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Academic Stress among High School and Higher Secondary Students: A Narrative Review of Sources and Challenges

1. Introduction

Academic stress is a global problem which affects the students in various ways. It is widely recognised as a psychological distress that arises when academic demands surpass the student's ability to cope effectively (Kalita & Nisanth, 2023). The academic stress in the students has recently increased due to academic competition, high expectations, and a performance-orientated education system. According to Deb et al. (2015), the large population of student's experience academic stress due to factors like examination anxiety, heavy workload, and parental expectation.

Academic stress is a multidimensional phenomenon that is affected by both internal and external factors. According to Jassal (2021), the internal factors include students' emotional regulation, self-belief, and coping capacities, whereas external factors involve curriculum demands, frequent evaluations, and social expectations. Reddy et al. (2018) found that various psychological and physical problems like anxiety, depression, fatigue, and sleep disturbance caused by academic stress can negatively affect the student's academic performance and overall health.

The intensity and nature of academic stress may vary across cultural and institutional contexts (Lin et al., 2019). The widespread impact of academic stress on students' mental health and academic performance underscores the importance to understanding its sources and causes. In the present study, most of the reviewed studies focus on high school and higher secondary students; however, a few studies from higher education are also included to provide a broader understanding of academic stress. The present study aims to identify the sources and challenges of academic stress among students.

1.1 Academic Stress

Academic stress is a complicated psychological condition that arises when the academic demands and expectations exceed the student's ability to cope with it. The academic stress often arises due to the mental strain caused by fear of failure and the pressure to maintain a high level of performance (Deb et al., 2015). The academic stress is multidimensional that can be understood through different experiences such as frustration when objectives are not met, conflict brought on by conflicting academic demands, pressure from an overwhelming workload, and anxiety brought on by a fear of performing poorly (Reddy et al., 2018).

The internal factors, like self-beliefs, emotional regulations, and personal expectations, with external factors like demanding curricula, frequent examinations, and pressure from parents & peers, lead to academic stress

among students (Jassal, 2021). The prolonged or unmanaged stress leads to physical symptoms such as fatigue, headaches, and sleep disturbances which further affect concentration and performance (Reddy et al., 2018). Overall, academic stress plays a significant role in shaping students' mental health, emotional adjustment, and academic outcomes, and its intensity often varies across cultural and institutional contexts (Lin et al., 2019).

2. Methodology

This study ⁶adopts a narrative literature review approach. The research study is based on secondary data collected from peer-reviewed journals, articles and other academic sources. The relevant literatures was selected through platforms like Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and academic databases including Elsevier and Sage using keywords like "academic stress", "examination anxiety", "student stress", and "academic pressure". The papers that were recent, relevant and credible were included in the study. Although the primary focus was on the studies related high school and higher secondary students, some studies from higher education were also included to offer more comprehensive contextual insight. The selected papers were then reviewed and organised into thematic categories to identify common patterns and key findings.

3. Literature Review

The existing literature of academic stress among the students is reviewed under this section. The reviewed literature highlights the sources and challenges of academic stress, which have been organised into thematic categories for better understanding. The following section below discusses these themes in detail.

3.1 Exam Anxiety and Fear of Failure

At all educational levels, examination pressure and fear-related anxieties are consistently identified as the major causes of academic stress among students. The current evaluation system based on achievement creates psychological pressure among students. According to Reshu, Kumar, & Rathi (2025), a significant proportion of adolescents reported a high level of academic stress due to examination anxiety and an uncertain academic future. Similarly, Subramani and Venkatachalam (2019) discovered that fear of failure, parental expectations, and excessive testing were the most commonly reported stressors among higher secondary students. To support these findings, Bedewy and Gabriel (2015) suggested that heavy coursework and limited examination duration lead to an increase in academic stress among the students. Deb et al. (2015) also reported that nearly 81.6% of students were suffering from exam-related anxiety, indicating that the pressure of examination ²is one of the leading causes of academic stress among the students.

Examination anxiety ²not only affects academic performance but also causes emotional instability and low self-confidence among students. This may also affect the student's overall well-being. Continuous emphasis on marks often leads to self-doubt in the students. Students might associate academic performance with their own value, which amplifies the fear of underachievement. These findings show that examination-based

systems significantly contribute to increased academic stress. This increased academic stress among students may cause health issues.

3.2 Institutional and Curriculum Demands

Institutional and curriculum-related demands are one of the major contributors to academic stress among students. Learners are overwhelmed with an extensive syllabus, continuous assessments, and strict grading systems. This reduces the abilities of the students to cope with academic responsibilities. Bedewy and Gabriel (2015), in their study, observed that huge curriculum loads and limited examination time were one of the major causes for academic stressors among university students. Mandal (2021) also pointed out that stress levels increase as a result of heavy academic burdens and institutional expectations, especially for students in the science stream. Sailo and Varghese (2024) support this perspective; in their study, they found that competitive academic environments and high internal academic expectations lead to psychological strain, thereby reducing academic satisfaction among adolescents. According to Reddy et al. (2018) institutional sources like excessive assignments, vast syllabus coverage, and inadequate academic facilities are the major causes of stress among students. It is clear from these studies that rigid curriculum structures and performance-driven institutional practices play a major role in amplifying academic stress. This, in turn, may affect the student's motivation level and mental well-being.

3.3 Parental and Societal Expectations

After the analysis of the various papers, it was observed that parental and societal expectations are the most important contributors to academic stress. In today's marks-based system, many students are under constant pressure to achieve high grades; on top of this, the pressure to match family expectations puts a greater burden on their shoulders. It causes emotional strain and fear of disappointing others. Mandal (2021) suggested that high expectations from parents lead to higher academic stress, which is more frequent among the students of the science stream. According to Subramani and Venkatachalam (2019), high family expectations and peer comparisons lead to academic stress among higher secondary students. Supporting this view, Sailo and Varghese (2024) pointed out that academic stress increases among adolescents because of internalised expectations and the desire for social recognition. This is strongly supported by Deb et al. (2015), who found that around 66% of students experience parental pressure for better academic performance, which leads to an increase in the level of academic stress and poor mental health. The above findings suggest that parental and societal expectations for academic success lead to high academic stress. This high academic stress among the students affects their self-confidence, motivation levels, and overall mental well-being.

3.4 Gender Differences in Academic Stress

It has been observed that gender differences also play a major role in the increment of academic stress among students. Many research studies indicate that the level of academic stress may vary between male and female students due to various reasons, including emotional, social, and academic factors. Singh and Sharma (2023) in their study have observed that female students have higher levels of emotional and psychological stress compared to their male counterparts, particularly in post-pandemic academic settings. Mishra & Choudhuri (2024), in their study however, found that male students experience higher academic stress. Supporting these mixed findings, Akande et al. (2014) also highlighted that while overall stress levels were moderate among secondary school students, but the source of stress may differ between genders. These studies suggest that gender difference does influence the level of academic stress. They are not uniform and may depend on the contextual, cultural, and institutional factors. Therefore, it is necessary that academic stress should also be understood through a gender-sensitive lens instead of assuming a single pattern for all students.

3.5 Environmental and Psychological Factors

Environmental and psychological factors have a significant impact on the level of academic stress of students. The level of academic stress among students is influenced by their surroundings, peer relationships, and internal emotional states. According to Singh and Sharma (2023), academic stress is closely linked with emotional maladjustment, meaning that students who have trouble controlling their emotions have greater stress levels. Similarly, Elavarasi and Rajendran (2021), in their study, found that stress among adolescents is greatly increased by peer pressure and unreasonable expectations in the social context. Thapa et al. (2025) found a strong correlation between academic stress and poor sleep quality, with students experiencing higher stress levels being more likely to suffer stress-related issues. Supporting this, Jassal (2021) found that academic stress has a negative correlation with emotional intelligence, which means that students with lower emotional intelligence experience higher academic stress. These findings suggest that academic stress among the students might also be due to environmental and psychological factors.

3.6 Global / Cross-Cultural Perspective

The issue of academic stress is a global phenomenon, and many research studies conducted in the various countries highlight both similarities and context-specific differences in its causes. The multiple studies conducted across the diverse cultural settings show that while the fundamental stressors like academic workload and performance pressure remain the same, their intensity and nature vary across the regions. For example, Akande et al. (2014), in a study conducted in Abuja, found that secondary school students have a moderate level of academic stress, with academic demands and environmental factors being the primary contributors. Similarly, Ma et al. (2024) in a Chinese setting discovered that punishment-related events, relationship stress, and adaptation challenges all significantly cause the increase in academic stress level.

among the secondary school students, with noticeable gender-based differences. Lin et al. (2019) reported that along with academic demands, time pressure and competition, the level of academic stress also increases due to language and cultural adjustment among the university students. In another context, Ahmead (2025) highlighted that in Palestine, high-stakes testing and socio-political conditions such as conflict and instability are the major causes of academic stress among the secondary school students. These findings suggest that though the problem of academic stress is universal, its causes are influenced by cultural, institutional, and social-political factors. Therefore, it is necessary that academic stress should be understood through a context-sensitive approach.

4. Critical Analysis of Literature

Academic stress is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by the combination of academic, psychological, and socio-cultural factors. Across all the studies, exam pressure, curriculum demands, and family expectations constantly emerge as major causes of academic stress among the high schools and higher secondary students. For instance, many studies have highlighted that a performance-based evaluation system leads to anxiety and fear of failure among the adolescents. This has significantly impacted the student's physical health and emotional well-being. Similarly, researchers have regularly linked institutional factors such as demanding curriculum, continuous assessments and competitive learning environments as primary causes of stress for high school and higher secondary students.

The strong influence of parental and societal expectations was observed during the literature review. Most of the studies indicate that students experience significant pressure to meet the parental expectations and achieve high academic performance. These high pressure circumstances lead to emotional strain and reduced self-confidence. Furthermore, psychological factors like emotional maladjustment, poor coping mechanisms, and sleep disturbance often lead to high academic stress among students.

It has been observed during the literature review that the findings related to gender differences are not uniform. Some studies had claimed that female students experience high academic stress, while others reported that academic stress is higher among the male students. These findings suggest that gender-based differences in academic stress are context-specific, which are influenced by cultural and institutional factors.

The majority of the existing studies are quantitative in nature, which majorly concentrate on identifying stress levels and sources. It was observed that studies gave limited emphasis to understanding the lived experiences of the students. The studies are mainly focused on examination-related stress, while neglecting the other dimensions like coping strategies, resilience, and supportive educational practices.

The generalisation of findings is a problem as most of the studies are focused on particular regions or educational systems. Although several international studies have also highlighted the similar issue of

academic stress among the students, differences in cultural, socio-political, and institutional contexts suggest that it cannot be fully understood through a universal framework.

Though the literature provides significant insights about the sources and challenges of academic stress, there is still a need for more comprehensive, context-sensitive, and qualitative approaches to better understand the experiences of the students. This will help to develop the effective interventions, which will improve the students' academic performance and overall health.

5. Research Gap

Although extensive research studies have been conducted to explore the academic stress among students, several gaps still remain in the existing literature. Most of the previous studies focus on identifying sources and levels of stress using quantitative methods. The limited studies have paid attention to students' lived experiences and subjective perspectives. There is a strong emphasis on examination-related stress, while other areas such as coping strategies, support systems, and resilience are not explored in detail. The inconsistent findings related to gender difference point to the necessity for more context-specific research. Most of the studies are limited to specific regions, which makes the generalisation of results difficult. Thus, there is a need for more comprehensive and context-sensitive research to better understand academic stress among students

6. Conclusion

It is clear from the analysis that academic stress is a complex issue influenced by a number of factors like examination pressure, curriculum demands, and parental expectations. These stressors significantly impact the student's well-being and academic performance. The review of literature clearly highlights those individual and environmental factors both influence academic stress, which varies across the contexts. Thus, it is very necessary to adopt supportive educational practices and create awareness to help students manage stress effectively, which will ultimately improve their academic performance and health.

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