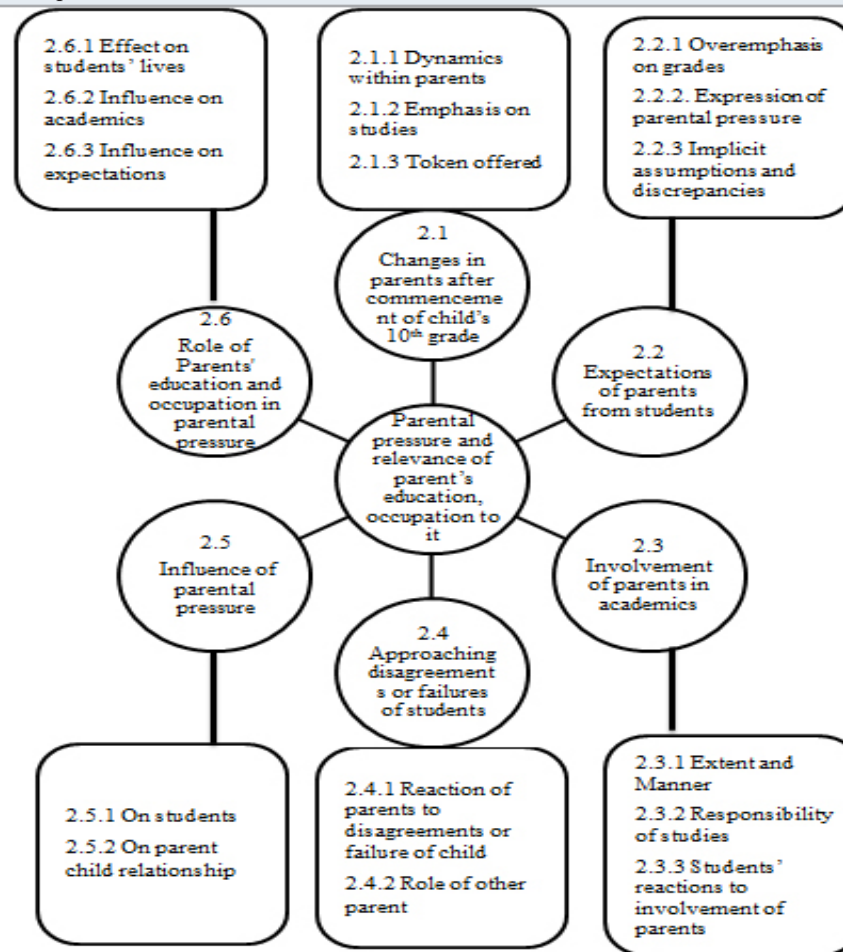
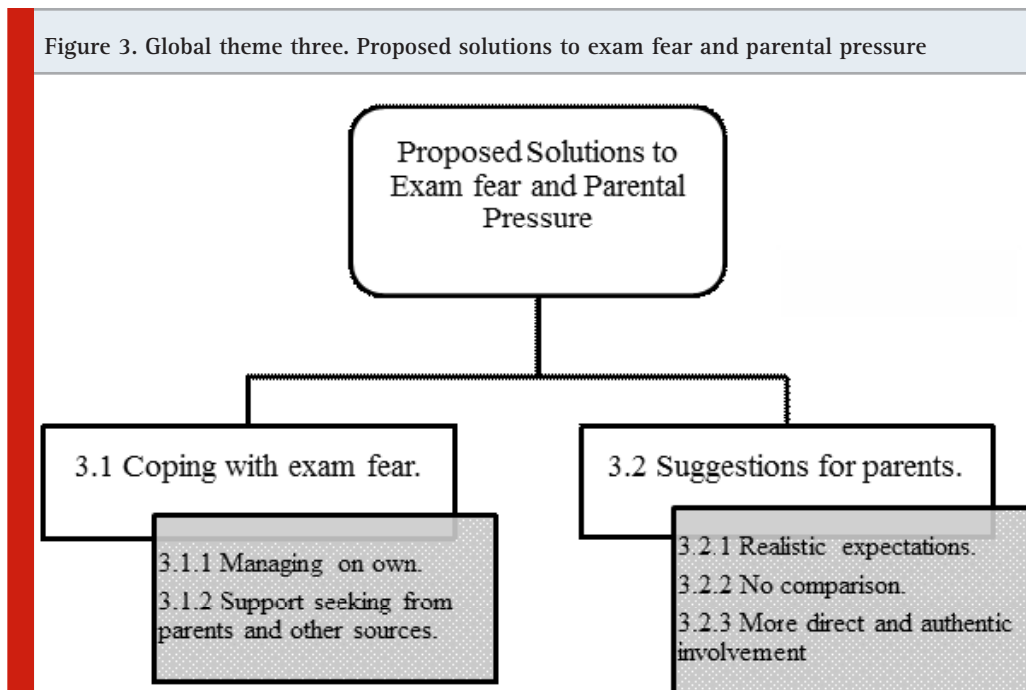


Figure 3. Global theme three. Proposed solutions to exam fear and parental pressure



**3.2 Suggestions for parents:** Students wanted parents to be a support in academics.

**3.2.1 Realistic expectations:** Highlighting the need for mutual goal setting, participants wanted parents to consider their perspective and abilities to set goals.

**3.2.2 No comparison:** Participants expressed dislike towards parents comparing them with toppers, relatives or classmates.

**3.2.3 More direct and authentic involvement:** Participants wanted direct and authentic involvement in studies. A participant wanted them to monitor her progress, enquire about her studies and allocate time to solve her queries. Nagpal and Sinha (2016) opined that parents together with teachers need to create environment fostering child's learning. Thus psychologists, school counsellors and school authorities need to conduct awareness creating workshops regarding parental pressure and test anxiety (Deb, Strodl & Sun, 2014). Imbibing the concept of 'mindful living' would help both students and parents to excel beyond the daily stressors (Sathiyaseelan & Sathiyaseelan, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

The study threw lights on role of socioeconomic factors in test anxiety and parental pressure. Parental pressure was found to be a predictor of test anxiety. Quantitative analysis did not favor for influence of education and occupation of parents on parental pressure and test anxiety experienced by students. However, the qualitative phase provided insights about links among parents' education, occupation, test anxiety and parental pressure. Parents could not give time for studies because of their busy schedules. Children of homemaker mothers reported active involvement, support and monitoring of studies.

Parents were reported to compare academic performance of child with peers, relatives. Insistence on selecting a particular career and rigid standards about scores contributed to parental pressure and test anxiety. But, the present study found contradictory evidences in two phases. The findings need to be interpreted by keeping the limitations of the study in mind.

The study has important theoretical as well as applied implications. The findings are relevant to the fields of education, parenting and counselling. To treat the root cause of the issues, all stakeholders of students' wellbeing like students, parents, teachers, psychologists, administrators and policy makers must devise an effective examination system. Efforts by academia along with professionals are required to address the issues of education and parenting in India holistically. Trelease (2006) reminds us of our responsibility of children's well being saying, "The child spends 900 hours a year in school and 7,800 hours outside school. Which teacher has the bigger influence?"

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