



Exploring Academic Stress among Secondary School Students: A Qualitative Study of Their Experiences and Coping Strategies

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Abstract

Academic stress has become an important concern during adolescence because students are expected to manage academic workloads, examinations, parental expectations, teacher expectations, peer relationships, and concerns about their future. Although quantitative studies can indicate the prevalence or level of academic stress, numerical scores alone may not fully explain how students experience stress in their everyday academic lives. The present qualitative study therefore proposes to explore the lived experiences of academic stress among secondary school students and to understand the ways in which they cope with academic pressure. A phenomenological qualitative design will be adopted. Participants will be selected through purposive sampling, and data will be collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interview data will be analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and experiences. Previous qualitative research among adolescents has identified academic pressure, family expectations, examination performance, school-related demands, peer relationships, and concerns about the future as important sources of stress. Indian qualitative studies have similarly highlighted academic pressure and family-related concerns, while also reporting coping mechanisms such as distraction, acceptance, withdrawal, self-comfort, spirituality, and seeking social support. The proposed study aims to provide a deeper understanding of students' voices and experiences and to generate educational implications for teachers, parents, counsellors, and schools. The study may contribute to the development of context-sensitive approaches for reducing academic stress and strengthening students' coping resources.

Keywords: Academic Stress, Adolescents, Secondary School Students, Coping Strategies, Lived Experiences, Phenomenology, Qualitative Research



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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is an important stage of human development characterized by considerable physical, emotional, psychological, and social changes. During this period, students are gradually developing their identity, independence, aspirations, and understanding of their future. At the same time, they are expected to perform well academically and make decisions that may influence their educational and career pathways. These expectations can create considerable pressure. Academic stress refers broadly to the psychological pressure experienced by students when they perceive that academic demands exceed, or may exceed, their ability or available resources to cope with them. Academic work itself is not necessarily harmful. A reasonable level of academic challenge may encourage students to work harder and develop competence. However, when academic demands become excessive or are accompanied by fear of failure, unrealistic expectations, competition, or continuous evaluation, students may experience significant distress.

Qualitative research is particularly valuable for understanding academic stress because stress is not experienced in exactly the same way by every student. Two students facing similar examination demands may interpret and respond to those demands differently. One student may consider examinations an opportunity for achievement, whereas another may experience fear, sleeplessness, self-doubt, or a feeling of being unable to meet expectations. Understanding



these personal meanings requires students to describe their experiences in their own words. Research conducted among adolescents in India has shown that academic pressure is an important source of stress. Nagabharana et al. (2021), using qualitative interviews with adolescents in Mysore, found that family and academic pressures were prominent stressors, while participants also described coping through acceptance, distraction, spirituality, self-comfort, and other strategies. The researchers emphasized the importance of understanding adolescents' own perspectives when developing interventions. Similarly, a qualitative study of school-going adolescents in Goa and Delhi reported that home, school, peer, and neighbourhood environments contributed to stress. Academic pressure was among the salient social stressors identified by participants. Academic stress is therefore not simply an individual problem. It may be influenced by the interaction between students and their families, teachers, schools, peers, examination systems, and wider social expectations. A qualitative exploration can help reveal these interactions in greater depth.

Background of the Study

Academic competition has become increasingly visible in the lives of school-going adolescents. Students may experience pressure to obtain high marks, perform well in examinations, complete homework, satisfy teachers and parents, compete with peers, and secure admission to desired educational institutions. For some students, academic performance becomes closely connected with their perception of self-worth and future success. A qualitative study conducted in Iran among students aged 12–18 years identified several categories of academic stressors, including family factors, peer relationships, teachers and the educational system, homework and test scores, and additional educational classes. The findings demonstrate that academic stress can emerge from several interconnected sources rather than from examinations alone.

Research from other cultural settings also indicates that students may experience academic stress through expectations related to achievement. A qualitative study of Chinese high-school students identified academic expectations as a major source of stress and found that stress could influence emotions, sleep, studies, and psychological well-being. Participants also reported different coping strategies, some of which provided short-term relief but were not necessarily effective in the long term. These findings suggest that academic stress should be understood within the social and cultural context in which students live and study. It is therefore important to listen directly to students and explore what they consider stressful, how they interpret these experiences, how stress affects their daily lives, and what forms of support they perceive as useful.

Rationale of the Study

Most conventional studies of academic stress rely on standardized scales and numerical scores. Such studies are useful for measuring the magnitude or prevalence of stress and for examining relationships among variables. However, they may not fully explain the personal meanings attached to stressful academic experiences. A student's statement such as "I am stressed because of examinations" may conceal several underlying experiences: fear of disappointing parents, uncertainty about the future, comparison with classmates, pressure from teachers, lack of preparation time, or fear of losing self-confidence after poor performance. Qualitative research provides an opportunity to move beyond numerical measurement and understand these experiences from the students' perspectives. In-depth interviews allow participants to describe situations that may not be captured through predetermined questionnaire items. The rationale for the present study is therefore to explore academic stress



as an experienced and socially situated phenomenon. The study will particularly focus on students' perceptions of academic pressure, its perceived sources and effects, their coping mechanisms, and the support they believe could help them.

Objectives of the Study

The proposed study will have the following objectives:

1. To explore the lived experiences of academic stress among secondary school students.
2. To identify the major academic and non-academic factors perceived by students as sources of academic stress.
3. To explore the emotional, behavioural, social, and academic experiences associated with academic stress.
4. To understand the coping strategies used by students to manage academic stress.
5. To explore students' perceptions regarding the role of parents, teachers, peers, and schools in managing academic stress.
6. To identify students' suggestions for creating a supportive learning environment.

Research Questions

The study will address the following research questions:

1. How do secondary school students describe their experiences of academic stress?
2. What factors do students perceive as major sources of academic stress?
3. How does academic stress influence students' emotions, behaviour, studies, and everyday life?
4. What coping strategies do students use when they experience academic stress?
5. What kinds of support do students expect from parents, teachers, peers, and schools?
6. What changes do students suggest for reducing unnecessary academic pressure?

RESEARCH METHODS

1. Research Approach. The study will adopt a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is appropriate because the purpose is to understand students' experiences, perceptions, feelings, meanings, and coping practices rather than to measure academic stress through numerical scores.
2. Research Design. A phenomenological research design will be employed. Phenomenology is suitable because the central concern of the study is the lived experience of academic stress as perceived and described by students themselves.
3. Participants. The participants will be secondary school students who are experiencing regular academic demands such as classroom learning, examinations, assignments, homework, and assessment. Participants may be selected from different schools to obtain diverse experiences. A tentative sample of approximately 15–20 students may be considered initially. However, the final number should be determined by data saturation, meaning that interviews may continue until additional interviews no longer contribute substantially new themes. A previous qualitative Indian study on adolescent stress similarly used purposive recruitment and stopped recruitment when new themes ceased to emerge.
4. Sampling Technique. Purposive sampling will be used. Participants will be selected because they can provide rich and relevant information about academic stress and its management. Where appropriate, maximum variation may be considered to include students with different academic experiences, genders, school contexts, and backgrounds.
5. Data Collection Tool. Data will be collected through a semi-structured interview schedule. Semi-structured interviews provide sufficient structure to maintain focus while allowing students to describe experiences in their own words. Possible interview questions include:



- a. What does academic stress mean to you?
 - b. Which academic situations make you feel stressed?
 - c. What do you feel when examinations are approaching?
 - d. What expectations do you experience from your parents?
 - e. What expectations do you experience from teachers?
 - f. Does comparison with classmates affect you? How?
 - g. How does academic stress affect your studies or daily routine?
 - h. What do you usually do when you feel academically stressed?
 - i. Whom do you talk to when you are under pressure?
 - j. What kind of support would make academic life easier for you? These questions may be followed by probing questions such as "Can you explain this further?", "Can you give an example?", or "How did you feel at that time?"
6. Data Collection Procedure. After obtaining necessary institutional permission and informed consent/assent, interviews will be conducted individually in a comfortable and reasonably private setting. Participants will be informed about the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw from the study. With appropriate permission, interviews may be audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Confidentiality will be maintained by using pseudonyms or participant codes instead of students' names. The use of individual in-depth interviews is supported by previous qualitative research because they allow adolescents to discuss sensitive experiences in greater detail and privacy.
7. Data Analysis. The study will employ thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke's approach provides a widely used framework for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis may involve the following stages:
- a. Familiarization with the interview transcripts.
 - b. Initial coding of meaningful statements.
 - c. Identification of recurring patterns.
 - d. Development of candidate themes.
 - e. Review and refinement of themes.
 - f. Naming and defining the final themes.
 - g. Interpretation and presentation of findings.
 - h. Previous qualitative research on adolescent stress has successfully used thematic analysis to identify themes related to stressors and coping strategies.

Possible Thematic Framework for Findings

Since the actual interviews will determine the final findings, the following themes are proposed as an analytical framework rather than predetermined results.

- Theme 1: Examination and Performance Pressure. Students may describe examinations, marks, grades, and expectations of academic achievement as important sources of stress. The pressure may become particularly intense when students perceive that their future opportunities depend heavily on examination performance.
- Theme 2: Expectations of Parents and Teachers. Students may describe expectations from parents and teachers as both motivating and stressful. Supportive expectations may encourage effort, whereas excessive or unrealistic expectations may create fear of failure or disappointment. Research among adolescents in India has identified family and academic pressure as important contributors to stress.
- Theme 3: Comparison and Competition. Students may discuss comparison with classmates, rankings, marks, and competition. Comparison can sometimes motivate students, but it may also contribute to feelings of inadequacy or anxiety when students perceive themselves as performing below others.



- Theme 4: Emotional and Behavioural Experiences. Participants may describe feelings such as worry, frustration, sadness, fear, irritability, confusion, or reduced confidence. Some students may report difficulty concentrating, changes in sleep, withdrawal, or loss of interest in routine activities. A qualitative study of Chinese school adolescents reported effects of stress on emotions, sleep, study, and psychological well-being, illustrating the importance of examining stress beyond examination performance alone.
- Theme 5: Coping Strategies. Students may report several ways of managing academic pressure, including studying according to a schedule, taking breaks, talking to friends or family, listening to music, engaging in physical activities, spending time alone, using humour or distraction, praying or engaging in spiritual practices, and accepting difficult situations. Indian qualitative research has identified acceptance, distraction, spirituality, self-comfort, and distancing from stressful situations among adolescents' coping responses.
- Theme 6: Need for Understanding and Support. Students may express a need for adults to listen to them without immediately judging their academic performance. They may expect teachers to provide academic guidance, parents to offer emotional support, and schools to provide opportunities for counselling and healthy communication.

Discussion

Academic stress appears to be a multidimensional experience rather than a single academic problem. The available qualitative literature suggests that students' stress may be shaped by interactions among academic demands, family expectations, school environments, peer relationships, and future aspirations. The proposed study is particularly relevant because students themselves can provide information about experiences that may remain invisible to teachers and parents. For example, a teacher may perceive repeated testing as a routine academic practice, while a student may experience the same practice as a continuous source of fear. Similarly, parental encouragement may be intended as motivation but may be interpreted by a student as pressure when expectations are perceived as unattainable. The literature also suggests that students are not passive recipients of stress. They actively develop different coping responses. These responses may be adaptive, such as planning, seeking social support, exercise, constructive problem-solving, and acceptance. Others may provide temporary relief without addressing the underlying source of stress. Research among Korean adolescents, for example, identified both positive and maladaptive forms of coping with excessive academic stress. Therefore, educational interventions should not focus exclusively on reducing academic workload. They should also consider communication, emotional support, realistic expectations, time management, coping skills, and students' opportunities to express their concerns.

Educational Implications

The proposed study may have several implications for education. First, schools may need to create opportunities for students to discuss academic concerns without fear of judgment. Regular counselling and student-support mechanisms may provide a safe space for communication. Second, teachers may play an important role in identifying signs of excessive stress. Instead of viewing academic performance only through marks and grades, teachers can consider students' emotional and social experiences. Third, parents can be encouraged to distinguish between supportive expectations and excessive academic pressure. Constructive communication may help students perceive parental guidance as support rather than as a constant demand for higher performance. Fourth, schools may incorporate stress-management and coping skills into student development programmes. Time management, study planning, relaxation, problem-solving, and help-seeking can be discussed as practical skills. Finally,



educational institutions may consider students' voices while designing academic schedules, assessment practices, counselling programmes, and student-welfare initiatives.

Limitations of the Proposed Study

The qualitative nature of the study means that the findings will represent the experiences of the selected participants and will not necessarily be statistically generalizable to all secondary school students. Participants may also hesitate to discuss sensitive experiences, particularly when the topic involves parental expectations, teachers, examination pressure, or personal emotions. The quality of the findings will therefore depend partly on the trust established between the researcher and participants. Furthermore, students' experiences may vary according to school context, socioeconomic background, gender, academic level, and cultural environment. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted within the context in which the data are collected.

CONCLUSION

Academic stress is an important educational and psychosocial concern during adolescence. It cannot be fully understood through marks, grades, or numerical stress scores alone. Students' own voices can reveal how academic pressure is experienced, interpreted, and managed in everyday life. The proposed phenomenological study seeks to understand these experiences through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and thematic analysis. Existing qualitative evidence indicates that academic pressure may interact with family expectations, school demands, peer relationships, examination performance, and future concerns. At the same time, students use a range of coping strategies and often express a need for greater understanding and support from adults. A deeper understanding of students' experiences can help teachers, parents, counsellors, and educational institutions move beyond simply asking whether students are stressed. The more meaningful questions are: What makes students feel stressed? How does that stress shape their everyday lives? How do they cope? And what kind of support do they believe would actually help? Answering these questions through students' lived experiences can contribute to more sensitive, supportive, and student-centred educational practices.

The novelty of this study lies in its effort to move beyond the predominant measurement-oriented approach to academic stress by providing an in-depth, phenomenological account of how secondary school students experience, interpret, and negotiate academic pressure within their everyday educational and social environments. While previous studies have largely examined academic stress through prevalence rates, psychological scales, or isolated stressors, limited attention has been given to the dynamic interplay between examination demands, parental and teacher expectations, peer relationships, future aspirations, and students' personal meanings of academic success and failure. This study further advances the existing literature by examining coping not merely as a set of predefined strategies, but as an evolving and context-dependent process through which students actively respond to, manage, and make sense of academic stress. By foregrounding students' own voices through in-depth qualitative inquiry, the study seeks to reveal potentially overlooked forms of coping, contextual variations, and tensions between adaptive and maladaptive responses that may remain obscured in quantitative assessments. Consequently, the study contributes a context-sensitive conceptual understanding of academic stress and coping among secondary school students and provides empirically grounded insights that can inform more responsive school-based counselling, pedagogical practices, parental engagement, and student-support interventions.



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