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Too Much to Learn, Too Little Peace: Mapping Academic Stress in Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is no longer just a transition—it's a pressure cooker. Adolescents in school nowadays must navigate a high-stakes environment where competition has become more worldwide, academic standards have increased, and the lines between home and school have become more hazy, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The outcome? a rising, unseen mental burden that is far too frequently ignored and unmeasured. **Objectives**: To assess the level of academic stress and the determinants of academic stress **Material and methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted in selected adolescents aged 13 to 18 years and studying in VIII to XII standards in the Belagavi district. A total of 1204 adolescent students were selected by using a stratified cluster sampling technique and were assessed for academic stress by using the ESSA scale. **Results**: The results showed that the mean of the sample on the total academic stress score was 49.38 (SD=13.00), and 273 (i.e.22.67%) reported a high level of academic stress. The chi-square test revealed that the levels of academic stress scores were significantly associated with age, Religion, grades, income, mother's & father's occupation, mother's & father's education & area of residence at the 0.05 level of significance. The multiple correlation coefficient R is 0.3413, and it is found to be significant at the 0.05 level of significance. **Conclusion**: Understanding various determinants of academic stress helps us to prevent consequences and promote mental health.

KEYWORDS: Academic stress, adolescents, determinants, students.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is no longer just a transition—it's a pressure cooker. Adolescents in school nowadays must navigate a high-stakes environment where competition has become more worldwide, academic standards have increased, and the lines between home and school have become more hazy—particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 epidemic((Lee et al., 2022). The outcome? a rising, unseen mental burden that is far too frequently ignored and unmeasured.

Academic stress is no longer a seasonal experience around exam time; it has evolved into a chronic challenge that shapes identity, motivation, sleep patterns, self-worth, and even the trajectory of future aspirations. Students are expected to perform, adapt, and excel—all while coping with social pressures, digital distractions, and developmental vulnerabilities (Deb et al., 2015; Pascoe et al., 2020; Reddy et al., 2021). Despite these realities, mental health remains a neglected metric in mainstream academic evaluation, often overshadowed by academic performance indicators (Kaur, 2022)

The urgency of this study lies in its intent to decode the mental architecture of stress experienced by adolescents within the academic ecosystem. By focusing not only on performance anxiety or curriculum burden, but also on gender norms, socio-economic disparities, parental influences, and school dynamics, this research aims to unpack the layered determinants of academic stress in a holistic manner (Deb et al., 2015; Arora et al., 2019; Reddy et al., 2021; Verma & Sharma, 2020).

In the Indian educational context—characterized by rigor, rote learning, and often limited emotional support—the mental health of adolescents is particularly vulnerable (Kumar & Bhukar, 2013; Deb et al., 2015). While national education policies emphasize inclusive and equitable learning, little attention has been paid to how stress is silently eroding the academic experience from within (NCERT, 2020; Kaur, 2022). This study

proposes a timely and necessary intervention by systematically measuring the cognitive and emotional weight carried by students in their day-to-day academic lives.

By mapping these stressors through evidence-based tools and identifying at-risk groups, the findings will not only inform educators and policymakers but also spark conversations around creating emotionally intelligent learning environments (Arora et al., 2019; Ravindran & Kumar, 2021). The ultimate goal is to shift the narrative from one of silent suffering to one of psychological safety, resilience, and meaningful academic engagement (OECD, 2021; Kaur, 2022)

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design and study setting

A cross-sectional study was conducted in selected adolescents aged 13 to 18 years and studying in VIII to XII standards in the Belagavi district.

Sample Description

To ensure geographic representation, Belagavi district was stratified into four zones: East, West, North, and South. Using simple random sampling and a probability proportional to size (PPS) approach based on student strength, two schools were selected from each zone (total: 8 schools). The sampling frame was developed from the official school list and enrollment data provided by the Deputy Director of Public Instruction (DDPI), Belagavi.

From each selected school, 150 students were randomly chosen—30 from each class (VIII to XII)—targeting adolescents aged 13 to 18 years. Of the 1,250 students selected, 1,204 consented and completed the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA), resulting in a final response rate of 96.3%

Participants

A total of 1204 adolescents aged between 13-19 years studying in VIII-XII standards in selected schools of Belagavi.

Data Measurements

In the present study the socio demographical variables are selected by reviewing the previous articles and to measure the perceived academic stress Educational stress scale for adolescents (ESSA) is adopted which has five components in its questionnaire As per literature reviewed the factors of academic stress considered in the study were - Pressure from study (Parental pressure, peer competition, expectations of teachers) Study workload (Homework, examination stress) Worry about grades, Self expectation, and Study despondency (lack of confidence and concentration).

Data collection

A total of eight schools were selected—two from each zone (East, West, North, and South). From each school, 150 students were chosen, with 30 students sampled from each grade (Classes VIII to XII) based on the predefined sampling criteria. Samples were drawn from the available student list as per the sampling plan. To account for potential attrition or incomplete responses, an additional 10% of respondents were included.

Written informed consent and assent were obtained from all participants after addressing their queries. Each participant completed a socio-demographic questionnaire and the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (IBM Corp., Chicago, IL, USA). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to summarize the data. The Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA), consisting of 16 items on a 5-point Likert scale, assessed five dimensions of educational stress: study pressure, workload, grade anxiety, self-expectation, and despondency.

Each component was analyzed individually and compared with total academic stress scores and demographic variables. Chi-square tests, multiple logistic regression, and stepwise linear regression were performed to identify significant determinants of academic stress among adolescents.

Ethics statement

The study received approval from the institutional ethics committee on human subjects, indicating that all ethical standards have been adhered in the study design (KLEU/IEC/17-18/D-31)

All procedures followed the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its amendments. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with assent and parental or guardian consent for minors. Participation was voluntary, with confidentiality maintained, and no harm to participants ensured.

RESULTS

Total of 1204 students aged between 13-19 years from schools participated in the study. This study included 1204 students who consented to use the data. The stress questionnaire was available for all students which was by 1204 (96.32%). The mean age of the participants in the study was 15.20 ± 1.61 years.

Demographics

Baseline

Of the 1204 students in this sample, 660 (or 54.82%) were male and 544 (or 45.18%) were female. One hundred and sixty-five percent of the teenagers were Hindu. The percentage of respondents who lived in urban and rural areas, respectively, was 64.78% and 35.22%. The vast majority of respondents (37.71%)

were from families with monthly incomes over Rs. 35,000/-.

Regarding parental education, the majority of the fathers and mothers—39.87% and 37.29%, respectively—completed graduate school. The information on the parents' employment showed that the majority of the dads (34.22%) were self-employed, and the women (68.94%) were homemakers. A total of 240 pupils were chosen from each grade based on their grades.

PREVALENCE OF ACADEMIC STRESS

Prevalence of academic stress among adolescent students

The mean of the sample on the total academic stress score was 49.38 (SD=13.00). The table revealed that 286 (i.e. 23.75%), 645 (i.e. 53.57%) & 273 (i.e.22.67%) reported low level, average level & High level of academic stress, respectively. [<Q1= Low, Q1-Q3 = Average and >Q3 = High where Q1 was considered as 44 & Q3 was 58].

Table 1

Association between academic stress scores and demographic variables by chi square test and by stepwise linear regression analysis

Characteristics	Academic of stress of level								χ^2	p-value
	Low	%	Average	%	High	%	Total	%		
Age groups										
12-13	76	38.38	111	56.06	11	5.56	198	16.45	**92.38**	**0.0001***
14-15	122	23.64	295	57.17	99	19.19	516	42.86		
16-17	75	19.69	192	50.39	114	29.92	381	31.64		
18-19	13	11.93	47	43.12	49	44.95	109	9.05		
Gender										
Male	154	23.33	364	55.15	142	21.52	660	54.82	**1.65**	**0.4370**
Female	132	24.26	281	51.65	131	24.08	544	45.18		
Religions										
Hindu	242	24.92	518	53.35	211	21.73	971	80.65	**43.42**	**0.0001***
Muslims	17	9.88	98	56.98	57	33.14	172	14.29		
Christians	2	25.00	6	75.00	0	0.00	8	0.66		
Others	25	47.17	23	43.40	5	9.43	53	4.40		
Grades										
8th grade	103	41.53	129	52.02	16	6.45	248	20.60	**129.57**	**0.0001***
9th grade	64	26.56	135	56.02	42	17.43	241	20.02		
10th grade	35	14.96	135	57.69	64	27.35	234	19.44		
11th grade	47	19.58	142	59.17	51	21.25	240	19.93		
12th grade	37	15.35	104	43.15	100	41.49	241	20.02		
Incomes										
Less than 15000	46	15.08	176	57.70	83	27.21	305	25.33	**111.93**	**0.0001***
15000 to 25000	33	12.13	142	52.21	97	35.66	272	22.59		
25000 to 35000	39	22.54	90	52.02	44	25.43	173	14.37		

Above 35000	168	37.00	237	52.20	49	10.79	454	37.71		
Mother educations										
No formal education	9	17.31	24	46.15	19	36.54	52	4.32	**13.05**	**0.0420***
School education	78	22.03	198	55.93	78	22.03	354	29.40		
Graduate	128	26.67	238	49.58	114	23.75	480	39.87		
Post graduate	71	22.33	185	58.18	62	19.50	318	26.41		
Father educations										
No formal education	12	15.38	42	53.85	24	30.77	78	6.48	**44.47**	**0.0001***
School education	78	18.48	218	51.66	126	29.86	422	35.05		
Graduate	110	24.50	246	54.79	93	20.71	449	37.29		
Post graduate	86	33.73	139	54.51	30	11.76	255	21.18		
Father occupations										
Government	72	24.00	150	50.00	78	26.00	300	24.92	**22.71**	**0.0010***
Private	109	30.79	183	51.69	62	17.51	354	29.40		
Self employed	83	20.15	235	57.04	94	22.82	412	34.22		
Agriculture	22	15.94	77	55.80	39	28.26	138	11.46		
Mother occupations										
Home maker	215	25.90	458	55.18	157	18.92	830	68.94	**38.68**	**0.0001***
Government	22	15.17	71	48.97	52	35.86	145	12.04		
Private	24	17.39	67	48.55	47	34.06	138	11.46		
Self employed	23	29.49	39	50.00	16	20.51	78	6.48		
Agriculture	2	15.38	10	76.92	1	7.69	13	1.08		
Locations										
Rural	64	15.09	226	53.30	134	31.60	424	35.22	**43.68**	**0.0001***
Urban	222	28.46	419	53.72	139	17.82	780	64.78		
Total	286	23.75	645	53.57	273	22.67	1204	100.00		

The levels of academic stress scores were significantly associated with age (i.e., 13 years old), Religion (i.e., Hindu), grades (i.e. 8th grade), income (i.e. less than R.s 15000/month), parents occupation (i.e. government job and home maker respectively), parents education (i.e. No formal education) & residence (i.e. Rural) at 0.05 level of significance. The gender was not significantly associated with academic stress scores.

Table 2: Stepwise linear regression analysis to assess the academic stress and its components

Independent variables	Beta	SE of Beta	Estimate	SE of estimate	t-value	p-level
Intercept			24.7342	4.5756	5.4057	0.0001*
Age	0.2273	0.0305	1.8326	0.2459	7.4531	0.0001*
Income	-0.1346	0.0325	-1.4334	0.3457	-4.1468	0.0001*

M.Edu	0.1053	0.0304	1.6172	0.4670	3.4633	0.0006*
F.Edu	-0.1000	0.0339	-1.5012	0.5091	-2.9485	0.0033
R=0.3413, R^2=0.1165, F(4,1199) =39.545 p<0.05, Std. Error of estimate: 12.247						

Stepwise linear regression analysis revealed that the combined influence of age, income, and parents' educational levels (both mother's and father's) on academic stress was positive and statistically significant. The multiple correlation coefficient (R) is statistically significant at the 0.05 level, indicating that the above-mentioned 4 variables are the best determinants of academic stress. The model explained 11.65% of the variance (R^2 = 0.1165), with a standard error of estimate of ±12.24.

Pressure from study stress

Table 3: Stepwise linear regression analysis of Pressure from study stress

Independent variables	Beta	SE of Beta	Estimate	SE of estimate	t-value	p-level
Intercept			5.6827	1.2027	4.7248	0.0000
Grades	0.2595	0.0305	0.7671	0.0901	8.5147	0.0000
Income	-0.1151	0.0328	-0.3968	0.1129	-3.5149	0.0005
M.ocuption	0.0570	0.0285	0.2409	0.1203	2.0024	0.0455
Gender	-0.0708	0.0275	-0.5985	0.2326	-2.5731	0.0102
M.Edu	0.0881	0.0315	0.4377	0.1564	2.7986	0.0052
F.Edu	-0.0617	0.0338	-0.2999	0.1642	-1.825	0.0500*
R=0.3541,R^2=0.1254,F(6,1197)=28.609 p0<.05,S,0 Std. Error of estimate: 3.9452						

*p<0.05 indicates a significant predictor

By stepwise linear regression analysis, it was shown that the combined influence of grades, income, mother's occupation, and parents education on Pressure from study stress was positive and statistically significant, suggesting these variables increase stress related to academic pressure. In contrast, the combined influence of gender, income, and father's education was negative and significant, indicating a stress-reducing effect. The multiple correlation coefficient R is 0.3541, and it is found to be significant at the 0.05 level of significance. It concludes that the above-mentioned variables are the best determinants of Pressure from study stress, with 0.1254 of explained variance, with a standard error of estimate of ± 3.94.

Study workload stress

Table 4: Stepwise linear regression analysis of Study workload stress

Independent variables	Beta	SE of Beta	Estimate	SE of estimate	t-value	p-level
Intercept			9.9794	0.5086	19.6199	0.0001*
Gender	-0.0863	0.0287	-0.5758	0.1912	-3.0111	0.0027*
Religion	0.0937	0.0289	0.4479	0.1381	3.2426	0.0012*
F. Occupation	-0.0586	0.0290	-0.2000	0.0991	-2.0177	0.0438*
F.Edu	-0.0537	0.0289	-0.2058	0.1108	-1.8574	0.0635
R=c, R^2=0.0210,F(4,1199)=6.4412 p<0.05,S, Std. Error of estimate: 3.2923						

*p<0.05 indicates a significant predictor

By stepwise linear regression analysis, it showed that the combined influence of Gender, religion, Fathers occupation and education on Study work load stress and statistically significant, indicating that these variables contribute to increased stress related to academic workload. When considering only gender, father's occupation and education, their combined influence was negative and significant, suggesting a mitigating effect on workload stress. The multiple correlation coefficient R is 0.0210, and it is found to be significant at the 0.05 level of significance. It concludes that the above-mentioned variables are the best determinants of Study workload stress, with 0.0210 of explained variance, with a standard error of estimate of ± 3.29.

Table 5: Stepwise linear regression analysis of Worry about grades stress

Independent variables	Beta	SE of Beta	Estimate	SE of estimate	t-value	p-level
Intercept			4.9430	1.2226	4.0430	0.0001*
AGE	0.1854	0.0307	0.4047	0.0670	6.0364	0.0001*
Income	-0.1758	0.0307	-0.5068	0.0884	-5.7303	0.0001*
M.Edu	0.0823	0.0290	0.3420	0.1204	2.8409	0.0046*
R=0.2891, R^2=0.0836,F(3,1200)=36.502 p<0.05,S Std. Error of estimate: 3.3747						

*p<0.05 indicates significant predictor

By stepwise linear regression analysis it showed that the combined influence of age, income and mother's education on Worry about grades stress is found to be positive and significant. It means that Worry about grades stress is positively influenced by above variables. The combined influence of income of the family is found to be negative and significant on Worry about grades stress of the students. The multiple correlation coefficients R is 0.2891 and it is found to be significant at 0.05 level of significance. It concludes that the above-mentioned variables are the best determinants of Worry about grades stress with 0.0836 of explained variance with standard error of estimate ± 3.37.

Table 6: Stepwise linear regression analysis of Self-expectation stress

Independent variables	Beta	SE of Beta	Estimate	SE of estimate	t-value	p-level
Intercept			3.0839	0.9688	3.1834	0.0015*
Grades	0.2477	0.0305	0.5860	0.0722	8.1171	0.0001*
Income	-0.0922	0.0329	-0.2541	0.0906	-2.8031	0.0051*
Gender	0.0825	0.0275	0.5582	0.1862	2.9984	0.0028*
M.Edu	0.1020	0.0307	0.4053	0.1218	3.3278	0.0009*
F.Edu	-0.0861	0.0341	-0.3349	0.1324	-2.5294	0.0116*
R=0.3332, R^2=0.1110, F(5,1198)=29.924 p<0.05,S, Std. Error of estimate: 3.1812						

*p<0.05 indicates a significant predictor

By stepwise linear regression analysis, it showed that the combined influence of grades, income, gender, and parents education on Self-expectation stress is found to be positive and significant. It means that Self-expectation stress is positively influenced by the above variables. The combined influence of income of the family and father's education is found to be negative and significant on Self-expectation stress of the students. The multiple correlation coefficient R is 0.3332, and it is found to be significant at the 0.05 level of significance. It concludes that the above-mentioned variables are the best determinants of Self-expectation stress with 0.1110 of explained variance with a standard error of estimate ± 3.18.

Table 7: Stepwise linear regression analysis of Study despondency stress

Independent variables	Beta	SE of Beta	Estimate	SE of estimate	t-value	p-level
Intercept			3.7212	1.0562	3.5232	0.0004*
AGE	0.2074	0.0300	0.4118	0.0597	6.9029	0.0001*
Income	-0.1570	0.0301	-0.4117	0.0789	-5.2197	0.0001*
Gender	-0.0577	0.0275	-0.3711	0.1767	-2.1004	0.0359*
R=0.3115, R^2=0.0970, F (3,1200) =43.005 p<0.05, Std. Error of estimate: 3.0472						

*p<0.05 indicates significant predictor

By stepwise linear regression analysis, it showed that the combined influence of age, income, and gender on Study despondency stress is found to be positive and significant. It means that Study despondency stress is positively influenced by the above variables. The combined influence of income and gender is found to be negative and significant on the Study despondency stress of the students. The multiple correlation coefficient R is 0.3115, and it is found to be significant at the 0.05 level of significance. It concludes that the above-mentioned variables are the best determinants of Study despondency stress, with 0.0970 of explained variance with a standard error of estimate of ± 3.04.

DISCUSSION

Several studies have highlighted the significant role of socio-demographic factors in influencing academic stress among adolescents. The present findings, which show that age, income, and parental education positively affect academic stress, are supported by Deb et al. (2015) and Sulaiman et al. (2009), who emphasized that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds often face increased expectations, contributing to stress. Interestingly, the observed negative association between father's education and income with academic stress suggests a protective effect, echoing Ang and Huan's (2006) findings that educated parents may create supportive academic environments. The model's modest explanatory power (R^2 = 11.65%) aligns with Verma and Gupta (2014), who reported that psychosocial and family factors explain a limited but meaningful portion of stress variance. Additionally, Kadapatti and Vijayalaxmi (2012) noted the importance of school-

related and peer factors, underscoring the multifactorial nature of academic stress.

The present study found that grades, income, mother's occupation, and parental education positively influence pressure from study stress, consistent with findings by Deb et al. (2015) and Sulaiman et al. (2009), who emphasized the impact of academic expectations and family background on student stress levels. Conversely, the negative influence of gender, income, and father's education suggests that male students and those with more educated or financially stable fathers may experience reduced pressure, aligning with Ang and Huan's (2006) observations on the protective role of supportive parental involvement. The model's R value of 0.3541 and explained variance of 12.54% are in line with Verma and Gupta (1990), who reported that demographic and academic variables contribute modestly to adolescents' stress levels.

The present study revealed that gender, religion, father's occupation, and father's education had a positive and significant influence on study workload stress among students. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that socio-demographic factors, including parental roles and cultural expectations, contribute to heightened academic stress (Deb et al., 2015; Sulaiman et al., 2009). Interestingly, the combined negative influence of gender, father's occupation, and education suggests that students with educated and employed fathers may experience reduced stress, potentially due to more supportive or structured academic environments. This aligns with the observations of Ang and Huan (2006), who noted that educated parents often provide guidance that alleviates academic pressure. Although the explained variance (R^2 = 0.0210) is modest, it is statistically significant and echoes findings by Verma and Gupta (1990), who emphasized that demographic factors, while accounting for a small proportion of variance, still hold meaningful influence on students' academic stress experiences.

The current study found that age, income, and mother's education positively and significantly influenced worry about grades-related stress, aligning with Deb et al. (2015) and Sulaiman et al. (2009), who emphasized that students from academically and socioeconomically advantaged families often face higher performance expectations, contributing to stress. Interestingly, the negative association between family income and worry about grades suggests that financial stability may buffer academic concerns, a pattern supported by Ang and Huan (2006), who highlighted the stress-reducing role of supportive family environments. Although the model's explained variance is modest (R^2 = 8.36%), it remains statistically significant and comparable to findings by Verma and Gupta (1990), who noted that demographic and family-related factors, though limited in explanatory power, significantly affect academic stress in adolescents

The present study found that grades, income, gender, and parental education positively influenced self-expectation stress among students, aligning with findings by Deb et al. (2015) and Sulaiman et al. (2009), who reported that academic performance pressures and socio-demographic factors significantly shape student stress. The negative association of family income and father's education with self-expectation stress suggests that financial stability and paternal educational support may buffer internalized academic pressure. This is supported by Ang and Huan (2006), who observed that students with supportive, well-educated parents often experience healthier expectations and reduced academic strain. The model's R value (0.3332) and explained variance (11.10%) are comparable to Verma and Gupta (1990), who noted that such variables moderately predict academic stress, underscoring the multidimensional nature of stress linked to self-imposed expectations

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study was conducted on a single group of adolescent students, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other populations. Additionally, the research was confined to a specific geographical area, further restricting the applicability of results to broader contexts. The use of a cross-sectional design, while suitable for initial exploration, is inherently weaker than experimental or longitudinal approaches in establishing causality.

To the best of the author's knowledge, this is among the first studies to explore the determinants of academic stress in depth within this population. While the association between academic stress and mental health issues is well-documented, this study made a focused effort to examine the individual, school-related, and familial factors contributing to academic stress. The insights gained can inform parents, educators, and policymakers in developing targeted strategies to mitigate academic stress among adolescents

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