



Caste, Class, and Classroom Stress: A Study of Mental Health Inequality in Secondary Schools of Bankura District in West Bengal

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Abstract

Mental health is a growing concern in secondary education, particularly in socially stratified contexts where caste and socio-economic inequalities affect students' experiences. This study examines mental health disparities among secondary school students in relation to caste, class, and classroom stress. Using a descriptive–correlational design, data were collected through standardized tools on mental health, classroom stress, and socio-economic status. Findings are expected to show significant mental health differences across social groups, with classroom stress acting as a key contributing factor. The study highlights the need for inclusive school environments, teacher awareness, and school-based mental health interventions to support students' well-being and promote equity.

Keywords: *Mental Health, Caste, Socio-economic Class, Classroom Stress, Mental Health Inequality, Secondary School Students, Social Stratification, Psychological Well-being*

Introduction

Human beings are highly intellectual, spiritual, and unique creation of nature. Each human being is born with spatial potentials. Due to these unique characteristics human beings are super and differ from all creation of nature. Education is one of the most important human activities which is helpful in development of individual's internal and external potentials. Education opens the door of development of intellectual, spiritual, social, cultural civilization and modernization. In other words, it is a powerful key of all-round development of individual and thereby nation. Highly educated citizens of any country are assets for national development. This means that quality education is essential for higher development of any nation. Quality of education is mostly assessed based on academic performance or academic Achievement of students. Academic achievement serves as a key criterion to judge student's true potentials and capabilities. It is directly related to status of individual and society and there by tax revenues of state and central government of the country. Due to importance of educational achievement of citizen, each country of the world wants to develop their educational system and thereby educational quality of citizens. Classroom stress functions as a critical school-based factor through which caste- and class- based inequalities are translated into unequal mental health outcomes. However, there is a lack of systematic empirical research examining the combined influence of caste, class, and classroom stress on mental health among secondary school students. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding mental health inequality and for designing inclusive and supportive educational environments.

Mental health is as vital to human life as physical, spiritual, and economic well-being. A sound and healthy mind enables individuals to experience satisfaction and enjoyment in life and their surroundings. Mentally healthy individuals are more likely to be creative, adaptable, and willing to take positive risks for higher achievement. Moreover, they are better equipped to cope effectively with challenges and problems in both personal and

professional life. Mental health problems are affecting academic performance of learner and big causes of poor academic achievement. Learners with poor mental health are facing failure in academic pursuit and a major cause of suicide. Various studies have been carried out in different parts of the world to Recognize which affect mental health of adolescents. Suicidal behaviour happens due to poor mental health, a sense of helplessness (Kay, Li, Xiao, Nokkaew & Park, 2009) and lower academic achievements (Puskar & Bernardo, 2007). In addressing the broader debate of the 'agrarian question', it is essential to understand how changes in economic institutions affect and interact in real life with other economic variables such as land, credit, output, and labour.

Review of Related Literature

The Review of Related Literature (RRL) establishes the theoretical and empirical background for examining how social inequalities affect students' mental health in secondary schools. Mental health is widely recognized as essential for academic achievement and social development, yet students' experiences differ due to factors such as caste, socioeconomic class, and classroom environment.

Previous studies show that caste discrimination, economic hardship, and unequal access to resources often lead to stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem among adolescents. Classroom

Practices, like teacher expectations, peer comparison, and academic competition, can further increase or reduce these pressures. Reviewing earlier research helps identify key themes and gaps, while emphasizing the importance of inclusive and supportive school environments to reduce mental health inequality.

Sears and Milburn (1983) in their book 'Stress in Children and Adolescents' summarized typical stress among the school-age children. As the main developmental task of this stage concerns schooling, many of the stresses are school-related. School related problems, in general are test taking, school fears, for example, homework and fear of failure or success including school phobia.

Ramamalini (1993) in her study on academic stress and quality of family support and intelligence in a selected group of high school girls reported no significant relationship among them. But a significant correlation was found between academic stress and family support.

Sarma (2004) in a study conducted that parent's education is highly related with the academic stress of their children. The students with the parents of official and government jobs may have poor level of academic stress and better adjustment compared to the students of business, coolie, and agricultural parents.

Tung and Chahal (2005) examined "Relationship between stress and adjustment" and found that "There was no significant causal relationship between stress and the adjustment. However, direction of the results implied that level of adjustment influences the number of stress full events and amount of stress experienced by them.

Rationale of the Study

Secondary education occupies a pivotal position in the educational system as it bridges elementary education and higher education while simultaneously shaping adolescents' academic, social, and emotional development. During this stage, students experience heightened academic demands, identity formation, and social pressures, making them particularly vulnerable to stress and mental health challenges. In the Indian context, and especially in rural and semi-rural districts such as Bankura in West Bengal, these challenges are further intensified by structural inequalities rooted in caste, class, and socio-economic status.

Despite significant policy initiatives aimed at universalizing secondary education, disparities in access, quality of schooling, and learning environments continue to persist. Students from marginalized castes and economically disadvantaged backgrounds often encounter overcrowded classrooms, limited academic support, inadequate infrastructure, and subtle forms of social exclusion. These conditions contribute to increased classroom stress, which in turn adversely affects students' mental health, academic engagement, and overall well-being. Existing research in India has largely examined mental health or academic achievement in isolation, with relatively fewer empirical studies exploring the interrelationship between caste, class, classroom stress, and mental health at

the secondary school level. Moreover, region-specific studies focusing on district-level realities such as those of Bankura are scarce, resulting in a gap between policy formulation and ground-level implementation. Understanding these localized dynamics is essential for developing context-sensitive interventions.

Therefore, the present study is undertaken to systematically examine how social stratification factors (caste and class) influence classroom stress and mental health among secondary school students in the Bankura district of West Bengal. By employing standardized tools and appropriate statistical techniques, the study seeks to generate empirical evidence that can inform educators, school administrators, policymakers, and mental health professionals. The findings are expected to contribute to more inclusive educational practices, stress-reduction strategies, and student support mechanisms, ultimately promoting equity, psychological well-being, and academic success in secondary education.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of mental health among secondary school students?
2. What is the nature and extent of classroom stress among secondary school students?
3. What is the relationship between classroom stress and mental health?

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine differences in mental health across caste groups.
2. To assess the level of classroom stress experienced by secondary school students.
3. To determine the relationship between classroom stress and mental health.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopted a descriptive survey method of research to examine the relationship between caste, socio-economic class, classroom stress, and mental health inequality among secondary school students in Bankura District, West Bengal. The descriptive survey method was considered appropriate as it enables the researcher to gather systematic, objective, and information about existing conditions, attitudes, and psychological states of students without manipulating any variables. This method is particularly useful for studying social and educational phenomena in their natural settings. It facilitates the identification of patterns, variations, and associations among social background variables and students' mental health outcomes, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of inequality within the school environment.

Method

The present study adopted the survey method to collect data from secondary school students. The survey method was considered appropriate as it enables the systematic collection of information related to social and psychological variables such as caste, socio-economic class, classroom stress, and mental health from a large and representative sample. This method facilitates the assessment of existing conditions and the examination of relationships among variables without manipulating them. Standardized tools were administered to gather quantitative data, which were subsequently analysed using appropriate statistical techniques to draw valid conclusions.

Population

The population of the present study consisted of secondary school students studying in Classes IX and X. These students were enrolled in government and government-aided secondary schools. Secondary school students were selected as the population because adolescence is a critical stage of physical, psychological, and social development, during which students are particularly vulnerable to classroom stress and mental health challenges. The study aimed to understand the relationship between social stratification (caste and socio-economic class),

classroom stress, and mental health within this population. West Bengal is divided into 23 Districts. The population of the present study consisted of all secondary school students of Govt. Secondary Schools affiliated with the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education (WBBSE). The total number of around 256 Secondary Schools affiliated to WBBSE in West Bengal according to the Annual Reports 2022-2023.

Sample

The sample for the present study consisted of 30 secondary school students, along with a limited number of secondary school teachers, selected from government and government-aided secondary schools of Bankura District, West Bengal. The participants were chosen to obtain both student-level data on classroom stress and mental health and teacher perspectives on classroom environment and academic pressure.

Students were selected from Classes IX and X to represent the adolescent age group, while teachers were included to provide contextual and observational insights related to classroom practices and student stress. The selection aimed to ensure representation from different caste categories and socio-economic backgrounds within the selected schools.

Tools

For the present study, a self-developed Likert-type questionnaire was used as the primary tool for data collection. The questionnaire was designed to measure students' levels of classroom stress, mental health status, and perceptions related to social background factors such as caste and socio-economic class. It consisted of a series of structured statements with five response options- Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree- to capture the intensity of respondents' opinions and experiences.

The items were framed in simple and clear language suitable for secondary school students to ensure better comprehension and reliable responses. The tool included sections on academic pressure, peer comparison, teacher expectations, and emotional well-being information. Prior to final administration, the questionnaire was reviewed by subject experts and teachers to ensure content validity and clarity. This tool enabled the researcher to collect quantitative data systematically and analyse patterns related to mental health inequality among students.

Statistical Techniques for Data Analysis

The data collected for the present study were analysed using percentage analysis to determine the distribution and frequency of responses across different items of the questionnaire. This technique helped in identifying trends and patterns related to classroom stress, caste and socio-economic background, and students' mental health status.

In addition, graphical representations, particularly pie charts, were used to present the findings in a clear, simple, and meaningful manner. These visual tools facilitated easier interpretation and comparison of response categories, thereby enhancing the overall understanding of mental health inequality among secondary school students.

Result

Objectives -1

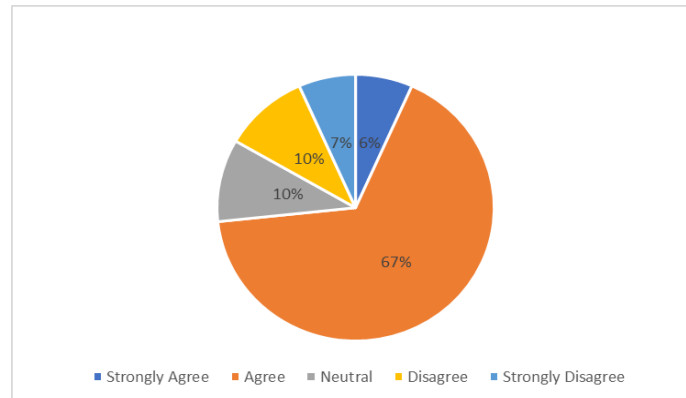


Figure - 1: Pressure due to heavy homework and assignments

Most students reported feeling pressure due to heavy homework and assignments. A total of 22 out of 30 students (73.3%) selected Agree or Strongly Agree, indicating that homework load is a significant source of classroom stress. Only 5 students (16.7%) expressed disagreement, while 3 students (10%) remained neutral. This distribution suggests that academic workload, particularly homework and assignments, plays a considerable role in increasing students perceived stress levels in the classroom environment.

Interpretation: A large majority of students feel pressure from homework and assignments. Homework load is a significant stress factor.

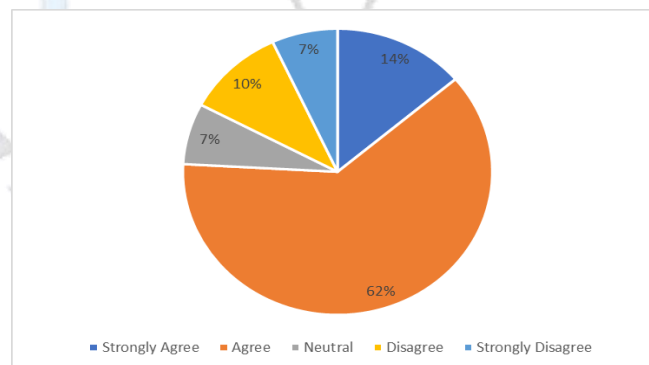


Figure - 2: Nervous before class tests or examinations

A large proportion of students reported feeling nervous before class tests or examinations. 22 out of 30 students (73.3%) selected Agree or Strongly Agree, showing that examination anxiety is highly prevalent among the respondents. Only 6 students (20%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 2 students (6.7%) remained neutral. This pattern indicates that tests and examinations are a major source of stress for students and significantly contribute to overall classroom anxiety.

Interpretation: Examination anxiety is highly prevalent among students, indicating test fear as a strong contributor to classroom stress.

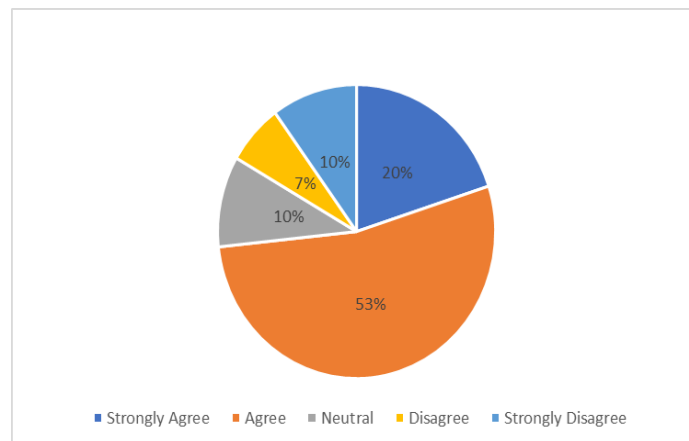


Figure - 3: Teachers expect very high performance

Most students perceived that their teachers expect very high academic performance from them. A total of 22 out of 30 students (73.3%) chose Agree or Strongly Agree, indicating that high teacher expectations are widely felt among the respondents. Only 5 students (16.7%) expressed disagreement, while 3 students (10%) remained neutral. This trend suggests that teacher expectations act as a notable source of academic pressure and may contribute to students' classroom stress and performance anxiety.

Interpretation: Most students perceive high expectations from teachers, which creates academic pressure and performance stress.

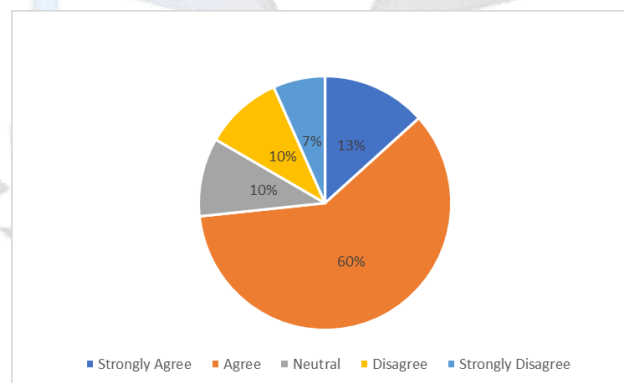


Figure - 3: Stress when lessons are not understood

The findings show that a substantial number of students experience stress when they do not understand classroom lessons. 22 out of 30 students (73.3%) selected Agree or Strongly Agree, indicating that lack of comprehension is a major contributor to classroom stress. Only 5 students (16.7%) disagreed, while 3 students (10%) remained neutral. This distribution suggests that difficulties in understanding lessons significantly affect students' confidence and increase their academic stress levels.

Interpretation: Difficulty in understanding lessons is another major source of stress, suggesting the need for clearer teaching methods and academic support.

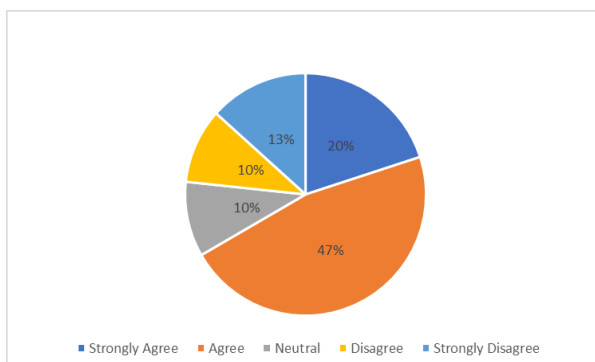


Figure - 4: Competition with classmates makes anxious

A considerable number of students reported that competition with classmates creates anxiety.

20 out of 30 students (66.7%) selected Agree or Strongly Agree, indicating that peer competition is a significant source of classroom stress for many respondents. 7 students (23.3%) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement, while 3 students (10%) remained neutral. This pattern suggests that although not as dominant as homework or examination pressure, competitive classroom environments still contribute notably to students' anxiety and emotional strain.

Interpretation: Two-thirds of students feel anxious due to peer competition. Competitive classroom environments moderately increase stress.

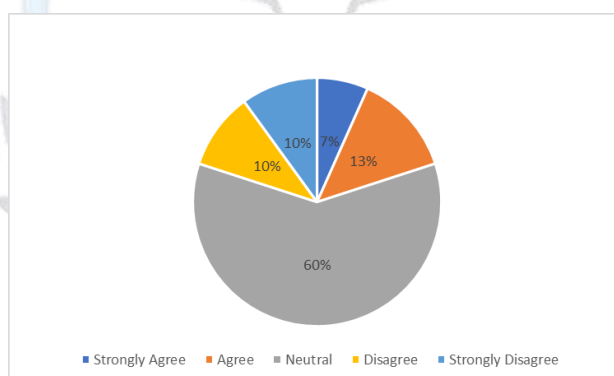


Figure - 5: Classroom discipline rules make uncomfortable

The responses indicate that most students neither clearly agree nor disagree that classroom discipline rules make them uncomfortable. A large majority, 18 out of 30 students (60%), selected Neutral, suggesting uncertainty or indifference toward discipline rules. Only 6 students (20%) agreed or strongly agreed, while another 6 students (20%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. This distribution shows that classroom discipline is not perceived as a major stress factor for most students, and its impact appears comparatively moderate or unclear.

Interpretation: Most students are neutral about discipline rules, indicating that discipline is not a major stress factor compared to academic issues.

Objectives - 2

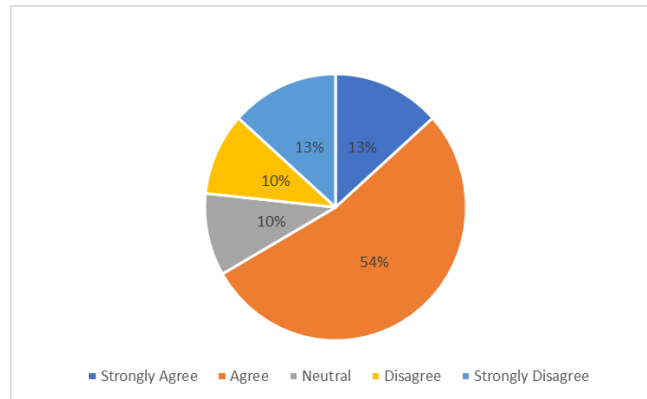


Figure - 6: Hesitate to ask questions in class

The results reveal that most students feel hesitant to ask questions in the classroom. 20 out of 30 students (66.7%) selected Agree or Strongly Agree, indicating that lack of confidence or fear of judgment may be a significant barrier to classroom participation. 7 students (23.3%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 3 students (10%) remained neutral. This pattern suggests that hesitation in asking questions is a notable contributor to classroom stress and may hinder effective learning and student engagement.

Interpretation: Many students feel hesitant to ask questions, reflecting lack of confidence or fear of judgment, which contributes to stress and reduced participation.

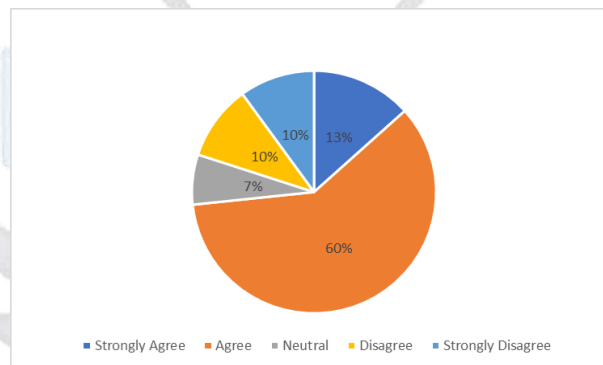


Figure - 7: Worry about comparison with other students

The findings indicate that many students worry about being compared with other students. 22 out of 30 students (73.3%) selected Agree or Strongly Agree, showing that social comparison is a prominent source of classroom stress. Only 6 students (20%) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement, while 2 students (6.7%) remained neutral. This distribution suggests that peer comparison significantly influences students' confidence and contributes notably to their overall academic anxiety and stress levels.

Interpretation: Social comparison is a strong psychological stressor. Students are highly sensitive to being compared with peers.

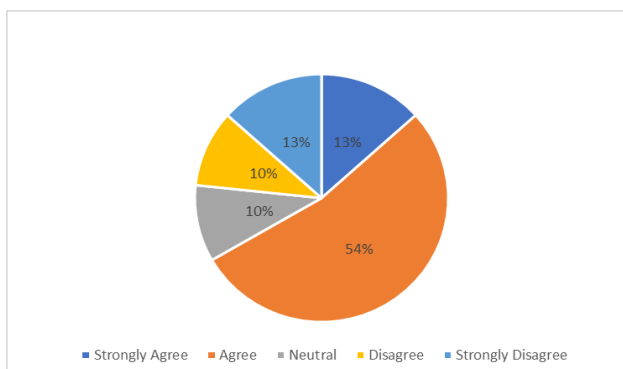


Figure - 8: Feel overloaded with schoolwork

The responses show that a significant proportion of students feel overloaded with schoolwork. 20 out of 30 students (66.7%) selected Agree or Strongly Agree, indicating that academic workload is a notable source of stress for many learners. 7 students (23.3%) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement, while 3 students (10%) remained neutral. This pattern suggests that excessive schoolwork contributes considerably to students perceived pressure and may negatively affect their academic well-being and overall classroom experience.

Interpretation: A considerable number of students perceive workload as excessive, indicating academic burden as a consistent stress source.

Objectives – 3

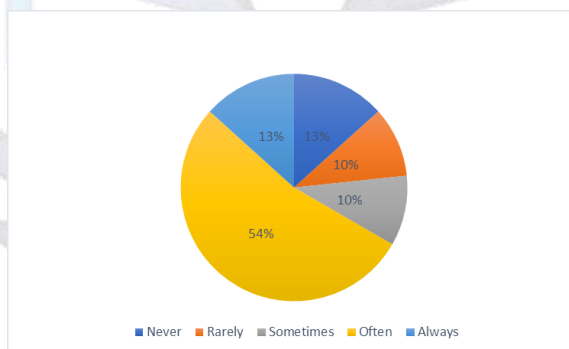


Figure – 9 : I feel sad or low without any clear reason

The percentage distribution shows that 66.6% of students (Often + Always) frequently experience sadness or low mood without a clear reason, indicating a high level of emotional discomfort. Only 33.3% reported such feelings never, rarely, or sometimes. The dominance of the “Often” category (53.3%) suggests that these emotions are recurring rather than occasional. Overall, the data points to a considerable level of emotional strain among students, highlighting the need for emotional guidance and school counselling support.

Interpretation: A significant majority of students frequently experience unexplained sadness or low mood. This indicates the presence of emotional vulnerability among many learners and suggests a need for emotional support mechanisms in school.

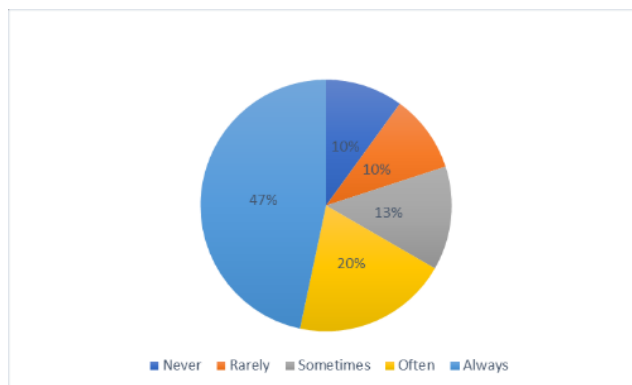


Figure – 10 : I have difficulty sleeping due to worries about school

The response distribution indicates that a large proportion of students experience sleep difficulties due to school-related worries. The “Always” category accounts for 46.7% (14 students) and “Often” for 20% (6 students), meaning 66.7% of students frequently face sleep disturbance. In contrast, only 33.3% reported such problems never, rarely, or sometimes. This percentage pattern shows that academic pressure and anxiety substantially affect students’ rest and mental well-being, emphasizing the need for stress-management strategies and counselling support in schools.

Interpretation: Two-thirds of students report sleep disturbances related to school worries. This highlights academic pressure and anxiety as strong contributors to students’ mental stress and potential fatigue during school hours.

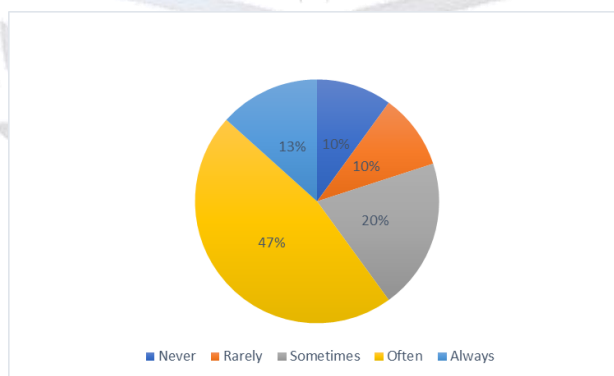


Figure – 11 : I get irritated easily

The data shows that most students experience frequent irritability. Nearly 60% (Often 46.7%

+ Always 13.3%) reported that they get irritated easily on a regular basis, while only 20% reported rarely or never experiencing such feelings. The remaining 20% selected “Sometimes,” indicating moderate occurrence. This distribution suggests that emotional tension and stress are common among students, which may influence their behavior, peer relationships, and classroom adjustment, highlighting the importance of emotional regulation and supportive school interventions.

Interpretation: More than half of the respondents admit to frequent irritability. This suggests emotional instability and possible stress accumulation from academic or social factors in the school environment.

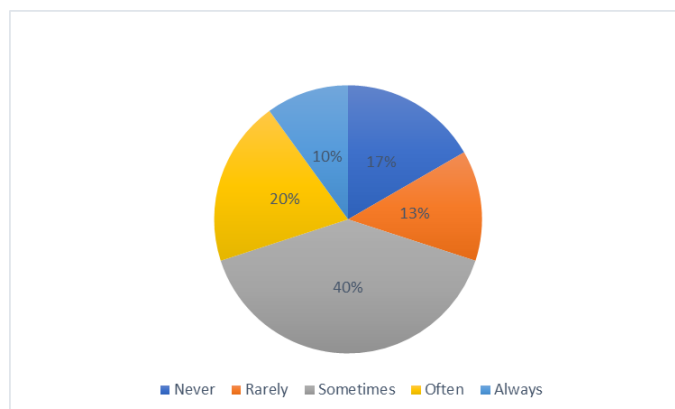


Figure – 12 : I feel lonely even when I am with friends

The responses indicate that feelings of loneliness are moderately present among students. While 30% (Often 20% + Always 10%) frequently experience loneliness even in the company of friends, a larger group 40% reported experiencing it sometimes. About 30% stated they rarely or never feel this way. This pattern suggests that although severe loneliness is not dominant, a considerable number of students experience occasional social or emotional isolation, highlighting the need for peer-support activities and inclusive classroom practices to strengthen students' sense of belonging.

Interpretation: While loneliness is not as dominant as other factors, a noticeable portion of students still experience social or emotional isolation. The higher "Sometimes" response (40%) indicates moderate but recurring feelings of disconnection among peers.

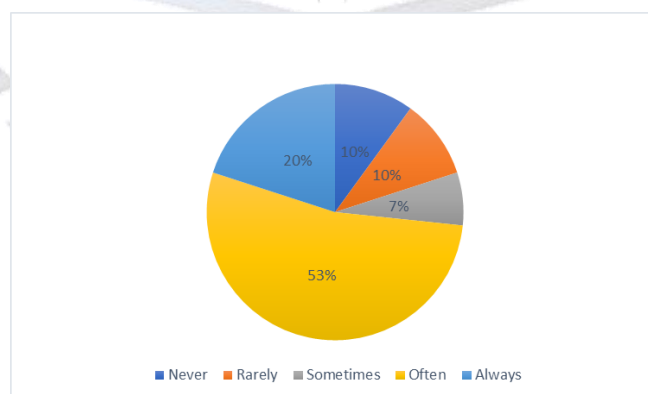


Figure – 12 : I feel anxious about my future

The data reveals that future-related anxiety is highly prevalent among students. A large majority, 73.3% (Often 53.3% + Always 20%), reported that they frequently feel anxious about their future, while only 26.7% experience such feelings rarely, never, or sometimes. The dominance of the "Often" category indicates that worry about career, academic success, or life goals is a recurring concern. Overall, this pattern reflects significant psychological pressure and uncertainty about the future, suggesting the importance of career guidance, counselling services, and motivational support within the school environment.

Interpretation: Future-related anxiety is highly prevalent. Nearly three-quarters of the students frequently worry about their future, reflecting pressure regarding career choices, academic performance, or societal expectations.

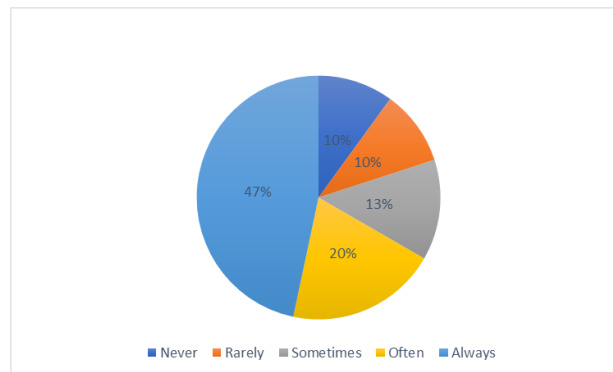


Figure – 12 : I feel mentally exhausted after school

The findings indicate that mental exhaustion after school is highly common among students. A significant 66.7% (Often 20% + Always 46.7%) reported frequently feeling mentally tired, while only 20% stated they rarely or never experience such exhaustion. The large proportion in the “Always” category shows that for many learners this is a persistent issue rather than an occasional feeling. Overall, the pattern suggests heavy academic workload or prolonged school stress, highlighting the need for balanced schedules, recreational activities, and mental well-being support in schools.

Interpretation: A large majority of students experience regular mental exhaustion after school. This suggests heavy academic workload, long school hours, or insufficient rest and recreational balance.

Conclusion

The study reveals that adolescents from comparatively disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds tend to experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional pressure, particularly in relation to examinations, peer comparison, and academic expectations. Classroom environments that emphasize excessive competition or performance pressure further intensify these mental health challenges. Conversely, supportive teaching practices and inclusive classroom interactions appear to reduce stress and promote better emotional balance among students. Overall, the research underscores the need for equitable and psychologically supportive school environments. Schools should adopt inclusive policies, strengthen guidance and counselling services, and encourage teacher sensitivity toward students’ diverse social backgrounds. Addressing classroom stress and social inequalities simultaneously can contribute to improved mental health, academic performance, and holistic development of secondary school students. The study thus emphasizes that promoting mental well-being in schools is essential for achieving both educational equity and sustainable social progress.

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