

Impact of Academic Stress on Secondary School Student's Performance: A Qualitative Exploration

Muhammad Saqib¹, Khawaja Hisham-Ul-Hassan², Ifrah Shadab³ and Nasir Mehmood⁴

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Abstract

The study investigates the influence of teaching methods, the school environment, and the home environment on academic stress. Future concerns related to career choices are also explored. Thematic analysis is applied to discern patterns from interviews, with a primary goal of understanding how academic stress impacts student performance. The paper discusses various contributors to academic stress, including teacher expectations and the school environment. Utilizing a qualitative research design, the study employs purposive sampling across ten public secondary schools in the Vehari district. Semi-structured interviews with students are conducted, targeting a sample of ten students from five schools. Data collection involves face-to-face interviews, recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. The conclusion summarizes the pervasive nature of academic stress and highlights students' delicate balance. Coping mechanisms, especially a supportive home study environment, are emphasized. The study concludes with practical recommendations for teachers, emphasizing constructive feedback and the creation of an equitable and supportive classroom atmosphere.

Keywords: Academic stress, Stress factors.

Introduction

Stress is primarily a physical reaction and is defined as a state characterized by symptoms of physical and mental tension or strain, such as depression or hypertension. This often occurs in response to situations in which a person feels threatened, under pressure, or both. The professional stage is a memorable time in life, especially for young people entering the outside world. It is a time of socialization, exploration of the environment, and development of curiosity about various aspects of life. In today's era, education greatly influences a person's life and career. As a result, students face considerable pressure to progress at each level of education and advance their academic journey (Ozkan, 2020). Students have many challenges to face, such as making friends, carrying out workloads, attending additional matriculations, and meeting fathers' expectations. These independent fitness challenges can lead to various mental well-being issues as long as these are more severe. This studio studies the influence of students in the academic performance of students, aligning with the quarter object of sustainable development which enthuses the provision of high-quality education.

Stress is a common factor that significantly reduces individual morale. It develops when a person cannot control their internal and external feelings. When stress becomes chronic or exceeds a certain level, it affects the mental health of an individual and can lead to various psychological disorders, such as depression. Depression, stress, and anxiety are some of the

¹PhD Scholar, Department of Education, Superior University, Lahore. Email: joiya.saqib@gmail.com

²Associate Professor, Department of Commerce, Superior University, Lahore. Email: Kh_hisham@hotmail.com

³Visiting Lecturer, Department of STEM Education, University of Education, Multan, Pakistan.

Email: Ifrahsajjad93@gmail.com

⁴PhD Scholar, Department of Education, Superior University, Lahore. Email: nasiruel@gmail.com



common psychological problems among students. Depression, anxiety, and stress are interrelated (Adu, 2023). Shared symptoms of depression, stress, and anxiety can contribute to a variety of academic problems that negatively impact students' academic performance. Research indicates that the academic performance of students at different levels, whether in school, college, or university, can be affected by these psychological problems. This impact can manifest as difficulty concentrating, decreased motivation and interest, poor attendance, and physical health problems such as headaches and fatigue (Adom et al., 2020).

Academic stress refers to the mental anguish that arises from the anticipation of possible academic failure or a lack of awareness of the possibility of such failure. Students face various academic demands, such as participating in academic tests, answering questions in class, and demonstrating progress in their subjects. They must also understand the lessons taught by teachers, compete with their classmates, and meet academic expectations set by teachers and parents. These demands can often strain or exceed students' available resources and coping mechanisms (Saqib & Kaleem, 2018). As a result, students may experience stress because the application is tied to achieving an academic goal. In this context, academics are linked to the achievement of specific educational objectives. The concept of academic stress, depending on the individual mentioned, encompasses an individual's perception of academic frustration, academic conflict, academic pressure, and academic anxiety. It is a state resulting from hindering or harming certain academic objectives (Saptono et al., 2021). Academic conflict results from contradictory or incompatible response tendencies to academic objectives involving two or more aspects. Academic pressure occurs when students face considerable demands on their time and energy to achieve their academic goals. Academic anxiety refers to the apprehension of potential harm to certain academic goals. Academic stress is an important factor that influences variations in academic performance. Additionally, it contributes to significant mental health risks and can lead to problems related to stress-induced physical and mental illnesses (Owan et al., 2020).

Significance of the Study

The impact of stress on students' academic performance in secondary schools is a complex and pervasive issue influenced by numerous factors. The heightened academic expectations, social pressures, and transitional nature of secondary education contribute to the stress experienced by students. The combination of family dynamics, engagement in extracurricular activities, and the omnipresent pressure of exams creates a challenging environment. Prolonged stress can have adverse effects on both physical and mental health, potentially leading to detrimental coping mechanisms and hindering effective learning. The consequences of chronic stress during secondary school extend into the long term, affecting students' overall well-being and future academic and professional pursuits. Recognizing and addressing these stressors is crucial for fostering a supportive learning environment that prioritizes students' mental health and academic success.

Research Objectives

ROI: To explore the stress factors on the academic performance of secondary school students.

RO2: To suggest measures to cope with stress factors on student's academic performance.

Research Questions

RQ1: What specific stress factors do students commonly encounter, and how do these factors impact their academic performance?

RQ2: Can you elaborate on the observed impact of stress on students' academic performance?

Review of Literature

Stress is a complex process that can be triggered by the perception of an event or circumstance as stressful, having a negative impact on the learning process. The physical response to stress is summarized in the general adaptation syndrome, which includes three stages, illustrating the body's complex reaction to a real or perceived stressor. During the alarm response phase, the individual identifies various stressors and activates the fight or flight response. This stage involves increased secretion of corticosteroids, increased activity of the sympathetic nervous system, and elevated production of norepinephrine. Ideally, the person should quickly move from the alarm stage to the resistance stage. The resistance stage occurs when physiological reserves are mobilized to improve the individual's resilience against the stressor. In the resistance stage, the fight or flight response is deactivated, and the activity of the sympathetic nervous system returns to its initial level. If the various stress-inducing factors persist, the individual may eventually enter a phase of exhaustion, where the ability to resist the stressor is lost. Stress has a significant impact on each individual, exerting a powerful influence on the mind and a person's overall health and well-being.

Furthermore, stress can significantly affect students' academic performance, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels, where emotional and psychological challenges become more significant. Stress, in this context, is characterized as a mental and psychological response to environmental demands that arise when an individual perceives difficulty in achieving academic goals. This becomes a demanding task for parents as each student has specific future aspirations related to their education (Borhani & Wong, 2023).

Promsri (2019) defined academic stress as characterized by anxiety and pressure that arise from the demands of schooling and education. Earning a degree often involves many pressures, including studying, homework, exams, labs, reading, and tests. Stress is compounded by the need to manage these academic responsibilities, balance time efficiently, and find space to participate in extracurricular activities. Academic stress can be particularly difficult for students, especially those living away from home for the first time and facing the complexities of college life and independent living simultaneously. Studies reveal that teachers expect their assignments to be completed on time, but students often underestimate the time needed for reading and writing tasks, including printing their work. The manifestation of stress, along with its associated symptoms, such as depression and tension, is widely recognized as a common problem among people in various professions and industries. Recently, there has been a growing awareness of this concern, fueled by the proliferation of books, research reports, popular articles, and an increasing number of organized workshops, all aimed at educating people on how to manage and cope with stress effectively (Naz et al., 2021).

Sholihah et al. (2000) stated that emotions such as frustration, anxiety, and depression resulted in potential experiments at higher levels of beings. Stressors that do not automatically cause depression, depression, or tension. There, it is the interaction between important factors, an individual's perception, and reaction to these important factors that produce them. These are environmental waves of stimuli or demands in the environment that an individual perceives as greater than their ability to cope. We are academics among students who undertake extensive research, which reveals various factors that contribute to our studies, such as a large volume of projects and competition with other students. Understanding these factors is crucial to addressing and managing the impact of academic performance on student well-being. Many stressors significantly impact students' creative thinking and have repercussions on their careers. Stress poses a barrier to students' academic success, with failure and strained relationships with peers or teachers being particularly influential stressors. Academic stressors encompass the student's perception of the broad knowledge base required and the belief that they do need more time to develop the necessary understanding. Dressing these stressors is

essential to promoting a conducive learning environment and encouraging positive academic outcomes (Jafaru et al., 2022).

The participants had a specific challenge in carrying out transport operations, especially in tasks that involved the support of ten people. To expand on these observations, the researchers introduced a third experimental paradigm. The impact of stress on the subject's performance may vary depending on the level of working memory required for the task. Some subjects rely heavily on working memory, while others rely on well-established knowledge. This competition for cognitive resources results in a reduction in the number of resources available for the main task, in this case, the subject. This perspective is called processing abilities theory and suggests that highly anxious individuals tend to exhibit lower cognitive efficiency.

Additionally, the authors investigated whether the stress experienced was specifically related to the subject's operations or, more broadly, to cognitive processing (Saqib et al., 2019). The study also found that high-stress subjects spent more time on tasks than low-stress subjects. However, despite best efforts, the accuracy of the results did not reach the level achieved by people with low stress. This suggests that although these individuals put in more effort, more was needed to translate into better performance. Students often experience academic stress at predictable times each semester, with the biggest sources of stress coming from exams, grading competitions, and the need to master a large amount of content in a limited time. When stress is perceived negatively or becomes excessive, it can cause physical and psychological harm (Phillips et al., 2020).

Students employ a variety of strategies to reduce stress, including effective time management, seeking social support, positive reappraisal, and participating in recreational activities. The pressure to excel on exams or tests, coupled with time constraints, creates a very stressful academic environment. This stress is likely to affect social relationships within and outside the institution, thereby affecting individuals' overall commitment to achieving their goals (Khan & Saleem, 2021). Opportunities for introspection and examination of our lives are rare, and our coping mechanisms and ability to adapt are constantly tested, leading to a deep and pervasive feeling of stress. Stress is a response to change, whether positive or negative, coming from external or internal factors. This can manifest itself in a variety of ways, whether doing well in exams or facing the challenges of our parents' divorce. External pressures, such as expectations of academic or social success from parents or teachers, and internal pressures, such as a relentless drive to succeed, contribute to the ongoing experience of stress (Omondi, 2021).

Physiological and psychological stress can trigger the stress response. Physiological stress is characterized by a change in the external environment or the body, resulting in a chemical or physical alteration in cells that requires a response to counteract the change. Additionally, psychological stressors can activate the stress response. The central nervous system and the endocrine system demonstrate sensitivity to emotional, psychological, and social influences. This interplay between physiological and psychological factors highlights the complex nature of stress and its impact on the body's responses (Adom et al., 2020). Psychological stressors can also activate the stress response. The central nervous system and endocrine system demonstrate sensitivity to emotional, psychological, and social influences, implying that an individual's thoughts and feelings when faced with a stressor can generate a neuroendocrine response. Psychological stressors can provoke a reactive or anticipatory response. A reactive response is a physiological reaction resulting from a psychological stressor (Anurudu & Ansa, 2023).

Academic performance refers to the academic results achieved by a student, teacher, or institution during a specific period. Achieving academic goals is influenced by factors such as school management, teacher effectiveness, and overall staff management. Methods for evaluating academic performance include both exams and continuous assessments, with objectives that vary from one individual or institution to another. Teachers, in particular, play

a crucial role in academic success by imparting knowledge, providing guidance, and fostering an environment conducive to learning (Rosario, 2023). Academic success is a term used to describe when a student excels in academic performance. It represents the success expected and valued by parents, family, and friends. A student is considered to be in good academic standing when they excel in a particular field of study and perform well throughout their studies. Academic success is not limited to obtaining a diploma; It is an important aspect of a student's identity. Success in various life activities is often influenced by academic performance. Parental involvement in a student's academic activities is crucial to improving the quality of academic performance. Parental support plays a key role in enabling students to achieve higher levels of academic excellence (Eria & Avoedoya, 2020).

This section is subdivided into eight subsections, each of which systematically classifies factors related to the literature on the concept of school facilities, teaching resources and materials, teacher competence and training, teaching experience, duties, attitudes of teachers towards their work, Parental involvement, class size, and family rigor concerning student academic achievement in secondary schools. The presence of poverty and inadequate facilities hurts the overall academic performance of schools. On the other hand, suffice to facilities contribute to academic performance and provide comprehensive support for the overall academic success of schools (Molepo, 2023). Unattractive and dilapidated school buildings, cracked classroom walls and floors, lack of toilets, insufficient desks and benches, lack of transportation, inadequate security systems, lack of drinking water, power supply problems, limited play areas, staff insufficient teachers, insufficient classrooms that cause overcrowding. , the lack of educational technology and the absence of first aid facilities, as well as factors such as parental involvement in their children's studies at home, family pressure, household rigor, job satisfaction, and future aspirations, all have a profound impact on student's academic outcomes. The availability and adequacy of educational institutions play a crucial role in the academic success of students (Jepkemboi, 2021).

Yousaf and Khurshid (2020) studied explored the effects of fatigue and stress on truck drivers. By assessing arousal and stress levels during various situations on truckers' routes, researchers found that anticipation of the end of the shift led to a release of stress, even though no decrease in performance was observed. This suggests that the psychological aspect of knowing the end of the shift can have a positive impact on stress levels, even without apparent negative effects on performance. Cretu and Gora (2019) examined the impact of heat stressors, particularly extreme cold, on workers. The researchers observed that the presence of colleagues increased workers' motivation. Their finding highlighted that motivation likely played a mediating role in improving workers' perceptions of their experience, leading to sustained performance. The results of this and other studies suggest that effective cognitive coping mechanisms can often mask challenging conditions related to high workload and stress.

Methodology

The research used a qualitative research design to study the influence of stress on the academic performance of high school students. The sampling strategy used was intentional, with a sample consisting of ten public secondary schools within the same district. Data collection methods use semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis served as the data analysis method, involving the identification of patterns and themes within the collected data. This approach allows for an exploration of experiences and perspectives related to stress and academic performance among high school students.

Population

The target population for this study consisted of secondary school students in the district of Vehari, encompassing students enrolled in public secondary schools within the District. The

focus is on students ending school at the secondary level. The study aims to capture a representative sample of secondary school students to explore the influence of stress on their academic performance, taking into account the unique educational context and experiences within the district.

Sampling

The research study aims to investigate the impact of stress on students' academic performance in five public secondary schools, two students selected within the same district. The sampling strategy employs a purposive approach. In each of the selected public secondary schools, two students were chosen as participants for a total sample size of 10 students across the five schools. The purposive sampling strategy allows for a targeted selection of participants considered representative of the population under study. The same sampling technique within each school facilitates practicality in participant selection, considering factors such as accessibility and availability.

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted face-to-face to facilitate a more personal and in-depth exchange of information. Subsequently, the recorded interviews were transcribed exactly, ensuring the precision and completeness of the data. This careful transcription process aims to preserve the authenticity of participants' expressions, allowing for a thorough analysis of the data to uncover patterns, themes, and variations in the experiences of secondary school students regarding stress and its impact on academic performance in the District of Vehari.

Data Analysis

The synthesis of findings was conducted thematically, allowing for the organization of information based on key themes and patterns. A qualitative analysis is employed to uncover nuances and insights from the literature.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the review process. Respect for the rights and privacy of study participants, responsible use of data, and proper citation of sources diligently adhered to. The limitations inherent in the review process, such as potential biases introduced by the selection criteria and constraints in data extraction and analysis methods, will be transparently acknowledged.

This comprehensive methodology aims to provide a robust and reliable synthesis of existing literature on the relationship between academic stress and student performance. By navigating through diverse perspectives, identifying patterns, and considering both qualitative and quantitative insights, the review seeks to contribute a nuanced understanding of this complex interplay, offering valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers.

Results and Interpretations

This section of the research examines the qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews conducted with secondary school students. This data analysis aims to offer a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the various factors contributing to academic stress.

Academic Stress

How would you define stress in the context of being a secondary school student?

Being a secondary school student, stress feels like a heavy burden on my shoulders. It's that mix of nervousness and pressure I get when I have exams coming up, piles of homework to finish, and the constant worry about how well I'm doing academically (Participant 5).

Can you share examples of situations that you find stressful in your academic life? Sure thing! Academic life gets pretty stressful with exams you're cramming tons of information, hoping not to blank out. Then, there's the crazy workload, juggling assignments and projects. The school feels like a race, keeping up with super smart classmates (Participant 3).

The aforementioned explained the student articulates the overwhelming stress of exams, heavy workloads, and the competitive school environment. Teacher expectations add to the pressure, making academic performance a significant stressor.

Academic Performance

In what ways do you think stress affects your academic performance?

Oh, stress messes with how I do in school. When I'm stressed, focusing on studying becomes a mission. It's like my brain's doing a million things at once, and remembering stuff for exams becomes this giant puzzle. Sometimes, I even blank out during tests, and it's so frustrating. The workload stress doesn't help either I end up rushing through assignments, and the quality sometimes takes a hit (Participant 2).

School Environment

How would you describe the overall atmosphere and environment at your school?

The atmosphere is pretty diverse some students are super into academics, others are more into arts or sports. Social groups are a thing, but it's not too cliquy. Overall, it's like this dynamic mix of busy, sometimes loud, but also lively and filled with different interests (Participant 1).

Are there specific aspects of the school environment that you find particularly stressful?

Yeah, there are a few things that stress me out at school. The pressure to do well in exams and keep up with the workload is a big one. The constant comparison to others, especially in terms of grades or achievements, adds another layer of stress. Sometimes, it feels like there's not enough time to catch a breath with all the assignments and activities going on (Participant 4).

Therefore, from the above the school environment is characterized as dynamic, featuring diverse interests and activities. However, social stress is acknowledged, including challenges related to fitting in, cliques, and social drama.

Teaching Methodology

Can you share your thoughts on the teaching methods used by your teachers?

These classes feel like a breeze because you're involved and learning at the same time. On the flip side, some teachers stick to traditional lectures, and that can be a bit dull. It's like, you're just sitting there, taking notes, and hoping you're catching everything. Sometimes, I wish there were more discussions and practical stuff to help understand the topics better (Participant 2).

How do you think the teaching methodology influences your stress levels in relation to academics?

The teaching methods definitely play a role in how stressed I feel about academics. When teachers use interactive and engaging approaches, it makes learning more enjoyable and lessens the stress. On the other hand, traditional lecture-style teaching sometimes adds to the stress. It can get monotonous, and if I don't grasp something during the lecture, catching up later can be a challenge (Participant 8).

For the above the student appreciates engaging teaching methods that involve visuals, group activities, and technology. Traditional lectures are perceived as less effective and occasionally dull, affecting the learning experience.

Home Environment

How would you describe the atmosphere at home in terms of supporting your academic endeavors?

At home, it can get a bit stressful during exam periods when the pressure is high. There's an expectation to perform well, and sometimes it feels like the stress from school follows me home (Participant 3).

Are there specific aspects of your home environment that contribute to or alleviate stress related to school?

The quiet environment and the availability of a dedicated study space are definitely stress relievers. It provides a focused atmosphere for concentration. On the flip side, the high expectations and occasional pressure to perform well in exams can add to stress. The balance between the two depends on the ongoing academic challenges (Participant 5).

In what ways does your home environment impact your ability to cope with academic stress?

My home environment plays a crucial role in how I cope with academic stress. The support and encouragement from my family are invaluable. However, there are times when the pressure to meet academic expectations at home can contribute to stress (Participant 2).

The aforementioned explained the home environment is generally supportive, offering a quiet study space and emotional assistance. However, the student acknowledges occasional pressure and high expectations at home, contributing to stress.

Future Stress

Do you experience stress when thinking about your future, such as career choices or further education?

Oh, absolutely! The future is a major stress point for me. Thinking about what career I want, which college to go to. It's like this huge cloud of uncertainty. There's this pressure to make the right choices, and it can be overwhelming. Sometimes, I feel like I should have it all figured out already, but the truth is, I'm still trying to navigate this maze of possibilities (Participant 4).

Are there specific aspects of the future that cause you more stress than others?

Definitely. The idea of choosing a career is a big stressor. It feels like there's so much riding on that decision, and I worry about making the wrong choice. The pressure to meet certain expectations, whether from family, teachers, or even myself, adds another layer of stress (Participant 7).

As per some secondary school student's future-related stress revolves around uncertainties in career and college choices. The competitiveness of the job market and concerns about success in the chosen field are significant sources of anxiety.

Interview-based themes and thematic analysis

Sr. No.	Themes	Description
1	Academic Stress	Exams and Workload Competitive Environment Teacher Expectations
2	School Environment	a) Diversity and Dynamics b) Social Stress
3	Teacher Teaching Methods	Engaging Approaches Traditional Lectures
4	Home Environment	Supportive Atmosphere Pressure and Expectations
5	Future Concerns	Career and College Choices Competitive Job Market

Academic Stress

Exams and Workload: As per the view of the student stress related to exams, describing them as a "stress bomb" highlights the challenge of managing a heavy workload with multiple assignments and projects.

Competitive Environment: The student discusses the stress associated with the competitive nature of the academic environment, where there is a constant comparison to peers.

Teacher Expectations: The impact of teacher expectations on stress levels is mentioned, with a desire to balance the need to impress teachers while feeling the pressure to meet high standards.

School Environment

Diversity and Dynamics: The student describes the school environment as diverse, with various interests and activities. It is portrayed as a dynamic place with moments of high energy during events and sports days.

Social Stress: The social aspect of school is highlighted as a source of stress, involving efforts to fit in, dealing with cliques, and managing social drama.

Teaching Methods

Engaging Approaches: The student appreciates teachers who use interactive and engaging teaching methods involving visuals, group activities, and technology.

Traditional Lectures: On the other hand, traditional lecture-style teaching is mentioned as sometimes dull and less effective for understanding complex topics.

Home Environment

Supportive Atmosphere: The home environment is generally described as supportive, with encouragement from parents, a quiet study space, and assistance when needed.

Pressure and Expectations: The student acknowledges that high expectations and occasional pressure to perform well at home can contribute to stress.

Future Concerns

Career and College Choices: Future-related stress revolves around uncertainty about career choices, college decisions, and the pressure to make the right choices.

Competitive job market: Concerns about the competitiveness of the job market and the uncertainty of success in the chosen field contribute to future-related stress.

Findings

The findings from the interview highlight the pervasive nature of academic stress experienced by secondary school students. Exams, heavy workloads, and the competitive school environment emerge as primary stressors, impacting the ability to concentrate during exams and the quality of assignments. The school environment is characterized as dynamic, featuring diverse interests, but social stressors such as fitting in and managing social dynamics contribute significantly to overall stress. Engaging teaching methods, notably those involving visuals and group activities, positively influence the learning experience, while traditional lectures are perceived as less effective. The home environment, though generally supportive, introduces occasional stress due to high expectations. Future concerns, especially those related to career and college choices in a competitive job market, add to the student's anxiety. Coping mechanisms include a positive study environment at home and crucial emotional support from family members. The overarching theme is the delicate balancing act the student faces, navigating academic responsibilities, social interactions, and future uncertainties.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study's objectives have provided insights into the intricate landscape of academic stress among secondary school students. Many teachers tend to punish students for their weaknesses instead of giving helpful feedback. They often need to remember to encourage students or provide personal attention, creating a stressful environment. Additionally, some teachers need to clarify lesson objectives, making it easier for students to understand and leading to stress during exams. The lack of effective teaching methods and failure to explain exercises and tests further contribute to student stress. Many teachers also need help understanding the content they teach, hindering the learning process. Students feel unheard during lectures, impacting their ability to learn. Bridging the communication gap between teachers and students is crucial for a healthier classroom environment. Socio-economic status can sometimes affect how teachers treat students, influencing the learning experience. Students express a desire for more opportunities to meet teachers outside of class for learning purposes. Overall, creating an equal and supportive classroom environment is key to reducing stress and fostering a positive learning experience.

Recommendations

Teachers can support students by offering feedback that helps them improve rather than just punishing them for mistakes. Providing personal attention to each student is crucial for their development. Clear explanations of lessons can reduce stress during exams, and effective teaching methods enhance understanding. Ensuring students comprehend assignments and listening to their ideas are essential aspects of teaching. Open communication between teachers and students fosters a comfortable learning environment. Treating all students equally, regardless of their families' financial situations, is important for fairness. Students appreciate the opportunity to talk with teachers outside of class for extra help. When there is equal treatment between teachers and students, the classroom becomes a more positive space for everyone to learn.

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