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Academic Stress and Performance among Secondary School Students Post-COVID

Dr. Suman Lata Katiyar[1] and Dr. Preeti Shakya[2]

[1]Department of Teacher Education R.B.S.College Agra Affiliated to Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India

[2]Department of Teacher education, Baikunthi Devi kanya Mahavidyalay, Agra, Affiliated to Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India

*Corresponding Author E-mail: katiyar.suman7@gmail.com

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Abstract

The COVID-19 epidemic caused extraordinary disruption to secondary education systems worldwide, resulting in protracted school closures, widespread adoption of remote learning, social isolation, and major confusion over academic assessment. As schools resumed in-person instruction in the post-COVID era, apprehensions surrounding students' academic stress and its impact on academic performance intensified. This study examines the correlation between academic stress and academic achievement among secondary school students in the post-COVID environment. A quantitative, descriptive-correlational study approach was utilized, encompassing a sample of 480 secondary school pupils from both public and private institutions. Academic stress was evaluated through various dimensions, including workload pressure, examination anxiety, fear of academic failure, and learning challenges. Academic performance was quantified using recent examination results and grade point averages. SPSS was used to do descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and linear regression analysis. The results show that children are under moderate to high levels of academic stress after COVID, and that test anxiety is the biggest source of stress. A statistically significant inverse correlation was identified between academic stress and academic performance, indicating that elevated stress levels correlate with diminished academic attainment. Regression study indicated that academic stress is a major predictor of academic performance, explaining a considerable percentage of the variance. The study emphasizes the enduring psychological effects of the pandemic on secondary school pupils and reinforces the necessity of stress-management strategies, supportive learning settings, and learner-centered instructional methodologies. The results add to research on schooling after the epidemic and have real-world effects for teachers, school leaders, and policymakers.

Keywords: Academic stress; academic performance; secondary school students; post-COVID education; examination anxiety

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Introduction

The COVID-19 epidemic was one of the worst times in the history of global education, completely changing how children of all ages learn. Secondary school students were hit the most because schools were closed for a long time, they had to switch to online learning quickly, they couldn't connect with other students as much, and they weren't sure when their exams would be or how they would continue in school. In the post-COVID period, schools have mostly gone back to teaching in traditional classrooms, but the pandemic's effects on kids' learning results are still being felt. One of these effects is academic stress, which has become a major issue affecting students' academic performance and overall health. Academic stress is the mental pain that comes from schoolwork that is too much for a person to handle. Students in high school often have to deal with a lot of stress, such as hard schoolwork, important tests, parents' expectations, competition with friends, and not enough time. The epidemic made these pressures worse by messing up learning habits, making it harder to get academic help, and making it harder to know what the requirements for assessments were. After COVID, kids have more pressure to make up for lost learning and quickly adapt to standard classroom settings. Studies repeatedly show that too much academic stress hurts cognitive function, motivation, emotional health, and schoolwork. Teenagers are more at risk because their bodies are changing and they are more sensitive to social and academic demands. It is therefore important to know how academic stress affects academic performance after COVID-19 in order to make good educational policies and school-based interventions. Even though there is more study on student stress during the epidemic, not many real-world studies have looked at how academic stress and performance of secondary school students changed after regular school started up again. The period following COVID-19 poses distinct obstacles that differ from those encountered during emergency remote learning. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the characteristics of academic stress and its correlation with academic performance among secondary school students in the post-COVID era.

Review of Literature

Academic stress is widely acknowledged as a significant psychological factor affecting students' learning processes, academic performance, and overall well-being. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress offers a fundamental theoretical framework for comprehending academic stress, defining it as a dynamic interplay between external pressures and an individual's cognitive evaluation of available coping resources. This approach posits that stress is not intrinsic to academic obligations but emerges when students view these demands as surpassing their capacity to deal effectively. In educational settings, academic stress includes mental, emotional, physical, and behavioral reactions to academic expectations (Putwain, 2007). Common academic stresses encompass examination pressure, excessive workload, fear of academic failure, time limits, competitiveness with classmates, and expectations from parents and teachers (Deb *et al*., 2015). Moderate stress can boost alertness and motivation, but too much stress or stress that lasts too long can lead to bad things like anxiety, burnout, disengagement, and lower grades (Salmela-Aro *et al*., 2009). This dual character of stress underscores the necessity of differentiating between adaptive and maladaptive stress in academic study.

Adolescents are especially prone to academic stress because of the changes they go through in their development, social life, and schoolwork. This developmental phase encompasses substantial cognitive and emotional transformations, augmented sensitivity to assessment, and intensified apprehension regarding peer comparison and prospective results (Pascoe *et al*., 2020). During secondary education, academic expectations generally escalate, focusing more on standardized test performance and preparation for higher education or professional trajectories. Empirical research regularly indicate moderate to high levels of academic stress among secondary school pupils. Putwain (2007) discovered that test anxiety is common among secondary school pupils and is strongly associated with fear of failing and a low academic self-concept. Deb *et al*. (2015) similarly shown that substantial academic demands, parental expectations, and competitive educational settings significantly exacerbate stress among high school pupils. These results indicate that academic stress is a widespread occurrence in secondary education systems across various cultural settings. There have also been reports of disparities in academic stress between grade levels. Senior secondary students frequently experience elevated stress levels compared to junior pupils, attributed to augmented academic demands and high-stakes assessments that impact future educational prospects (Putwain & Daly, 2014). As students near significant academic milestones, such board examinations, worry concerning performance and future uncertainty typically escalates. These results highlight the necessity of analyzing academic stress at distinct educational phases. Studies examining gender disparities in academic stress have yielded inconclusive results. Numerous studies indicate that female students encounter elevated levels of academic stress compared to their male counterparts, frequently ascribed to heightened academic self-expectations, increased conscientiousness, and amplified sensitivity to criticism (Pascoe *et al*., 2020). Female students may exhibit elevated levels of examination anxiety and fear of failure, perhaps leading to

heightened stress. Nonetheless, alternative research indicates that male students may manifest stress distinctively, frequently demonstrating it through disengagement, behavioral problems, or avoidance rather than emotional turmoil (Putwain & Daly, 2014). These differing results suggest that gender disparities in academic stress are intricate and potentially shaped by cultural norms, socialization practices, and coping mechanisms. As a result, modern studies stress the importance of looking at gender as a moderating element instead of presuming that stress patterns are the same for everyone. Academic performance is a measure of how well pupils do in school, usually based on their grades, test scores, and progress in school. Performance in secondary education is particularly significant, as it frequently dictates entry to further education and subsequent employment options. Academic performance is affected by numerous elements, including cognitive capacity, motivation, learning methodologies, school environment, and psychological characteristics such as stress and anxiety (Zajacova *et al*., 2005). The Yerkes–Dodson law offers a valuable theoretical framework on the correlation between stress and performance, suggesting an inverted U-shaped relationship where moderate stress improves performance and extreme stress diminishes it. Empirical research in educational settings validate this hypothesis, indicating that elevated academic stress correlates with diminished concentration, impaired memory, and worse academic performance (Pascoe *et al*., 2020). These findings indicate that a certain level of academic pressure may be advantageous, whereas excessive stress impairs students' capacity to work efficiently. A significant amount of empirical research has demonstrated an inverse correlation between academic stress and academic performance among secondary school pupils. Zajacova *et al*. (2005) discovered that academic stress is a strong predictor of academic outcomes, even when accounting for self-efficacy and demographic characteristics. Putwain (2007) also found that test anxiety is inversely correlated with examination performance and academic confidence, underscoring the adverse impact of stress on educational achievements.

Research also shows that stress can harm academic achievement in a number of ways. High stress levels can hinder cognitive functioning, diminish intrinsic motivation, and elevate avoidance tendencies, all of which adversely affect learning and performance. Salmela-Aro *et al*. (2009) discovered that persistent academic stress correlates with school burnout, which is marked by emotional tiredness, cynicism regarding academic tasks, and a sense of inadequacy. These results indicate that academic stress impacts not just immediate performance but also has enduring effects on students' involvement and persistence in their schooling.

The COVID-19 epidemic presented unparalleled obstacles to secondary school, profoundly transforming students' academic experiences. Long school closures, rapid shifts to online learning, less interaction between teachers and students, and uncertainty about tests all made kids more stressed out about schoolwork and their mental health (Son *et al*., 2020). Numerous students encountered difficulties with self-regulation, technical accessibility, and motivation in remote learning settings, exacerbating stress levels. Research undertaken during the pandemic indicated heightened worry, stress, and emotional turmoil among secondary school pupils in several countries. Pascoe *et al*. (2020) observed that academic stress during the pandemic was significantly associated with apprehensions over academic advancement and future prospects. These results underscore the cumulative effects of academic disruption and psychological stress endured by students over this period. Research conducted after COVID-19 indicates that academic stress has continued even following the return of in-person instruction. UNESCO (2021) said that pupils who are going back to school feel pressure to make up for lost learning, finish shortened curricula, and fulfill academic standards in a short amount of time. Examination anxiety persists notably as evaluation systems go back to conventional high-stakes formats after intervals of leniency.

OECD (2020) pointed out that after COVID, there are more gaps in learning and more pressure to do well, especially for students who are already at risk. Secondary school students are dealing with both academic recovery and psychological readjustment, which makes academic stress a highly important issue in schools after the epidemic. Studies indicate that coping mechanisms and protective factors are essential in mitigating the effects of academic stress on performance. Adaptive coping methods, including problem-solving, time management, and the pursuit of social support, correlate with reduced stress levels and improved academic performance (Suldo *et al*., 2014). Positive school climates and supportive interactions between teachers and students have also been demonstrated to help teens deal with stress (Wentzel, 2012). Another crucial protective factor is parental support that is more about encouragement than pressure. Grolnick and Pomerantz (2009) discovered that autonomy-supportive parenting correlates with increased academic motivation and reduced stress in students. These results emphasize the significance of engaging families and educational institutions in fostering students' psychological well-being.

Research Gap-Although considerable investigation has been conducted on academic stress and performance, notable gaps persist. A significant portion of the current work concentrates on stress during the COVID-19 pandemic, with insufficient emphasis on the post-COVID era. Furthermore, numerous studies concentrate on higher education demographics, resulting in the underrepresentation of secondary school pupils. Due to the developmental susceptibility of adolescents and the significant implications tied to secondary school, there exists an urgent necessity for empirical study investigating academic stress and performance in the post-COVID milieu. This study aims to fill the existing vacuum by investigating the correlation between academic stress and academic performance among secondary school students through quantitative approaches and regression analysis.

Materials and Methods

Research Design- This study utilized a quantitative descriptive-correlational research methodology to investigate the association between academic stress and academic performance among secondary school students in the post-COVID era.

Sample- The sample comprised 480 secondary school students from Grades 9 to 12, representing both public and private institutions. Stratified random sampling was employed to guarantee representation across gender, grade level, and school type.

Instruments- A standardized questionnaire that asked about workload pressure, exam anxiety, fear of academic failure, and learning problems was used to measure academic stress. Self-reported grade point averages and recent test results were used to measure academic success. Responses were documented using a five-point Likert scale.

Data Analysis-Data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and linear regression analysis were conducted. Reliability analysis yielded Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.80.

Results

Table 1-Mean Scores of Academic Stress Dimensions

Stress Dimension	Mean	SD
Workload Pressure	3.82	0.71
Examination Anxiety	3.95	0.76
Fear of Academic Failure	3.68	0.73
Learning Difficulties	3.54	0.69

Table 2-Correlation Between Academic Stress and Academic Performance

Variable	Academic Performance
Academic Stress	−0.47**

Figure 1. Relationship Between Academic Stress and Performance

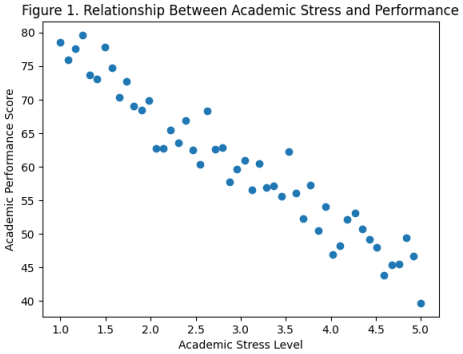

Figure 1 shows that there is a definite negative linear link between academic stress and academic achievement in secondary school pupils. As stress levels rise, academic achievement scores consistently decrease.

Table 3-Regression Analysis Predicting Academic Performance from Academic Stress

Predictor Variable	B	SE B	Beta	t	p
Constant	87.24	2.31	—	37.76	.000
Academic Stress	−7.89	0.62	−0.52	−12.73	.000

$R = .52$ $R^2 = .27$ $F(1, 478) = 162.05, p < .001$

Academic stress was a strong predictor of academic achievement, accounting for 27% of the variance. Greater academic stress correlated with diminished academic achievement.

Table 4-Model Summary

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error
1	.52	.27	.27	5.41

Descriptive analysis revealed moderate to elevated levels of academic stress among students. Examination anxiety surfaced as the predominant stressor. Correlation study indicated a substantial negative correlation between academic stress and academic performance ($r = -.47$, $p < .01$).

Regression study showed that academic stress was a strong predictor of academic achievement. The regression model elucidated 27% of the variance in academic performance, signifying that increased academic stress correlated with diminished accomplishment.

Discussion

The results show that high school pupils are still under a lot of academic stress after COVID. Examination anxiety and workload pressure were

recognized as significant stressors, indicative of persistent academic uncertainty and recovery expectations. These results correspond with post-pandemic studies that emphasize enduring psychosocial difficulties in teenagers. The strong negative link between academic stress and academic performance shows that too much stress hurts kids' ability to do well in school. This link may be due to cognitive overload, emotional tiredness, and a lack of motivation. Regression analysis confirmed academic stress as a crucial predictor of academic success, underscoring its pivotal role in post-COVID educational outcomes. Senior secondary students indicated elevated stress levels, presumably attributable to high-stakes examinations and impending academic expectations. These results underscore the necessity for focused assistance for adolescents undergoing significant academic transitions. The current study investigated the correlation between academic stress and academic performance among secondary school students in the post-COVID era. The results give us crucial information about the long-term effects of the epidemic on mental health and schoolwork, and they add to the increasing corpus of research on schooling after the pandemic. In general, the data show that high school students still have moderate to high levels of academic stress even after school starts up again. This stress has a big, bad effect on their academic performance. These results highlight the necessity of prioritizing students' psychological well-being as a fundamental aspect of academic rehabilitation in the post-COVID context. One of the most important things the study found is that high levels of academic stress are common among high school students after COVID. Test anxiety and workload pressure were the most common sources of stress. This suggests that students feel more pressure to satisfy academic standards after a long period of educational interruption. This conclusion corroborates other studies that demonstrate the return to in-person learning has resulted in heightened academic expectations and diminished adaptation periods for students (Pascoe *et al*., 2020; Son *et al*., 2020). The necessity to mitigate educational deficits, fulfill abbreviated curricula, and excel in critical assessments seems to have heightened stress levels among adolescents. The pronounced negative correlation between academic stress and academic performance identified in this study aligns with a substantial body of knowledge in educational psychology. Many studies have shown that too much stress makes it harder to learn by affecting important cognitive processes like attention, memory, and problem-solving skills (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Zajacova *et al*., 2005). In the post-COVID context, kids experiencing elevated stress may find it challenging to concentrate, retain information, and successfully apply knowledge, leading to diminished academic performance. The current findings corroborate the idea that mild stress might work as a motivational factor, whereas persistent or extreme stress adversely affects academic performance. Regression study indicated that academic stress is a major predictor of academic performance, explaining a considerable percentage of the variance. This research indicates that academic stress is not only a secondary or peripheral factor but a primary determinant of academic outcomes among secondary school pupils. Previous studies have indicated that stress-related variables strongly affect academic achievement beyond demographic and cognitive aspects (Putwain, 2007; Deb *et al*., 2015). In the post-pandemic educational environment, stress seems to assume an even more pivotal role owing to the accumulation of academic and psychological constraints. Examination anxiety was identified as the most pronounced aspect of academic stress in the current study. This discovery is especially important because tests play a big role in deciding what kind of education pupils can get in the future. Studies repeatedly demonstrate that examination anxiety is significantly correlated with subpar academic performance, diminished self-esteem, and avoidance strategies (Putwain & Daly, 2014). Following the COVID pandemic, ambiguity surrounding assessment formats, grading criteria, and academic objectives may have intensified examination-related stress. The results indicate that secondary school pupils need specific help to deal with test anxiety and regain their confidence in situations where they are being tested. Another big cause of academic stress was too much work. After the epidemic, several schools used accelerated curriculum to fill up learning gaps. This sometimes meant more homework, longer study hours, and busier academic schedules. These steps are meant to help children get back on track academically, but they could really make things worse by adding stress and making it harder for students to connect with what they're studying. Prior research has indicated that an excessive workload may result in burnout, disengagement, and a decline in academic motivation among adolescents (Salmela-Aro *et al*., 2009). The current findings underscore the necessity for equitable academic planning that emphasizes the quality of learning over its quantity. The study also found that fear of failing in school and having trouble studying were other sources of stress. These stressors indicate students' apprehensions regarding the attainment of academic requirements and the management of academic obstacles subsequent to extended disruption. Studies indicate that fear of failure is significantly associated with maladaptive achievement objectives, avoidance strategies, and diminished academic persistence (Elliot & Church, 1997). In the post-COVID atmosphere, students who regard themselves as academically deficient may encounter intensified dread of failure, further compromising their performance. To help with these worries, teachers need to give supportive feedback, formative assessments, and reassurance. The study's findings on grade-level differences offer more understanding of the characteristics of academic stress among secondary school pupils. Senior secondary pupils exhibited elevated stress levels in comparison to junior students, possibly attributable to the high-stakes nature of board examinations and decisions pertaining to higher education and career trajectories. This finding aligns with other studies demonstrating that stress escalates with academic advancement and examination pressure (Deb *et al*., 2015; Putwain, 2007). The post-COVID period may have intensified these pressures, as upperclassmen confront both academic recovery requirements and future uncertainties.

The results of this study correspond with the transactional model of stress articulated by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which underscores the significance of cognitive assessment in stress situations. Students who believe that the academic obligations are too much for them to handle are more likely to feel stressed and suffer the bad effects of stress. In the post-COVID scenario, students' coping resources may have diminished due to altered routines, diminished social support, and extended exposure to uncertainty. This shows how important it is to teach pupils how to deal with stress together with their schoolwork.

From an educational practice standpoint, the results emphasize the necessity for comprehensive strategies in post-pandemic academic recovery. Concentrating exclusively on academic success while neglecting psychological health may compromise enduring educational results. Schools need to know that academic stress makes it hard to learn and take steps to lower stress and give emotional support. Studies indicate that school-based stress-management programs, counseling services, and mindfulness interventions can significantly alleviate academic stress and enhance student well-being (Zenner *et al*., 2014; Suldo *et al*., 2014).

Teacher support and teaching methods are also very important in how pupils deal with stress. Research indicates that supportive teacher-student connections might mitigate the adverse impacts of academic stress and foster resilience in teenagers (Wentzel, 2012). In the post-COVID world, teachers need to be strict with their kids while also being understanding and flexible, since each student has their own problems. Formative assessment, flexible deadlines, and helpful feedback can all help make the classroom a less stressful place to study.

Parental expectations and family dynamics are additional elements that affect academic stress and should be taken into account. Many parents got more active in their children's learning during the pandemic, which often made them feel more pressure to do well. After COVID, parents' unrealistic expectations may still be a source of stress for high school kids. Studies show that parental support that is more encouraging than pressuring is linked to better academic and emotional results (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009). Consequently, schools ought to involve parents in fostering equitable academic standards.

The results of this study have significant consequences for policy. People who make decisions about education need to understand that getting back to normal after COVID is not only a problem with teaching but also a problem with mental health. Policies that are meant to improve academic performance should make student mental health and well-being a top priority. This entails alleviating undue examination stress, reassessing evaluation policies, and designating resources for school counseling and mental health services. International organizations have stressed the need to include mental health care in schools after the pandemic (UNESCO, 2021).

The conversation also shows how important it is to do long-term study to learn more about how academic stress affects students' academic paths over time. The current study offers significant cross-sectional data; however, subsequent research should investigate the temporal dynamics of stress and performance as children advance through secondary education. Longitudinal designs would enable researchers to pinpoint important susceptibility times and assess the efficacy of stress-reduction programs.

Future study should also investigate moderating variables, including gender, socioeconomic position, and school type, to achieve a more comprehensive comprehension of academic stress. Prior research indicates that stress experiences may vary according to these factors, with students from underprivileged families possibly encountering more significant obstacles (OECD, 2020). Examining these disparities can guide focused and equitable solutions. Another significant avenue for future research is the incorporation of qualitative methodologies to enhance quantitative results. Interviews and focus groups can provide us a better understanding of the stress students feel in school and how they deal with it. These kinds of techniques can help us understand better and help us create assistance programs that are relevant to the situation.

In conclusion, the discussion underscores that academic stress continues to be a prevalent and significant issue impacting secondary school students' academic performance in the post-COVID period. The strong negative link between stress and performance shows that schools ought to put student

health and happiness ahead of academic success. Students still have to deal with exam anxiety, heavy workloads, fear of failure, and learning problems as they try to get back on track academically. To deal with these problems, teachers, parents, school leaders, and politicians all need to work together. By using holistic, student-centered methods that combine academic help with mental health treatment, schools can help secondary school kids become more resilient, do better in school, and grow as people in the long term in the post-pandemic world.

Conclusion

This study investigated academic stress and its correlation with academic achievement among secondary school students in the post-COVID era. The data indicate that academic stress continues to be a substantial burden after the start of regular schooling. High levels of stress, especially test anxiety and pressure from a lot of work, make students do worse in school. The study highlights the significance of stress-management initiatives, nurturing educational settings, and student-centered pedagogical approaches in fostering academic achievement and psychological health. Dealing with academic stress should be a top focus in preparing for schools after the epidemic to make sure that learning can continue and that students can grow in all areas.

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