

Exploring the Impact of Academic Stress on Junior Secondary School Students in Oredo Local Government Area, Edo State, Nigeria

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Abstract: This study investigated the impact of academic stress on Junior Secondary School Three (JSS3) students in Oredo Local Government Area, Edo State, Nigeria. Using a descriptive survey design, data were collected from 500 students across public and private schools through a validated questionnaire (Cronbach's alpha = 0.84). Data were analyzed using means, standard deviations, frequency counts, and independent samples t-tests. Findings revealed that JSS3 students experience high levels of academic stress, with the most significant contributors being high parental and teacher expectations, heavy workloads, and frequent examinations. While no significant difference was found in stress levels between male and female students, private school students reported higher stress compared to their public-school counterparts. The study concludes that academic stress among JSS3 students is systemic and shaped by unrealistic expectations, potentially undermining students' well-being and academic achievement. It recommends the integration of stress management programs into school curricula, the strengthening of guidance and counseling services, sensitization of parents and teachers, provision of balanced academic workloads, and policy interventions to ensure supportive learning environments.

Keywords: Academic stress, Junior Secondary School, parental expectations, coping.

Introduction

Stress is an inevitable aspect of human life, influencing performance across academics, work, and social relationships. Among students, academic stress is particularly prevalent and often stems from pressure to meet educational demands such as examinations, class participation, subject mastery, peer competition, and high parental and teacher expectations. When these demands exceed students' coping abilities, stress can manifest as frustration, anxiety, and reduced academic performance (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Misra & Castillo, 2004).

Academic stress refers to the psychological and physiological responses students experience when academic demands exceed their coping abilities (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While stress is often viewed negatively, Selye (1974) introduced the concept of *eustress*, which can enhance performance, and *distress*, which undermines learning and health outcomes. Academic stress has been broadly categorized into two forms: *eustress* and *distress*. *Eustress*, first introduced by Selye (1974), is a positive form of stress that motivates individuals to achieve goals

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and enhances productivity. In contrast, *distress* occurs when pressures exceed coping resources, leading to negative psychological and physical outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and impaired performance (Li & Yang, 2016; Zhang et al., 2022). For adolescents, especially during transitional stages, the balance between eustress and distress is critical for both academic achievement and personal development (Reddy et al., 2018).

Global evidence indicates that while academic stress is a universal phenomenon, its causes and effects vary by context. In East Asian societies such as South Korea and Japan, high-stakes examinations and societal pressures result in intense academic stress and widespread mental health challenges among adolescents (Kim et al., 2021; Lee, 2020). In Western countries, stress is often linked to standardized testing, competition for university admissions, and financial burdens such as student loans (American Psychological Association, 2020). These regions have increasingly prioritized mental health interventions in schools to help students cope. Unlike these regions, Nigerian students face systemic constraints such as inadequate resources, overcrowded classrooms, and limited access to counseling (Ogunyemi & Ademokoya, 2020).

Research shows that academic stress is commonly triggered by examinations, heavy workloads, and parental expectations (Reddy et al., 2018). Prolonged stress may lead to anxiety, depression, and declining performance (Zhang et al., 2022), but under certain conditions, it may promote motivation and resilience (Hajian, 2016). The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) explains how students appraise and respond to stressors, while the Yerkes–Dodson Law (1908) illustrates the optimal balance between stress and performance.

Gender findings are mixed. Some studies report that females experience more stress and adopt different coping strategies (Lavoie et al., 2019; Ahmad & Ghosh, 2020), while others find no significant differences when academic conditions are similar (Laigong & Shikuku, 2020). Concerning private and public school stress patterns, studies suggest that private school students may face higher stress than their public counterparts due to stricter demands and higher parental expectations (Siddiqui & Habib, 2021; Pajarianto et al., 2020). Empirical evidence further shows that elevated parental expectations and perfectionistic tendencies are directly associated with increased school stress and health complaints among adolescents (Díez et al., 2023; Guo et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2023).

In Nigeria, the problem of academic stress is shaped by both socio-cultural and institutional factors. Students face pressure to perform well in critical examinations such as the Junior and Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations, which determine academic progression and future opportunities (Nworgu et al., 2013; Raji & Abdulquadri, 2021). Additional challenges include overcrowded classrooms, limited learning resources, and the absence of adequate mental health support services in schools (Ogunyemi & Ademokoya, 2020). Research also highlights that high parental expectations significantly intensify stress and anxiety among adolescents (Guo et al., 2023; Xu, Zuo, & Zheng, 2023). These stressors can undermine motivation, impair performance, and in extreme cases, lead to dropout (Adom et al., 2020).

Given the transitional importance of Junior Secondary School Three (JSS3), when students prepare for the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), it is critical to understand the sources and impacts of academic stress at this level. Previous studies in Nigeria have examined stress among secondary students generally, but limited attention has been paid to JSS3 students, who face unique academic and developmental challenges. This study, therefore, investigates the impact of academic stress on JSS3 students in Oredo Local Government Area of Edo

State. Specifically, it examines the prevalence of academic stress, the most common stressors, and variations across gender and school type.

Research Questions

The following questions were raised to guide the study.

1. What is the level of academic stress experienced by Junior Secondary School 3 (JSS3) students in Oredo Local Government Area?
2. Which specific types of academic stress are most common among students in public and private schools within Oredo Local Government Area?
3. In what ways does the level of academic stress vary between male and female JSS3 students in Oredo Local Government Area?
4. How do academic stress levels compare between students in public and private Junior Secondary Schools in Oredo Local Government Area?

Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survey research design to investigate the impact of academic stress among JSS3 students. The population comprised students in both public and private junior secondary schools in Oredo Local Government Area, Edo State, which includes 14 public and 120 private schools. A sample of 500 students was selected, consisting of 250 from public schools and 250 from private schools, using a multi-stage sampling technique. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire divided into three sections. Section A captured demographic details such as gender and school type. Section B included nine items identifying sources of academic stress, while Section C contained sixteen items assessing stress experiences. Responses were measured on a four-point Likert scale ranging from Always (4) to Never (1). The instrument's content validity was established through expert review by specialists in Measurement and Evaluation at the University of Benin. A pilot test involving 30 students outside the study area yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.84, indicating good reliability.

Data analysis involved descriptive and inferential statistics. Mean scores and standard deviations addressed the first research question, with a cluster mean benchmark of 40.0 determining stress levels. Frequency counts and rank ordering were used to identify major stressors. Independent samples t-tests at the 0.05 significance level assessed differences by gender and school type.

Results

Table 1

Level of Academic Stress among JSS3 Students in Oredo Local Government Area

Item	Mean	Standard deviation	Remark
Difficulty paying attention in class due to stress	2.72	0.91	Sometimes
Difficulty understanding teachers' lessons	2.48	1.02	Rarely
A great deal of homework to do	2.50	1.21	Sometimes
Too many assignments every week	2.81	1.08	Sometimes
Too many workbook tasks	2.65	1.28	Sometimes
Insecurity from competition for good grades	2.65	1.19	Sometimes
Little or no time for physical activities	2.41	1.19	Rarely
Pressure from examinations and assignments	3.01	1.07	Sometimes
Pressure from school competitions	2.55	1.30	Sometimes

Burden from extracurricular activities	2.67	1.16	Sometimes
Stress from take-home assignments	2.90	1.08	Sometimes
High number of subjects	2.94	1.22	Sometimes
Lack of conducive classroom environment	3.12	1.10	Sometimes
Stress from peer relationships	3.04	1.15	Sometimes
High expectations from parents and teachers	3.27	0.97	Sometimes
Stress from high test/exam scores	3.13	1.07	Sometimes
Cluster Mean	44.86	7.55	

Table 1 shows that students reported experiencing stress from multiple academic activities, including numerous assignments, homework, and workbook tasks. They also indicated stress related to competition for grades, pressure from examinations, extracurricular commitments, and high parental and teacher expectations. The cluster mean of 44.86 (Standard deviation = 7.55) exceeded the normative benchmark of 40.0, indicating that students in the area generally experience a high level of academic stress.

Table 2

Most Prevalent Sources of Academic Stress among JSS3 Students

Source of Academic Stress	Frequency	Rank
High academic expectations	58	1
Pressure from subject teachers	57	2
Too many subjects offered	56	3
Extra lectures at home	55	4
Tutorial centers	54	5
Extra lectures in school	52	6
Unconducive classroom environment	51	7
Test and examination grades	43	8
Peer/classmate relationships	41	9

Table 2 reveals that high academic expectations emerged as the leading source of stress, followed closely by pressure from subject teachers and the large number of subjects studied. Other significant contributors included extra lessons at home and tutorial centres, as well as additional classes organized by schools. Stress from unfavourable classroom environments and test or examination performance was also reported, though to a slightly lesser extent. Relationships with classmates ranked lowest among the identified sources of stress. These findings suggest that institutional and parental demands, rather than peer factors, constitute the strongest triggers of academic stress among JSS3 students.

Table 3

Independent Samples t-Test of Academic Stress by Gender

Gender	N	Mean	Standard deviation	t-value	p-value	Remark
Male	250	37.38	7.39	-1.06	.293	Not significant
Female	250	38.94	7.37			

Results from the independent samples t-test in Table 3 revealed no significant difference between male students and female students, $t(498) = -1.057$, $p = 0.293$. This indicates that both male and female students in the study area experienced similar levels of academic stress.

Table 4

Independent Samples t-Test of Academic Stress by School Type

School Type	N	Mean	Standard deviation	t-value	p-value	Remark
Public	250	36.55	7.60	-2.40	.019	Significant
Private	250	40.00	6.86			

Results presented in Table 4 showed a significant difference between the two groups, with private school students reporting higher stress levels compared to their public-school counterparts $t(498) = -2.395$, $p = 0.019$. This suggests that students in private schools are subjected to greater academic pressures, likely due to heightened parental expectations, stricter academic demands, and the competitive culture often associated with private institutions.

Discussion of Findings

This study investigated the impact of academic stress on Junior Secondary School Three (JSS3) students in Oredo Local Government Area, Edo State. The findings revealed that students generally experience high levels of academic stress, with the most significant sources being high academic expectations from parents and teachers, frequent examinations, and multiple assignments. This supports Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model, which emphasizes that stress occurs when perceived demands exceed coping resources, and is consistent with Beerendonk et al. (2024), who found that performance improves under moderate arousal but declines when stress becomes excessive.

The high stress levels observed among JSS3 students are consistent with previous research in both African and international contexts (Adom et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021). Students' inability to balance heavy workloads, extracurricular activities, and the pressure of examinations suggests that stress is both systemic and culturally reinforced. The dominance of high expectations as a stressor reinforces findings by Eisenberg and Schaller (2020) and aligns with recent evidence showing that perfectionism and parental expectations significantly contribute to heightened school stress and health complaints (Díez et al., 2023). Similarly, Guo et al. (2023) and Xu et al. (2023) demonstrated that parental expectations intensify the relationship between academic pressure and adverse outcomes such as anxiety and poor mental health. Unlike in developed contexts where mental health support is readily available, Nigerian students often lack access to guidance and counselling services (Ogunyemi & Ademokoya, 2020), exacerbating their stress levels.

The analysis revealed no significant difference in academic stress between male and female students. This finding contrasts with studies that suggest gendered variations in stress perception and coping (Ahmad & Ghosh, 2020; Lavoie et al., 2019), where females are often reported to experience higher levels of academic and emotional stress. A possible explanation lies in the uniformity of the curriculum, subjects, and classroom practices to which both male and female students are equally exposed. This suggests that context, rather than gender, may play a stronger role in shaping academic stress experiences in Nigerian schools.

A significant difference was found between public and private school students, with private school students reporting higher stress levels. This is consistent with the findings of Siddiqui and Habib (2021) and Pajarianto et al. (2020), who observed that private schools often impose stricter academic demands due to parental expectations and profit-driven management systems. Teachers in private schools face intense pressure to cover curricula quickly, prepare students for competitions, and maintain high performance rates. These pressures are transferred

to students, amplifying stress levels. By contrast, students in public schools, although facing challenges such as overcrowded classrooms and inadequate facilities, experience relatively less academic pressure from both teachers and parents. This indicates that structural and institutional contexts significantly shape students' academic stress.

The persistence of high stress levels across gender and school types suggests that Nigerian students operate under chronic “distress” rather than “eustress” (Selye, 1974). Distress, when prolonged, impairs coping abilities and may contribute to declining academic performance, absenteeism, and mental health challenges (Zhang et al., 2022). Importantly, the findings highlight the urgent need for schools to balance ambition with realistic expectations. Incorporating stress management programs, guidance counselling, and supportive school climates could help reframe students' perceptions of stress, turning potentially harmful distress into productive eustress, as suggested by Hajian (2016).

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was established that students experience elevated levels of academic stress, primarily due to high expectations from parents and teachers, frequent examinations, and heavy workloads. While no gender differences were observed, private school students reported significantly higher stress levels than their public-school counterparts, reflecting structural and institutional disparities. The study concludes that academic stress among JSS3 students is largely shaped by systemic pressures and unrealistic expectations, which often exceed students' coping resources. When unmanaged, such stress can impair learning, reduce motivation, and negatively affect both academic achievement and well-being. However, with adequate support systems, stress can be redirected into a motivating force that fosters resilience, creativity, and improved performance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and theoretical insights, the following recommendations are made:

1. Schools should embed structured stress management and coping skills training into the curriculum.
2. Well-equipped counselling units should be established in both public and private schools.
3. Parents and teachers should be educated on the negative effects of unrealistic expectations and excessive workload.
4. Schools should adopt a more balanced approach by reducing excessive assignments and creating time for recreational and physical activities.
5. Educational policymakers in Edo State and beyond should develop frameworks that regulate workload, promote mental health awareness in schools, and ensure equitable access to counselling services across both public and private institutions.

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