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School Stress and Anxiety Among High School Students

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ABSTRACT

School is often the main source of stress and anxiety for adolescents. While stress can be a normal response to challenges, excessive and prolonged stress may result in fear of failure, feelings of inadequacy, and anxiety, with negative effects on well-being and academic outcomes. This study investigated school-related stress among 268 high school students, focusing on general school stress, experienced anxiety in school-related situations, and students' responses to school stress, and differences by gender, grade level, and academic performance. School stress is widespread among high school students, and it is particularly acute in situations involving assessments. Mathematics was identified as the most stressful subject, while fatigue and nervousness were the most common psychophysical responses to stress among high school students. Female students, those in higher grades, and those with poorer academic performance experienced the most stress. Correlation analyses further confirmed strong positive associations between general school stress, situational anxiety, and stress responses.

Keywords: high school, responses to stress, Slovenia

INTRODUCTION

Stress is one of the most common and significant health concerns of our time (WHO, 2011; Piao, Xie & Menagi, 2024). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, an increase in stress levels among students around the world has been observed (Xu & Wang, 2023). The various dimensions of stress experienced by young people are described by Singh (2016), achievement stress being one of the biggest problems, mostly connected to mathematics (OECD, 2024). Also, educational expansion, performance orientation, and desire to achieve high results are more likely to contribute to increasing mental health problems in students (Högberg, 2021). Therefore, in the theoretical part, we explain school stress and responses to excessive stress and school anxiety. In the empirical part, we were interested in how high school students experience school stress, which subjects are the most stressful for them, which are their most common responses to stress, and whether there are differences in the level of stress experienced depending on gender, grade, and academic performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

School stress

Most of the students' day is spent within the educational institution. While school can act as a protective factor for young people (Jeriček Klanšček et al., 2018), it is also frequently the source of a multitude of stressors. Within the school environment, students encounter numerous daily demands, including rigorous curricula, high expectations from themselves, their parents, and the wider community. They experience stress in various circumstances, such as during assessments, repeated failure and low grades, competitive environments and peer pressure, public performances, and when confronted with simultaneous deficits, obstacles, and disturbances, including specific learning difficulties and social anxiety, poor relationships with teachers, other students, experiencing discrimination, bullying, changes in school rules, and the education system (Habe, 2000; Puklek Levpušček, 2006; Jeriček Klanšček et al., 2011; Hribar & Magajna, 2011; Kozina, 2016). As Singh (2016) asserts, various dimensions of stress have been observed in young people, including existential stress, achievement stress, academic or school stress, stress based on negative self-image, physical stress, and social stress, etc.

Notably, academic or school stress has been identified as particularly prevalent among students. It has been hypothesised that the transition to a scientific-economic society, coupled with the expansion of education, has led to an increased emphasis on academic success and resulted in an escalation in school stress. This pressure, curricular reforms, increased external knowledge testing, and intense social competition are hypothesised to cause elevated levels of school stress, which in turn may result in an increase in mental health problems (Högberg, 2021).

Responses to excessive stress and school anxiety

Stress and fears (related to the school environment) have been identified as a normal component of the development of young people. However, if they are excessive, they may give rise to fear of failure, feelings of inadequacy, and anxiety (Hribar & Magajna, 2011).

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The experience of stress depends on the intensity and duration of the stressful situation, the control that the individual has over the stressful situation, and the individual characteristics of the person, such as their personality, past experiences of dealing with stressful situations, and the support they receive in their social environment (Jeriček Klanšček et al., 2018).

Constant stress has many negative consequences for an individual's physiology, emotions, thoughts and behaviour, and these consequences are also reflected in their interpersonal relationships. As our physical and mental resources are exhausted, a range of symptoms manifest (Jeriček Klanšček et al., 2018; Torsheim and Wold, 2001): a) physical symptoms, including headaches, fatigue, and pain, b) emotional symptoms, such as irritability, feelings of insecurity, and helplessness, c) cognitive symptoms, such as memory problems, reduced concentration, anxiety, and d) behavioural symptoms, such as sleep and appetite problems, withdrawal, neglect of responsibilities, and delinquent behaviour. These symptoms are intertwined and interdependent (Torsheim & Wold, 2001; Rupnik Vec in Slivar, 2019).

In the school environment, excessive stress manifests itself in reduced academic performance, decreased motivation for schoolwork, social exclusion, and an increased risk of developing anxiety, depression, and behavioural problems as truancy, various addictions to psychoactive substances, and sexuality (Becker & Börnert-Ringleb, 2025). Anxiety is also negatively associated with school achievement and is a significant inhibiting factor in the process of acquiring knowledge. It can interfere with learning due to its association with negative self-talk, ineffective self-regulation and learning strategies, and difficulty recalling information (Calvete et al., 2005). The most common forms of anxiety that occur in school situations are test anxiety, mathematical anxiety, school phobia, and social anxiety (Kozina, 2016). All forms of anxiety hinder cognitive functioning, learning, and school adjustment (Hribar & Magajna, 2011).

Students may feel anxiety in all subjects, but most notably in mathematics, given its status as a core subject in primary and secondary education (Lutovac, 2014). Across the OECD countries, the mathematical anxiety among 15-year-old students increases from 31% to 39% in ten years' time, from 2012 to 2022 (OECD, 2024).

The term mathematical anxiety has been defined as tension, worry, anxiety, nervousness, and excessive fear in various situations that require solving mathematical problems, both in school and outside of school, even when just thinking about mathematics (Hribar & Magajna, 2011; Cho, 2022). Students with mathematical anxiety often avoid other science subjects as well (Puklek Levpušček, 2014).

METHODS

The research was based on descriptive and causal non-experimental methods of empirical pedagogical research.

The purpose and objective of empirical research

The objective of this study was to ascertain the prevalence of stress in high school students related to school and schoolwork, and to examine their responses to stressful situations. More precisely, the study was designed to investigate which subjects and individual situations related to school were found to cause the greatest level of stress for students, and how students respond to such stressful situations. Furthermore, the investigation encompassed an analysis of correlations based on gender, school year level, and academic performance.

Research process and instruments

The survey was conducted on a convenience sample of high school students from a selected high school in Slovenia and took place from March 18, 2025, to April 18, 2025. The questionnaire was sent by email to the school counsellor, who was asked to send it to all high school students enrolled at their institution. The survey was anonymous and voluntary. The questionnaires that had been incorrectly completed were removed from the data set that had been obtained, processed, and analysed. The remaining questionnaires were then analysed using SPSS software at the level of descriptive and inferential statistics. The results presented in this article are part of a more extensive study.

We used the following instruments: (1) The Likert scale was used for measuring overall school stress (from *1-Not stressful* to *5-Very stressful*). (2) List up to four school subjects that students found most stressful and indicate which subject they found most frightening. (3) *The scale for measuring anxiety levels in school-related situations* was based on the generally accepted modified 5-point m-AMAS scale for measuring mathematical anxiety (from *1-Not stressful* to *5-Very stressful*) (Hopko et al., 2003; Cho, 2022). Three questions were added, and all the statements were modified in such a way as to provide insight into school anxiety towards various subjects, not just towards mathematics. The calculated Cronbach's alpha demonstrated excellent reliability ($\alpha \geq 0.91$) for the new twelve-item scale. (4) *Responses to the school stress scale* (from *1-Very rarely* to *5-Very often*) were created based on research by the authors (Rupnik Vec & Slivar, 2019) and were also modified. It consisted of twenty items (*Indicate how often school causes you to: feel tired, not do your homework, feel nervous, get angry quickly, have headaches, etc.).* The calculated Cronbach's alpha demonstrated excellent reliability ($\alpha \geq 0.93$).

Research sample

The survey was conducted on a sample of high school students (15-19 years old) that was selected on an occasional basis. The survey was conducted among all students who attended a selected high school in Slovenia during the 2024/25 academic year.

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Of the 326 participants who initiated the completion of the questionnaire, 268 completed it correctly. A greater proportion of female participants completed the questionnaire correctly (n =188;70.1%) than male participants (n =76; 28.4%). Four participants (1.5%) did not respond to this question, and those were excluded from further analysis regarding gender. Of the participants, 86 (32%) were in their first year, 48 (18%) in their second year, 69 (26%) in their third year, and 65 (24%) in their fourth year. In the case of first-year high school students, self-assessments of overall performance were based on the students' first-semester grades. In contrast, the other high school students assessed their performance for the previous academic year. The results obtained for this study yielded a mean score of = 3.12 and standard deviation of 0.82. Two students who were negative were excluded from further analysis.

RESULTS

Self-assessment of general school stress experienced

A study was conducted in which students were invited to assess the extent to which they found the school environment in general to be a source of stress. Two-thirds of respondents (n = 242) reported that the school environment was a major source of stress for them (35% reported it as quite stressful; 29% as very stressful), with a relatively small percentage (24%) reporting it as moderately stressful, and as slightly stressful (10%). A mere 2% of the high school students surveyed indicated that they did not perceive the school environment to be stressful.

In selecting a maximum of four subjects that are most feared by students, the following subjects were identified: natural sciences (mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and computer science; totalling 65.6%), social sciences (primarily history and geography, with minimal representation from philosophy, sociology, and psychology; totalling 18.1%), languages (mother, first, second, or third foreign language; totalling 15.4%), arts (visual arts and music; totalling 0.5%), and sports (0.5%).

When students were further invited to nominate one subject that they feared the most, mathematics was selected by the majority (n = 101; 45.7%).

Anxiety levels in school-related situations

The scale for measuring the stressfulness of various school-related situations relates to different school-related situations. These are situations that students experience daily and which can cause anxiety. Students were asked to answer questions about how stressful each situation was for them, bearing in mind only the subject they feared the most.

Table 1: Anxiety levels in school-related situations

Statements - different school situations (n = 223)	**Mean**	**SD**
Having to complete a worksheet by yourself.	2.58	1.17
Thinking about the exam the day before you take it.	3.99	1.04
Watching the teacher work out a problem on the board	2.30	1.28
On the day of the assessment (e.g., in the morning).	4.14	1.01
Five minutes before the exam.	4.44	0.97
During the written exam.	3.61	1.31
During the oral exam.	4.17	1.08
Being given homework with lots of difficult questions that you must hand in the next day.	3.34	1.29
Listening to the teacher lecture for a long time.	2.51	1.33
Listening to another student in your class explain a problem.	2.07	1.22
Finding out that you are going to have a surprise assessment when you start your lesson.	4.33	1.03
Starting a new topic in a subject.	2.30	1.28

Based on the calculated average values, it is evident that most students are more concerned about knowledge assessment than explanation and solving other tasks.

In Table 2, we present descriptive statistics for gender, school year, and academic performance in experiencing school anxiety.

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Table 2: Descriptive statistics of school anxiety by gender, school year, and academic performance

Gender **Mean (SD)**		**School year** **Mean (SD)**		**Academic performance** **Mean (SD)**	
Men	35.02 (10.44)	First	41.43 (9.70)	Sufficient (2)	44.22 (9.35)
		Second	37.83 (8.89)	Good (3)	42.31 (8.13)
Women	41.44 (8.62)	Third	38.28 (9.96)	Very good (4)	40.12 (11.11)
		Fourth	40.90 (9.89)	Excellent (5)	37.01 (8.26)

The Mann-Whitney U-test was used to check whether the level of school anxiety in school-related situations experienced differed by gender. The results showed a statistically significant difference (n = 221, U = 6266.0, $p < 0.001$) among students; girls experienced significantly higher levels of anxiety in various situations than boys.

The average level of anxiety experienced at school differs slightly between school years in school-related situations First year and fourth-year students tend to experience the most anxiety. First-year students are probably more stressed because everything is new to them, whereas fourth-year students were preparing for their final exams, aware that their grades would affect their chances of further education, and experienced more anxiety than other students. Calculated Kruskal–Wallis's test for non-normally distributed samples was used to examine the level of school anxiety experienced in school-related situations, categorized by the school year students were enrolled in. The results were not statistically significant (n = 223, H = 7.28, p > 0.06).

Kruskal–Wallis tests for non-normally distributed samples were used to test whether the level of school anxiety experienced in school-related situations differs regarding academic performance. The results of the study were statistically significant (n = 221, H = 12.03, p ≤ 0.007). Students who achieve lower final grades statistically significantly experience greater anxiety than their peers who achieve higher grades.

Students' responses to stress

We asked students to indicate how often they experience various responses to stress related to school (Table 3).

Table 3: Students' stress responses

How often does the following happen to you because of school?	**n**	**$\bar{X}$**	**SD**
You are tired.	217	4.46	0.83
You don't do/copy your homework.	217	3.10	1.27
You are tense/nervous.	216	3.96	1.10
You get angry quickly.	216	3.26	1.26
You have a headache.	217	3.40	1.36
You feel sick and/or have digestive problems.	215	2.87	1.48
You skip classes.	214	1.46	0.93
You feel tightness in your chest.	216	2.76	1.45
You feel depressed.	217	3.39	1.30
You have difficulty breathing.	216	2.33	1.40
You sleep poorly and/or cannot sleep.	217	3.26	1.41
You resort to substances (alcohol, smoking, drugs).	214	1.73	1.24
You cannot concentrate on schoolwork.	215	3.27	1.23
You eat more/less than usual.	216	3.17	1.48
You study sporadically.	216	4.11	0.99
You keep to yourself.	215	2.55	1.27
You cannot relax.	215	3.47	1.29
You feel insecure.	216	3.67	1.17
You are tired.	216	3.17	1.40
You don't have time for your friends.	215	3.24	1.38

Table 3 shows that fatigue and nervousness are the most common psychological reactions to stress experienced by students. In terms of behavioural responses, skipping school and delinquent behaviour are rarely observed, whereas campaign-style learning is very common. This suggests that fatigue and nervousness are not only common but may also act as early indicators of excessive stress or anxiety in students.

Later, we were interested in whether there were any differences in students' responses to stress regarding gender, school year, and academic performance (Table 4).

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Table 4: Descriptive statistics of stress responses by gender, school year, and academic performance

Gender (n=121) **Mean (SD)**		**School year (n=213)** **Mean (SD)**		**Academic performance** **Mean (SD)**	
Men	51.14 (12.20)	First	58.60 (16.67)	Sufficient (2)	67.89 (21.27)
		Second	63.00 (14.63)	Good (3)	68.44 (14.91)
Women	66.12 (15.76)	Third	60.31 (16.46)	Very good (4)	60.96 (16.80)
		Fourth	70.77 (16.46)	Excellent (5)	58.60 (16.01)

The Mann-Whitney U-test was used to check whether the level of stress responses differed by gender. The results showed a statistically significant difference (n=212, U=6270.0, Z=5.67, p<0.001) among students; girls experience significantly higher levels of (negative) stress responses in various situations than boys.

ANOVA test for normally distributed samples was used (Levene's test showed no significant difference in variances between groups, $p > 0.62$, indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met) to examine whether the level of stress responses differed by school year of students. The results were statistically significant ($n = 212$, $F(3,209) = 5.72$, $p < 0.001$). We can conclude that the average level of stress responses significantly differs between school years. Fourth-year ($M = 70.77$) students tend to experience the highest level of stress responses. Post-hoc Bonferroni analysis revealed statistically significant differences between fourth-year and first-year students ($p < 0.001$) and between fourth-year and third-year students ($p = 0.007$), but not between fourth-year and second-year students ($p = 0.14$). Fourth-year students were having the most intense responses to school stress, presumably because they were approaching university enrolment.

Further, we examine whether the level of stress responses differed by students' previous academic performance. Assumption of homogeneity of variances was met (Levene's test showed no significant difference in variances between groups, $p = 0.13$); therefore, we used the ANOVA test for normally distributed samples. The results were statistically significant ($n = 212$, $F(3,207) = 4.23$, $p = 0.006$). Students with lower grades tend to experience greater stress responses than those with higher grades. Post-hoc Bonferroni analysis revealed statistically significant differences between students with good (3) and excellent (5) final grades ($p = 0.007$) and the tendency between students with good (3) and very good (4) final grades ($p = 0.057$). This highlights the strong link between perceived academic performance and emotional well-being.

Correlations

We were also interested in exploring any links between anxiety levels experienced in specific school situations, students' responses to stress, and overall school stress assessments.

Spearman's rho correlation coefficient ($n = 221$, $\rho = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$) showed a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation between experiencing school anxiety in specific, school-related situations and students' assessment of experiencing general school stress. This suggests that experiencing higher levels of anxiety in specific school situations is associated with experiencing higher levels of general school stress.

Spearman's rho correlation coefficient also revealed a statistically significant correlation between anxiety experienced in various school-related situations and the intensity of responses to school-related stress ($n = 209$, $\rho = 0.60$, $p< 0.001$). There is a moderately strong positive correlation between anxiety and stress responses, meaning higher anxiety levels coincide with more intense responses to stress.

Spearman's rho correlation revealed a strong, positive, and statistically significant correlation between experiencing general stress and responding to stressful situations in a school environment ($\rho = 0.675$, $p < 0.001$, $n = 211$). These results suggest that individuals who report higher levels of general stress tend to exhibit more intense behavioural and emotional responses in a school setting. In other words, general stress appears to intensify both emotional and behavioural reactions in the school setting.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study provide valuable insights into how high school students perceive and respond to stress in the school environment. The results confirm that school is a major source of stress for most of the students, with a particularly high level of anxiety observed in situations related to knowledge assessment—notably just before and during exams (Seiffge-Krenke, 2021).

Mathematics emerged as the most feared subject, which aligns with previous literature on subject-specific anxiety, particularly in STEM fields (Lutovac, 2014; Rozgonjuk et al., 2020). This indicates a potential area for pedagogical intervention, particularly in the way subjects perceived as challenging are taught and assessed.

Gender differences were evident across several dimensions. Female students reported significantly higher levels of anxiety in school-related situations as well as more intense emotional responses to school stress compared to their male peers.

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This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting that adolescent girls may internalize stress more acutely and experience academic pressure differently (Jeriček Klanšček et al., 2018; Högberg, 2021; OECD, 2024).

In terms of school year, fourth-year students reported higher levels of anxiety and stronger stress responses, although the differences in anxiety across years were not statistically significant. The higher stress levels in first-year students may be attributed to the transition into a new school environment, while fourth-year students likely experience increased pressure due to graduation and university admission.

Academic performance also played a significant role. Students with lower self-reported academic success experienced significantly higher levels of school-related anxiety and stress responses, supporting the theory that perceived academic competence affects emotional well-being (Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Pekrun, 2006).

Furthermore, correlation analysis revealed: a moderate positive correlation between anxiety in specific school-related situations and the perception of general school stress ($\rho = 0.51$), a moderately strong positive correlation between school-related anxiety and behavioural/emotional responses to stress ($\rho = 0.60$), and strong positive correlation between general stress and stress responses ($\rho = 0.675$). These results suggest that these psychological constructs are interrelated: higher general stress levels are associated with higher anxiety and more intense responses to stressful school experiences.

CONCLUSION

The study of stress in young people has recently become a widely discussed topic, but the research involved is very complex as it must cover various types of stressors, stress responses, and coping strategies (Rupnik Vec & Slivar, 2019). The data thus emphasize the importance of addressing both cognitive (e.g., exam-related anxiety) and emotional (e.g., nervousness, fatigue, or concentration issues) and behavioral (e.g., school absenteeism and substance misuse) dimensions of stress in the educational context.

As the study was conducted on a small sample of high school students in Slovenia, our findings cannot be generalized to the entire population. Nevertheless, the obtained data provide insight into the students' experiences of stress, fear, and anxiety at school. For this reason, more detailed research should be conducted and tailored interventions developed to reduce these issues throughout the school system. This would promote equality and inclusivity within the school system, as well as improve academic performance.

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