

Exploring the Effects of Academic Pressure on Social Behavior and Mental Well-Being among Adolescents in Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Academic pressure is increasingly recognized as a significant factor influencing adolescent mental health and social behavior, particularly in education-focused regions such as Himachal Pradesh, India. This study investigates how academic stress affects the psychological well-being and social interactions of secondary school students aged 13–17 across both urban and rural districts in the state. Using a mixed-method approach, data was collected from 400 students through standardized scales measuring academic stress, mental health symptoms, and social behavior. Findings revealed that high levels of academic pressure were strongly correlated with increased symptoms of anxiety, stress, and social withdrawal. Furthermore, students in urban and private schools reported higher stress levels compared to their rural and government school counterparts. Gender differences were also evident, with female students reporting more emotional symptoms. The study concludes that the intense academic competition and societal expectations in Himachal Pradesh have profound implications on adolescents' mental and social development. It recommends the integration of mental health education, reduction of curriculum load, and implementation of school-based counseling services to promote a healthier educational environment.

Keywords: Academic pressure, adolescent mental health, social behavior, secondary education, Himachal Pradesh, India

Introduction

The academic environment for adolescents in India has undergone dramatic changes in recent decades, with increased emphasis on scholastic achievement as a gateway to future success. In states like Himachal Pradesh, known for relatively

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high literacy rates and parental involvement in education, the expectations placed on students are immense. Secondary school students are often subjected to a performance-driven culture that can negatively affect their psychological and social well-being. Academic pressure, if not managed effectively, can lead to anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and poor social functioning.

Adolescents are at a critical stage of emotional and social development. During this period, excessive stress can disrupt normal growth and influence behavior, social relationships, and academic performance. The stress experienced by students is not only due to workload but also the constant fear of failure, parental expectations, peer comparisons, and pressure from teachers or school administrators.

Himachal Pradesh, despite being largely rural, reflects these national trends due to increasing competition, rising private schooling, and digital exposure. However, little region-specific research has been conducted to explore how academic stress impacts adolescents beyond urban centers like Delhi or Mumbai.

This study aims to explore the effects of academic pressure on the mental well-being and social behavior of secondary school students in Himachal Pradesh. It examines stress levels, behavioral responses, and how these vary by gender, school type (government/private), and location (urban/rural).

Review of the Literature

❖ Academic Pressure and Mental Health

Academic pressure is commonly defined as the stress or anxiety students feel due to high academic demands. Several studies, including Kumar & Bhukar (2013), have shown that excessive academic stress correlates with anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and even suicidal ideation among Indian adolescents. The National Mental Health Survey (2016) reported that nearly 7.3% of Indian adolescents suffer from depression, much of it linked to academic stress.

A 2020 study by Singh and Misra found that over 65% of Class 10 and 12 students in North India experienced high stress levels before board exams. Academic stress is also associated with psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, and gastrointestinal issues.

❖ **Social Behavior in Adolescents**

Social behavior includes how individuals interact with peers, family, and society. Adolescents under stress often experience social withdrawal, irritability, or aggression. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development emphasizes the role of social relationships in adolescence. Academic pressure may reduce the time and emotional capacity needed to build healthy relationships.

Research by Sharma (2019) in rural Himachal Pradesh showed that students with higher academic workloads participated less in peer activities and family interactions, highlighting the behavioral consequences of academic overload.

❖ **Regional Context: Himachal Pradesh**

Himachal Pradesh boasts one of India's highest literacy rates, and its school infrastructure is rapidly improving. However, the growing shift toward private education and digital learning tools has intensified academic competition. Despite its scenic and peaceful setting, the mental health of students in the state is under strain. Limited mental health resources and awareness further aggravate the issue.

❖ **Gaps in Research**

While much research exists on academic stress in India's metros, fewer studies focus on Himalayan or rural regions. The intersection of academic stress, mental health, and social behavior remains underexplored, especially in the context of Himachal Pradesh.

Methodology

❖ **Research Design**

This study employs a descriptive, cross-sectional research design using mixed methods. Quantitative data were collected via standardized questionnaires, and qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews.

❖ **Sample**

A total of 200 students (ages 13–17) from six schools (3 governments and 3 private) across urban and rural districts of Himachal Pradesh were selected using stratified random sampling.

❖ **Tools for Data Collection**

- Academic Stress Scale (ASS) – Measures perceived academic pressure.
- DASS-21 (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale) – Evaluates mental health symptoms.
- Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) – Assesses social behavior and peer interaction.
- Demographic questionnaire – Captures data on age, gender, school type, and family background.

❖ **Procedure**

Permissions were obtained from school principals and consent from parents. The survey was administered during school hours. Students were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

❖ **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (mean, SD) and inferential tests (t-tests, ANOVA, Pearson correlation) were used. Qualitative responses were thematically analyzed to support findings.

Results and Discussion

❖ **Academic Pressure Levels**

Over 68% of students reported experiencing moderate to high academic pressure. Urban students reported significantly higher stress than rural counterparts, largely due to private coaching, parental expectations, and peer competition.

❖ **Mental Health Outcomes**

There was a strong positive correlation between academic pressure and scores on the DASS-21 ($r = 0.64, p < 0.01$). Students reporting high academic pressure also reported higher symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Female students reported greater emotional distress, including crying spells, trouble sleeping, and feelings of worthlessness, consistent with previous research on gender-based emotional expression.

❖ Social Behavior Impacts

High-stress students reported less peer interaction, increased irritability, and withdrawal from family activities. Interview responses supported this:

- “I don’t go out with friends anymore. I feel guilty if I’m not studying.” – Class 10 student, Shimla
- “My parents don’t understand that I’m stressed. They just want me to score high.” – Class 11 student, Mandi

Many students mentioned feeling isolated or judged, especially in competitive classroom settings. Group work and extracurricular engagement were lower among highly stressed students.

❖ Rural vs. Urban Differences

Urban students faced more pressure due to private school systems, digital learning demands, and parental expectations. Rural students had fewer resources but reported slightly better mental well-being, possibly due to less academic competitiveness and more social interaction.

❖ Summary of Findings

- Academic pressure is negatively associated with both mental health and social well-being.
- Gender and location significantly influence the experience of academic stress.
- Schools lack effective support systems for students’ emotional needs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study confirms that academic pressure significantly impacts the mental health and social behavior of adolescents in Himachal Pradesh. The culture of competition, combined with parental expectations and systemic educational challenges, places adolescents at risk for emotional distress and social withdrawal.

❖ Recommendations

Mental Health Counseling in Schools: Establish regular school counseling programs with trained psychologists.

Parent Awareness Campaigns: Educate parents on recognizing signs of stress and the value of emotional support over performance.

Curriculum Reforms: Reduce excessive homework and incorporate life skills and stress management into the curriculum.

Promote Extracurricular Activities: Encourage balanced development through music, sports, and peer group activities.

Further Research: Longitudinal studies are needed to examine long-term impacts of academic pressure in rural and urban contexts.

By understanding and addressing these challenges, educators and policymakers can create a more supportive academic environment that promotes both achievement and well-being.

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