Excess Baggage: Exploring Triggers of Worry and Stress in Young Students

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Abstract: Throughout their primary school years, children are likely to experience feelings of stress or worry, triggered by elements within the school setting. While these terminologies indicate negative connotations, such feelings can differ in consistency and are known to occur when young children respond negatively to situations that are considered problematic. The research study presented in this paper is analysed from a sociological perspective and it examines the triggers of worry and stress in young school children and what form of action is taken by parents in such instances. The insights and opinions of parents regarding how schools can contribute and support such students are also critically examined. Data was gathered from parents with children between the ages of 3 and 8 years through online questionnaires that were analysed qualitatively employing a thematic approach, while quantitative data was used in order to quantify the responses and present demographic information. The findings indicate that the most common causes of worry and stress in young children are linked to social, academic, logistical, and situational factors including, but not limited to, attachment, bullying, changing of teachers, academic load, and online exclusion. Data also suggests that most parents took action when their children expressed feelings of worry or stress; this included the elements of discussions, guidance and reassurance. The findings further revealed that the school staff were rarely informed about such situations, which raises a concern in terms of communication practices between stakeholders.

Keywords: worry, stress, early childhood education, schooling experience

Introduction

A considerable number of published studies have reported that the school has a profound influence on young children since this environment provides a space for them to interact with others, build social relationships, feel accomplished, and achieve their full potential (Ticusan 2014). Osher et al. (2014) support this statement and argue that the educational institution serves as a social microcosm of the broader society and helps in the formation of children’s character, their development, and their sense of wellbeing. An overview of local school ethos indicates that schools strive to serve as an environment that creates a sense of community and where children feel a sense of belonging. This is also reflected in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs which further indicates that young children’s psychological needs should be met through intimate relationships (McLeod 2018). Children’s schooling experience is prone to providing an environment that caters to these needs, but it might also be a place that triggers feelings of ‘worry’ and ‘stress’; two terms which are metaphorically addressed as ‘excess baggage’ in the title of this paper.

Various studies have attempted to explore the main causes of stress and worry in children. Yet, there is lack of national and international research on this topic when it comes to
the early years, as most studies focus on children who form part of an older age bracket (Sammut 2007). This indicates that feelings of stress and worry are more common when children reach the final years of primary school and that such feelings within the early years are viewed as innocuous and transitional (Sammut 2007). In contrast, Csoti (2003) asserts that such feelings are common within the early years, and addressing these at an early age will ensure that children are well-equipped and more capable of tackling similar feelings or longer-term risks as they proceed through their schooling experience. This is because children’s early social experiences ‘can assist or undermine coping and adjustment, or, in some cases, alleviate the effects of prior stressful experiences’ (Thompson 2014 p. 42). Similarly, Ticusan (2014) argues that if severe feelings are not treated in the early years, they can worsen in time and influence the children negatively when they are adults. Lack of early intervention may also lead to anxiety (Van Der Mhenn et al. 2020); additionally, negative symptoms of stress experienced during childhood might also impact the child’s development (Costa et al. 2020).

This indicates a need to understand the causes of stress and worry from a young age. However, to date, there has been little agreement on what causes stress and worry in young schoolchildren, particularly in the country of Malta. This research aims to highlight these gaps in the literature and addresses an issue that has not been investigated on a national level. In line with this argument, the main research question behind this study is: What triggers feelings of worry and stress in young students and which forms of action are taken by parents in order to address such feelings? A set of field-questions were also formulated at the initial stages of this research study and included:

- Can the school improve in the way it reaches out to its students?
- How could parents tell that children were worried or stressed over a school-related issue?
- Were the school and class teacher aware if/when the child was feeling worried or stressed?
- How can schools address such situations?

Before presenting the findings of the main research question and the corresponding field-questions, it is useful to explore the definitions of ‘stress’ and ‘worry’ in addition to what is presented in the literature in the field.

**Literature Review**

**An Overview of Definitions**

‘Worry’ and ‘stress’ are at times used simultaneously and in ‘popular parlance’ (Wilson 2021), as they are colloquially linked to other terms such as ‘concern’, ‘fear’ and ‘nervousness’. The literature refers to ‘worry’ as a common symptom of anxiety and is linked to the cognitive aspect (Kilbride & Sweeney 2021). It denotes negative and constant dwelling of repetitive thoughts (Greenberg 2016), whilst extreme worry is a component of generalised anxiety, which can also develop through childhood (Caes et al. 2016). ‘Stress’ is the body’s physical response to an external concern, demand, stressor or threat. In such situations, the body rapidly responds by employing a ‘fight-or-flight’ reaction (Herrick & Redman-White 2019), which is usually short-lived (Kilbride & Sweeney 2021). Lebrun and Mann (2016) extend the definition of ‘stress’ further and include three major types: acute, episodic acute and chronic.

The terms ‘worry’ and ‘stress’ are at times used alongside the term ‘anxiety’, yet, literature in the field denotes that ‘anxiety’ is different from ‘worry’ and ‘stress’ (Kilbride & Sweeney 2021).
Whilst all children encounter some form of worry or stress during their early childhood schooling experience, these feelings become a problematic issue when fear is out of proportion to the situation or age, hence persisting for a long period of time and interfering with the child’s ability to function properly (Herrick & Redman-White 2019; Kilbride & Sweeney 2021). ‘Anxiety’ can be defined as an ‘umbrella term’ that ‘has many faces’ (Grose & Richardson 2019 p. 9) and whilst it connotes with ‘worry’ and ‘stress’, it specifically refers to the culmination of both worry and stress. It is a reaction to stress and worry (Kilbride & Sweeney 2021) and occurs in an individual’s body and mind (Chansky 2004). Whilst ‘stress’ and ‘worry’ are, at times, used alongside the term ‘anxiety’, the standpoint taken for the purpose of this research is that these terms differ in meaning and are not interchangeable (Kilbride & Sweeney 2021).

Triggers of Worry and Stress in Young Students

Recent local research shows that across all age groups surveyed in Malta, the percentage of children who reported feeling ‘low’ or ‘nervous’ is higher than the average amongst a total of 48 countries in Europe and North America (Ministry for Health 2019). However, local research focuses on children aged 11 years and older, given that feelings of ‘worry’ and ‘stress’ in students increase by age (Muris et al. 2002) and that the complexity of worrisome thoughts increases from 8 years onwards (Vasey et al. 1994; Caes et al. 2016). Similarly, Muris et al. (1998) point out that 70% of the children who participated in their study have worried at some point or another in their life. Ample research has also indicated that anxiety disorders, which might ignite from severe feelings of stress and worry, are common in early childhood, with 50% of these appearing in children who are younger than 6 (Egger & Angold 2006; Dougherty et al. 2013).

Much of the current literature agrees that during childhood, it is likely that children will pass through such feelings and research also indicates that low levels of stress and worry in school children may also manifest positively since children are set to better prepare themselves academically and are more motivated (Sweeny & Dooley 2017). The literature in the field, therefore, suggests that there is a distinction between normal and pathological trends in worry (Caes et al. 2016) and stress (Scott 2020). Similarly, Jewett (1997) refers to stress as a normal part of life and states that even young children experience elements of stress throughout their childhood (Jewett 1997). Whilst there are numerous causes for stress and worry, it is when these reach high and unmanageable levels that such feelings are considered as problematic.

Research on the topics of ‘stress’ and ‘worry’ have indicated a number of factors that might contribute as main triggers, some of which are age- and school-related. A common indication that a student is experiencing such feelings is refusal to attend school, which may occur during transitional periods, such as when 3-year-old children start kindergarten at a formal primary school (Kearney & Albano 2007). Whilst some instances of refusing to attend school are normative (Reilly 2015), they are associated with negative outcomes and are an indicative sign that the child might be worried or stressed about a situation. Such a trigger might be associated with the child’s hesitancy in leaving home and their family members; however, this can reduce once the child becomes familiar with the school and the educator (Reilly 2015). A common trigger in children as young as three can be linked to the social aspect of the new schooling experience. This indicates that young children might worry or stress about separation issues and encounter difficulties in settling in and adjusting at school.

Another issue presented in the literature as a possible worry and stress trigger in older children is bullying and peer pressure (Grose & Richardson 2019). Feelings of worry and stress can manifest when children feel intimidated and rejected, are unable to cope whilst remaining socially passive and have very low self-esteem (Csoti 2003). This reflects upon
the specific types of worry presented in Silverman et al.’s (1995) study. The participants from their study listed scapegoating, being picked on, being neglected, rejection and friends’ betrayal when asked about their worries. In relation to this, Forero et al. (1999) suggest that schools should not tolerate such behaviour and that this could be addressed through the incorporation of supportive, anti-bullying policies. In line with this, Csoti (2003) substantiates her argument by stating that schools need to ensure that students feel safe to report such situations without fear and worry of others finding out.

Given the triggers outlined, research indicates that the most prevalent worry across all ages is related to school and homework tasks (Caes et al. 2016), with school performance being one of the most common causes of worry in 3 to 14-year-old children (Muris et al. 2002). This includes homework, schoolwork, stage performances and impromptu questioning in class (Grose & Richardson 2019). According to Csoti (2003), the class environment may also be a cause of stress in young children. Young children may be afraid of answering questions or reading loudly in class because of the fear of being ridiculed if they stammer or stumble over the words (Csoti 2003). Whilst research suggests that there may be various triggers which cause stress and worry in young students, an agreed standpoint taken in the literature emphasises the importance of the classroom environment. Ticusan (2014) maintains that the classroom atmosphere needs to make students feel respected and accepted. In the same vein, Reilly (2015) asserts that classrooms should give students a sense of safety, and nurture, whilst being a space which promotes opportunities for conversations about emotions.

Addressing Challenges

Children depend on the care of adults. Whilst some children may “pull for” their parents’ rescue when they are in distress (Chronis-Tuscano et al. 2018 p. 657), others might struggle to express and talk about their feelings of stress and worry. The literature in the field indicates that it is imperative for adults to help young children identify their emotions, even under the age of 4, as young children need to relate to concrete examples and reminders in order to be able to practise context-specific skills (Reilly 2015). Adults also need to help students in recognising their feelings as they occur (Lebrun and Mann 2016) and seek professional help if the worry and stress levels in children are out of proportion and are affecting the child’s daily routines and relationships with others. Lack of action in such situations may lead to consequences. The literature, for example, suggests that children who are under stress cannot learn effectively (Csoti 2003).

Grosu et al. (2020) refer to a coping approach that could be incorporated at schools and refer to the use of the creative arts, particularly dance as a technique, which helps children decrease negative feelings. In line with this, they argue that relaxation techniques through dance results in improving children's emotional distress profile. In the same vein, Ticusan (2014) considers drama and the use of puppets to be an excellent tool with young children, as the puppet is considered as an ‘ideal mediator’ (p. 148) between the teacher and the children within the classroom setting. Andrews’ (2014) viewpoint correlates with that of Grosu et al. (2020); she denotes that music is proven to calm the nerves and reduce fearful thoughts in children. Sterling Honig’s (2010) work also draws on an extensive range of techniques which specifically address how children can minimise stress within group settings. Similar to the literature outlined above, Sterling Honig (2010) denotes that relaxation games during circle time can reduce stress whilst dance can relax tensions. In her work, Sterling Honig (2010) further emphasises the importance of group activities which enhance self-esteem, vigorous movement, self-control, and the teaching of new vocabulary related to feelings, such as; worried, excited, patient, frustrated, embarrassed, and amazed. Talking about feelings within the classroom setting helps children to reflect, empathize, understand, and think about the feelings of other people, as well as their own (Sterling Honig 2010).
Research Methodology

As previously highlighted, this study's principal goal is to explore the concepts of ‘stress’ and ‘worry’ in children aged between 3 and 8 years. The main aim was to determine what causes young students to feel worried or stressed in terms of their schooling experience, which action was taken to address such feelings, and how schools can help in this regard.

Research Approach

The study used a mixed-methods approach: variable data is presented quantitatively, whilst the qualitative aspect of the research is analysed through a thematic approach. The quantitative part of this research provides background information about the participants and highlights the number of responses, but given that the main research question behind this study is socially constructed, it was appropriate to apply a thematic approach in order to analyse the data. Literature in the field suggests that there may be various reasons for adopting a mixed-methods approach in research (Denscombe 2013). The justification behind the research approach adopted reflects Denscombe’s assertion that a mixed-methods approach provides ‘a more complete picture’ (p.141). The use of more than one method enabled the researcher to present qualitative data and substantiate such information with the exact correlated number of responses.

Data Instrument and Method of Distribution

The main research tool used was a questionnaire that was divided in three consecutive parts, covering the participants’ background information, the children’s schooling experience, triggers of school stress and worry, and forms of action taken. This choice of instrument reflects upon the advantages outlined by Denscombe (2013) who asserts that questionnaires are economical, used with large number of responses in many locations and once completed can be fed into a data file which in turn automates the process of data entry. The questionnaire presented a balanced number of close- and open-ended questions. The first part of the questionnaire required a definite answer from a list of possible outcomes. Such questions addressed information about the participants’ sex and nationality, the age of the respective child, the child’s current school grade and the type of school attended. The second part of the questionnaire which addressed the children’s schooling experiences was presented through drop-down questions which were combined with open-ended questions. Here, the participants were encouraged to voice their opinion, justify, and elaborate on their answers. The last section of the questionnaire was presented similarly to the previous one but this section required a higher level of detail and therefore open-ended questions were utilized more frequently.

The questionnaire was formulated on Google Forms, a free, online survey software offered by Google. This was available as a web application and distributed through the use of a direct link to the questionnaire. Snowball sampling was the main technique utilized, through which the researcher identified a small number of parents or guardians who have children within the 3 to 8 years age gap. These participants then served as informants and identified other participants who were eligible to take part on the basis that they fit the required variable. Through the use of instant messaging systems such as Messenger and WhatsApp, the participants themselves shared the link to other parents or guardians. This type of sampling method was used because the topic researched contributes to sensitive educational research, and this method enabled the participants to participate without restrictions.
Analysis of Data

As previously outlined, this research used a mixed-methods approach. Numerical data is presented in correlation to pre-coded questions. Such information was directly gathered from the Google Forms interface, and this eliminated the possibility of human errors whilst facilitating the analysis process. Numerical data is presented in percentage formats and the corresponding frequency numbers are also presented throughout the writing of this paper. Qualitative data was gathered through open-ended questions and gave the participants the possibility to add comments and opinions in paragraph format. These were analysed through a thematic approach, an analysis method which deals with the search for themes or patterns (Braun and Clarke 2006). The six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were adopted for the purpose of analysis. The researcher 1) familiarised herself with the data, 2) generated initial codes, 3) searched for themes, 4) reviewed the themes, 5) defined and named the themes and 6) presented the paper. The themes which were generated from the process of manual assigned coding are in fact presented as subtitles in the sections which follow.

Ethical Considerations

Since the subject of ‘worry’ and ‘stress’ are negative and sensitive in nature, data were anonymously gathered from parents or guardians rather than minors. This was to safeguard children who might be going through severe ‘worry’ or ‘stress’ experiences and to ensure that data is more reliable, given that ‘worry’ and ‘stress’ can be abstract terminologies for young children to discuss. Attention was also given to the type and wording of the questions in order to eliminate any form of moral harm. In addition to this, the questions presented in the third section of the questionnaire were all optional, and it was up to the participants to choose whether to elaborate on the answers further.

The Participants and the Demographics of the Responses

The study intended to have a confidence level of 95% and a confidence interval of 9 and was based on the number of young children who attend primary schools and who fall within the kindergarten and the grade 4 bracket. A total number of 27,598 students were considered in the survey system. This number is based on the profile of students enrolled by academic year in 2019, as published by the National Statistics Office (2021). According to the survey sample, the number of questionnaires needed to be collected was 118; therefore, no further responses were accepted after this number was reached.

Females contributed to 95% of the participants (n = 112), while 5% were males (n = 6). Out of the 118 participants, 97% of the parents were Maltese, 2% were Italian and 1% was Polish. Data gathered also indicated that 48.3% (n = 57) of the children were girls whilst 51.7% (n = 61) were boys. Table 1 presents a visual representation of the children’s current grade. It shows that 28.8% of the children (n = 34) were kindergarten students. The highest percentage, 26.3% (n = 31), of participants have a child of 8 years, followed by 22% who have a child aged 4 (n = 26). The mean age of the total sample was 5.8 years; 63.6% (n = 75) of the participants explained that their children attend a government school, 22.9% (n = 27) attend a church school, whilst 13.6% (n = 16) attend a private school.
Table 1: Children’s current school grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current grade</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Relative Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=118 participants

Results, Analysis of Findings and Discussion

Children’s Schooling Experience

As previously explained, following the participants’ background information, parents were asked to describe their child’s schooling experiences. Most parents described it as positive, 21.2% (n = 25) as good and 7.6% (n = 9) as fair. No participant argued that their child’s schooling experience was negative. Participants were asked to elaborate on this. Many used terms such as ‘happy’, ‘enthusiastic’ and ‘eager’ in association with their children’s schooling experience. Over 75% of the participants described the school environment as positive and indicated that the school prioritises teacher-student relationships, fosters a sense of community, creates a caring and supportive environment, and is sensitive to students’ needs and emotions.

Triggers of School Stress and Worry

The main aim behind this research study was to investigate triggers of stress and worry in young students. In order to address this, a list of common triggers outlined by Herrick and Redman-White (2019) was adapted and presented in the questionnaire, with the aim of investigating whether children have encountered worrisome and stressful experiences due to similar situations. Data gathered from the questionnaires distributed throughout this study showed that the most common trigger for stress and worry at school is linked to social issues with other students, with 37.2% (n = 44) arguing that this happens quite often. Following this, another common trigger is related to academic tasks such as homework, schoolwork and reaching academic expectations, with 33% (n = 39) of the respondents arguing that this occurs quite often, and a further 24.5% (n = 29) suggesting that worry and stress are also linked to assessments, tests, and grading activities. Issues of bullying (24.5%; n = 29) and teacher-student relationships (20.3%; n = 24) were also pointed out as triggers. Most parents explained that the severity levels of stress and worry were minimal, whilst 10.1% (n = 12) of the participants described their children’s level of stress and worry as severe. The questionnaire allowed the participants to add to the list of triggers presented. Through the process of coding, it was noted that such triggers fall under four main categories: social, academic, logistical, and situational. As Fig. 1 shows, data indicated that there were sub-forming agents under each category; a number of triggers correlated between a variety of factors, thus justifying the use of arrows around the figure.
In terms of social issues, data from this study revealed that the most common situations that cause worry and stress in young children were linked to separation concerns and social relationships. Parents of 3- and 4-year-old children explained that one of the most common triggers that stressed children was linked to separation. Two of the parents stated that “He loves his school and always comes home very happy. However, it’s hard for him to leave the house in the morning, as he hates leaving his family and toys behind” and “My son suffers from separation issues and doesn’t want to leave my side to go to school”. This reflects a common situation that children between the age of 2 and 4 are likely to experience (Moore & Carr 2000). Data expounded on Moore and Carr’s (2000) claim showed that this is not only causing distress and crying in young children but is also affecting parents. Qualitative data exhibited that such feelings led to more worry and stress: “School drop-off was a heartache for a few weeks. You end up worrying about your child all morning” and “It became a daily struggle to take him to school and it is sad to see your child crying every day.” Data further revealed that parents regarded these experiences as “normal” and phrases such as “for a few weeks” and “for a few minutes in the morning” indicate that the participants were aware that such situations were likely to occur. Here, data showed that stress and worry are linked to transitional experiences, with one of the participants also stating that this sometimes happens on the last day of the weekend and when returning to school after the holidays.

The data gathered also revealed that participants made reference to bullying situations as triggers for worry and stress in young children. Data showed that bullying situations occurred with children aged 5 and over; no reference to bullying was made at kindergarten level. These experiences were linked to feelings of worry and stress, with one of the parents explaining that it also influenced her daughter’s academic performance in class: “A classmate told my daughter that she should learn how to speak properly because no-one ever understands a word she says. This happened often. Other children can be mean sometimes and this made my daughter more conscious about the speech defect so much so that she avoids speaking in class and hates school concerts and class presentations!” Similar to this, another parent also extenuated a link between the concept of appearance and bullying, and remarked that this was one of the main experiences that caused feelings.
of stress: “Bullying - my son has glasses. When he started wearing them, a boy from school started teasing him and telling him he looked like a monster with glasses on. My son was very stressed about this, but thankfully, this stopped.” These two experiences indicate that bullying and name-calling may occur within the school setting and can also be a source of worry and stress in young children. The literature in the field suggests that it is imperative for children to be able to identify such behaviour and learn to deal with this in a positive manner, as uncontrollable cases of stress and worry may lead to anxiety (Salmon et al. 1998), poor mental health (Csoti 2004) and low self-esteem (Rigby & Slee 1993).

Whilst these situations are directly linked to social factors, other participants took a different standpoint and referred to social exclusion as the main trigger of stress and worry. Two participants reported that worry and stress were linked to technological use, with one of the parents stating that her daughter was socially excluded by her classmates on a social chat on Hangouts and another reporting that bullying occurred online through negative comments made on Microsoft Teams. For clarity and understanding purposes, Hangouts is an app by Google, through which people can communicate through text messages, audios and visuals. It also allows two or more participants to join a mutual group chat. In addition, Microsoft Teams is a communication platform which was commonly being used by schools and stakeholders as a means of communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. On MS Teams, students could also communicate with individual friends or create group chats amongst themselves.

An additional social factor trigger evident in this research is linked to the teacher-student relationship. Five participants chose to elaborate further on this and argued that at times, the teacher’s approach instigated feelings of worry and stress in children to the extent that they refused to go to school. One parent stated that “I notice a drastic change in his behaviour right before sleeping because he is aware that he has to face his teacher the following day”. Reference to teacher-student relationships was made by the participants across different levels. Two participants whose children are currently at kindergarten level argued that “The behaviour of some teachers, especially with kindergarten children, can stress them a lot”, whilst another parent was more specific and explained that “The teacher at times is not so approachable - she raises her voice when my son does not eat all his lunch, and he is always forced to eat it. Eating stresses him out and the teacher’s way of dealing with this makes it worse sometimes”. Another reference to the concept of ‘raising voice’ was made by another parent who has a child aged 8 and who explained that her daughter worries about self-expression because she is afraid the teacher would scold her, given that the teacher yells at the children quite frequently. Out of the five responses related to teacher-student relationship, one participant took a different standpoint and argued that the teacher’s decision not to take students out to play in the playground is what is stressing her son: “During break time, the teacher does not take them out to play. This was making my son frustrated – he needs to run! Sitting down all day in class does not help him concentrate! His main worry in the morning is whether the teacher will let them out to play”.

In summary, this section has mirrored the most common social factors outlined by the participants. Triggers such as these indicate that whilst they are socially constructed, they also correlate to particular situational factors, as contested in Fig. 1. With reference to school drop-off, for example, one can argue that whilst the main trigger is socially constructed, it also includes elements of situational factors, as each experience is not applicable to every student.

**Academic Factors**

A factor that resurfaced frequently through the qualitative data gathered was linked to academic worry and stress. This was more common in the older years while no such reference
was made at the kindergarten level. Parents of children as young as 5 did, however, point out that there were academic issues that triggered worry and/or stress, with one parent claiming that spelling game exercises and end-of-term assessments are the main cause of her son's stress. An excessive number of homework tasks also trigger similar feelings according to another parent who explained that her daughter “does not like abundant written school tasks and these feelings are transferred from school to home because a lot of homework is given”. A similar response indicated that her son is “too tired after school to do the homework after a whole day of writing and this causes stress and frustration”, whilst similarly, another participant claimed that her daughter “feels overwhelmed when she sees the homework tasks written on the whiteboard. This leads to restlessness and nail-biting”. Here, qualitative data indicates that worry and stress are related to homework and assessment factors, which also include finishing examination tasks in time, given that 8-year-old children sit for their first formal exam at the end of Grade 4. “He worries that he will not manage to write a story or will not manage to finish a paper in time. The fact that there aren’t any half-yearly exams, in a way, relieved some stress from December and January, but the fact that the first paper will be in June, I feel that he started stressing about this from the end of January.”

Data from this study also indicated that there were instances where stress and worry were triggered because the children did not meet academic expectations and because the child “tends to struggle to understand a topic related to a particular subject”. In this regard, one of the parents also claimed that her daughter compares herself to others, and this is causing more stress: “My daughter is happy most of the times, but sometimes, she refuses to go to school because she is aware that she is not academically able in comparison to her friends.” This relates to the concept of ‘competitiveness' which is elaborated upon in the literature by Madrid et al. (2007) and Kistruck et al. (2015). In their work Madrid et al. (2007) argue that competition can improve a student’s performance whilst similarly, Kistruck et al. (2015) denote that competitive goal structures generally lead to higher levels of motivation. This contrasts with the data presented in this paper as the parents associated the concept of comparison with negative feelings of stress. Another participant, also brought forward this notion of comparison but from a different standpoint; she argued that, “In private schools the syllabus is covered two years in advance in comparison to government schools, and this sometimes stresses children to reach a certain level of academic competence”.

Therefore, data here suggests that academic factors may manifest in stress and worry in children, and that this can be caused due to two sub-triggers; one is directly linked to homework, schoolwork, and methods of assessment, such as tests, spelling exercises and exams, whilst another is linked to specific situations of children who tend to struggle to meet the required academic expectation. Fig. 1 further extenuates upon this notion and shows that although the main trigger for stress and worry here are linked to academic factors, they may also be linked to situational and social factors.

Logistical Factors

Spending long hours at school was another element that parents referred to when asked about main triggers of stress and worry in young children. Such instances have been correlated to logistical factors, as data indicated that some of the children acknowledged long school hours negatively. Whilst a number of participants referred to the school day as “tiring” and made reference to “long hours at school”, another participant was more explicit in her response as she explained that “School finishes at 3.30 pm. After that, we have long hours of work and studying. He has no time for leisure and extracurricular activities”. Given that parents in state, church or independent schools can make use of before-and-after school care services, like Klabb 3-16 and Breakfast Club, this also means that a number of students get to spend longer extended hours at school. Three of the participants made
reference to these services and explained that their children tend to stress about having to spend longer hours at school, and whilst the participants made reference to a feeling of personal parental guilt, two explained this is done due to work commitments. Another logistical issue that parents made reference to was the fact that some students had to wake up early, with a parent stating that her daughter has to wake up as early as half past five in the morning in order to catch school transport.

An additional trigger that was raised through the qualitative data gathered contributed towards a concept which can be linked to logistical-social factors. Participants referred to logistical changes such as the changing of teachers and friends and argued that these influenced children negatively. One of the participants explained that last year her son had three different teachers in one scholastic year and how this affected his social behaviour with the teachers themselves and his friends along with his academic level. This relates to a similar finding in Chen et al.’s (2020) study about the influences of teacher-child relationships and classroom social management on child-perceived peer social experiences during early school years. Chen et al.’s (2020) findings revealed that students who have close relationships with their teachers tend to feel more socially supported by their peers. Constant changes in teachers tends to disharmonise teacher-student relationships and the findings presented here suggest that parents linked such changes to stress and worry. Another participant, for example, also mentioned “the change of teacher in the middle of the scholastic year” when asked to elaborate on other stress and worry triggers. A bigger logistical-social concern was for a parent whose son had to change schools because they had recently moved house. Whilst the main trigger was not school-initiated, the participant explained that this logistical change affected his social interaction with his new friends as “he started avoiding speaking to the class teacher and his classmates”. Similarly, another participant explained that upon their arrival from Italy, her son struggled to adjust because of the language barrier which “stressed him a lot because he couldn’t communicate with his friends”.

Situational Factors

The remaining triggers referred to by the participants all contribute towards situational factors. A common current issue which resurfaced within all age groups as a trigger for stress and worry was the COVID-19 pandemic, a period which is linked to complicated emotions including stress (Kilbride & Sweeney 2021). Kilbride and Sweeney's (2021) statement was also reflected in this study as participants referred to the pandemic as a situational factor which increased stress and worry and “brought about a certain level of uneasiness”. Most parents who added this situational factor to the list of triggers explained that their children were physically going to school, whilst a minimal number were following “the virtual programme”. Both scenarios were linked to negative feelings of stress and worry with one parent claiming that “my daughter is very worried and frustrated because she has to follow all measures”, whilst another parent claimed that the fact that children could not share, hug each other, and play with other children stressed her daughter. The participants who made reference to online schooling also linked negative feelings with the system being used because the children could not “focus”, they “kept finding excuses and distractions to avoid joining in” and “attending to school on alternate days was rather stressful”. Extensive recent research has investigated the effects of the pandemic, and given that this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was inevitable that parents would refer to the current situation as a trigger of stress and worry. Such negative feelings were similarly expressed through international research in the field (Spinelli et al. 2000) and shows that feelings of stress and worry were not only experienced by children but also by their parents (Ren et al. 2020). Other situational factors which some of the participants referred to as triggers were related to particular temporary experiences. A participant, for example, explained that her daughter was stressed at a point because a
classmate of hers had lice. Worrisome thoughts were also linked to the thought of having to miss school because of similar situations, such as, frequent visits to the hospital and medical clinics.

In short, the previous sections have shown that the main triggers for stress and worry were linked to social, academic, logistical, and situational factors, and at times these took place interchangeably. A number of the triggers outlined in this paper were also common in a previous study which was conducted by Silverman et al. (1995), a study whose participants were in the early stages of their primary schooling experience, covering from grade 2 to grade 6. Silverman et al.’s (1995) study revealed that regarding school, the participants indicated that the most prevalent triggers of worry were tests, followed by being called on and worries about teachers. The latter triggers were common to those outlined in this paper; however, data from this study showed that the most prevalent trigger for stress and worry in young students was related to social issues, followed by academic factors. Given that Silverman et al.’s (1995) study was conducted more than two decades ago, the current study has contributed and showed additional triggers of stress and worry, which reflect current times and changes such as the COVID-19 pandemic and others linked to technological advancements.

Signs, Effects and Forms of Action Taken

In order to address the field-questions, the participants were asked to explain how they could tell that their child was stressed or worried; 54.8% (n = 46) of the parents who proceeded with the filling of the questionnaire explained that it was through a direct conversation about the issue that led them to understand what was causing worry and stress. Participants who made reference to this also suggested that the children's facial expressions, including crying, were also indicative that the child was stressed or worried about an issue, whilst 28.6% explained that children complained of physical symptoms such as stomach aches and headaches. The same percentage, 28.6%, indicated that there were instances when the children refused to go to school. The participants also added other ways to the list provided on how they could tell that their child was feeling worried or stressed. These included craving attention, refusing to play in the schoolyard, vomiting, diarrhoea, faking sickness and nail biting.

Through the questionnaire, participants were asked to elaborate on how such feelings affected them as parents or guardians. Opposing views were expressed in this regard, with two parents stating that it did not affect them because as parents, they are aware that “many issues haven’t as yet been experienced by the children” and “feeling worried or stressed is part of growing up”. Most parents did, however, claim that they felt “worried”, “anxious”, “troubled”, “confused”, “helpless”, “nervous” and “anxious” when their children were stressed or worried about several issues. Opposing views were expressed by parents with younger children. Some stated that when children cry to go to school, they feel very worried about the situation and at times, they themselves cry, and they find it “very hard to concentrate on work” and “worrying about the child all day long until it is time for pick up”. Other parents were more optimistic; they stated that they got used to such situations and are less concerned because they are aware that this only lasts for a few minutes in the morning. Parents of children older than 5 seemed more concerned when issues were directly linked to social factors, with two participants stating that they contacted a psychologist in order to address issues related to friendships and bullying. When asked whether action was flagged, 73.2% of the participants explained that they took action and only 2% stated that no action was considered. The most common form of action taken by parents are linked to open discussions, guidance and reassurance, which are presented in Table 2 in a systematic order, with the first being the most commonly used strategy:
Forms of action taken by parents/guardians

Suggested strategies which may help the child deal with such feelings.
Discussed the issue openly with the child.
Offered reassurance and words of comfort.
Expressed feelings of care and understanding and was a good role-model.
Guided the child towards solutions.
Spoke to the teacher, a member of staff or the nurture teacher.
Helped the child focus on the positive.
Researched about the issue on the internet.
Discussed the concern with a psychologist.
Read relevant and relatable stories to the child.

Table 2: Forms of action taken by parents/guardians

When asked whether the parents informed the school or class teacher about their child’s feelings, 32% (n = 22) explained that they did inform other stakeholders; 22% (n = 26) of the participants explained that this was done in writing most of the times, through an email or note (39.4%; n = 13), a face-to-face meeting at school (27.3%; n = 9) or through a telephone conversation (12.1%; n = 4). On the contrary, 68% of the participants did not contact the school when their child expressed feelings of stress and worry. The reasons for their choice varied, but the most common response was either because they felt that the main stressor was of a minor nature or because the main stressor was directly linked to the teacher-student relationship. One of the participants who held this viewpoint stated that “it is not easy to explain to the teacher that my daughter is stressed over the approach she herself uses. I think it is very awkward to present negative criticism to the person provoking it and talking to the head of school might make things worse!” Such situations raise a concern in terms of open communication practices and whilst most participants in this study explained that schools provide a sense of community and that communication is encouraged, some presented the argument that the way this is done is not necessarily the best way possible.

The Way Forward

The participants were asked to elaborate on means how the school can address factors which are likely to entice upon worry and stress on children, and the most common response was related to an open communication approach. This strategy also resurfaces in the literature as communication is key to any relationship (Andrews 2014). Whilst various literature denotes that open communication channels between the school and homes is imperative (Fitzgerald 2004), this study has revealed that although this is acknowledged and practised, there are other means of communication practices which are not used, yet should be more successful and transparent in reaching out concerns and issues related to stress and worry in children. Participants in this study explained that sending emails and going directly to school might not be the best way how to express concerns.

One of the participants explained that through the use of anonymous questionnaires, the school administration can ensure more reliable communication streams, whilst other participants also extenuated upon the need of additional members who serve as a link between school and home, thus addressing concerns which are of a more delicate nature, and which might be difficult to address to the school. Herrick and Redman-White
(2019) refer to a similar concept in their work and explain that in some areas, emotional literacy support assistants are working with children who encounter social and emotional difficulties. In this regard, a number of responses suggested that the school administration need to draw the staff’s attention and ensure that the classroom promotes a “safe homely environment where children are taught more about their emotions and focus isn't only on reaching academic levels”. According to the participants, this can be achieved by having school administration staff who is more aware of what happens in classrooms and during break time, through direct observations. Similarly, another participant suggested that classrooms should “emphasise on the sense of love, care and belonging”, and teachers should not only respond “on an academic level but also express care”. This extract mirrors many other suggestions given by participants which focus on the need for children to learn about social interactions, how to deal with bullying and academic stressors, and about the importance of communication. According to another participant, the school can also teach children how to study and how to cope with experiences which might trigger stress and worry rather than focusing on reaching academic goals. Other responses and suggestions were provided by participants who listed separation issues as a main trigger for stress and worry. Data showed that most participants acknowledged that this is linked to minor stress; however, they also argued that schools can help in facilitating this transition. According to one of the participants, schools can implement a more strategic way on how young children will enter school for the first time; she further suggested visiting the school and classroom with the child prior to starting or allowing children to take their own favourite toys with them to school.

The literature presented in this paper suggests other strategies which build upon those presented by the participants. Creative arts activities can be, for example, manifested within the early years whilst personal, social and career development lessons, also referred to as PSED, could be addressed to kindergarten classes. Within the local context, such lessons are addressed from grade 3 upwards, but given that data from this study showed how stress and worry can be manifested in the early years, it would be beneficial that young children are given the same learning opportunity. The literature in the field suggests that within the early years, this could also be done through the reading of stories, as these provide an excellent way for children to communicate their feelings through reactions and comments, learn about the negative and positive sides of situations, and pick up different emotions (Andrews 2014).

Limitations and Recommendation for Further Study

Data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic which meant that it was difficult for the researcher to gather data directly from schools. The questionnaire tool was in fact adopted and data was mainly gathered by parents, rather than children. Whilst this pertained to the advantage of reaching a good number of responses, it presented a limitation in that the child’s voice was not directly heard. This limitation can be addressed through similar research with young students. A focus group discussion about students’ feelings of worry and stress, for example, might reveal other triggers which were not addressed in this research. Another limitation, which was addressed at the best of the researcher’s ability, was that definitions for ‘worry’ and ‘stress’ might differ in meaning across different participants. For this reason, both terms were defined in the second section of the questionnaire.
Conclusion

This paper investigated what causes feelings of stress and worry in young children, aged from 3 to 8. Data indicated that the most common trigger of such feelings for the youngest children was linked to separation issues. The findings presented showed that this affected children and parents in different ways and that most parents did not feel the need to inform staff members. Data further showed that there were other social issues which the children pondered upon, and these included bullying, friendship issues and concerns linked to the teacher-student relationship. Qualitative data further showed how parents can feel “trapped” when the stressor is directly linked to the teacher’s approach. This, in turn, enticed more feelings of worry and stress, and words like “frustrated” and “helpless” were used to describe such situations. It was also noted that this factor was also brought forward across the 3 - 5-year-old age group. This, therefore, indicates that although literature suggests that feelings of stress and worry tend to increase by age, such feelings are also inevitably present in the early years. Qualitative extracts further showed that children worry and stress about assessments, tests, spelling games and exams whilst others do not always like staying at school for long hours, with a concern expressed on after-school programmes, given that parents might work for long hours. It was also shown that constant changes in teachers within the same academic year were seen as problematic for some of the participants whilst other triggers were linked to situational factors since this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A significant finding presented through the qualitative data gathered showed that the school and the classroom teacher were mostly aware of worry and stress in students when the main stressor involved other children. Conversely, qualitative data showed that there were instances where the participants did not contact the school because the main stressor was directly linked to the teacher-student relationship. This indicates that the means of communication need to be reviewed to better tackle issues which might be directly linked to the systems adopted by the school. In this respect, it is important for school systems to acknowledge that as shown in this research paper, young children may experience feelings of stress and worry, some of which might be triggered within the school environment. In line with this, data showed a need for more emphasis to be given towards children's emotional and social development, rather than schools being solely academically driven. Listening to children effectively and teaching social, problem-solving, communication, and resilience skills should be pushed forward in order to fully acknowledge children's needs. The findings in this paper have revealed that the wellbeing of students, including students in the early years, needs to be conceded, as it is only through such means that schools can truly cater for holistic learning whilst ensuring that students’ diverse learning needs are met.

References


