

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON ELEVENTH-GRADE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN MANAGING ACADEMIC PRESSURE AT SMA NEGERI 1 PEMATANGSIANTAR

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ABSTRACT

Academic pressure significantly affects eleventh-grade students navigating intensive curricula and future uncertainties. This phenomenological study explores how eight eleventh-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar experience and manage academic pressure. Through semi-structured interviews analyzed via thematic analysis, four key themes emerged: sources of pressure (workload, parental expectations, future uncertainty), psychological and physical manifestations (anxiety, fatigue, sleep disturbances), varied coping strategies (both adaptive and maladaptive), and the critical role of environmental support. Findings reveal that students experience pressure as a multifaceted phenomenon affecting their daily lives, with supportive environments proving essential for effective coping. The study contributes valuable insights into Indonesian students' lived experiences and suggests practical implications for educators, parents, and policymakers in developing holistic support systems that balance academic achievement with student well-being.

Keywords: Academic Pressure, Phenomenological Study, Eleventh-Grade Students, Senior High School Education, Students' Experiences, Coping Strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Academic pressure has become one of the most pressing issues in secondary education globally, but its impact feels particularly acute for senior high school students in Indonesia. When we talk about academic pressure, we're referring to the stress that emerges when the demands of schoolwork exceed what students feel capable of handling (Ang & Huan, 2006). This isn't just about having homework, it's about that constant feeling of being overwhelmed, of never quite catching up.

For eleventh graders, this pressure intensifies dramatically. They're at a critical turning point, facing tougher coursework, endless examinations, and mounting decisions about their futures. It's a transition period where they're no longer quite children but not yet adults, and their academic performance suddenly feels like it determines everything that comes next.

In Indonesia, the situation gets even more complicated. Our cultural context adds layers of pressure that students in other countries might not experience as intensely. Many Indonesian families, influenced by traditional values where education represents family honor and social mobility, place enormous expectations on their children's academic success (Putri & Widodo, 2020). A student's report card isn't just about the student, it reflects on the entire family.

The numbers paint a concerning picture. Research by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture indicates that students across the country report increasingly high stress levels related to their schoolwork. The introduction of full-day schooling in many urban schools, including areas like Pematangsiantar, has extended the school day well into the afternoon. Students often spend 10-12 hours between school, homework, and additional tutoring (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2022). When do they rest? When do they just get to be teenagers?

The consequences of this relentless pressure are well-documented and troubling. Studies have linked prolonged academic stress to anxiety disorders, emotional burnout, sleep problems, and declining motivation (Pascoe et al., 2020; Santrock, 2019). Adolescents are still developing their emotional regulation skills and coping mechanisms, which makes them particularly vulnerable. Research in Indonesian schools has found that approximately 40% of high school students show signs of academic burnout, which ironically leads to worse academic performance (Yanuarti & Mulyana, 2021). The very pressure meant to improve achievement ends up undermining it.

Despite growing awareness of this issue, most research in Indonesia has approached academic pressure through quantitative lenses, surveys, questionnaires, statistical correlations (Putri & Widodo, 2020; Yanuarti & Mulyana, 2021). While these studies provide valuable data on prevalence and patterns, they miss something crucial: the lived reality of students experiencing this pressure. What does it actually feel like to be an eleventh grader in this system? How do students make sense of their experiences? What strategies do they develop, and why do some work better than others?

Phenomenological research, which focuses on understanding experiences from the inside out, remains surprisingly rare in Indonesian educational research. We have statistics, but we need stories. We need to understand not just that students are stressed, but how they experience that stress, what it means to them, and how they navigate it in their daily lives.

This study addresses that gap by exploring the lived experiences of eleventh-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar through a phenomenological lens. By centering students' own voices and perspectives, we aim to provide insights that can inform more effective and compassionate educational practices. Our research asks: What are the primary sources of academic pressure for these students? How does this pressure manifest in their daily lives? What strategies do they use to cope? And what role do teachers, peers, and family play in either alleviating or intensifying this pressure?

Understanding these experiences isn't just academically interesting, it's essential for creating school environments where students can thrive, not just survive.

METHOD

This study employed a phenomenological research design, specifically drawing on descriptive phenomenology, to understand the essence of eleventh-grade students' lived experiences with academic pressure. Phenomenology, as articulated by Creswell and Poth (2018), seeks to capture how individuals make sense of their experiences within particular contexts. Rather than testing hypotheses or measuring variables, we wanted to understand what academic pressure actually means to students who live with it every day.

This approach made sense for several reasons. First, academic pressure is inherently subjective, what feels overwhelming to one student might feel manageable to another. Second, we weren't interested in reducing complex human experiences to numbers; we wanted the nuance, the contradictions, the individual stories that reveal deeper patterns. Finally, phenomenology's emphasis on meaning-making aligned perfectly with our goal of understanding how students interpret and respond to their circumstances.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Through thematic analysis, four interconnected themes emerged from students' narratives. These themes don't exist in isolation, they weave together to create the complex tapestry of students' daily experiences with academic pressure.

Sources of Academic Pressure: "It Comes from Everywhere"

Students identified multiple, often overlapping sources of pressure that created what several described as a feeling of being "trapped" or "suffocated."

1. Heavy Academic Workload

The sheer volume of work dominated students' descriptions. With classes running until mid-afternoon, students then faced hours of homework across multiple subjects.

"We finish school at 4 PM, and you'd think that's it, right? But then there's homework from five subjects waiting. Math problems, history essays, English assignments, it never ends. I usually don't finish until 10 or 11 at night, and then I'm too tired to actually understand what I studied." (P3)

"Teachers assign work like theirs is the only class we take. They don't coordinate with each other, so suddenly we have three big assignments due the same week." (P5)

The problem wasn't just quantity but timing. Students described feeling like they were constantly playing catch-up, finishing one assignment only to face two more.

2. Relentless Testing and Evaluation

Beyond daily homework, frequent examinations created persistent anxiety. Students weren't just tested during midterms and finals, weekly quizzes and regular assessments meant they were always preparing for something.

"We have exams basically every week, plus the big midterms and finals. My brain feels fried all the time. There's no break where I can just relax and not worry about a test coming up." (P7)

"Even after a test, I can't feel relieved because the next one is already scheduled. It's test, study, test, study, over and over." (P2)

3. Parental Expectations

Family expectations added significant weight. Several students described parents who viewed academic success as a non-negotiable pathway to future security and family prestige.

"My parents constantly say that good grades mean a bright future, that everything depends on my report card. They compare me to my cousins who got into good universities. There's no room for mistakes, even a B feels like I've failed them." (P1)

"It's not that my parents are mean, but I know they sacrificed a lot for my education. That makes the pressure worse because I feel guilty if I don't excel. Their hopes are all on me." (P4)

Interestingly, not all parental pressure was explicit. Some students described internalizing expectations they perceived from their parents' sacrifices or subtle comments.

4. Uncertain Futures

Looming decisions about university and careers created existential anxiety. Students connected their current academic performance directly to life outcomes in ways that felt absolute.

"What if I fail the entrance exam? No good university means no decent job. Everyone says the competition is crazy, and if I don't make it... I don't know. Everything feels like it depends on these next two years." (P2)

"I see older students who didn't get into their first-choice university, and they seem so lost. I'm terrified of ending up like that, so I push myself constantly, even when I'm exhausted." (P6)

These sources didn't exist independently. Parental expectations amplified exam stress. Heavy workloads combined with future uncertainty to create what students described as a "cycle" or "spiral" of pressure.

Manifestations of Academic Pressure: Mind and Body

Academic pressure didn't remain abstract, it showed up in students' psychological states and physical bodies.

1. Psychological Manifestations

Anxiety was nearly universal, though it took different forms. Some students experienced constant background worry, while others had acute anxiety episodes before exams.

"Before tests, I get so anxious that I snap at my friends over nothing. I know I'm being irritable, but I can't seem to control it. Everything feels like too much." (P6)

"There's this constant knot in my stomach. Even when I'm trying to relax, part of my mind is thinking about what I should be studying. It never shuts off." (P8)

Several students mentioned declining motivation, a kind of exhaustion that went beyond physical tiredness.

"Sometimes I just stare at my textbook and can't make myself care anymore. It's like my brain has given up even though I know I need to study." (P4)

"I used to like learning, especially science. Now everything feels like an obligation. I've lost the joy in it." (P7)

Social withdrawal emerged as another common pattern. Students described isolating themselves, partly due to lack of time but also from a sense that peers wouldn't understand.

"I avoid hanging out because I'm too tired to pretend I'm fine. It's easier to just stay home and be stressed alone than to fake being okay around friends." (P8)

2. Physical Manifestations

The pressure didn't stay in students' heads, it affected their bodies in tangible ways.

"I get headaches almost every day now. Sometimes they're so bad I can't focus on anything. And I barely eat anymore, pressure has killed my appetite." (P4)

"My sleep is terrible. Either I can't fall asleep because I'm worrying about tomorrow's quiz, or I wake up at 3 AM thinking about everything I need to do. I'm always tired." (P3)

"I've noticed my hair falling out more than usual. My mom says it's stress, but that just makes me more stressed because now I'm worrying about my hair too." (P1)

Other physical symptoms mentioned included stomach problems, tension headaches, fatigue that rest didn't resolve, and for some female students, irregular menstrual cycles they attributed to stress.

What struck me during interviews was how normalized these symptoms had become. Students often prefaced descriptions with "everyone feels this way" or "it's just part of school," suggesting they viewed physical and psychological distress as inevitable rather than concerning.

Coping Strategies: What Works and What Doesn't

Students weren't passive recipients of pressure, they actively developed strategies to manage it, with varying degrees of effectiveness.

1. Adaptive Coping Strategies

Some students had discovered approaches that genuinely helped them manage stress while maintaining their academic performance.

2. Structured Planning and Time Management

"I started planning my week on Sundays. I write down all assignments and deadlines, then figure out when to tackle each one. It doesn't reduce the work, but it keeps me from panicking because I know what's coming and have a plan." (P5)

"I use a planner app that reminds me of deadlines. Breaking big projects into smaller tasks makes them feel less overwhelming." (P2)

3. Seeking Social Support

"Talking to friends who get it really helps. We vent to each other, and just knowing I'm not alone in feeling overwhelmed makes the pressure more bearable." (P5)

"I have one friend I can be completely honest with about struggling. She doesn't judge, just listens. That helps more than people realize." (P8)

4. Physical Activity and Relaxation

"I put on music after studying, usually something calm. It helps my brain shift gears and relax. Even 15 minutes makes a difference." (P3)

"I started walking around the neighborhood when I feel too stressed. Getting out of my room and moving helps clear my head." (P2)

Maladaptive Coping Strategies

Other strategies provided temporary relief but ultimately made things worse, creating guilt or leading to poorer outcomes.

1. Procrastination

"I know I should start assignments early, but I postpone them because thinking about the work makes me anxious. Then I'm up all night before the deadline, which makes me more stressed. It's a bad cycle." (P4)

"Putting things off feels better temporarily, like I'm giving myself a break. But the dread builds up, and the last-minute panic is worse than if I'd just started earlier." (P7)

2. Avoidance and Escape

"Sometimes I just skip doing homework altogether and watch Netflix instead. I know it'll bite me later, but in that moment, I need an escape from thinking about school." (P7)

"When I'm really overwhelmed, I ignore my responsibilities and just zone out. It doesn't solve anything, but I can't face the work either." (P4)

3. Excessive Social Media Use

"I scroll through TikTok for hours when I should be studying. It makes me forget about stress temporarily, but then I feel guilty for wasting time, and I'm behind on work, so I'm even more stressed." (P6)

"Instagram is my escape, but I've noticed I feel worse after scrolling for a long time. It's like a temporary distraction that doesn't actually help." (P3)

Students often recognized that maladaptive strategies were counterproductive, yet felt unable to break these patterns without support or alternative coping mechanisms.

Environmental Support: The Critical Moderating Factor

The presence or absence of support from teachers, peers, and family significantly affected how students experienced and managed pressure.

1. Teacher Support: A Mixed Picture

Some teachers emerged as crucial support figures who understood students' struggles.

"A few teachers are really understanding. They see when we're exhausted and sometimes give extensions or lighten the load a bit. Knowing they care makes a huge difference." (P2)

"My Indonesian teacher told us it's okay to not be perfect, that learning is more important than grades. That stuck with me, it made me feel less like a failure when I struggle." (P5)

However, other teachers seemed unaware of or indifferent to students' stress levels.

"Some teachers just assign work without considering that we have other classes. When I tried to explain I was overwhelmed, the response was basically 'everyone else manages, why can't you?'" (P7)

2. Peer Dynamics: Support and Competition

Friendships provided crucial emotional support, but the competitive academic environment also created tension.

"My close friends and I help each other study and share notes. We're in it together, which helps. But there are also classmates who brag about grades and make everything feel like a competition." (P1)

"It's complicated. I have friends who support me, but I also feel like I'm competing with them for university spots. It's hard to be completely open when we're technically rivals." (P6)

3. Family: Encouragement vs. Additional Pressure

Family support varied dramatically, sometimes even within the same household.

"My mom tells me to take breaks and prioritizes my health. But my dad constantly pushes harder, asking why I'm not ranked first in class. They give me opposite messages, and I'm caught in the middle." (P8)

"My parents mean well, but they don't understand today's academic pressure. They compare their school days to mine, saying they had it harder, which makes me feel like I can't complain." (P3)

A few students described families that successfully balanced encouragement with realistic expectations, creating what P5 called "pressure but with a safety net, they push me but also let me know they'll love me regardless of grades."

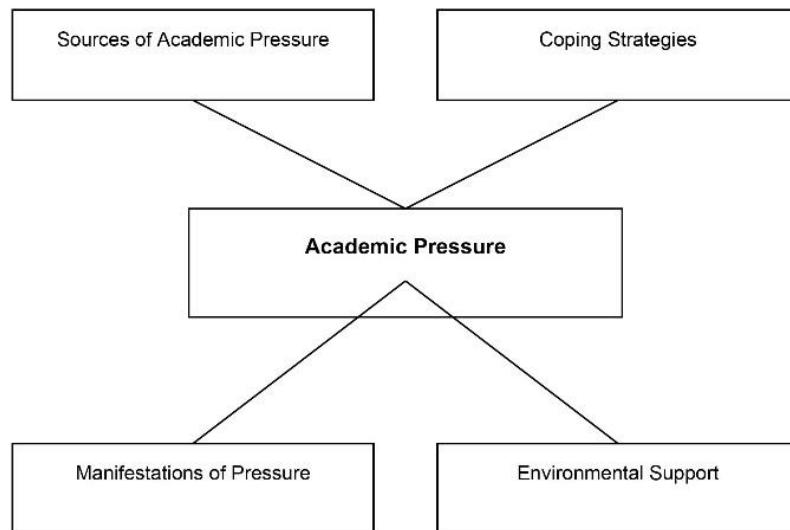


Figure 1. Thematic Map of Students' Experiences of Academic Pressure

The figure illustrates how sources (workload, expectations, uncertainty) lead to manifestations (psychological and physical symptoms), which prompt coping strategies (adaptive or maladaptive). Environmental support moderates this entire process, potentially buffering negative effects or, when absent, exacerbating them. The bidirectional arrow indicates that support influences coping effectiveness, while coping success can strengthen support networks.

DISCUSSION

The findings from SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar illustrate that academic pressure is a complex web of cultural expectations and systemic demands rather than a simple cause-and-effect relationship. Our data strongly supports Ang and Huan's (2006) theory that pressure stems from a mismatch between relentless demands and a student's perceived capacity to cope. While the manifestations we documented, such as anxiety, sleep loss,

and social withdrawal, align with the research of Pascoe et al. (2020), our phenomenological lens reveals the "emotional labor" behind these symptoms. Students are not just withdrawing; they are performing a mask of normalcy until they are too exhausted to continue. When P8 remarked about being "too tired to pretend I'm fine," she highlighted a subjective dimension often missed by quantitative scales: the daily burden of managing perceptions while privately struggling.

This experience is deeply rooted in the specific Indonesian context, where parental expectations are tied to values of family honor and filial piety. As seen with P1, a "B" grade is not merely a personal setback but a perceived failure to the entire family unit. This cultural weight is exacerbated by the full-day schooling system, which creates a "time poverty" that echoes concerns raised by the Ministry of Education and Culture (2022). With school ending at 3 PM followed by heavy homework loads, students lose vital windows for rest, making teacher empathy a critical protective factor. Teachers who acknowledge this stress provide necessary validation that students' struggles are legitimate.

In managing this stress, students utilize the Lazarus and Folkman (1984) model of coping. While adaptive strategies like structured planning (P5) build long-term resilience, many students default to maladaptive behaviors, such as social media escapism or procrastination, for immediate relief from overwhelming guilt. This suggests that the burden of management should not rest solely on the student. Schools must coordinate assignment timing and provide explicit training in adaptive coping skills. Parents should be encouraged to adopt a "growth mindset" that prioritizes effort over grades, while policy-makers should reconsider the implementation of full-day schooling and move toward assessments that emphasize understanding over constant testing.

Looking forward, this study opens avenues for future research, including longitudinal studies on how these coping mechanisms evolve into adulthood and intervention research to test the efficacy of peer-mentoring in Indonesian schools. However, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Our sample of eight students limits generalizability, and the reliance on self-report interviews may be subject to bias. Furthermore, my own positionality as a researcher within the Indonesian education system influenced the interpretation of these narratives. Despite these constraints, the study's strength lies in its depth and the authenticity of student voices, providing a human narrative to academic statistics and offering a foundation for more holistic educational practices.

CONCLUSION

The eleventh-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar live with academic pressure that is multifaceted, relentless, and deeply consequential for their well-being. They face pressure from multiple sources, demanding workloads, frequent evaluations, parental expectations, and uncertain futures, that manifest in both their minds and bodies. Some have developed effective ways to cope, but many struggle with strategies that provide temporary relief while ultimately making things worse.

Yet what emerges most clearly from their stories is that students don't have to face this pressure alone. Supportive teachers, understanding peers, and balanced family expectations can make the difference between pressure that motivates and pressure that crushes. The question isn't whether eleventh graders should face academic challenges, they should, but whether we're providing them with the tools and support they need to meet those challenges without sacrificing their health and well-being.

For schools, this means looking beyond academic outcomes to consider the whole student experience. It means teachers coordinating to prevent overwhelming workload peaks, creating spaces for honest discussion about stress, and teaching concrete coping skills alongside academic content.

For families, it means maintaining high expectations while ensuring children know their worth isn't determined by grades alone. It means understanding that today's academic environment differs from the past and that acknowledging difficulty isn't the same as excusing poor effort.

For Indonesian education policy, these findings add to growing evidence that the current system needs adjustments. We can maintain academic rigor while building in more support for student mental health and well-being. These aren't competing goals, they're complementary. Healthy, supported students learn better and achieve more.

Ultimately, this research reminds us that behind every statistic about academic stress are real teenagers trying their best to navigate systems that often feel overwhelming. They're developing resilience and coping skills that will serve them throughout life, but they shouldn't have to do it alone. By understanding their experiences more deeply, we can create educational environments that challenge students to grow while supporting them along the way.

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