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What do We Know About Academic Stress and Burnout in Secondary Schools? A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Academic stress and academic burnout have become critical concerns in secondary education, with growing implications for students' psychological well-being and educational engagement. Although scholarly attention to these issues has increased, evidence focusing specifically on secondary school contexts remains fragmented, and comprehensive syntheses are still limited. This study aims to systematically review empirical research on academic stress and academic burnout among secondary school students. A systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Relevant studies were identified through Google Scholar using the keywords academic stress, academic burnout, secondary school, and high school. Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2025 were included. After a structured identification, screening, and eligibility process, 12 articles met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed using thematic synthesis. The findings indicate that academic stress in secondary schools is primarily associated with excessive academic workload, high-stakes assessment practices, competitive school climates, and strong expectations from teachers and parents. Sustained exposure to these stressors frequently develops into academic burnout, manifested through emotional exhaustion, cynicism toward school, and reduced academic efficacy. Furthermore, academic stress and burnout are consistently linked to negative psychological outcomes, including anxiety and reduced well-being, as well as educational consequences such as lower academic engagement, diminished motivation, and increased risk of school disengagement. This review provides an integrated understanding of the sources and impacts of academic stress and burnout in secondary education and underscores the need for school-based strategies that address both institutional demands and students' psychological resources to promote sustainable well-being and engagement.



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Introduction

In recent decades, students' psychological well-being has become a central concern within educational research, particularly in secondary school contexts (Belfi et al., 2012; Bosacki et al., 2023; Cilar et al., 2020). This concern is reflected in the sharp increase in scholarly publications addressing academic stress, school pressure, and related constructs. As illustrated in Figure 1, research output in this area has grown steadily over time, with a marked acceleration since the late 2010s. While this trend indicates heightened global awareness of academic stress as a critical educational issue, it simultaneously raises an important methodological question: has the rapid

expansion of research produced a coherent and integrative understanding of academic stress and burnout among secondary school students, or has it resulted in a fragmented accumulation of findings?

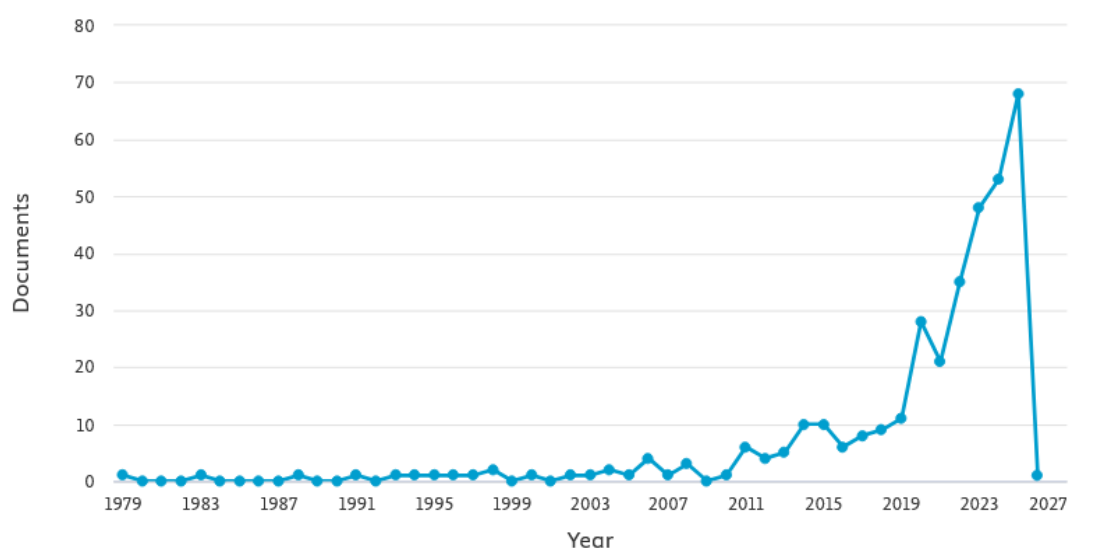


Figure 1. <Dokument by Years>

Secondary education represents a distinct developmental stage characterized by intensified academic demands, heightened performance accountability, and profound psychosocial transitions. Students at this level are expected to manage heavy workloads, frequent evaluations, and future-oriented pressures associated with academic success and educational trajectories (Lin et al., 2024; Hossain et al., 2024). Within such environments, academic stress is commonly conceptualized as students' psychological responses to academic demands perceived as exceeding their available coping resources. When exposure to these demands becomes prolonged and insufficiently regulated, academic stress may develop into academic burnout, a multidimensional condition involving emotional exhaustion, cynical attitudes toward school, and a diminished sense of academic efficacy (Yuhuan et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2021; Ramos-Vera et al., 2024). Although the burnout construct originates from occupational psychology, its increasing application in secondary education research as reflected in the growing volume of studies shown in Figure 1 underscores its relevance for understanding students' school-related experiences.

Despite the apparent conceptual clarity of these constructs, existing empirical findings reveal substantial variation in how academic stress and burnout are operationalized, explained, and linked to student outcomes. While numerous studies report associations between academic stress and adverse psychological outcomes, such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, and reduced well-being, others emphasize educational consequences, including diminished engagement, declining academic performance, and increased risks of school disengagement (Sinval et al., 2025; Rabbi & Islam, 2024). However, as suggested by the heterogeneous thematic distribution of publications over time (see Figure 1), these strands of evidence often remain analytically separated, with limited efforts to integrate psychological and educational perspectives within a unified explanatory framework. Consequently, the literature tends to generate parallel insights rather than cumulative understanding.

Moreover, although publication trends shown in Figure 1 may suggest a maturing research field, closer examination indicates that the existing evidence base is marked by thematic fragmentation and contextual imbalance. Many studies focus narrowly on specific stressors (e.g., examinations or parental expectations) or isolated outcomes, while broader patterns across school systems, cultural contexts, and methodological designs remain insufficiently synthesized (Makarova et al., 2023; Havill et al., 2019). Research on higher education students is relatively abundant and has benefited from multiple reviews and meta-analyses; by contrast, systematic syntheses focusing exclusively on secondary school populations remain scarce, limiting the field's capacity to distinguish age-specific stress processes from more general academic phenomena.

Importantly, the rapid growth of empirical studies documented in Figure 1 has not been matched by a comparable advancement in integrative synthesis capable of identifying convergences, inconsistencies, and explanatory gaps within the literature. Without such synthesis, it remains unclear whether academic stress and burnout in secondary schools represent universally consistent phenomena or context-dependent processes

shaped by institutional structures, assessment regimes, and developmental factors. This lack of clarity constrains both theoretical development and the design of effective school-based interventions.

In response to these limitations, the present study conducts a systematic literature review (SLR) to synthesize empirical evidence on academic stress and academic burnout specifically within secondary school settings. Guided by PRISMA 2020, this review seeks to move beyond descriptive accumulation by identifying dominant patterns, points of convergence and divergence, and the scope of evidence linking academic stress and burnout to psychological and educational outcomes. Rather than treating the expanding literature depicted in Figure 1 as indicative of conceptual consensus, this SLR aims to clarify what is known, what remains contested, and where evidence is methodologically constrained.

Accordingly, the review is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the main sources and forms of academic stress and burnout in secondary schools?

RQ2: What are the psychological and educational impacts of academic stress and burnout on secondary school students?

By systematically examining and synthesizing the existing literature, this review seeks to contribute to educational psychology by providing a more coherent and critically informed understanding of academic stress and burnout in secondary education. The findings are expected to inform future research directions and support the development of school-based strategies that address both institutional demands and students' psychological resources in a sustainable manner.

Method

This study adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) design to synthesize empirical evidence on academic stress and academic burnout in secondary school contexts. The review was conducted in accordance with PRISMA 2020, which served as the guiding framework for ensuring transparency, methodological rigor, and replicability throughout the processes of study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion (Ifdil et al., 2025). The use of an SLR design was intended not merely to summarize existing studies, but to enable a structured synthesis capable of identifying dominant patterns, points of convergence and divergence, as well as methodological constraints within the current body of literature on academic stress and burnout among secondary school students.

The literature search was carried out using Google Scholar as the primary database, given its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals in the fields of education and psychology. To reduce the risk of omitting relevant studies and to strengthen the comprehensiveness of the search, this database search was complemented by manual backward citation tracking of reference lists from key articles identified during the screening process. The search employed a Boolean strategy combining the terms “academic stress” OR “academic burnout” with “secondary school” OR “high school.” To ensure relevance to contemporary educational contexts while maintaining sufficient temporal breadth, the search was restricted to articles published between 2010 and 2025. Only empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals and written in English were considered eligible for inclusion.

Following the search, a structured screening procedure was implemented. The initial search yielded 1,248 records. After applying publication year and peer-review filters, 436 records remained. Duplicate entries were then removed, resulting in 350 unique records that underwent title and abstract screening. At this stage, studies were excluded if they did not focus on secondary school populations, addressed psychological constructs unrelated to academic stress or burnout, or did not constitute empirical journal articles. This process led to the exclusion of 298 records. The remaining 52 articles were subsequently subjected to full-text assessment, during which 40 articles were excluded because they focused on higher education populations, lacked explicit examination of academic stress or burnout, or failed to meet the predefined inclusion criteria. Ultimately, 12 studies met all eligibility requirements and were retained for final synthesis. The full selection process is documented in Figure 2 using a PRISMA flow diagram.

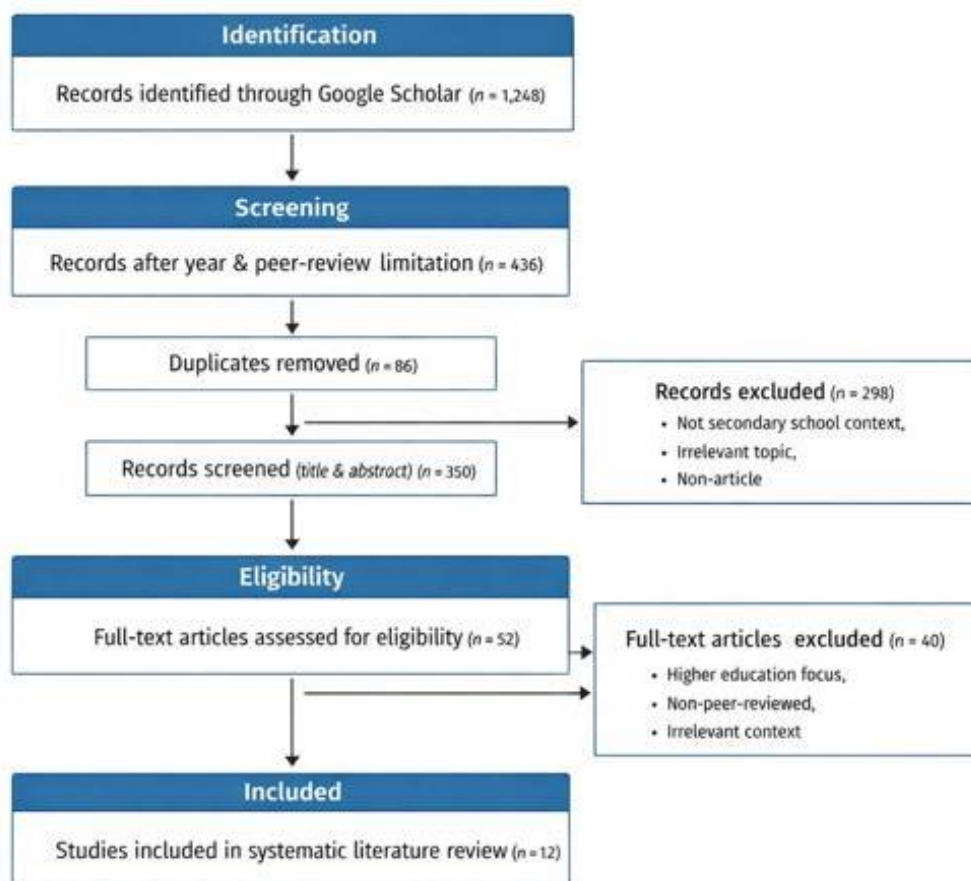


Figure 2. <PRISMA flow diagram>

To enhance the credibility and interpretive rigor of the review, all included studies were subjected to a methodological quality appraisal (Bah et al., 2024). This appraisal focused on key aspects of research quality, including clarity of research design, adequacy of sample characteristics, validity of measurement instruments, and transparency of analytical procedures. Rather than serving as a basis for exclusion, the quality assessment informed the weighting and interpretation of evidence during the synthesis process, allowing findings from methodologically weaker studies to be treated with appropriate analytical caution.

Data extraction was conducted systematically using a structured framework designed to capture essential study characteristics, including publication information, research design, sample features, focal constructs, and principal findings related to academic stress and academic burnout. The extracted data were analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach, which involved iterative reading, coding, and comparison across studies to identify recurring themes, patterns of consistency, and areas of divergence. This analytical process was explicitly guided by the two research questions of the review, focusing on the sources and forms of academic stress and burnout in secondary schools, as well as their psychological and educational impacts on students.

The findings of the thematic synthesis were reported narratively, with particular attention to cross-study patterns, contextual variations, and methodological limitations within the evidence base. By integrating quality appraisal with thematic analysis, this approach enabled a critical and coherent synthesis of existing research, providing a robust foundation for the discussion of theoretical implications, educational practice, and directions for future research.

Results and Discussions

To complement the systematic literature review, a bibliometric mapping analysis was conducted using VOSviewer based on Scopus-exported data. The visualization results are presented in Figure 3, which illustrates the co-occurrence network of keywords related to academic stress and burnout in secondary school contexts. The map reveals a well-defined clustering structure, indicating that research on academic stress and burnout is organized around several interconnected thematic domains.

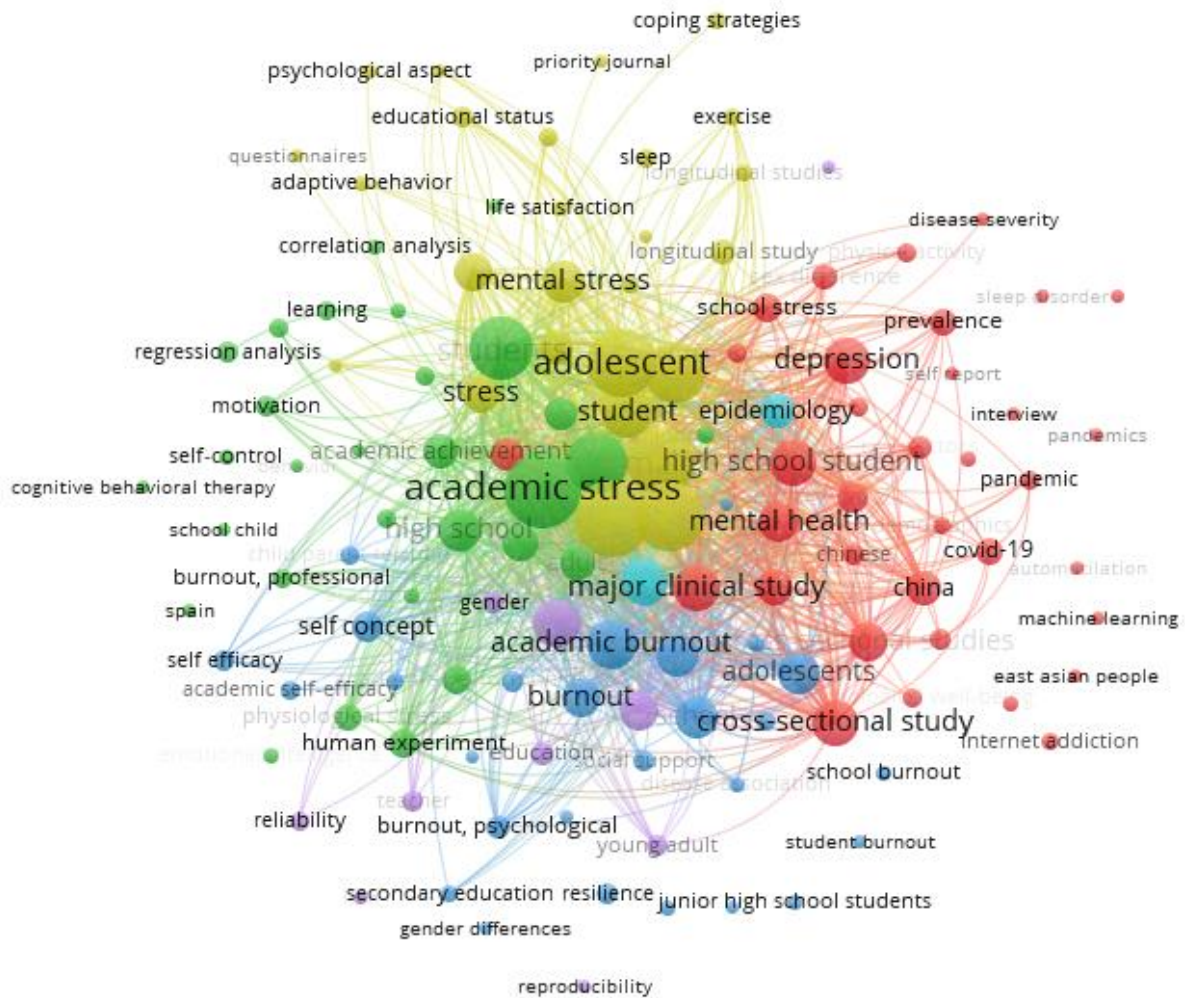


Figure 3. <Data VOSviewer>

As shown in Figure 3, the central nodes of the network are *academic stress*, *adolescent*, and *academic burnout*, confirming their dominant role in the literature. These core terms are strongly connected to psychological constructs such as *mental stress*, *depression*, *mental health*, and *coping strategies*, as well as educational variables including *school stress*, *student engagement*, and *school burnout*. The density and strength of these connections indicate that academic stress and burnout are primarily examined at the intersection of psychological well-being and school-related demands.

The visualization further demonstrates the presence of distinct clusters. One prominent cluster emphasizes psychological outcomes, linking academic stress with depression, anxiety, and mental health indicators. Another cluster highlights educational processes, such as learning engagement, motivation, and school adjustment. A third cluster connects contextual and methodological terms, including cross-sectional study designs, adolescent populations, and secondary education settings. These clusters provide a structural overview that aligns closely with the two research questions guiding this review.

Table 1. <Article Synthesis>

No	Article	Journal	Focus & Main Findings	RQ
1	Salmela-Aro et al. (2009)	<i>Journal of Youth and Adolescence</i>	Student burnout: exhaustion, cynicism, inadequacy related to school demands	RQ1
2	Walburg (2014)	<i>Journal of Adolescence</i>	Burnout in high school students is closely related to academic stress	RQ1

No	Article	Journal	Focus & Main Findings	RQ
3	Pascoe et al. (2020)	<i>International Journal of Adolescence and Youth</i>	Academic stress impacts mental health & achievement	RQ2
4	May et al. (2015)	<i>School Psychology International</i>	School climate and academic pressure trigger student stress	RQ1
5	Seo et al. (2015)	<i>School Psychology Quarterly</i>	Academic stress is related to adolescent depression	RQ2
6	García-Ros et al. (2012)	<i>European Journal of Psychology of Education</i>	Workload and evaluation as the main stressors for high school students	RQ1
7	Wang & Eccles (2012)	<i>Developmental Psychology</i>	School pressure reduces engagement and motivation	RQ2
8	Gao et al. (2023)	<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>	Academic stress predicts burnout; self-efficacy is protective	RQ1 & RQ2
9	Madigan & Kim (2021)	<i>Educational Psychology Review</i>	Academic burnout impacts performance and well-being	RQ2
10	Schaufeli et al. (2002)	<i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i>	The burnout framework (exhaustion–cynicism–efficacy) is relevant for educational contexts	RQ1
11	Liu & Lu (2012)	<i>Learning and Individual Differences</i>	Exam pressure and parental expectations increase high school students' stress	RQ1
12	Romano et al. (2021)	<i>School Psychology</i>	Burnout is correlated with disengagement and dropout risk	RQ2

RQ1: Sources and Forms of Academic Stress and Burnout in Secondary Schools

The thematic synthesis of the twelve selected journal articles (see Table 1) indicates that academic stress in secondary schools is predominantly driven by structural and contextual demands inherent in contemporary schooling systems. Across multiple studies, academic workload and evaluation pressure consistently emerge as the most salient stressors. García-Ros et al. (2012) demonstrate that intensive homework demands, frequent examinations, and performance-based assessment practices function as primary sources of stress among secondary school students. These findings are reinforced by Liu and Lu (2012), who identify examination pressure and parental expectations as critical external contributors to students' academic stress experiences.

In addition to workload-related factors, school climate and institutional pressure are repeatedly identified as significant stress-inducing conditions. May et al. (2015) report that competitive learning environments and limited emotional support within schools amplify students' stress levels. This contextual dimension of stress is also reflected in the bibliometric patterns observed in Figure 3, where terms such as *school stress* and *student* are densely connected to *academic stress*, indicating the centrality of school environments in shaping stress experiences.

When academic stress persists over time, it often evolves into academic burnout, which is conceptualized in the literature as a multidimensional construct. Salmela-Aro et al. (2009) identify three core manifestations of burnout among secondary school students: emotional exhaustion, characterized by chronic fatigue related to schoolwork; cynicism, reflected in detached or negative attitudes toward school; and feelings of inadequacy, involving diminished academic self-efficacy. This conceptualization is theoretically grounded in the burnout framework articulated by Schaufeli et al. (2002), which has been widely adopted in educational research.

Empirical evidence further confirms the close relationship between academic stress and burnout. Walburg (2014) demonstrates that higher levels of academic stress are strongly associated with increased burnout symptoms among high school students. More recent findings by Gao et al. (2023) extend this relationship by showing that academic stress significantly predicts burnout, while individual psychological resources particularly self-efficacy serve as protective factors that can mitigate burnout severity. Collectively, these findings suggest that academic burnout in secondary schools represents a cumulative response to sustained academic pressure rather than a transient or isolated condition.

RQ2: Psychological and Educational Impacts of Academic Stress and Burnout

The reviewed literature consistently shows that academic stress and burnout have substantial psychological and educational consequences for secondary school students. From a psychological perspective, multiple studies document strong associations between academic stress and adverse mental health outcomes. Seo et al. (2015) report that academic stress is a significant predictor of depressive symptoms among adolescents, highlighting the vulnerability of secondary school students to internalizing problems in high-pressure academic environments. Similarly, Pascoe et al. (2020) demonstrate that elevated academic stress negatively affects students' mental health and overall well-being.

These psychological consequences are closely mirrored in educational outcomes. Wang and Eccles (2012) show that school-related stress undermines students' behavioral and emotional engagement, leading to reduced motivation and persistence in learning activities. In line with these findings, Madigan and Kim (2021) provide robust evidence that academic burnout is associated with lower academic performance and diminished psychological well-being across educational contexts. The convergence of these results underscores that academic stress and burnout not only impair students' mental health but also compromise core educational processes.

At more severe levels, burnout is linked to school disengagement and increased dropout risk. Romano et al. (2021) find that students experiencing high levels of burnout are more likely to disengage psychologically from school and exhibit withdrawal tendencies. This pattern is also reflected in the bibliometric visualization presented in Figure 3, where *school burnout* and *student burnout* are closely connected to terms such as *mental health* and *depression*, indicating the intertwined nature of psychological distress and educational disengagement.

Importantly, several studies identify protective and moderating factors that can buffer the negative impacts of academic stress and burnout. Gao et al. (2023) emphasize the role of academic self-efficacy in reducing the likelihood that stress will develop into burnout, suggesting that interventions targeting students' psychological resources may play a critical role in promoting resilience. These findings collectively point to the necessity of addressing both individual and institutional factors when designing strategies to reduce academic stress and its consequences in secondary schools.

The findings of this systematic literature review indicate that academic stress and academic burnout among secondary school students are consistently linked to structural characteristics of contemporary schooling, particularly excessive academic workload, high-stakes assessment practices, competitive school climates, and strong expectations from teachers and parents. While these stressors have been widely reported in individual studies, the present synthesis demonstrates that their influence is not isolated or episodic, but rather cumulative and systemic (Liu et al., 2024). This finding supports the view that academic stress in secondary education should be understood as an embedded feature of institutional practices rather than merely an individual coping failure.

The synthesis further reveals that academic burnout emerges as a developmental extension of prolonged academic stress, characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynical attitudes toward school, and reduced academic efficacy. Although this conceptualization is largely derived from burnout models originally developed in occupational contexts, its consistent application across secondary school studies suggests that burnout has been meaningfully adapted to educational settings (Salmela-Aro, 2022; Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). However, the review also highlights conceptual variability in how burnout is operationalized across studies, indicating that the construct has not yet achieved full theoretical consolidation within secondary education research. This inconsistency may partially explain variations in reported prevalence rates and outcome associations across contexts.

From a psychological perspective, the reviewed studies converge in demonstrating that elevated academic stress and burnout are associated with adverse mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depressive symptoms, and diminished well-being. Importantly, the synthesis suggests that these psychological consequences are not uniformly distributed but are shaped by contextual and individual moderators, such as school climate, perceived social support, and students' self-efficacy beliefs (Wang et al., 2024; Qu, 2024). This finding aligns with stress-coping frameworks that emphasize the interaction between environmental demands and personal resources, and it underscores the limitation of approaches that focus exclusively on reducing stressors without strengthening students' adaptive capacities.

In terms of educational outcomes, the synthesis provides strong evidence that academic stress and burnout undermine key learning processes, particularly student engagement, motivation, and academic persistence. Across studies, higher levels of stress and burnout were consistently associated with reduced behavioral and emotional engagement, lower academic performance, and increased risks of school disengagement. These findings suggest that academic stress and burnout function as critical mediating mechanisms through which institutional pressures translate into educational underachievement (Chen et al., 2025). Notably, the review also reveals that most of the evidence

supporting these relationships is derived from cross-sectional designs, which limits causal inference and calls for greater caution in interpreting directional effects.

A key contribution of this review lies in its identification of fragmentation within the existing literature. Although individual studies provide valuable insights into specific stressors or outcomes, the lack of integrative synthesis has hindered the development of a coherent explanatory framework. The present SLR demonstrates that psychological and educational consequences of academic stress and burnout are frequently examined in parallel rather than as interdependent processes. This separation obscures the reciprocal dynamics through which psychological distress and academic disengagement may reinforce one another over time, particularly during adolescence.

The bibliometric mapping analysis offers additional context for interpreting these findings by illustrating how research on academic stress and burnout is organized into distinct but interconnected thematic clusters. However, when interpreted alongside the thematic synthesis, the mapping also reveals a relative underrepresentation of longitudinal and intervention-focused research, suggesting that the field remains predominantly descriptive. This imbalance limits the capacity of existing studies to inform evidence-based school interventions aimed at preventing or mitigating academic stress and burnout.

Taken together, the findings of this review suggest that academic stress and burnout in secondary schools should be conceptualized as multidimensional phenomena shaped by the interaction of institutional structures, developmental factors, and individual psychological resources. The consistent identification of protective factors particularly academic self-efficacy and supportive school environments indicates that effective responses must extend beyond workload reduction to include strategies that enhance students' sense of competence, autonomy, and belonging. However, the methodological limitations identified across studies, including reliance on self-report measures and cross-sectional designs, highlight the need for more rigorous longitudinal and experimental research to strengthen the evidentiary base. By integrating findings across diverse contexts and methodological approaches, this systematic literature review advances understanding beyond individual study results and clarifies both what is currently known and what remains unresolved. The discussion thus positions academic stress and burnout not only as outcomes of educational pressure, but as critical indicators of the sustainability and psychological consequences of contemporary secondary education systems.

Conclusions

This systematic literature review synthesizes empirical evidence on academic stress and academic burnout in secondary school contexts to clarify the current state of knowledge and its limitations. The findings indicate that academic stress and burnout are structurally embedded phenomena shaped by excessive academic workload, high-stakes assessment practices, competitive school climates, and strong expectations from teachers and parents. Rather than representing isolated psychological conditions, academic stress and burnout emerge as cumulative responses to prolonged academic demands, with burnout reflecting a developmental trajectory marked by emotional exhaustion, cynical disengagement, and reduced academic efficacy. The review further demonstrates that academic stress and burnout are consistently associated with adverse psychological and educational outcomes, including anxiety, depressive symptoms, reduced well-being, lower engagement, declining academic performance, and increased risk of school disengagement. At the same time, protective factors such as academic self-efficacy and supportive school environments play a critical buffering role. By identifying fragmentation in existing research and the predominance of cross-sectional designs, this review highlights the need for longitudinal and intervention-based studies to inform systemic, school-level strategies that promote sustainable student well-being and engagement in secondary education.

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