

Understanding Academic Pressure Among Junior High School Students: A Qualitative Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Academic pressure has become an increasing concern among secondary school students as rising academic demands may affect their psychological well-being and learning experiences. This study explored the lived experiences of junior high school students regarding academic pressure in a public secondary school in the Philippines. Specifically, the research examined students' perceptions of academic expectations, the emotional and psychological effects of academic stress, and the coping strategies they employ to manage academic challenges. A qualitative case study design was employed to obtain in-depth insights into students'

experiences. Twenty-four junior high school students from Grades 7 to 10 participated in the study, with six students selected from each grade level using stratified random sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke. Findings revealed five major themes: academic stress and student performance, emotional intelligence and academic well-being, emotion regulation and coping strategies, motivation and learning outcomes, and mental health and academic pressure. Results indicate that heavy workloads, high academic expectations, and time constraints were the primary sources of stress among students. However, emotional intelligence, social support, motivation, and adaptive coping strategies helped students manage academic pressure effectively. The findings highlight the importance of supportive school environments, mental health awareness, and guidance programs that promote both academic achievement and student well-being.

Keywords: *academic pressure, student stress, emotional intelligence, coping strategies, junior high school students*

INTRODUCTION

Academic pressure has become an increasingly significant concern in contemporary education, especially among secondary school students who face rising academic expectations, competitive environments, and increased performance standards. Research consistently shows that academic stress is a major source of psychological strain for young learners, affecting their emotional well-being and overall development (Pascoe et al., 2020).

Stress is widely understood as the *body's psychological and physiological response to perceived challenges or demands*. According to WHO, adolescence is a crucial stage of development in which individuals are especially vulnerable to stressors, including educational expectations, social pressures, and environmental challenges (World Health Organization, 2025). Persistent academic stress in adolescents has been associated with increased symptoms of anxiety and depression, which can interfere with students' ability to concentrate, learn effectively, and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships. Systematic reviews show that high levels of academic pressure are linked to greater risk of mental health difficulties including anxiety, depressive symptoms, and emotional exhaustion.

Despite the growing recognition of mental health concerns, many students do not seek help due to stigma, limited access to support, and lack of awareness of coping strategies (WHO, 2025). Furthermore, academic stress is often associated with physical symptoms such as sleep disturbances, fatigue, and reduced concentration, which further impede academic performance. Large-scale studies indicate that academic pressure during secondary schooling can be significantly associated with depressive symptoms and increased risk behaviors later in life.

In many public-school settings, particularly in rural or resource-limited communities, student stress may be intensified by socioeconomic barriers, overcrowded classrooms, and lack of access to mental health support. School climate, including peer relationships and teacher-student interactions, also plays a crucial role in shaping adolescent emotional health (Kumar et al., 2024). A supportive school environment characterized by positive student-teacher relationships, autonomy in learning, and social connectedness reduces stress levels and improves emotional outcomes, whereas competitive climates emphasizing ranking and performance can contribute to emotional fatigue and lowered motivation.

Understanding how students experience and respond to academic pressure is therefore essential for promoting *healthy learning environments* that support mental health while fostering academic success. The present study explores the lived experiences of junior high school students at Union National High School, with the goal of generating insights that can guide educators, parents, and school leaders in creating balanced, supportive approaches to academic expectations.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the lived experiences of academic pressure among junior high school students. The qualitative approach enabled researchers to capture detailed narratives and personal perspectives regarding students' academic experiences and emotional responses to academic demands.

Research Setting

The study was conducted at Union National High School located in Barangay Union, Dapa, Surigao del Norte, Philippines. The school serves students from Grades 7 to 12 and represents a public secondary school environment where students experience academic expectations alongside socioeconomic challenges.

Participants and Sampling

The participants consisted of twenty-four junior high school students from Grades 7 to 10. Six students were selected from each grade level to ensure representation across different academic levels. Participants were selected using stratified random sampling, where students were grouped by grade level and randomly chosen from each group. Participation was voluntary, and only students who expressed willingness to share their experiences were included in the study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions designed to explore students' perceptions of academic pressure, sources of academic stress, emotional responses, coping strategies, and motivation for academic achievement. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase process developed by Braun and Clarke. The process included familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the final report. Manual coding was conducted to identify recurring patterns and themes that reflected the common experiences of the participants.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study. Permission was obtained from the school administration prior to conducting the research. Since participants were minors, informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians, while student assent was secured from participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and participants were informed that their participation was voluntary.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis revealed five major themes describing students' experiences of academic pressure.

Table 1. Major Themes Identified from Student Interviews

Theme	Description
Academic Stress and Student Performance	Students reported heavy workloads, multiple deadlines, and high expectations affecting concentration and performance.
Emotional Intelligence and Academic Well-being	Students demonstrated awareness of their emotions and the ability to regulate stress during academic challenges.
Emotion Regulation and Coping Strategies	Students used relaxation techniques, hobbies, and short breaks to manage academic stress.
Motivation and Learning Outcomes	Personal goals and encouragement from teachers and peers helped students remain motivated.
Mental Health and Academic Pressure	Mental Health and Academic Pressure

Theme 1: Academic Stress and Student Performance

Workload and Expectations

Most respondents identified heavy workloads, multiple deadlines, and high academic expectations as the primary sources of stress. One participant shared, "When I'm under pressure, I find it harder to listen and take notes properly. My mind jumps from one task to another." This finding suggests that excessive academic demands can interfere with students' concentration, cognitive processing, and ability to complete tasks effectively. When students experience academic overload, they often encounter fatigue and emotional strain, which may reduce productivity and academic engagement (Zhang, Rehman, & Zhao, 2024; Pérez-Jorge, Boutaba-Alehyan, & González-Contreras, 2025). Additionally, heavy workloads and high expectations can directly affect concentration and academic performance (Pérez-Jorge et al., 2025).

Positive Drive Under Pressure

Despite the challenges brought by academic stress, some students viewed pressure as a motivating factor that encouraged them to strive harder. One respondent explained, “*I see stress as a sign that I care about my studies. It reminds me that I’m working toward something meaningful.*” This perspective reflects the idea that stress is not always detrimental. Studies have found a positive correlation between academic stress and academic motivation, indicating that students who experience moderate stress may develop stronger motivation to perform well (Christino et al., 2024). Longitudinal research has also shown that, even when stress negatively affects well-being indicators, academic performance can increase under pressure, suggesting that stress may sometimes serve as a motivator that drives effort and determination (Benítez-Agudelo et al., 2025).

Balancing Stress and Success

Several respondents emphasized the importance of balancing academic responsibilities with personal well-being. One participant stated, “*Academic stress has taught me to plan better. It’s not easy, but it helps me focus on priorities.*” Research indicates that effective time-management strategies can reduce academic stress and are associated with improved academic performance (Macan, Shahani, Dipboye, & Phillips, 1990). In addition, adequate sleep and rest have been shown to improve emotional stability and reduce stress symptoms, which can help students maintain consistent academic engagement (Owens, Belon, & Moss, 2010). Studies also demonstrate that students who combine stress management strategies, including planning and self-care, report lower anxiety and better adjustment to academic demands (Misra & McKean, 2000). Moreover, perceptions of control over academic tasks and self-regulation are linked to reduced stress and increased academic confidence, supporting the idea that balanced approaches to academic pressure can enhance both well-being and performance (Putwain, Woods, & Symes, 2010).

Theme 2: Emotional Intelligence and Academic Well-being

Self-Awareness and Emotional Regulation

Students highlighted the importance of managing their emotions to remain focused on their academic tasks. One respondent stated, “*I try to control my emotions so I can still do my tasks even when I’m upset.*” This reflects the role of emotional intelligence in enabling students to recognize and regulate their emotions during stressful academic situations. Emotional intelligence, particularly self-awareness and emotional regulation, allows individuals to monitor their feelings, respond adaptively to challenges, and maintain task engagement. Research indicates that students with higher emotional intelligence are better able to cope with academic stress and sustain focus, demonstrating improved psychological well-being and academic performance (Ye et al., 2024).

Empathy and Social Awareness

Some students explained that emotional awareness also helps them interact positively with peers and classmates. One participant shared, “*Knowing when to pause and breathe helps me avoid breakdowns.*” This capacity reflects how emotional intelligence facilitates not only self-recognition of emotions but also the understanding of others’ emotions, fostering empathy and improving social interactions. Empathy and social awareness contribute to better communication, collaboration, and engagement within the classroom (Y Shengyao, 2024).

Emotional Stability and Academic Focus

Respondents further explained that emotional stability allows them to reframe stressful experiences and maintain focus on academic goals. When students understand and manage their emotional responses, they are better able to transform stress into motivation rather than discouragement. Research shows that higher emotional stability is associated with greater resilience, persistence, and adaptive coping strategies in academic settings, enabling students to maintain focus and reduce the likelihood of burnout (Ye et al., 2024; Y Shengyao, 2024).

Theme 3: Emotion Regulation and Coping Strategies

Relaxation and Self-Regulation

Many respondents described personal relaxation strategies that help them manage academic stress. These included listening to music, watching short videos, resting, or engaging in creative hobbies. One student stated, “I take short breaks and do something relaxing, like stretching or watching a short video. It helps me return to my schoolwork refreshed.” Such practices align with research showing that relaxation and sensory activities, including music listening, can serve as effective emotion regulation and stress-coping tools for students. Studies have found that strategies like music listening, enjoyable breaks, or structured leisure activities can improve emotional well-being and provide students with a temporary psychological distance from stressors, helping to restore focus before resuming academic work (Vidas et al., 2021).

Social Support and Peer Connection

In addition to personal coping strategies, several participants emphasized the importance of social support from friends and family. One respondent shared, “Talking to friends or family works for me because I feel supported.” Social interaction provides emotional reassurance and reduces feelings of isolation, especially during stressful periods. Research consistently shows that social and emotional support from peers, family, and mentors is linked to improved student well-being and better stress coping, as it fosters emotional reassurance and provides a buffer against the psychological burdens of academic pressure (Barbayannis et al., 2022).

Theme 4: Motivation and Learning Outcomes

Goal Setting and Purpose

Motivation emerged as a crucial factor that sustains students' commitment to learning despite academic challenges. One participant stated, "Motivation reminds me of my goals and keeps me moving even when things get hard." Goal setting provides direction and purpose in learning, energizing students to initiate and persist in academic tasks. Motivation especially when linked to autonomous goal pursuit is central to maintained effort, strategic learning, and academic persistence (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Within motivational research, both intrinsic goals (personal growth or mastery) and extrinsic goals (grades or external rewards) shape students' reasons for engaging in learning and influence how effectively they sustain effort toward academic tasks (Diseth, 2025).

Encouragement and Support Systems

Respondents also highlighted the importance of encouragement from teachers and peers in maintaining their motivation. One student remarked, "Seeing my progress makes challenges feel less overwhelming." Positive feedback and supportive classroom environments strengthen students' confidence and willingness to continue learning despite academic difficulties. According to Self-Determination Theory, intrinsic motivation is enhanced when students experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness psychological needs supported by encouragement and support systems, which in turn boost engagement and persistence in learning (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Perseverance and Growth Mindset

Students who perceived challenges as opportunities for growth demonstrated stronger resilience. A growth mindset encourages learners to view difficulties as part of the learning process rather than as failures. Research shows that beliefs about the malleability of ability and effort are linked with adaptive academic outcomes such as persistence, effort regulation, and the use of effective learning strategies. Students with a growth-oriented perspective typically demonstrate stronger motivation and are more likely to persist in the face of academic challenges, leading to better learning outcomes and increased engagement (Diseth, 2025).

Theme 5: Mental Health and Academic Pressure

Balancing Academic Demands and Well-Being

Students consistently emphasized the importance of maintaining mental well-being while pursuing academic success. One respondent noted, "I make time to rest because mental health is part of success." Academic stress has been consistently linked with students' mental well-being, with higher perceived academic pressure associated with poorer psychological health and reduced overall well-being

(Barbayannis et al., 2022). Research suggests that prioritizing rest, self-care practices, and balanced routines helps students sustain concentration, manage emotional fatigue, and protect their mental health in the face of academic demands. This alignment between rest and academic success underscores the need for mental health strategies that allow students to regulate stress and recover from academic demands (Barbayannis et al., 2022).

Coping Through Communication

Communication with peers, family members, or teachers was identified as a common coping strategy. One participant explained, “Talking to friends helps me release stress.” Open communication provides students with emotional support, validation, and a sense of connectedness, all of which are associated with better mental health outcomes. Studies show that perceived social support from family, friends, and other significant people is linked with lower levels of stress and improved psychological well-being, as these support networks help students appraise stressful events as more manageable and provide emotional reassurance (Acoba, 2024).

Institutional Support and Awareness

Respondents also suggested that schools should strengthen mental health programs and provide guidance services to help students cope with academic stress. Empirical evidence supports the notion that institutional supports such as counseling services, mental health awareness initiatives, and supportive school environments play a significant role in reducing academic stress and enhancing students’ mental well-being. Creating accessible mental health resources and fostering a supportive academic climate can buffer the negative effects of academic pressure and help students maintain psychological health while achieving academic goals.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of junior high school students regarding academic pressure in a rural public secondary school. The findings revealed that students commonly experience stress due to heavy workloads, high expectations, and limited time to complete academic tasks. Despite these challenges, students demonstrated resilience through emotional regulation, motivation, and support from peers and family members. The study highlights that academic pressure does not solely produce negative outcomes. When students develop effective coping strategies and receive support from their learning environment, academic challenges can also serve as motivating factors that promote perseverance and personal growth. Creating supportive school environments that prioritize both academic achievement and student well-being is essential in helping students manage academic stress effectively.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted in a single public secondary school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational settings. Second, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of only twenty-four participants. Finally, the study relied on self-reported experiences from students, which may be influenced by personal perceptions and recall bias. Future studies may include larger samples and multiple schools to obtain broader insights into academic pressure among secondary school students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study and the five major themes identified, the following recommendations are proposed to support junior high school students in managing academic pressure effectively:

- 1. Enhance Mental Health Programs (Theme 5: Mental Health and Academic Pressure)*
Schools should strengthen mental health initiatives, including counseling services, awareness campaigns, and accessible support programs, to help students cope with academic stress. Programs should focus on promoting self-care, stress management, and emotional resilience to ensure students maintain psychological well-being while pursuing academic success.
- 2. Balance Academic Workloads (Theme 1: Academic Stress and Student Performance)*
Teachers should carefully consider the volume and pacing of academic tasks to prevent excessive pressure. Structured timelines, clear instructions, and realistic deadlines can help reduce stress and improve students' ability to concentrate and perform effectively.
- 3. Promote Emotional Intelligence Development (Theme 2: Emotional Intelligence and Academic Well-being)*
Classroom activities and school programs should foster students' emotional awareness, regulation, and empathy. Integrating lessons on emotional management and social skills can help students navigate academic challenges while maintaining positive relationships with peers and teachers.
- 4. Implement Coping Skills and Stress Management Workshops (Theme 3: Emotion Regulation and Coping Strategies)*
Guidance counselors should conduct workshops that teach practical strategies for managing academic stress, such as relaxation techniques, time management, goal setting, and leisure activities. Encouraging students to adopt adaptive coping mechanisms can enhance focus, motivation, and overall well-being.
- 5. Strengthen Motivation and Support Systems (Theme 4: Motivation and Learning Outcomes)*
Teachers and school staff should provide consistent encouragement, constructive feedback, and opportunities for students to set personal and academic goals. Cultivating a growth mindset and recognizing students' efforts can increase engagement, perseverance, and resilience in the face of academic challenges.

6. Foster Supportive and Open Classroom Environments (Cross-cutting across Themes 2–5)
Schools should create a learning climate where open communication between students and teachers is encouraged. Peer support initiatives, mentoring programs, and collaborative learning opportunities can reduce feelings of isolation, improve social connectedness, and strengthen students' capacity to manage stress effectively.

7. Recommendations for Future Research

Future researchers should replicate this study in multiple schools with larger and more diverse samples to enhance generalizability. Further studies could also explore the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as emotional intelligence training or structured stress management programs, in reducing academic pressure among secondary school students.

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