

Educational Stress Among Adolescents Within the Greek School Context

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ABSTRACT

Any individual who progresses through life goes through various changes and transitions where stress becomes invariably part of the journey. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the concept of academic stress as the transitions occur at an individual and social level. It, therefore, becomes imperative to understand the sources and the impacts of academic stress to derive adequate and efficient intervention strategies. This article aims to understand stress in general and Greek adolescents' academic stress in particular, at a psychological level, highlighting the impacts and sources of academic stress. Greek adolescent students experience high levels of educational stress during the school period. Older age, female sex, family status, parental profession, and the number of study hours are positively associated with the amount of stress, anxiety, depression and dysphoria-related symptoms reported by the students, including pressure from studying, worry about grades and academic failure. Future research studies are needed to aid specialized interventions for adolescent students to effectively deal with their academic challenges.

KEYWORDS: educational stress; adolescents; students; Greece; school; academic anxie.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Educational stress has emerged as a growing concern among adolescents worldwide, and Greece is no exception. The Greek school system, known for its academically demanding nature and emphasis on high-stakes examinations, exerts significant pressure on students. Adolescents in Greece often navigate a rigid curriculum, intense competition, and societal expectations, all of which contribute to heightened levels of stress. This article explores the key causes, consequences, and potential interventions for educational stress among Greek adolescents.

2. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Stress is a negative emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and physiological process that occurs when a person tries to adjust to or cope with stressors (Bernstein et al., 2008). Stressors are circumstances that disrupt or threaten to disrupt an individual's daily functioning and cause people to make adjustments (Auerbach & Grambling, 1998). However, stress is perceived differently by different individuals. Some people perceive it as events or situations that cause feelings of tension, pressure, or negative emotions such as anxiety and anger. Others define stress as the response to existing situations, which includes physiological changes (increased heart rate, muscle tension), emotional changes, and behavioral changes (Bernstein et al., 2008). Stress is generally regarded as a psychological process that involves an individual's personal interpretation of and response to any threatening event. Stress can be caused by unusual physical conditions such as extreme heat or cold, illness, lack of oxygen, or exposure to bright light.

It is important to note that stress can have both positive and negative effects on people. Stress can be a normal, adaptive reaction or a threat. Its role is to signal and prepare individuals to take defensive action. Most psychologists believe that moderate stress motivates individuals to achieve and fuels creativity, although stress can impair performance on difficult tasks (Auerbach & Grambling, 1998). Auerbach and Grambling (1998) argue that stress can lead to serious problems if it is not managed effectively. Chronic stress can increase the risk of physical illness (including heart disease) and mental illness (e.g., anxiety disorders). Health psychology focuses, in part, on how stress affects body functioning and how people can use stress management techniques to prevent or minimize disease (Grambling and Auerbach, 1998).

3. SOURCES OF STRESS

Bernstein et al. (2008) define stressors, the sources of stress, as any circumstance or event that poses a threat to an individual's daily functioning and necessitates adaptive responses. These stressors are demands originating from either the internal or external

environment that disrupt homeostasis, thereby impacting both physical and psychological well-being, and requiring restorative actions to regain equilibrium (Lazarus & Cohen, 1977). It is crucial to acknowledge that stressors vary significantly in their severity and duration. A stimulus that elicits a stress response in one individual may not do so in another. For instance, the omission of academic lectures may be perceived as a significant stressor by first-year undergraduate students, whereas it may be inconsequential to other students, contingent upon their individual expectations and priorities.

Stressors are typically categorized into three primary domains: catastrophic events, major life changes, and daily hassles. Major life changes, such as the onset of illness or the bereavement of a family member, are generally recognized as universally stressful experiences. However, the preponderance of stress encountered in daily life stems from daily hassles. These can be defined as the minor irritations, pressures, and annoyances that, while individually seemingly insignificant, can exert a substantial cumulative impact. These daily hassles are often associated with occupational demands, everyday living circumstances, and interpersonal relationships (Bernstein et al., 2008).

4. EFFECTS OF STRESS

Experiencing stress can manifest in a range of cognitive difficulties, including anxious thoughts, impaired concentration, and memory lapses. Furthermore, it often triggers behavioral alterations, such as nail-biting, rapid breathing, teeth clenching, and hand-wringing. Common physiological effects of stress, often linked to anxiety, include cold extremities, a sensation of butterflies in the stomach, and an elevated heart rate (Auerbach & Gramling, 1998). The interplay between physical and psychological stress responses is typically observed, especially under conditions of heightened stressor intensity. Notably, these responses are not isolated; one category can significantly influence another. For example, even mild chest pain might induce psychological distress, characterized by worries about a potential heart attack. Psychological responses to stress, as highlighted by Bernstein et al. (2008), can manifest as changes in emotional states, cognitive processes, and behavioral patterns.

5. COPING WITH STRESS

While the impact of stress varies among individuals, its potential to induce illness and negative experiences is undeniable. Consequently, a person's ability to manage stress significantly influences their health-seeking behaviors, including the pursuit of medical care and social support, as well as their receptiveness to professional advice (Passer & Smith, 2007). The transactional model of stress and coping, as proposed by Lazarus & Cohen (1977), provides a framework for understanding how individuals navigate stressful situations. This model posits that stress arises from the dynamic interaction between an individual and their environment, where external stressors play a pivotal role. These interactions are characterized by two key appraisal processes: the individual's evaluation of the stressor and the assessment of available social and cultural resources. The initial appraisal, often referred to as primary appraisal, involves the individual's examination of the potential threat posed by a stressor. This process encompasses the evaluation of an event's major implications, determining whether it is perceived as stressful, positive, controllable, challenging, or irrelevant. The subsequent appraisal, or secondary appraisal, involves assessing the resources and options available to the individual for coping with the stressor. This stage focuses on the individual's proactive efforts to identify and implement effective solutions (Cohen, 1984).

6. ACADEMIC STRESS

Academic stress is the anxiety and stress that comes from schooling and education. There is often a lot of pressure that comes along with one's education. There is studying, homework, tests, labs, reading, and quizzes. There is the stress of doing all of the work, balancing the time and finding time for extra-curricular activities. Academic stress is especially hard on school students. Teachers expect work to be completed on time and students may underestimate the amount of time available or the degree of difficulty.

Stress and its manifestations, such as anxiety, depression, and burnout, have always been seen as a common problem among people in different professions and occupations. In the last few decades, alarm has already been provoked by the proliferation of books, research reports, popular articles and the growing number of organized workshops, aiming to teach people how to cope with this phenomenon (Keinan & Perlberg 1986). Keinan and Perlberg (1986) argue that the feelings of frustration, anxiety, and depression are among the potential consequences of high degree of stress. Mckean et al. (2000) maintain that stressors alone do not produce anxiety, depression or tensions. Instead, the interaction between stressors and the person's perception and the reaction to these stressors cause stress. Environmental stress occurs as a result of environmental stimuli or demands apprehended by a person that are exceeding his or her ability to deal with them (Shirom, 1986).

Academic stress among students have long been researched on, and researchers have identified stressors as too many assignments, competitions with other students, failures and poor relationships with other students or lecturers (Fairbrother & Warn, 2003). Academic stressors include the student's perception of the extensive knowledge base required and the perception of an inadequate time to develop it (Carveth et al, 1996). Students report experiencing academic stress at predictable times with the greatest sources of academic stress resulting from taking and studying for exams, grade competition, and the large amount of content to master in a

small amount of time (Abouserie, 1994). When stress is perceived negatively or becomes excessive, students experience physical and psychological impairment. Methods to reduce stress by students often include effective time management, social support, positive reappraisal, and engagement in leisure pursuits (Murphy & Archer, 1996). The pressure to perform well in the examination or test and time allocated makes academic environment very stressful (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2006). This is likely to affect the social relations both within the institution and outside which affects the individual person's life in terms of commitment to achieving the goals (Fairbrother & Warn, 2003).

7. STRESS AMONG ADOLESCENTS WITHIN THE GREEK SCHOOL CONTEXT

Educational stress among adolescents within the Greek school context has become an increasingly important topic in recent years. As in many other countries, Greek students face considerable academic pressure, which can have significant effects on their mental health and well-being (Sotiropoulou et al., 2020). This stress is influenced by various factors such as the competitive nature of the Greek educational system, societal expectations, and the demands of standardized testing (Kounenou et al., 2011).

The structure of the Greek education system is characterized by a strong competitive nature, where academic success, particularly in secondary education, is highly valued. Adolescents, especially those in high school, experience intense stress due to the high stakes of the Panhellenic Exams (a nationwide exam for university admission) (Lymberopoulou et al., 2015). From an early age, students are encouraged to perform well academically, with the ultimate goal of securing a spot in a prestigious university. This leads to long study hours and the pressure to succeed academically, contributing significantly to stress (Papanis & Sotiriou, 2010). Greek schools often have a relatively fixed and traditional curriculum, with little room for flexibility or creativity. This can make students feel confined to specific subjects that may not match their interests, increasing the likelihood of burnout (Kassotaki, 2017). In Greek society, education is highly valued, and there is significant pressure from parents to excel academically. This can lead to unrealistic expectations, particularly if the child is expected to follow a specific career path (e.g., becoming a doctor or lawyer) (Zafiropoulou et al., 2022). Greek culture places importance on academic achievement as a key route to success. Thus, adolescents may internalize these societal values, leading to feelings of anxiety and self-doubt if they do not meet their parents' or society's expectations (Chalari, 2014).

The Panhellenic Exams, taken in the last year of high school, are often viewed as the most important event in a student's life. The results of these exams determine access to higher education and future career prospects. This single exam can shape a student's self-worth and future opportunities, leading to immense stress (Koutsampelas & Tsakloglou, 2015). Students spend years preparing for these exams, attending private tutoring sessions, and engaging in extra study to improve their chances of success. The overwhelming emphasis on preparing for exams can negatively affect mental health, leading to stress, anxiety, and even depression (Giavrimis & Papanis, 2009).

The pressure to perform well academically can lead to psychological issues such as anxiety and depression among Greek adolescents. Studies have shown that the most stressful periods for students in Greece are during the months leading up to the Panhellenic Exams (Kounenou et al., 2011). The high academic demands often result in long study hours, contributing to sleep deprivation. This further exacerbates stress, leading to difficulties in concentration, poor academic performance, and mood swings (Sotiropoulou et al., 2020). The focus on academics often leaves little room for social interactions, extracurricular activities, or hobbies. This can lead to feelings of isolation, affecting overall well-being (Papapanou et al., 2021).

There is evidence to suggest that girls may experience higher levels of educational stress compared to boys. They tend to internalize academic pressure more and face higher expectations from both family and society regarding their academic performance (Tzivinikou & Papoutsaki, 2019). Societal norms in Greece often emphasize particular career paths for young women, such as teaching or medicine, which can contribute to additional pressure to perform well academically (Chalari, 2014).

Adolescents in Greece have developed various coping mechanisms to deal with academic stress. These include seeking emotional support from family or friends, engaging in physical activities, or practicing relaxation techniques (Zafiropoulou et al., 2022). Recent discussions in Greece have focused on reducing the stress associated with the Panhellenic Exams. Some proposals suggest reforms to introduce a more holistic approach to education, incorporating continuous assessment rather than relying solely on a single set of exams (Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2023). There is a growing recognition of the importance of mental health support within schools. Many schools in Greece have begun offering counseling services and programs designed to help students manage stress and improve their emotional well-being (Papapanou et al., 2021).

8. KEY FINDINGS FROM GREEK STUDIES ON ADOLESCENT STRESS:

Greek studies increasingly focus on stress experienced by young Greek adolescents within the educational framework. Research in this area examines various contributing factors, the consequences on well-being, and methods for measuring educational stress. Studies have shown that multiple variables contribute to stress, ranging from academic pressures to family dynamics, with some tools being developed to assess the severity of stress in this demographic (Kitsaras et al., 2023; Economou et al., 2013; Galanakis et al., 2023).

Prevalence of Educational Stress: Research consistently indicates that Greek adolescents experience substantial stress, with academic factors such as exams, homework, and concerns about future educational and career paths being central stressors. The academic environment, coupled with societal expectations, creates a high-pressure scenario for students, leading to significant stress levels (Kitsaras et al., 2023).

Identifying Risk Factors: Several factors have been identified as contributing to elevated stress levels among adolescents in Greece:

Demographic Factors: Studies consistently show that older adolescents, as well as females, report higher levels of stress. This demographic trend may reflect both biological and social pressures unique to these groups (Papadopoulos, 2019).

Socioeconomic Factors: Family dynamics, including socioeconomic status and parental occupation, also play a role. Research suggests that adolescents from lower-income or less stable family backgrounds tend to experience greater academic stress, possibly due to economic pressures or lack of support structures (Economou et al., 2013; Tziviniou & Papoutsaki, 2019).

Study-Related Factors: Increased study hours are directly correlated with heightened levels of anxiety and stress. A significant body of work suggests that long hours spent on academic activities, particularly in the lead-up to critical exams such as the Panhellenic Exams, are stress-inducing (Kitsaras et al., 2023).

Validated Measurement Tools: A number of validated measurement tools have been developed to assess educational stress in Greek adolescents. These tools, such as the Greek versions of the Adolescent Stress Questionnaire (ASQ) and the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA), provide researchers with reliable means of evaluating stress levels within this population (Galanakis et al., 2023). The use of these tools has facilitated a more nuanced understanding of the specific sources and impacts of stress.

Impact on Well-being: High stress levels among Greek adolescents are linked to a range of negative psychological outcomes. These include increased levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and dysphoria, all of which can significantly affect a student's emotional and social development (Economou et al., 2013). Additionally, chronic stress may hinder emotional intelligence development, which is crucial for managing interpersonal relationships and coping with life's challenges (Papadopoulos, 2019).

Contextual Factors: The Greek school environment, including issues such as bullying and violence, plays a significant role in the stress experienced by students. Research highlights the importance of a supportive school climate in reducing stress, but the presence of bullying, violence, and interpersonal conflict can exacerbate feelings of anxiety and distress among adolescents (Koutsampelas & Tsakoglou, 2015). Furthermore, broader societal factors, such as Greece's ongoing economic challenges, may contribute indirectly to adolescents' stress through family financial instability or parental job insecurity (Zafropoulou et al., 2022).

Overparenting: Overparenting, a trend in Greece where parents exhibit excessive control over their children's academic and social lives, has been shown to negatively affect adolescent stress levels. Studies suggest that overparented adolescents may experience higher levels of stress due to a lack of autonomy and excessive pressure to meet parental expectations (Kassotaki, 2017).

Impact of Disruptions: The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of Greek adolescents to stress, particularly through the disruption of daily routines, educational activities, and social connections. The shift to online learning and isolation from peers resulted in heightened feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, underscoring the need for resilience and support structures in the face of unexpected challenges (Galanakis et al., 2023).

Protective Factors (Implied): While not always the central focus, research suggests that emotional intelligence and other personal coping mechanisms may serve as protective factors against stress. By fostering emotional awareness, self-regulation, and social skills, adolescents can better manage the pressures of the academic environment and mitigate the negative effects of stress (Tziviniou & Papoutsaki, 2019).

9. OVERALL TRENDS

Recent research trends in Greece indicate that a significant portion of scientific attention is directed toward academic stress experienced by adolescents. The intense demands of the Greek educational system, especially related to high-stakes exams such as the Panhellenic Exams, are widely recognized as primary contributors to student stress (Kitsaras et al., 2023; Galanakis et al., 2023). Greek researchers frequently adapt and validate Western psychological models and assessment tools to fit the cultural and educational landscape of Greece. Tools such as the Adolescent Stress Questionnaire (ASQ) and the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA) have been translated and validated for use with Greek adolescents, enabling more culturally appropriate and reliable measurements of stress (Galanakis et al., 2023).

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of adolescent mental health within Greek society. This shift in awareness has led to an increase in research exploring the psychological well-being of students, the sources of stress they encounter, and the broader impact of educational pressure on their mental health (Economou et al., 2013; Tsitsas & Paschali, 2022). Although existing studies provide a clear understanding of the problem and highlight key contributing factors such as academic overload, gender, socioeconomic background, and parental expectations, there is still a need for research that focuses on practical interventions. Effective support strategies within the school system are necessary to help students cope with stress more constructively (Kitsaras et al., 2023; Tziviniou & Papoutsaki, 2019).

In conclusion, research in Greece demonstrates that academic stress is a significant and persistent issue for adolescents. This stress is largely rooted in the structure and values of the educational system and is shaped by a combination of individual, social, and contextual influences. The current body of literature offers valuable insights into the prevalence and effects of stress, creating a strong foundation for the development of school-based programs and mental health initiatives aimed at reducing its impact.

10. CONCLUSION

Educational stress among adolescents in the Greek school context is a complex issue influenced by societal expectations, the structure of the education system, and the high stakes of standardized testing. Addressing this stress requires a multifaceted approach, including reducing the emphasis on exams, improving mental health support within schools, and fostering a culture that values students' well-being alongside academic achievement.

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