

Academic Anxiety and School Burnout in Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

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Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed our lives, both personally, academically and professionally. Students, from elementary school to university, were particularly affected by the teaching methods implemented (UNESCO [1]). Since then, clinicians have been encountering more and more adolescents who are suffering and need support. These adolescents seem to present symptoms of depression and anxiety, associated with symptoms of school burnout. These clinical findings corroborate the state of the art on this subject since several recent studies show that middle school and high school students presented

(1) A very high level of anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hoyt, et al. [2,3]) and

(2) A particularly high rate of burnout and academic stress (19% and 47% respectively (Salmela Aro, et al. [4]). Girls appear to be more affected by burnout and academic stress than boys (Esparbès Pistre, et al. [5-7]). To our knowledge, no study has evaluated the symptoms of exhaustion, school stress and anxious school refusal from a comparative developmental perspective. This research therefore proposes to apprehend these different dimensions in French adolescents.

Method

Participants

493 adolescents participated in the online study. The distribution was as follows: 82 12th graders (17 males and 65 females), 39 11th graders (13 males and 26 females), 38 10th graders (20 males, 17 females, and 1 undefined), 107 9th graders (57 males and 50 females), 91 8th graders (36 males and 55 females), 49 7th graders (23 males and 26 females), and 87 6th graders (41 males and 46 females).

Material

An online questionnaire was developed and distributed to middle and high school students. This questionnaire, consisting of

- (1) The school burnout inventory of Meylan, et al. [8]
- (2) l'Echelle Toulousaine de Stress Scolaire perçu by Esparbès-Pistre, et al. [9] and
- (3) The School refusal evaluation of Gallé-Tessonneau, et al. [10].

Procedure

Potential participants and their legal guardians were recruited using a snowball method. The research team sent a newsletter by

e-mail to a few personal contacts selected according to the study's inclusion criteria who had agreed to distribute this message to other people they knew who met the study criteria. The anonymity of the data did not allow the participant to go back to their answers after completing the questionnaire.

Results

A 2 (Gender) x 7 (Grade levels: 6th to 12th) ANOVA was performed on the scores on the three tests

- (1) School burnout,
- (2) Perceived school stress, and
- (3) Anxious school refusal.

The ANOVA showed that the gender effect was significant for perceived school stress, $F(2,413) = 8.727$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .04$. Girls, across all grade levels, were significantly more academically stressed than boys (39.64 vs. 37). Although this trend was found descriptively for school burnout and anxious school refusal, the differences were not significant (all p 's, ns.). In contrast, the effect of grade levels was significant regardless of test (all p 's $< .05$). Fisher LSD post-hoc analysis to determine significant differences between group means was conducted for each test and is expanded upon below.

Burnout Scolaire

The analysis shows

- (1) 6th graders had a significantly lower school burnout score than more advanced students,
- (2) The scores of students in 7th, 8th and 9th grade were globally close,
- (3) The highest school burnout scores were found for 12th and 10th graders.

The descriptive analysis showed that 73.17% of 12th graders, 55.26% of 11th graders, 84.21% of 10th graders, 49.53% of 9th graders, 34.07% of 8th graders, 40.82% of 7th graders and 12.64% of 6th graders met or exceeded the threshold for school burnout.

Stress Scolaire Perçu

The analysis shows

- (1) Students in 6th grade have a significantly lower perceived school stress score than more advanced students,
- (2) High school students have a significantly higher perceived school stress score than middle school students. The descriptive analysis showed that 78.05% of 12th graders, 64.10% of 11th graders, 76.32% of 10th graders, 42.06% of 9th

graders, 38.46% of 8th graders, 24.49% of the 7th graders and 11.49% of 6th graders had high academic stress.

Anxious School Refusal

The analysis shows

- (1) The students in 6th grade have a significantly lower academic anxiety refusal score than more advanced students,
- (2) High school students score significantly higher than college students.

The descriptive analysis showed that 48.78% of 12th graders, 43.59% of 11th graders, 52.63% of 10th graders, 30.84% of 9th graders, 30.77% of 8th graders, 30.61% of 7th graders and 9.19% of 6th graders showed anxious school refusal.

Discussion

As far as developmental aspects are concerned, the most positive result concerns the French 6th graders interviewed in this survey. Between 9% and 12% of them present school stress, anxious school refusal and/or school burnout. This proportion is much lower than that found in the literature on perceived school stress (e.g., Esparbès Pistre, et al. [5]). The second point to emphasize concerns the significant difference observed between the scores of high school students and those of middle school students on the different scales. Although some work has been conducted with middle school students internationally (Sun, et al. [11]), to our knowledge, no comparative middle school/high school study has been conducted on these topics. Nevertheless, our results seem to be consistent with Jeong, et al. [12] findings that middle schoolers' academic stress appears to be rather average without distinguishing between the sexes. The third important point arising from our results concerns high school students. These adolescents are globally the most prone to school stress, anxious school refusal and school burnout, with average scores close to the thresholds of maximum difficulties. The descriptive data are alarming, with nearly three-quarters of the students in the 12th and 10th grades of our sample experiencing school burnout and/or high school stress. Further studies will undoubtedly be necessary to understand the evolution of the psychological state of adolescents in relation to the evolution of the health and social situation in France.

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