#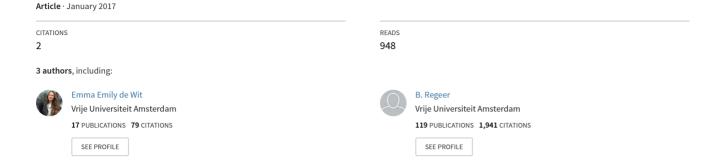 'UNSCHOOLING' IN THE CONTEXT OF GROWING MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS AMONG INDIAN STUDENTS: THE JOURNEY OF 3 MIDDLE-CLASS UNSCHOOLING FAMILIES

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'UNSCHOOLING' IN THE CONTEXT OF GROWING MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS AMONG INDIAN STUDENTS: THE JOURNEY OF 3 MIDDLE-CLASS UNSCHOOLING FAMILIES

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Abstract

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

Introduction

Much has been written about the effects of high parental pressure, and overall academic stress, on children in India and many Asian countries alike. Most strikingly witnessed in countries like China, South-Korea, Japan and India, education is often treated as an

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

Interestingly, alternative movements have begun to emerge as critical response to the high expectations regarding children's learning processes in India, of which unschooling is one and on which we will expand a bit later on. We present the journey of three middle-class unschooling families in Pune, in the context of ever increasing concerns regarding the mental wellbeing of youth in urban India; their difficulties growing up in a rapidly changing society, the burden resulting from the rigid education system and competitive job market and tendencies towards experiencing anxiety and depression (Gupta et al. 2015; Nazeer and Sultana 2014). In this in-depth study, we set to explore what role (the anticipation of) stress

and anxiety in children and families plays in the motivations of parents in India to choose unschooling as an alternative to the formal education system. We also aim to understand how unschooling is framed by Indian parents in their own context, and what advantagesor disadvantages they experience in their unschooling journey. More specifically we aim to gain indepth understanding of how personal stress is recognized and lived in their every day lives. Ultimately our objective was to discover key issues that emerged from the unschooling families' educational journey so far that could be considered distinctively different from those commonly existing in more formal education systems, particularly with regards to how mental health issues exist and develop over time.

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

Hence, mainstream education has received much critique in India, and alternative ways of schooling, parallel to the increasing commercialization of 'normal' formal education, have slowly started appearing over the past few decades, as well as various forms of 'home-

schooling' and 'unschooling' (Augustine & Brahme, 2014). Indeed, as Tharakan (2016, p. 5) explains:

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

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

Furthermore, as well as growing numbers returning to these less formal and more child-centered learning strategies in the home environment, India boasts many recent 'alternative' schooling strategies. For instance, 'Swaraj' University (in the city of Udaipur), meaning 'recovery/harmony' of the self, began in 2010, inviting college – and university-aged young people into two-year self-determined learning programmes (Jain & Akomolafe 2016). Moreover, 'Digantar' schools (now a non-profit society) continuously practice and search for new alternatives in primary education with an ethos of 'joyful' and 'creative' learning across three school centres in the city of Jaipur (Chopra & Chabra 2013). Indeed, whether through an increasing awareness of the creative, independent and free-thinking capacities of their children (see Pell 2013) or wide-scale global trends to return to more unstructured community- or home-centred learning environments (Ricci 2011; Rolstad & Kesson, 2013),

Indian parents are becoming increasingly aware, and conscious, of how and in what ways they themselves might relate to and educate their children.

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

'Unschooling' in the Context of Growing Mental Health Concerns Among Indian Students: The Journey of 3 Middle-Class Unschooling Families

Methodology

The study was conducted in the context of a larger study on stress and anxiety in Indian students (see; de Wit, Adithy, Bunders-Aelen & Regeer, 2016), for which the researchers worked and stayed in Pune for a spell of eighteen months between 2013 and 2017. Pune is a large city in the state of Maharashtra and often considered 'Oxford of the East' due to its abundance of educational institutes. Through their colleagues in Pune, the researchers got introduced to Monica[1], an important figure in the fields of community co-creation and development, parenting, and education in Pune. She and her husband have unschooled their three children (a girl of 23 years old, and two boys of 19 and 15 years old) from the very beginning. In the earlier years of their children's upbringing, there were very few families making the same choices, making them (in a sense) pioneers and a valuable source of experiential knowledge and inspiration for other parents across India. They agreed to take part in this in-depth semi-structured interview in order to explore the aforementioned questions together. After, Monica made a referral to two more unschooling parents; Nidha, a mother of two children (a girl of 15, and a boy of 9 years old), who is now divorced and raising her children largely by herself, and Reshma, a mother of two young girls (5 and 3 years old) who lives together with her husband in a joint family home, and had – at the time - only just begun unschooling her children. In the period after the interviews, the researchers stayed in close contact with these families, meeting each other often through community events and other various gatherings at their homes or in the city, helping to derive more meaning and understanding towards the questions posed in this study.

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[1] All names of participants in this study have been replaced with pseudonyms so as to protect confidentiality.

Methods and analysis.

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

Overall, a descriptive- and explanatory-research style rooted in the phenomological approach (Lester, 1999) was used to inquire into the individual life narratives of each parent, highlighting the significance of certain events, insights and challenges in the form of three family stories (see *Results*), in order to give answer to the main research questions regarding how these families came to arrange their lives around unschooling (Sandelowski, 1991). Each interview had its own unique structure with regards to the exact formulation and sequence of the questions in order to maintain a natural flow, yet, overall, each aforementioned theme was explored with every parent.

'Unschooling' in the Context of Growing Mental Health Concerns Among Indian Students: The Journey of 3 Middle-Class Unschooling Families

Results

<u>Monica and Paul's story</u>

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

> *'I didn't know at the beginning that there was a thing called 'unschooling' or 'home schooling'. I was just saying clearly that I know I'm not sending the children to school'.*

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

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

> Interestingly, their gradual journey into what only later they found out to be 'unschooling' moved Monica towards exposing their 3 children to what she herself admits

was only really important according to *her*, and from what she had derived and accepted from her environment as important concepts to study. Indeed, as she comically explains: *"If the child said 'why is it important?' I really didn't know."*

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

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

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

> *Monica: 'We had 5 different breakfasts, 5 different lunches… everyone had their own activity, their own pattern, their own rhythm… apart from funny sleeping behaviours, funny eating times, the children had funny behaviours also'.*

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

> *'Because of being unschooled, at a very early age, 13, 14, 15, she had already developed a self-watcher. So she could watch a sense of jealousy arising in her, and she could talk about it. And she could see it as something, it didn't consume her. All of her emotions, they don't consume her'.*

Equally prevalent in their 'unschooling' process were the difficulties they experienced through such years. Monica and Paul encountered countless challenges when excitedly trying to engage their children enough with other environments outside of the home in particular. Indeed, as Monica details, it was hugely challenging to cope with the whole family at home every day, and equally as tricky finding suitable, nourishing and (what they felt to be) 'unschooling' environments in the wider world:

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

But such experiences, like every step of Paul and Monica's story, whether overwhelming, inspiring or painful, are reflected upon like every other – as a lesson to be

learned and a natural, important phase to be journeyed through together. Indeed, it is this ability to consciously reflect upon, and continuously move through, life that most reflects Paul and Monica as people and as 'unschooling' parents. Paul:

'In India, there is a saying that your outer environment is just a reflection of your inner environment... And they say that you kind of 'clean up the lake' and then it reflects better. So I've kind of realised that if you are at ease within, everything on the outside moves with ease...even when there is dis-ease, it is something inside of you that needs to develop....'.

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

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

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

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

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

Nidha's Story

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Over time, Nidha's family have been allowing for a broader range of experiences and possibilities, both in their relationships with others, their interests and the way they relate to themselves. As such, her daughter discovered a keen love for animals and wanting to care for them, as well as enjoying painting and drawing. Also, with regards to emotions, Nidha embraced a sense of exploration and acceptance:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> *'Learning and education for me, personally, is to develop the skills, the emotional balance, the integrity and the strength to be able to embrace life with all its*

challenges and conflicts and struggles. And its share of happiness, whatever. Life is not one dimensional. It's multi-dimensional. There are dimensions we don't even know of!... At least by living the way some of us are choosing to live now, we are experiencing more dimensions than those who still choose to live 1 or 2 dimensional lives.'

Reshma's Story

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> *'Traditionally our family members are very very educated. In my family I have 2 doctors,*
>
> *5 engineers, 2 double post-docs, 3 research scientists, the rest are in research in organic*

chemistry or banking. So that level of academic achievement is so so high. And I myself, I have a masters, trained abroad, so coming from there I feel judged many times. My Mum especially feels I have achieved everything but I'm not going to let my children have that, and that's not true, though sometimes I feel that's how they think of me - that I'm stopping them achieving.'

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

Discussion

Based on the analysis of the data derived from the in-depth interviews with these unschooling families, several commonly perceived themes were identified, revealing vital details about their shared lived experiences. First, the concept of *freedom* was equally emphasized as an important value to protect regarding each member of the family, including the freedom to express individual needs and preferences, as well as a wide range of emotions and social behaviors. Secondly, all three families exhibited a belief in their children's *autonomy* as an important starting point for their young lives. Before learning anything else (e.g. formal social skills), their children were allowed to express their individuality, and experience for themselves what the social repercussions may or may not be. Finally, all three families showed a certain desire for *togetherness* as a way of both living and learning, which at times could be experienced as challenging, due to so many hours being spent at home and with very few outside distractions, but equally often as harmonious and peaceful.

Besides these consistent themes, there were many other unique relations suggested between unschooling and the concept of stress and mental wellbeing, as portrayed by the lives of these families. Through the gathering, and understanding, of these three unschooling family stories,

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

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

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Robinson (2010), through his TED talk on creativity and the norms found in formal schooling institutes for example, reminds us of such concerns:

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

Hence, as Reshma and Monica especially attested for, it was perhaps not the challenging and self-responsible emotional journeys that their children (and often themselves) were seen to deeply experience, but instead the suffering – or 'stress' – of boredom, inactivity and self-neglect that is of real concern when examining the apparent mental health[2] of young Indians today (Goodlad 1984; Chopra & Chabra 2013; Jain and Akomolafe 2016). As evident from the study, this could understandably become a key motivation for Indian parents to choose the 'alternative' approach of unschooling for their own children; especially if these forms of 'stress' are problematised by parents, and – as Nidha, in the study exemplifies – when other educational options are increasingly made explicit and available to them.

Indeed, it is perhaps after all the role of any form of education, and equally of (unschooling) parenting practices, to expose children to their own infinite spectrum of growing emotional, physical and cognitive capacities. As Chopra and Chabra (2013, p. 28) remind us, *"the hearts and minds of children and young adults are wide open to the wonders of learning and the fascinating complexities of life"*. When applying this to the subject of formal or informal education, the study more than anything essentially stresses the importance of *trust* and, as such, the willingness or ability as a parent or educator to be open to, and thoughtful towards, multiple educational choices and outcomes, accepting that there may not even be a single and recognized 'correct' way of doing things. Equally, to make

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[2] Although from a cross-cultural perspective, mental health is impossible to define, we refer to mental health as described by the WHO (2001, p. 21), as a container concept that includes aspects of subjective wellbeing, perceived self-efficacy and functioning, and actualization of one's emotional and intellectual abilities.

decisions for and neglect a child's natural tendencies through their educational environment, and as such dictate a singular, outdated method of formal schooling, is perhaps the most likely route towards an Indian child's sufferin stress, anxiety, and perhaps, over time, other more severe mental health difficulties.

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

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

Thirdly, and what is perhaps most interesting, is how *'stress'* in itself is specifically recognised, experienced and reflected upon in this process of self-governance that has been strongly pointed to above. Paul and Monica, as well as both their daughter and youngest son for example, were shown to exhibit what they admitted to be deeply challenging and 'stressful' periods that still continue to persist today at times. It would seem, equally by Reshma and Nidha's occasional fatigue, self-doubt and self-depreciation, that the autonomy fostered by unschooling lifestyles may provoke feelings of responsibility for one's own life and actions, which in turn can become its own kind of stress or, just as equally exhibited, sheer confusion and 'not-knowing'. Furthermore, as is common with many alternative homeschooling strategies, the parents in our study were solely responsible for the care, support and facilitation of their children's chosen daily routines (see Hauseman 2011; Holt

1981). As such it is perhaps not surprising that marked examples of feeling overwhelmed, mentally exhausted and doubtful existed throughout the parents' lives especially so far. Unschooling may therefore in itself be an intensely self-confronting and responsible adventure for children to undertake, and equally so for unschooling parents (see Pell 2003; Grunzke 2010; Morrison 2007).

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

and so on (see Chopra and Chabra 2013; Ricci and Pritscher 2015).

Lastly, what seems most vital, and distinctively different from those children in formal education systems perhaps, is the development, first and foremost, of a sense of *agency,* essentially to diverse, fluid coping approaches to navigating themselves healthily and effectively in the world. It is argued that the self-determination stimulated by unschooling parents, through the bold choice of unschooling in the first place, as well as daily facilitative methods, despite their children being so young and still somewhat dependent, evidently allow for extraordinary capacities in children to act through their own individual will, conscious freedom and choice (see Kumpulained et al., 2012; Borkar 2016). Children need rather not learn how to 'cope with' or blindly 'react to' life's circumstances, but develop their psycho-social abilities, including e.g. reflectivity, self-empathy and aspects of communication, in order to make relevant and empowered choices (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001). The latter especially might be considered a key consideration when improving formal educational approaches in India, ensuring that children develop a sense of responsibility for their lives and that their sense of self-value is derived from what was observed in this study as 'critical self-reflection', independent of comparative and external evaluation measures. One way to establish this philosophy, for instance, could be to create platforms (either physical or online spaces) for meaningful exchanges and continuous reflection among teachers, parents and children whereby this aim of self-learning can be reiterated. Such platforms are used by parents in the Pune community through social networks that use email exchange to share experiences and ideas. In alternative schools also, such as those based on the Jiddu Krishnamurti schools in India, teachers and children are stimulated to come together weekly in order to have potentially meaningful discussions. What is promising for the future, in this respect, is that such platforms are already being seen in numerous alternative schools across

India (Vittachi, Raghavan & Raj, 2007). If parents (and indeed educators alike), are able to provoke in children this sense of self-discovery, regardless of its educational format, it is perhaps less likely that experiences of anxiety or stress in youth – particularly those mentioned above as being somewhat unavoidable, natural and even healthy - should necessary lead to more severe and restrictive mental health concerns.

Naturally, this is already more actively witnessed in unschooling settings, in India, as well as other parts of the world. What is perhaps more unique about the journeys of these families in the context of Pune however, and what could be an inspiring lesson to unschooling families outside of India also, is the way in which these families continue to use their 'pioneering' (Unschooling) status as an incentive to derive support and continuous reflection from other parents in the community. There is a tremendous sense of sharing and empathic listening evident among these families, on which solid relationships continue to be built. As such, despite the rapidly expanding borders of Pune, the values of a small, close-knit village are somewhat maintained, in which various constructs and taboos regarding family and societal roles (including issues of sexuality, money, power and physical health) are often challenged and negotiated. As authors, equally we have been inspired to stay in close contact with this community, and remain involved in learning what answers unschooling may provide for ourselves with regards to such issues.

Ethics

A declaration from the VU University's Medical Ethics Committee for non-WMO (confirming that the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act does not apply to this particular study) was obtained in 2014 (reference number: 2014.170). All participants were informed about the objectives, that their participation was voluntary and their right to leave

the study at any point, for which they signed informed consent forms.

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