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An investigation of learning stressors among secondary school students: A case study in northeast Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the influences of learning stressors among secondary school students in a school in northeast Thailand. It identified six different learning stressors—academic-related, interpersonal-related, intrapersonal-related, learning and teaching, teacher-related, and group social-related—and their influences on different groups of students. A series of cross-sectional surveys was administered to 925 students consisting of four student groups (177 male lower secondary, 276 female lower secondary, 105 male higher secondary, and 367 female higher secondary). Descriptive statistics (mean score and percentage) and inferential statistics (MANOVA and ANOVA) were used to examine the differences between the groups. The results indicated that there were significant differences in all six learning stressors between the lower secondary and higher secondary groups of students. Only the academic-related stressor had a significant difference between males and females. The results contribute significantly to the body of knowledge and have implications for designing appropriate instructional plans and strategies while dealing with students learning stressors.

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Introduction

Stressful events are very common in educational settings, both for students and teachers. Potential stressful life events affect every student almost daily (Monteiro, Balogun, & Oratile, 2014). The need to complete many examinations and assessments, and to meet deadlines creates massive stress; this stress can have a critical impact on learning and the memory process (Joëls, Pu, Wiegert, Oitzi, & Krugers, 2006; Schwabe, Joëls, Roozendaal, Wolf, & Oitzi, 2012), which are at the heart of our educational system. The effects of stress were found to be complex, with stress

having both enhancing and impairing effects on memory, depending on the specific memory process or stage that is affected by stress and the activity profile of the major physiological stress response systems (Vogel & Schwabe, 2016).

The manner in which students confront stressful events depends significantly on whether and how they perceive and react to the situations. Perhaps owing to this variability in experience, there is no single definition of stress (Monteiro et al., 2014). Humans experience stress in varying forms and degrees when they are exposed to potential threats or stressors. Their brain initiates a course of action that releases numerous transmitters, peptides, and hormones throughout their body (Joëls et al., 2006), all of which are directed at coping with the stressful situation and bringing their organism back to balance, for example homeostasis (Joëls et al., 2006; Schwabe et al., 2012).

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Several experts (Grant, Compas, Thurm, McMahon, & Gipson, 2004; Tessner, Mittal, & Walker, 2011; Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2008) identified that common stressors during the adolescent period have been linked to behavior and changes in adolescent psychopathology development. While unhealthy responses develop when the demands of a stressor exceed one's coping capabilities, students vary significantly in their response to a stressful situation (Garcia, 2010). Reactions include depression and anxiety, as well as externalizing behaviors, such as aggression and antisocial acts (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2008). It is essential that teachers minimize stressful events in the classroom as much as possible. This research finding is expected to provide a better understanding for teachers in learning about the effects of stressors on their students' academic functioning as indicated by Valente, Swanson, and Eisenberg (2012).

Additionally, basic needs must be met by providing students with a safe environment, structure, consistency, and positive relationships. In addition to creating a safe and caring environment, teachers can assist students to manage the stressful moments that inevitably come up in the school setting as mentioned by past researchers where appropriate teaching models can help to reduce stress tremendously (Bunterm et al., 2014; Rachahoon, Bunterm, Wattanathorn, & Muchimapura, 2011; Rattanawongsa, Bunterm, Wattanathorn, & Muchimapura, 2013; Vangpoomyai, Bunterm, Wattanathorn, & Muchimapura, 2012). Instead of viewing the stressed students as a disruption, stressful moments can be turned into opportunities to establish students self-calming skills.

Several researchers have shown the influence of gender on coping strategies among students, indicating that female students feel larger amounts of stress than male students (Brougham, Zail, Mendoza, & Miller, 2009). This is further supported by Misra and McKean (2000) who found females are more stressed by pressures in relation to academic situations and experience higher academic stress and anxiety than males do. Maloney, Waechter, Risko, and Fugelsang (2012) examined the reason for the difference in mathematics anxiety between males and females. Their results revealed that mathematics anxiety is negatively correlated with spatial processing ability, suggesting that females experience more mathematics anxiety than males because they are worse than males at spatial processing. Shessel (2003) examined the effect of gender as an independent variable and revealed that there is a main effect of gender with females experiencing higher levels of stress than males. In addition, there is a main effect of the task with mathematics producing higher levels of stress than spelling, and an interaction between gender and task, with females reporting a bigger difference in the stress levels of each task and males reporting little difference in the stress levels of each task. Gender affects each element in the stress process as much in the input—by determining whether a situation will be perceived as stressful—as in the output, influencing the coping responses (Matud, 2004). In short, numerous past researchers have determined that females find themselves in stressful circumstances more than males (Almeida & Kessler, 1998; McDonough & Walters, 2001).

On the other hand, past researchers have also indicated the influence of age on coping strategies among students. Birditt, Fingerman, and Almeida (2005) found that older individuals were less emotionally reactive to the interpersonal stressor. This was supported by Uchomo, Berg, Smith, Pearce, and Skinner (2006) who suggested that older individuals are less emotionally reactive to stressors than younger individuals are. These age patterns are consistent with many past studies in which older age is related to reduced stressor reactivity (Birditt, Fingerman, & Almeida, 2005; Neupert, Almeida, & Charles, 2007), reduced duration of negative emotions (Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselroade, 2000), and increased well-being (Charles, Carstensen, & McFall, 2001).

The above research review indicates that current stressful events are very common and have different stress impacts based on gender and age across all the subjects in the educational setting. Using this line of reasoning, this study was designed to explore gender and levels of study differences in students learning stressors. The questions researchers seek to address are: (i) Is there a significant difference in learning stressors between males and females? and (ii) Is there a significant difference in learning stressors between lower and higher secondary school students?

Method

Research Design and Samples

The research employed a cross-sectional survey design using a questionnaire as the method to collect quantitative data. The research school was a typical extra-large school located in northeast Thailand, comprising 65 classes for all six grades with an average number of 35–46 students per class, giving a total of 2,942 students (male = 1,160; lower secondary level = 1,568) in 2013. Yamane's (1973, p. 727) formula was utilized to calculate the sample size, the least sample size for the population of 2,942 is 332. Owing to the focus of this study being on the lower and higher secondary subgroups, the least sample size for the 1,568 lower secondary and 1,374 higher secondary populations was 319 and 310, respectively, giving a total sample of 629. In order to avoid excessive disturbance to the routine operation of the school being studied, the researchers randomly selected four classes from each grade, giving a total of not less than 420 samples for each level of study. A total of 925 samples (282 males and 643 females) from Grades 7 to 12 were selected using a lottery method of selection. All the selected samples were then classified into four groups according to their gender and level of study as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1 presents the principal demographic characteristics of the groups. There were representatives of all the different grade groups, although the total number of samples from each grade was rather similar, the differences between male and female students were significant, perhaps because of the nature of Thai society whereby the number of females is always more than males. In fact, the school administrators had purposely distributed an equal number of male and female students to each class during the class streaming process at the beginning of the academic year.

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