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Academic stress from the viewpoint of Iranian adolescents: A qualitative study

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Abstract:

BACKGROUND: Academic stress is one of the major affecting factors on adolescent health. This study investigates adolescents' view about the sources of academic stress, with which their identification could be used for the reduction of adolescent academic stress.

MATERIALS AND METHODS: This qualitative study was conducted with Directional Content Analysis methodology. Semi-structured interview methods were used for data collection. Participants were students aged 12–18 years old. Purposeful sampling with Opportunistic Maximum Variation Method was performed in terms of type of schools, socioeconomic classes, and gender of students. A total of 43 interviews and were conducted by two interviewers.

RESULTS: A total of 173 codes, 11 subcategories, and 5 categories were extracted as academic stressors. The categories included family factors (32 codes); peers (18 codes); teachers, school supervisors, and educational system (72 codes); homework and test scores (32 codes); and educational assistance classes (19 codes).

CONCLUSION: This study showed that students have different sources of academic stress. Awareness of their source of stress can help parents and teachers to revise their treat about students' function and policymaker to provide better planning and management for students.

Keywords:

Academic stress, adolescents, content analysis, Iran, qualitative study

Introduction

The period of adolescence is defined by the World Health Organization as the age range of 10–19 years. People in this period of life face many physical, mental, and social changes and depending on their individual characteristics and family circumstances, their compatibility with diverse situations of life will be different.^[1–4] In this period, many stressors affect adolescents, one of which is academic stress.^[1,2,5] Academic stress is a psychological stress that is created due to the expectations of parents and teachers from students to achieve

educational success.^[6] Some students may experience a lot of academic stress in dealing with school-specific homework and responsibilities,^[5] which has a significant effect on the educational performance of adolescents aged 15 years.^[6–8] In Iran, the most important academic stress is facing the university entrance exams (Konkour) which is an important stressor for adolescents due to the importance of results in determining the future career. However, with the policies of the Ministry of Education in conducting national and provincial entrance examinations to attract students in special schools, examination stress has influenced a wide range of educational grades and due to the families' sensitivity to invest in their children's future, students are required to

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attend educational assistance, tutoring classes, and other university entrance examination training activities. In different studies, the educational pressure of students has been studied and the role of various factors in adolescents stress has been determined.^[9-15] A study in Tehran showed that 81.1% of students had the stress of tests and grades, and 59.2% of them considered this level of stress to be unbearable.^[14] University entrance examination candidates considered the most stressful sources as family, educational environment, compulsory military dispatch (in boys), and the social importance of entering the university.^[15] Considering that the education system varies in different countries and the stressful educational factors are affected by educational system and dominant culture on those societies, therefore, in different societies, the sources of academic stress for students are in different forms. In the Iranian society, parents do consider educational system and schools as the main cause of adolescent stress, while schools emphasize mostly on the role of parents and their pressures on adolescents. Despite the importance of considering the sources of stress in adolescents, researchers have not seen so far this issue examined from their point of view. Therefore, this study aims to explain the views and opinions of adolescents on academic stressful factors in the Iranian society.

Materials and Methods

The present qualitative study was conducted with a directional content analysis methodology. Semi-structured interview methods were used for data collection. Participants included students aged 12–18 years old (studying in the first and second periods of high school) in Qazvin, Iran. Sampling was done by purposeful sampling with maximal variation opportunistic method so that the maximum information was gathered from the participants and the transferability of the study was provided. The criteria for maximum diversity in the selection of samples included the type of schools, including public, private, special (brilliant talents, Nemone-Dolati, and Shahed) schools, socioeconomic classes of students in public schools, and academic achievement of students. According to these criteria, eight strata were determined and the information gathering in each layer continued until duplicate replies were received and reached to saturation. For selecting the samples, the necessary coordination with the general department of education in the province and the city of Qazvin was carried out. Then, the selected schools were visited, and the schools' supervisors were asked to introduce the eligible students that have the ability to connect with others or have high academic achievement based on knowledge of the students and taking into account the desired strata of the researcher.

The interviews were conducted in one of the school's classrooms or consulting room of the school. At the end, 43 interviews were conducted with students. Interviews were conducted by the researchers. With a preliminary review of the literature, we identified variables such as role of parents, teachers, educational system, and peers' and families' condition that could possibly affect the participants. In the interviews, questions were asked according to a prescriptive guide. The average duration of interviews was 30–45 min. In all the interviews, before gathering of the data, oral consent was received from the participants and they were assured that all the information would be confidential and all of the conversations were recorded, with their permission. The study was conducted over a period of 3 months. In order to validate the study, thick descriptions (credibility) and prolonged engagement were conducted.^[16] In the interview sessions, a group of participants were asked to express their views on the educational pressure of adolescents, as well as the role of families, peers and friends, teachers, school supervisors and educational system, school homework, grades and examinations, financial status, responsibilities of adolescents, and other factors in creating educational pressure in adolescents.

Data analysis was done through directional content analysis method. In directed approach, analysis starts with a theory or relevant research findings as guidance for initial codes and codes are derived from theory.^[17] After merging the audio file of the interviews and notes, the text was read several times, and then the codes were extracted with the Graneheim and Lundmans method.^[18] In addition, the codes were summarized, and subcategories and categories were extracted and ordered according to the standard questionnaire categories arranged by the Adolescents Stress Questionnaire (ASQ). A total of 173 codes were extracted from the 43 interviews by two interviewers. It should be noted that this study was the first step in designing the Iranian version of the Adolescents Academic Stress Questionnaire. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Tehran University of Medical Sciences (IR.TUMS.VCR.REC.1396.4610.) - Analysis was carried out manually during the data collection.

Results

The mean age of participants was 14.73(SD=3.63) years. Both sex groups participated in the gathering of information. Students from private and public schools were selected from different socioeconomic classes of the city. Almost the majority of students considered academic stress as an important issue and emphasized on the role of teachers, parents, and educational system. After summarizing and combining the codes, stressors were categorized in 11 subcategories and 5 main

categories including family factors (32 codes), peers (18 codes), teachers, parents and school environment (72 codes), homework and grades of the examinations (32 codes), and educational assistance classes (19 codes). The categories of stressful factors in adolescents and the codes are summarized in Table 1.

Category of family factors

This category consisted of 32 codes. Perfectionism and high expectations of families, interference in the method of studying, comparison of adolescents with others, not paying attention to their interests, lack of proper condition of study at home, and economical problems of the family were the most frequent codes. Some of these cases are mentioned below with details:

Perfectionism of families and high expectations of adolescents

Students expressed perfectionism of the family as one of the most important stressors. Many parents had too much expectation from their children, as being the top student

in the school and participating in all school competitions. Students complained of parents' involvement in their studying method. One of the participants in this study told "If the parents have not been able to be successful during their studies, they want to compensate it with their child's high grade point average (GPA)." Another student said, "In some exam nights, despite that I have read the material 6 times, I cannot sleep." Students believe that parents do not pay attention to their interests and even ignore their talents in sports and other cases. They believe that parents other programs, like sports and fun activities of their life and just do their homework. This was a concern for a large number of participants.

Comparing adolescents with others

An issue that hurts adolescents very much is being compared with others, especially when they try a lot for educational achievement, parents, regardless of their efforts, compared their test results with others and their judgment about the amount of studying was only based on the test result. One of the students told us that in the

Table 1: Categories, subcategories, and repeated codes extracted as sources of academic stress from the viewpoint of Iranian adolescents in qualitative study

Categories	Subcategories	Codes
Family factors	Perfectionism of the families	Perfectionism of the families, interference in the adolescent's method of studying, high expectation of the child, expecting to attend school competitions, expectation of always reading the books, not paying attention to adolescent's favorite sport and activities, worrying about the future of adolescents
	Comparison of the adolescent with others	Comparing children with each other or with other children of relatives and friends, wrong judgments about the amount of studying only on the basis of the grade score
	Inappropriate family situations	Not having financial ability to attend school's Olympiad classes, forcing the adolescent to attend family parties, being roommate with other siblings, lack of good conditions for studying in the home
Peers	Lack of integrity between friends and peers	Lack of honesty among peers about the quantity and quality of studying and hiding the grades and ratings of tests from each other, imitation of the way of studying from other peers, the lack of cooperation among peers
	Being mocked by friends	Being mocked by friends, being sensitive about each other's grades and rankings ·proud of top students
Teachers, supervisor, and educational system	Behavior of teachers and supervisor	Student discrimination, mocking the student, inappropriate behaviors of some teachers, excessive teacher seriousness in class, teacher ghosting, teachers "and school supervisors" threat to expel students from school in the case of low average, dictation of not being passed in the exam by teachers
	Technical and managerial ability of teachers and supervisor	Teacher's bad method of teaching, low scientific and teaching ability of the teacher, conditional participation in important exams, reading student grades in the classroom, taking a test without previous notice, forcing the student to pass the tests, disregarding of the school supervisors to the student's aims, inability of the teacher to manage the class, lack of mastery of some teachers in the lessons material because of taking a break in teaching
	Educational system	Differences in the style of studying for UEE and school, the lack of coordination between teachers in providing educational materials, competitive tests at school and the region, the lack of educational justice in competitive tests at the school and the region
Homework and grades of the exams	School environment	Announcing the name and rank of top students at school, school change, lack competition in school, low school facilities, too much noise in the school, street intruders in the way of school (for female students), problems of travel between village and city for rural students
	The mass of homework and exams	Too much homework, lack of coordination between teachers in giving homework to students, emphasis on the only top grade (20) by some teachers, the lack of interest to teaching material in students, the weakness of students in certain lessons, Not specifying the homework and expectation for doing it in next session
Educational assistance classes	Educational assistance classes	Concerning non-attending the educational assistance classes despite the presence of others, the higher level of educational assistance classes than school classes, the concern of costs that parents payed for taking classes and their expectations, concerns about reactions of the relatives to participation in educational assistance classes and not passing the exams, the financial inability to buy training books or participating in the educational assistance classes, the homework of educational assistance classes in addition to the school homework, the high expectations of teachers in educational assistance classes

case of low grade, parents would say, "What you were doing in the room if you were not studying." This increased students' stress to get higher scores.

Families' lack of proper conditions

The lack of considering the adolescents' educational programs in setting family gatherings, too much family visits and forcing adolescents to participate in those parties, families' economical issues to provide necessary tools for the adolescents to study, especially educational assistant books, and lack of a suitable place at home for the adolescents to study were some of the issues mentioned by students of lower socioeconomic classes. However, female students in 2nd grade of high school referred to the issue of marriage as one of the stressors.

Category of peers

In this category, 18 codes were raised. The lack of honesty between friends and peers and being mocked by them were the most frequent codes.

Lack of honesty between friends and peers

Students, especially adolescent girls, expressed their annoyance because of the lack of empathy and honesty among peers and considered this as a stressor. They believe that there is an unhealthy competition between them due to the emphasis of the school and teachers on the student's grade and rank; the students in order to achieve superior grades in class and school hide the number of hours of study, exam scores, and other subjects from each other and even deny helping each other to improve. One student said: "My peers always consider me as an enemy and never help me in my lessons." By this sentence, the impact of peer's role on academic stress and its consequences could be understood.

Being mocked by friends

In addition to the educational issues, many students were worried about mockery from friends and peers. This was especially the case for more privileged students, as they were worried about being mocked by their classmates in the case of failure in school examinations.

Category of teachers, school supervisors, and school environment

A total of 72 codes were in this category, mainly placed in the subcategories of the teachers and supervisors and the technical ability of teachers in the classroom.

Behavior of school teachers and supervisors

Stressful factors of the school, which were mainly mentioned by students, included disrespectful behavior of teachers, mocking them in front of others, using inappropriate terms in class, and injustice in teachers "and supervisor" treats with students. Among the aforementioned issues, the one that seemed to hurt

students more than the others was the discrimination between students and the attention of school supervisors to some students and ignoring others. Many students, especially in special schools, stated that the behavior of teachers in the class is unconsciously stressful to students. The emphasis of teachers on the test score, rank of student, passing the exams, and even the excessive magnification of some of the schools' entrance examinations (such as exceptional talents and Nemouneh-Doulati schools) are mentioned as stressors. They were mostly dissatisfied with too much seriousness of the teachers. One of the students said that when we protest the atmosphere of the classroom, the teacher says, "If you are stressed, go home." Another student said, "If I get less than 20 I will cry and even sometimes I cannot breathe." However, students pointed to some teachers who enter the classroom with a smile and cheerful mood and make them happy. The issue raised mainly by high school students was putting their photographs and ratings at schools' board; some of them were worried that they would not be able to score in the next tests and that their photographs would not be installed on the board. A number of students mentioned injustice in competitions held at regional and provincial level, citing this as one of the stressors.

Technical ability and behavior of teachers in the classroom

A number of students stated the inappropriate teaching method of some teachers or their low abilities to teach as stressors. Female students believed that male teachers have better quality of teaching than female teachers. In schools with low socioeconomic status, students were more concerned about the lack of sense of competition at school and ignoring the aims of students by school supervisors and felt that they were lagging behind students from other schools.

School environments

The inappropriate school environment was mostly mentioned by students from lower socioeconomic classes as stressors. The lack of educational facilities such as dissatisfaction with school benches, teaching aids, school space, noise pollution, the problem of going to school, especially for students who travel from village to city daily and street intruders (for female students of 2nd grade of high school) was also mentioned as stressor.

There were a significant number of stressful codes in this category that highlighted the important role of school and teachers in creating adolescent educational pressure.

Category of school homework and examination grade

The amount of homework and examinations

Too much homework, multiple examinations, and lack of coordination between teachers in teaching educational materials were repetitive codes. Most of the participants

complained about holding multiple examinations at school, especially the lack of coordination between teachers in organizing different examinations on a single day. In addition, official examinations in middle of the term, end of the term, educational achievement, and even examinations of private institutes that were held at some schools were the source of stress for students. Indeed, exam anxiety was a common problem for all participants. Furthermore, the other repetitive theme was considering much homework worthless in improving the student's educational quality.

Differences in the style of studying for the university entrance examination and the school examinations

Another notable issue raised by the 2nd grade of high school students was the difference in studying for the university entrance examination and the school examinations, which makes the students stressed. Students stated that they have to pass school tests successfully to get a good grade and also be ready for the university entrance examination which, due to the difference in the style of the examinations, is a source of stress for them.

Category of educational assistance classes

Educational assistance classes and economic status of the families

Educational assistance programs in various socioeconomic classes create stress in various forms. In higher socioeconomic classes, students complained of participating in multiple classes and stated the interference of the programs and tasks of these classes with school homework as a stressful factor. In lower socioeconomic classes, students were concerned about being unable to attend educational assistance classes and being lagged of students from other schools. *"I have not been able to participate in school Olympiad classes because of the financial conditions. Wealthy people still will be wealthy even if they don't study but those who are not rich should study in difficult situation to earn money,"* said one student. One of the students considered this kind of the classes as show off. It seems that the socioeconomic status is contributing to cause academic stress of adolescents.

In addition to the factors mentioned above, female students, particularly in special schools, worried about school change, being expelled by school supervisors because of the low grade point average, and dictation of teachers about not passing the examinations. In special schools, some students regretted studying in these schools and said due to limitations and lack of educational facilities in the city, there was no choice but to choose a special school.

Discussion

The results of this study showed that from the viewpoint of Iranian adolescents, the most important causes of

academic stress in the school environment are the grades of the examinations, the high amount of homework, family expectations, competition among peers, and educational assistance classes. The majority of students expressed the most important stressors as teachers and the school supervisors and then mentioned the role of families. In addition, some of them stated that their examination grades and rankings in school were the most common sources of stress. Other studies have also pointed to these stressors.^[8,19,20] Inability in doing homework is introduced as one of the causes of depression in some participants.^[11,21]

Regarding school-related stresses, announcing the names and rank of top students or installing their photographs on the boards was one of the causes of academic stress. Although this action could be a motivating factor for all students, it is a stressor for top students in their next examinations and they were always worried about their name being removed from the list of top students; therefore, announcing the names and rank of students (although it was not a general issue in all schools) seemed to increase academic stress.

A significant number of students considered family as an important factor in academic stress, although the role of families in causing academic stress was different in different socioeconomic classes. It seems that families have played a role in causing stress in adolescents in various forms. In the study of Persike and Seiffge-Krenke, the most stressful factors were attributed to parents and school.^[3]

Another major stressor is the amount of homework, the tests that were held during the year, and the grades and rankings of students. Many participants believed that doing lots of homework at home is only waste of time and had little effect on their educational improvement. Cooper et al. believed that having a large amount of homework reduces the effectiveness of the individual.^[22] Studies have shown that students who do a large amount of homework at home, in spite of more free hours at school, do not have enough time to spend with friends and peers and cannot do some important things in life. It is believed that these students experience more physical problems and academic stress than others. This could have a direct relation with depression.^[23,24]

In the present study, all participants had the same opinion about the role of peers, and like other studies, mentioned the reaction of students about their scores and rank.^[3,8,11] The unhealthy competition between peers, the lack of empathy and honesty between them, and mocking by friends and peers were considered important stressors. Of course, it should be noted that female students get influenced by this issue more than that of male students. Other studies have also pointed to stress caused by peers.^[10]

Socioeconomic status is considered one of the stressors that influence the choice of school, the ability to buy educational assistance books, and participation in educational assistance classes and school examinations, such as Olympiads. Of course, in students from low-income families, the economic situation and not participating in educational assistance classes were a cause of academic stress, but in affluent families, the role of educational assistance classes was more highlighted in academic stress, and students mentioned this issue in different ways.^[25]

Since stresses on adolescents can appear in various forms of physical and mental health problems such as stomach pains, sleep problems, depression, fatigue, and other psychological problems,^[8,26,27] it seems that their compatibility strategies with academic stress that affect personality characteristics, individual maturity, and coping with stress will be very effective.^[11,28,29]

Considering that the target group was students and their mental condition regarding academic stress could have been influenced by recent educational events, there was a potential for bias in their statements and perspectives.

Conclusion

This study showed that students have different sources of academic stress. According to the type of schools, sex, and families' conditions of adolescents, the role of each of the sources of academic stress is different. The majority of participants considered teachers and educational system as the most important causes of academic stress. Hence, for reducing the stress of adolescents, educational sessions should be held for parents, school curriculum and student ranking at schools should be reviewed, and also the social context of school and interactions between teachers and students should be considered.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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