

Challenges faced on academic pressure among students: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the complex challenges of academic pressure on forty students at Biabas Trade High School, focusing on its impact on academic tasks, the pursuit of better grades, and balancing multiple school responsibilities. Findings revealed that while pressure serves as a dually-motivating force, successfully fostering discipline, time management, and focus, it exacts a significant psychological cost, causing chronic stress, exhaustion, and fear of failure. The relentless pursuit of high grades also leads to unhealthy peer rivalry and compromises well-being. Although students display resilience through individualized proactive coping mechanisms (rest, self-care), the study concludes that the threat of burnout is systemic. Recommendations urge the institution to shift to a proactive model by implementing a mandated mental health and wellness program, adopting stress-reducing assessment methods, and formalizing time management and self-care skills training to mitigate the negative effects of pressure.

Keywords: Academic pressure, stress, fear of failure, student well-being, burnout, coping strategies, time management, qualitative research.

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INTRODUCTION

Academic pressure is a pervasive and complex phenomenon that significantly shapes the educational experiences of students, particularly in secondary institutions such as Biabas Trade High School. It extends beyond the volume of academic workload and manifests as a multidimensional source of stress that affects students' ability to accomplish academic tasks, attain

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better grades, and manage multiple school responsibilities simultaneously. Rather than viewing academic pressure as a purely instructional concern, contemporary research frames it as a lived experience with profound cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences. In response to this concern, the present study adopts a qualitative, human-centered approach to capture students' personal narratives and lived realities, thereby providing a deeper understanding of how sustained academic pressure influences their daily academic functioning and overall well-being.

The rationale for this investigation is grounded in three interrelated domains of student life. First, academic tasks such as assignments, projects, and examinations often become significant stressors under conditions of heightened pressure. The persistent demand for high performance and perfection may lead to mental fatigue, anxiety, and reduced intrinsic motivation, shifting students' focus away from meaningful learning toward compliance and performance validation. Second, the pursuit of better grades operates as a powerful driver of academic pressure, frequently reinforced by external expectations from family, teachers, and the broader school culture. This emphasis on grades may cultivate unhealthy competition, fear of failure, and diminished self-worth, thereby affecting students' self-esteem and psychological health. Third, the expectation that students excel not only academically but also in extracurricular and social domains further intensifies academic pressure. Balancing these competing demands often results in poor time management, emotional exhaustion, and burnout, highlighting systemic challenges that hinder students' capacity to maintain a healthy balance between school responsibilities and personal well-being.

The experiences of academic pressure may be explained through several established psychological frameworks. Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources Theory posits that stress arises when individuals perceive a loss or threat to essential resources such as time, energy, and emotional capacity, a condition commonly experienced by students facing excessive academic demands (Hobfoll, 1989). Similarly, Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping emphasizes that stress is shaped by students' appraisal of academic demands and their perceived ability to cope with them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory further underscores the role of self-efficacy, suggesting that students who doubt their academic capabilities are more vulnerable to stress (Bandura, 1986), while Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory highlights that academic pressure becomes particularly detrimental when it undermines students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Within the Philippine context, academic pressure is also addressed through key legal and policy frameworks that emphasize student welfare and mental health. The 1987 Philippine Constitution guarantees the right to quality education and protection from harmful conditions, establishing a foundational mandate for safeguarding student well-being. This mandate is reinforced by the Education Act of 1982 (Batas Pambansa Blg. 232), which calls for a supportive and conducive learning environment. While the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (K to 12 Law) aims to improve global competitiveness through curricular rigor, it has simultaneously increased academic demands, making the examination of academic pressure more pressing. More recently, the Basic Educational Mental Health and Well-being Promotion Act (Republic Act No. 12080), enacted in 2024, explicitly requires schools to implement mental health programs and

support systems, underscoring the urgency of research that informs interventions to mitigate academic pressure and promote holistic student development.

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that excessive academic pressure is associated with adverse outcomes such as anxiety, depression, burnout, and self-harm (Deng, 2024; Pascoe et al., 2020; Zhang, 2024). Key contributors to academic stress include heavy academic workloads (Zhang et al.), exam-oriented educational systems prevalent in many Asian contexts (Reddy et al., 2020), and the challenges of adapting to online and blended learning modalities in the post-pandemic period (Haikalis et al., 2025; Kumar & Sharma, 2023). Individual factors such as low academic self-efficacy (Honkie & Broadbent, 2020) and maladaptive perfectionism (Jiang et al., 2022) further intensify pressure, often leading students to impose unrealistic expectations on themselves (Urrego, 2023; Antonio et al., 2025). In response to overwhelming stress, some students resort to maladaptive coping strategies, including academic dishonesty, substance use, and social withdrawal (De Guzman, 2019). Conversely, literature highlights the effectiveness of proactive and supportive interventions, such as time management training (Kim & Seo, 2020), mindfulness-based practices (Abdullah et al., 2020), strong social support networks involving teachers and peers (Raufelder & Schneider, 2020), and school-based stress management programs (Cruz et al., 2024).

Anchored in these theoretical, legal, and empirical foundations, the present study seeks to examine the challenges associated with academic pressure among students at Biabas Trade High School by considering their demographic profile, academic experiences, psychological and emotional struggles, and difficulties in balancing multiple responsibilities. By foregrounding students' voices and lived experiences, the study aims to generate evidence-based recommendations for school administrators, educators, and students that can contribute to more compassionate educational practices, supportive learning environments, and policies that prioritize both academic success and student well-being.

Statement of the problem

This study aims to investigate the challenges associated with academic pressure among students at Biabas Trade High School during the academic year 2025–2026, with particular emphasis on students' academic tasks, their pursuit of better grades, and their ability to balance multiple school responsibilities. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how academic pressure influences students' academic and personal experiences and to generate insights that may inform supportive interventions within the school context.

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the profile of the students in terms of age and sex?
2. How does academic pressure affect students' academic tasks, efforts to achieve better grades, and ability to balance multiple school responsibilities?
3. Based on the results of the study, what recommendations can be made to address the challenges associated with academic pressure among students?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design using in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore students' lived experiences of academic pressure and its influence on academic tasks, grade attainment, and the management of multiple school responsibilities. A qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate because it allows for an in-depth examination of students' subjective perceptions, emotions, and coping experiences, thereby generating rich and descriptive data that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods. By focusing on personal narratives, the study sought to develop a holistic understanding of how academic pressure is experienced within the school context.

The research was conducted exclusively within the premises of Biabas Trade High School to ensure that the data gathered were contextually grounded in the participants' actual learning environment. Conducting the study within the school setting allowed the researcher to capture experiences that are directly shaped by the academic demands, culture, and expectations present in the institution. The participants of the study consisted of forty students enrolled at Biabas Trade High School. A simple random sampling technique was utilized to select the participants from the target population, ensuring that each student had an equal opportunity to be included in the study. This approach minimized selection bias and supported a more balanced representation of student experiences related to academic pressure.

Data were collected using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit detailed accounts of students' experiences with academic pressure. The interview questions were carefully constructed to explore how academic pressure affects students' academic tasks, pursuit of better grades, and ability to balance multiple responsibilities. The semi-structured nature of the instrument provided flexibility, allowing the researcher to ask follow-up and probing questions when necessary to clarify responses and gain deeper insights into each participant's perspective.

Prior to data collection, formal permission to conduct the study was secured through a written request addressed to the school principal. Once approval was granted, the selected participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with parental or guardian consent secured for those who were minors. Participants were assured that their involvement was voluntary and that their identities and responses would remain confidential and anonymous throughout the research process. Individual one-on-one interviews were then conducted in a private area within the school to ensure comfort and confidentiality. With the participants' explicit permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data collected.

Following data collection, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to produce textual data for analysis. The transcriptions were subjected to thematic analysis, which involved carefully examining the data to identify recurring patterns, significant themes, and meaningful insights relevant to the research questions. This systematic analysis enabled the researcher to interpret the students' experiences comprehensively and to draw conclusions that informed the study's findings and recommendations.

Throughout the research process, strict adherence to ethical standards was maintained to protect the rights and welfare of the participants. The researcher ensured transparency, respect, and integrity in all stages of the study, from participant recruitment to data analysis and reporting. The

researcher also extends sincere appreciation to the Grade 11 students who willingly participated in the interviews and shared their experiences, as well as to Mr. Diomedes L. Montero, the principal of Biabas Trade High School, whose support and cooperation made the conduct of this study possible. Finally, the authors certify that this research was conducted free from any conflict of interest and affirm that the findings and interpretations presented were not influenced by any financial, personal, or professional relationships.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic profile of the respondents

This section presents the results and discussion derived from qualitative data gathered from forty (40) student participants of Biabas Trade High School who were selected through simple random sampling and interviewed using a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide, as detailed in the methodology. All interviews were conducted individually within the school premises and were subjected to thematic analysis. The demographic profile of the respondents shows a developmentally consistent and balanced group. In terms of age, the majority of the respondents were sixteen (16) years old, accounting for thirty-six (36) out of forty participants, while two (2) respondents were fifteen (15) years old and another two (2) were seventeen (17) years old. Regarding sex, the respondents were evenly distributed, with twenty (20) male and twenty (20) female students. This equal gender representation minimizes potential gender bias and ensures that both male and female perspectives on academic pressure are equally reflected in the findings.

Students' perceptions of the challenges faced on academic pressure

The qualitative data obtained from the forty student interviews were analyzed thematically and revealed three major categories of challenges associated with academic pressure: academic tasks, achieving better grades, and balancing multiple school responsibilities. These categories encapsulate the primary domains in which students experience pressure and illustrate how academic demands shape their motivation, emotional well-being, and coping behaviors.

Academic tasks

With respect to academic tasks, students consistently described academic pressure as having both motivating and debilitating effects. On one hand, pressure was reported to enhance motivation, inspiration to succeed, focus, discipline, and goal-setting, encouraging students to manage their time effectively and remain committed to completing assignments, projects, and examinations. Several students indicated that academic pressure pushes them to strive for success and maintain organization in their academic work. On the other hand, students also reported that heavy academic workloads lead to stress, anxiety, exhaustion, and overwork. Fear of failure and self-doubt were commonly expressed, with some students noting that excessive pressure reduces creativity and productivity. Difficulties in balancing rest and study time were also highlighted, as prolonged academic demands often leave students feeling mentally and physically drained. To cope with these challenges, students reported consciously adopting strategies such as taking breaks,

practicing positive thinking, and attempting to balance academic responsibilities with adequate rest.

Achieving better grades

In terms of achieving better grades, the findings indicate that academic pressure serves as a powerful motivator but also a significant source of psychological strain. Students emphasized that the desire to attain high grades increases motivation, focus, determination, and preparation, often leading them to work harder and make personal sacrifices, including reduced leisure time and social activities. However, this pursuit is frequently accompanied by stress, anxiety, fear, and sleeplessness. Pressure and expectations from self and others were described as restrictive, sometimes diminishing students' enjoyment of learning. Fear of failure emerged as a central theme, influencing students' confidence and emotional stability. Despite these challenges, students acknowledged that support and encouragement from peers, teachers, and family members help sustain motivation and balance academic demands with personal well-being. The data suggest that achieving better grades is closely linked to both academic effort and emotional resilience, requiring a balance between hard work, confidence, and support systems.

Balancing multiple school responsibilities

Balancing multiple school responsibilities was identified as another major challenge intensified by academic pressure. Students reported that effective time management, organization, discipline, and prioritization are essential in managing academics, extracurricular activities, and personal commitments. When successfully applied, these skills help students create a balance between study and leisure, resulting in satisfaction, motivation, and a sense of achievement. However, many students also reported experiencing stress, overwhelm, exhaustion, and burnout due to multiple deadlines and demanding schedules. Sacrifices in rest and social activities were frequently mentioned, and a lack of adequate rest was associated with burnout and unhappiness. Distractions were also noted to negatively affect focus and performance. To manage these pressures, students described taking breaks, setting priorities, seeking support from others, and engaging in hobbies as important coping strategies that help reduce stress and maintain overall well-being.

Discussion

The demographic findings provide a strong foundation for interpreting the results, as the forty respondents were largely homogeneous in age and evenly distributed by sex, ensuring equitable representation of student experiences. The thematic analysis clearly demonstrates that academic pressure among students at Biabas Trade High School is a multifaceted phenomenon characterized by both positive and negative effects across three key areas: academic tasks, achieving better grades, and balancing multiple school responsibilities. While academic pressure promotes discipline, motivation, focus, and the development of time management and

organizational skills, it simultaneously contributes to stress, anxiety, fear of failure, exhaustion, reduced creativity, and burnout. The consistent use of coping strategies such as rest, self-care, support-seeking, and prioritization reflects students' resilience but also highlights the need for institutional support. Overall, the findings underscore that although academic pressure can drive achievement, excessive and unmoderated pressure poses significant risks to students' mental and emotional well-being, emphasizing the importance of supportive school policies and practices that foster balance and holistic development.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study lead to the conclusion that academic pressure among students at Biabas Trade High School is a pervasive and complex phenomenon that functions as both a motivating force and a significant psychological burden. Based on qualitative data gathered from forty students who were predominantly sixteen years old and equally represented by sex, the results demonstrate that academic pressure compels students to develop discipline, time management, organization, and goal-setting skills necessary for completing academic tasks, striving for better grades, and balancing multiple school responsibilities. However, these perceived benefits are consistently accompanied by substantial negative consequences, including chronic stress, anxiety, fear of failure, exhaustion, reduced creativity, and a high risk of burnout. The pressure to perform well academically was found to extend beyond the classroom, affecting students' emotional well-being, confidence, and, in some cases, peer relationships due to unhealthy competition and heightened expectations.

The study further concludes that while students show resilience by relying on individualized coping mechanisms such as taking breaks, practicing self-care, seeking support, and engaging in personal hobbies, these strategies are largely reactive and place the burden of managing academic pressure on the students themselves. Difficulties in balancing academic demands with extracurricular activities, social commitments, and rest were repeatedly identified, with many students reporting sacrifices in leisure and sleep that ultimately led to fatigue and emotional strain. Although academic pressure can enhance motivation and determination, its excessive and unregulated nature undermines students' mental health and overall well-being, suggesting that academic success achieved under such conditions may not be sustainable.

In light of these findings, the study underscores the need for a systemic and institutional response to academic pressure rather than an exclusive reliance on students' ability to cope. Schools must take an active role in mitigating the negative effects of academic pressure by fostering a learning environment that values balance, emotional health, and holistic development alongside academic achievement. This includes the integration of comprehensive school-wide mental health and well-being programs that move beyond traditional counseling services to include regular stress-management initiatives, mindfulness activities, and structured peer support systems. Such programs would directly address the chronic stress, exhaustion, and fear of failure identified in the findings and redistribute responsibility for well-being from individual students to the institution.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of equipping teachers with strategies to reduce excessive academic pressure through flexible and diverse assessment practices. Emphasizing project-based learning, coordinating workloads across subjects, and reducing overreliance on high-stakes assessments may help curb grade obsession, prevent burnout, and lessen unhealthy competition among students. At the same time, students should be provided with

structured opportunities to develop not only organizational and time-management skills but also self-care practices and boundary-setting strategies that reinforce the importance of rest and personal well-being as integral to academic productivity.

Finally, the conclusions of this study point to the value of future research that quantitatively examines the effectiveness of targeted school-based interventions, such as mindfulness training and workload management programs, in reducing students' stress levels, fear of failure, and symptoms of burnout. By building on the qualitative insights generated in this research, future studies may further strengthen evidence-based approaches to addressing academic pressure and contribute to the development of educational policies and practices that sustain both academic excellence and student well-being.

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