The Silent Crisis: Understanding Student Suicides, Stress, Anxiety in the Context of Academic Pressure

Riya Banerjee[1], Dr. Niradhar Dey[2]

[1]Research scholar in Indira Gandhi National Open University, School of Education, New Delhi
[2]Associate Professor, Indira Gandhi National Open University, School of Education, New Delhi

Abstract

Stress- a word with quite a huge load. And the word has become synonymous to the situation of almost everyone from the current times. Stress can have a diverse range of possible causes and effects on students' emotional and intellectual development. However, academic pressure is vital for a student's academic achievement since it may have both good and negative effects on productivity. This paper however aims to discuss the various root causes and facets of this word especially for the students pursuing Professional courses. The study found that students pursuing Professional Courses report greater levels of stress. Recent studies show that college students face significant stress in several aspects of their lives."Research has found that excessive levels of academic stress can result in an increased occurrence of psychological and physical issues such as depression, anxiety, nervousness, and stress-related disorders. This study underscores the need for coordinated efforts among parents, educators, legislators, and students themselves to minimize academic pressure and its adverse effects.

Keywords: Death, anxiety, policy, pressure, professional, exam, stress

Introduction:

In today's rapidly evolving world, stress has become an almost ubiquitous part of life, particularly among students. If we see in the Indian context, the pressures faced by students pursuing professional courses are exceptionally high which often leads to significant emotional and intellectual challenges. The competitive academic environment, societal expectations, and the rigorous demands of professional courses contribute to an overwhelming burden on students. This stress sometimes works as a motivator but most of the time it results in adverse outcomes like psychological and physical issues such as depression, anxiety, nervousness, and various stress-related disorders.

India's educational landscape consists of high-stakes examinations and significant emphasis on academic success which often exacerbates these pressures. The pursuit of professional courses such as engineering, medicine, and law is seen as a pathway to secure and prestigious careers, but it comes with its own set of challenges. Students are required to maintain high academic performance, navigate complex curricula, and meet the expectations of parents and society, all of which contribute to heightened stress levels.

This paper aims to explore the root causes of stress among students in professional courses in India, examining both the positive and negative effects of academic pressure. By understanding the multifaceted nature of this stress, we can better address its impact on students' well-being and productivity.

Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of collaborative efforts among parents, educators, policymakers, and students themselves in mitigating academic stress and fostering a more supportive educational environment.

Overview of the Indian Education System: General, Professional, and Technical Education

The Indian education system is structured into several stages: Pre-primary, Primary/Elementary, Secondary, and Higher Education. At the higher education level, there are three main types of education: General, Technical, and Professional.

General Education focuses on the holistic development of students, encouraging critical thinking and a broad understanding of the world. Core subjects such as English, Mathematics, Science, and Social Sciences form the foundation of general education and continue to be emphasized at the higher education level.

Professional Education is a formalized approach where students acquire both theoretical knowledge and practical techniques relevant to specific professions. Fields such as medicine and law are typical examples, where students must achieve a level of competence necessary for professional practice. These students are also expected to adhere to ethical standards and commit to lifelong learning to maintain their professional competence. Professionals like doctors, teachers, and lawyers serve society with financial remuneration being a secondary consideration.

Technical Education prepares individuals for the workforce by developing work-related skills and understanding the scientific principles underlying these skills. In India, technical education encompasses programs in Architecture, Planning, Design, Engineering and Technology, Computer Application, Management, Pharmacy, Hotel Management, and Catering, offered at Diploma, Undergraduate, and Postgraduate levels.

Technical, vocational, and professional education are crucial for the development of individuals and society. Post-Independence, India has significantly expanded its educational institutions, particularly in technical and legal education, a stark contrast to the pre-Independence era. Education in India is a concurrent subject, managed by both the Central and State governments. Statutory bodies such as the AICTE, NMC, and BCI, established by Acts of Parliament, regulate higher education across the country. These bodies have evolved over time to operate more professionally and transparently. India boasts a vast network of institutions producing skilled manpower for industries and society, yet the demand for skilled professionals remains unmet. While expanding the number of educational institutions is necessary, maintaining high quality is equally important.

In the context of globalization and rapid technological advancement, Indian graduates must acquire 21st-century skills and competencies to remain competitive. Strengthening partnerships with stakeholders, including the community and industry, is essential to ensure that educational courses remain relevant and meet societal needs.

The Impact of Competitive Exams on Student Stress in India

In India, the pursuit of admission to professional and technical courses is a significant source of stress for students. From a young age, students are driven to secure spots in prestigious fields such as engineering, medicine, and law, often spurred by parental expectations and societal norms. Parents, motivated by their own aspirations or societal pressure, place immense expectations on their children to excel academically and secure admission to top-tier institutions. This pressure is further amplified by the high competition;

with countless students competing for a limited number of seats, the need to achieve outstanding academic performance becomes critical.

The impact of this pressure on students is profound. Many experience severe anxiety, marked by symptoms like sweating, a racing heart, and difficulty breathing. This anxiety can impair their ability to concentrate and make decisions, further hindering their academic performance. Depression is another common outcome, leaving students feeling sad, hopeless, and worthless, and often losing interest in activities they once enjoyed. In extreme cases, the overwhelming stress can lead to suicidal thoughts, underscoring the urgent need for effective support systems. It is crucial for parents, educators, and society to acknowledge these pressures and work together to create a supportive environment that prioritizes the mental health and well-being of students, ensuring they are uplifted rather than overwhelmed in their academic endeavors.

Case studies of the Stress and anxiety faced by students

According to **Prajapati and Singh** (2017), 95% of students experience significant study-related stress, driven by their aspirations for a successful career. Many students set personal targets and worry about potential failures, with 65% reporting anxiety over their academic performance. The pressure to continuously improve after poor exam results affects 83% of students, while 93% feel compelled to meet high parental expectations due to financial investments in their education. This self-imposed and parental pressure contributes to uncertainty about their future, highlighting the need for effective stress management strategies.

Peer comparison plays a crucial role in student stress levels. Approximately 77.66% of students blame themselves for inadequate effort when comparing poorly to peers, and 68.33% resolve to enhance their performance in response to lower marks. Despite the negative impacts, 81.66% of students use peer pressure positively to correct mistakes and strive for better results. However, unfavorable comparisons can lead to doubts about their abilities and heightened anxiety, emphasizing the importance of supportive peer dynamics.

Parental inquiries and expectations also significantly contribute to student stress. Prajapati and Singh found that 82.33% of students feel pressured by parental inquiries about their academic progress, while 78.67% are demotivated by discussions about poor performance. Parental worry about their child's future, expressed through advice and comparisons with successful peers, further adds to student stress levels. Effective communication and positive parental support are crucial in mitigating stress and fostering a supportive learning environment.

According to **Vivek B. Waghachavare, Girish B. Dhumale, Yugantara R. Kadam, Alka D. Gore** (2013) stress levels among 1,224 university students across dental, engineering, and medical disciplines, drawing insights from a comprehensive analysis of demographic and academic factors. Findings revealed that approximately a quarter of respondents experienced stress, with notable variations among different fields of study. Dental students reported the highest prevalence at 28.7%, followed by medical students at 25.1%, and engineering students at 19.7%. Gender emerged as a significant factor, with female students (27.7%) more likely to experience stress compared to their male counterparts (20.4%). Moreover, living arrangements played a crucial role, as students residing in hostels (25.9%) reported higher stress levels than those living elsewhere (19.6%).

Academic pressures were consistently identified as major stressors across all disciplines, particularly impacting medical students. The study underscored the importance of integrating stress management

education into the curriculum, with over half of the students expressing a need for such initiatives. Comparisons with similar studies highlighted lower stress levels in this cohort, potentially influenced by regional and social context. However, limitations included the use of self-reported data and the study's geographical focus on a single urban area, suggesting caution in generalizing findings. Overall, the research underscores the complex interplay of demographic and academic factors in student stress, advocating for targeted interventions to support mental well-being in higher education.

The study by **Aafreen Gull** (2023) explores the dual impact of competitive examinations on students' mental health. It highlights that while these exams can positively influence mental health by fostering a competitive spirit and motivation, they also pose significant risks. Suicides linked to these exams have become a pressing issue due to the immense academic, parental, and personal stress students face. The intense competition and high expectations from parents contribute to feelings of inadequacy, stress, and even thoughts of suicide among students who struggle to meet academic standards.

The study addresses the need for a supportive environment where students can openly discuss their challenges without fear of judgement. It calls for active involvement of families and communities in students' lives to provide crucial social support. Policy changes are also recommended at higher levels to reform educational systems and mitigate the negative impacts of excessive competitiveness on students' mental well-being. Ultimately, the study advocates for understanding students' individual needs and implementing strategies to help them cope with stress effectively, thereby reducing the incidence of mental health crises associated with competitive exams.

The study by **Gokul G. et al.** (2016) examines stress levels among students in various academic disciplines, highlighting distinct findings and coping mechanisms. Medical and dental students reported high levels of stress primarily due to academic pressures such as deadlines for assignments and projects, alongside peer pressure. This stress often manifests in symptoms like anxiety, depression, and insomnia, with some students also experiencing issues like obesity and irregular eating habits. In contrast, engineering students exhibited average stress levels, with depression being equally prevalent across medical, dental, and engineering fields.

The article underscores the importance of effective stress management strategies. Social interactions, adequate sleep, and internet use were identified as significant stress-relievers for students across disciplines; while smoking and entertainment (like music and movies) were less commonly used for stress relief. Law and MBA students, although facing relatively lower stress levels, were particularly concerned about financial issues and future uncertainties. They preferred coping mechanisms such as talking with friends and occasionally smoking.

Exploring the Dark Side: Suicidal Tendencies Among Students Under Academic Stress

The news of September 10,2023 from The Wire highlights a concerning trend in India regarding student suicides, particularly emphasizing the significant increase in such cases over the past decade. According to data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), student suicides rose by 70% between 2011 and 2021, with 13,089 student deaths by suicide recorded in 2021 alone. This uptick is reflective of broader societal issues impacting students, exacerbated by factors like academic pressures, family problems, and mental health challenges.

Specifically, the report notes Kota as a focal point, a city known for its coaching centers, where student suicides have surged, reaching a high not seen since 2015. Reasons cited for these tragic incidents include

academic stress, failures in examinations, and the socio-psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted normal social interactions and support systems for students.

The response from authorities includes measures like installing spring-loaded fans in accommodations to address immediate safety concerns. Mental health experts and advocates, such as Nelson Vinod Moses, emphasize the critical need for enhanced counseling services within educational institutions to support students in coping with stress and preventing such devastating outcomes.

The article from Frontline which was published on September 21, 2023 highlights the poignant story of Arjun Gupta, a young man who battled severe mental health challenges during his adolescence, exacerbated by the intense pressures of academic exams like the AIPMT (now NEET) in India. Gupta's experience underscores the immense stress students face, spending up to 15 hours a day studying, which took a toll on his mental well-being. Despite achieving academic success, he struggled with negative thoughts and depression, initially viewing mental health issues as signs of weakness.

Gupta's journey reflects broader issues within Indian society where discussions around mental health are often stigmatized, particularly for young men. His turning point came when he bravely shared his struggles on social media, prompting an outpouring of support that helped him recognize the importance of seeking help and eventually pursuing a career as a psychologist.

The article from Financial Express, which was published on 19th December, 2023 highlights the alarming rise in student suicides in India, emphasizing that between 2018 and 2022, 59,239 student suicides were reported, accounting for 7.76% of all suicides during this period. This trend underscores the severe mental health challenges faced by students, largely attributed to the pressure of centralised competitive exams and academic stress. Maharashtra recorded the highest number of student suicides from 2019 to 2021, followed by Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, with Delhi leading among Union Territories.

Experts and stakeholders, including educational bodies and psychologists, advocate for urgent reforms. They stress the need for comprehensive mental health support within educational institutions, such as establishing on-campus counselling centers and conducting regular workshops on mental health awareness. Additionally, there's a call to reevaluate the educational system by reducing exam-centric pressures and promoting continuous assessment methods. Addressing issues of gender and caste-based discrimination on campuses is also deemed crucial for creating a more supportive environment. Government initiatives like the proposed UMMEED guidelines aim to address suicide prevention in schools, focusing on understanding risk factors, dispelling myths, and empowering stakeholders. However, critics argue that more sustained efforts are required to tackle systemic issues effectively.

The article from The Hindu which was published on December 04, 2023 primarily emphasizes the concerning issue of student suicides within the broader context of suicide statistics in India for the year 2022. Among all reported suicides, over 12,000 were attributed to students, underscoring the significant mental health challenges faced by young individuals pursuing education across the country. While the report points towards various causes such as 'family problems', 'illness', and socio-economic factors affecting suicide rates among different demographics, it specifically notes the substantial number of student suicides as a critical concern. This demographic faces unique pressures related to academic performance, competitive exams, and societal expectations, all of which contribute to their mental health vulnerabilities.

The data highlights that Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Telangana reported the highest numbers of suicides, reflecting regional variations and potentially differing stressors impacting students in these areas. It also mentions the absence of farmer and agricultural laborer suicides

in certain states and union territories, pointing out specific gaps in suicide reporting and prevention efforts across different sectors of society.

Conclusion

The journey of academic pursuit among students in India is often driven by aspirations for a better future, driven by the promise of professional success and societal expectations. However, this path is fraught with significant challenges that go beyond mere academic rigors. Students face mounting pressures stemming from the competitive nature of entrance exams, societal demands for achievement, and the fear of unemployment or underemployment post-graduation. These factors collectively contribute to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and in severe cases, suicidal tendencies among students across various educational domains.

The stark reality of student suicides reveals disturbing trends across different states and educational disciplines. Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Telangana stand out as regions witnessing disproportionately high rates of student suicides, reflecting localized variations in academic pressures and socio-economic stressors. It is clear that while academic pursuits play a crucial role in shaping students' futures, the accompanying stressors and mental health challenges must not be overlooked.

These issues require a nuanced approach that involves not only educational reforms but also broader societal and governmental interventions. Robust mental health support systems within educational institutions are needed to enhancing career counselling services, and fostering a supportive academic environment are critical steps. Moreover, policymakers must prioritise initiatives aimed at reducing unemployment anxieties and enhancing vocational training opportunities to alleviate the pressures on students striving for professional success.

While the educational system plays a pivotal role, it is essential to recognize that the issue of student suicides is multifaceted, influenced by societal expectations, economic uncertainties, and individual aspirations. By fostering a holistic approachz we can empower students to navigate challenges more resiliently and ensure their overall well-being and future success.

Reference

1. Education For All in India. (n.d.). *Pressure on students appearing for competitive exams in India*. Retrieved July 7, 2024, from https://educationforallinindia.com/pressure-on-students-appearing-for-competitive-exams-in-india/

2. Gokul, G., et al. (2016). *The mental stress levels of students studying in different professional courses*. J. Pharm. Sci. & Res., 8(6), 483-486.

3. Gull, A., Ramesh, A., Mahapatra, M., Gupta, P., Prashar, S., & Birendri, K. M. (2023). *Competitive exams and its impacts on student's mental health: An analytical study in India.* YMER, 22(5). Retrieved from http://ymerdigital.com

4. Mandhyan & Perna. (2021). *Technical and Professional Education.* Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi. Retrieved July 7, 2024, from http://egyankosh.ac.in//handle/123456789/71574

5. Prajapati, N., Singh, K., & Mahaveer, V. (2017). *Sources of stress among students preparing in various competitive exams for job*. International Journal of Computer Research and Technology, 5(4), December 2017. Retrieved July 7, 2024, from http://www.ijcrt.org ISSN: 2320-2882

6. The Hindu. (2023, December 4). *One-third of all 2022 suicides were of daily wage earners, farmers: NCRB report.* The Hindu. Retrieved from https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/one-third-of-all-2022-suicides-were-of-daily-wage-earners-farmers-ncrb-report/article67604859.ece

7. The Wire Staff. (2023, September 10). *Share of students among Indian suicide victims has grown over last 10 years.* The Wire. Retrieved from https://m.thewire.in/article/society/share-of-students-among-indian-suicide-victims-has-grown-over-last-10-years

8. Waghachavare, V., Dhumale, G., Kadam, Y., & Gore, A. (2013). *A study of stress among students of professional colleges from an urban area in India.* Sultan Qaboos University Medical Journal, 13, 429-436. https://doi.org/10.12816/0003266