

## Relationship Between Teachers' Emotional Support and Students' Academic Stress at Secondary Level in District Karak

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### Abstract

Teachers' emotional support may represent an important interpersonal resource for adolescents facing academic demands. This study examined the relationship between teachers' emotional support and students' academic stress among male students at the secondary level in District Karak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The study used a quantitative, cross-sectional descriptive-correlational design. The target population comprised 8,034 male students enrolled in Grades 9 and 10 in government boys' high schools, and 362 complete cases were included in the reported analysis. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire containing 25 items assessing teachers' emotional support and 25 items assessing students' academic stress, alongside demographic questions. Descriptive statistics and Pearson product-moment correlation were used for analysis. The reported results indicated a generally favourable perception of teachers' emotional support ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ) and a moderate level of academic stress ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ). Examination stress and anxiety was the most salient academic-stress dimension. A statistically significant, moderate negative association was reported between teachers' emotional support and students' academic stress,  $r(360) = -.520$ ,  $p < .001$ , with approximately 27% shared variance. Respect, fairness, and emotional safety showed particularly strong associations with overall academic stress. The findings suggest that emotionally supportive classroom relationships may be relevant to students' experiences of academic pressure. However, because the study is cross-sectional and correlational—the findings should not be interpreted as causal effect.

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### Introduction

Secondary education is a particularly important developmental period because students experience increasing academic demands while simultaneously navigating cognitive, emotional, and social changes. In Grades 9 and 10, examination requirements, workload, performance expectations, fear of failure, and decisions about further education may contribute to students' perceptions of academic pressure. Schools are not only instructional settings but also developmental contexts in which classroom relationships can influence motivation, psychological adjustment, and students' interpretation of academic demands.

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Academic stress is not simply the amount of schoolwork students receive. It reflects the extent to which academic demands are appraised as exceeding available time, skills, control, social support, or coping resources. In secondary school, stress may be expressed through examination anxiety, fear of failure, homework and assignment pressure, expectations from teachers, and family-related academic pressure. Prolonged academic stress has been associated with poorer well-being and difficulties in academic functioning. Academic stress is particularly relevant in the Pakistani context, where examination performance and family expectations can be especially consequential for adolescents.

Teachers are an important source of interpersonal support within the school environment. Emotional support involves behaviours through which teachers communicate care, respect, empathy, fairness, approachability, encouragement, and responsiveness. Such support may make students more comfortable asking questions, acknowledging difficulties, receiving corrective feedback, and recovering from academic setbacks. The study distinguishes emotional support from instructional support: emotional support primarily concerns students' sense of care, belonging, respect, and psychological safety, whereas instructional support concerns explanation, modelling, feedback, and task guidance.

Prior research provides a theoretical basis for expecting supportive teacher–student relationships to be associated with better emotional and academic adjustment. Roorda et al. (2011), in a meta-analysis, found meaningful associations between affective teacher–student relationships and school engagement and achievement. Lei et al. (2018) reported that teacher support was associated with positive academic emotions and lower negative emotions, with culture, age, and gender moderating some relationships. More recently, Kristensen and Jeno (2024) examined teacher autonomy support and academic stress longitudinally in upper secondary education, providing evidence that teacher support and academic stress can develop together over time. These findings reinforce the importance of examining relational processes within specific educational contexts.

The present study is grounded primarily in social support theory and self-determination theory. Social support theory proposes that supportive relationships can provide resources that protect well-being under stressful conditions (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Self-determination theory emphasizes the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness; supportive educational environments can contribute to these needs and thereby promote healthier motivation and adjustment (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In classroom settings, encouragement can support competence, respectful participation can support autonomy, and warmth and acceptance can support relatedness.

The local context is important. The study identifies a gap in empirical evidence concerning the relationship between perceived teacher emotional support and academic stress among male students in government secondary schools in District Karak. Much of the existing literature has focused on broader forms of teacher support, parental stress, academic emotions, burnout, or contexts outside rural and semi-urban Pakistan. The present investigation therefore sought to examine whether the expected negative association between teachers' emotional support and academic stress could be observed among Grade 9 and Grade 10 students in government boys' high schools in District Karak.

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### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The study had three objectives: (a) to assess teachers' emotional support at the secondary level in District Karak; (b) to examine students' academic stress at the secondary level in District Karak; and (c) to examine the relationship between teachers' emotional support and students' academic stress.

The corresponding research questions were: (1) To what extent do secondary school teachers provide emotional support to their students in District Karak? (2) What degree of academic stress is faced by secondary school students in District Karak? and (3) How is teachers' emotional support associated with students' academic stress in secondary schools of District Karak?

The null hypothesis was:  $H_0$ : There is no statistically significant relationship between teachers' emotional support and students' academic stress at the secondary level in District Karak. The alternative hypothesis predicted a statistically significant negative relationship.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study integrates the stress-buffering perspective of social support with self-determination theory. From a social-support perspective, interpersonal resources can reduce the harmful effects of stressful experiences by providing reassurance, information, feedback, practical help, and a sense of belonging. In the classroom, emotionally supportive teachers may help students interpret academic demands as manageable rather than threatening and may make help-seeking safer and more acceptable (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Self-determination theory provides a complementary motivational explanation. Students are more likely to function adaptively when learning environments support autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Teachers can support competence by giving constructive feedback and communicating confidence in students' capacity to improve; relatedness through warmth, acceptance, and respectful interaction; and autonomy through meaningful participation and non-controlling communication. The framework therefore predicts that higher perceived emotional support will be associated with lower academic stress, while recognizing that the study design cannot establish a causal pathway.

The conceptual model is consequently straightforward: teachers' emotional support is the predictor variable, students' academic stress is the outcome variable, and the expected association is negative. This study operationalizes emotional support through emotional closeness and approachability, empathy and responsive care, encouragement and confidence building, respect/fairness/emotional safety, and emotional regulation and coping support. Academic stress is operationalized through examination stress and anxiety, homework and assignment pressure, fear of academic failure, teacher expectations, and parental expectations and family academic pressure.

### **Method**

#### **Research Design**

A quantitative, cross-sectional descriptive-correlational design was used. The descriptive component estimated students' perceived level of teachers' emotional support and their academic stress, whereas the correlational component examined the direction and strength of the relationship between the two composite variables. No classroom conditions were manipulated. Because measurements were collected at one point in time, the design does not establish temporal order or causality.

### Population and Sample

The target population comprised 8,034 male students enrolled in Grades 9 and 10 in government boys' high schools in District Karak, including 4,177 students in Grade 9 and 3,857 students in Grade 10. The minimum required sample size was 367 students. Proportionate stratified random sampling was employed to select participants. Based on proportional allocation, 191 students were selected from Grade 9 and 176 from Grade 10, resulting in a planned sample of 367 students. After data screening, 362 complete cases were retained for the final analysis, comprising 188 Grade 9 and 174 Grade 10 students.

| Characteristic  | Category   | n   | %    |
|-----------------|------------|-----|------|
| Grade           | 9          | 188 | 51.9 |
| Grade           | 10         | 174 | 48.1 |
| School location | Rural      | 249 | 68.8 |
| School location | Semi-urban | 113 | 31.2 |
| Residence       | Rural      | 228 | 63.0 |
| Residence       | Semi-urban | 100 | 27.6 |
| Residence       | Urban      | 34  | 9.4  |

### Measures

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire. The instrument contained 25 items for teachers' emotional support and 25 items for students' academic stress, together with demographic questions. Teachers' emotional support was measured across five dimensions: emotional closeness and approachability; empathy and responsive care; encouragement and confidence building; respect, fairness, and emotional safety; and emotional regulation and coping support. Academic stress was measured through examination stress and anxiety; homework and assignment pressure; fear of academic failure; stress caused by teachers' expectations; and parental expectations and family academic pressure. Higher scores represented greater perceived support and greater academic stress, respectively.

The experts reviewed the instrument for clarity, relevance, organization, cultural appropriateness, age suitability, instructions, response options, and alignment with the study objectives. A pilot test involving approximately 50 Grade 9 and Grade 10 students from a comparable government boys' high school was conducted. Cronbach's alpha was computed for each dimension and for the total scales, with approximately .70 or higher treated as acceptable for research purposes.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected following institutional permission, parental permission where required, and student assent, with voluntary participation ensured. Participant privacy and confidentiality were maintained through anonymous questionnaires, secure data storage, and aggregate reporting. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic characteristics and the two principal constructs. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to test the principal hypothesis at the .05 level.

### Results

#### Teachers' Emotional Support

| Variable | N | M | SD | Interpretation |
|----------|---|---|----|----------------|
|----------|---|---|----|----------------|

|                             |     |      |      |                    |
|-----------------------------|-----|------|------|--------------------|
| Teachers' emotional support | 362 | 3.51 | 0.48 | Agree / favourable |
|-----------------------------|-----|------|------|--------------------|

Students generally reported favourable perceptions of teachers' emotional support ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ). The thesis reports that encouragement and confidence building was the strongest dimension, while emotional regulation and coping support was comparatively lower. Emotional closeness and approachability also received a relatively strong rating.

### Students' Academic Stress

| Variable                  | N   | M    | SD   | Interpretation |
|---------------------------|-----|------|------|----------------|
| Students' academic stress | 362 | 3.00 | 0.49 | Moderate       |

Overall academic stress was reported at a moderate level ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ). Examination stress and anxiety was the most salient source of stress, followed by parental expectations and family academic pressure and fear of academic failure.

### Relationship Between Teachers' Emotional Support and Academic Stress

| Academic-stress outcome           | r     | p      | Interpretation    |
|-----------------------------------|-------|--------|-------------------|
| Overall academic stress           | -.520 | < .001 | Moderate negative |
| Examination stress and anxiety    | -.404 | < .001 | Moderate negative |
| Homework and assignment pressure  | -.333 | < .001 | Weak negative     |
| Fear of academic failure          | -.338 | < .001 | Weak negative     |
| Teachers' expectations            | -.407 | < .001 | Moderate negative |
| Parental/family academic pressure | -.423 | < .001 | Moderate negative |

Note.  $N = 362$ . The reported correlations were statistically significant at the .05 level.

The principal association was statistically significant and moderately negative,  $r(360) = -.520$ ,  $p < .001$ . The squared correlation ( $r^2 = .270$ ) indicates approximately 27% shared variance between the two composite scores. The result is consistent with the alternative hypothesis and inconsistent with the null hypothesis. Importantly, the shared variance should not be interpreted as causal variance explained by teachers' emotional support.

### Discussion

The first major finding was that students generally perceived teachers as emotionally supportive. The overall mean of 3.51 indicates a favourable pattern, with encouragement and confidence building, emotional closeness and approachability, and respectful treatment emerging as comparatively strong areas. This pattern is consistent with literature emphasizing the importance of supportive teacher–student relationships for engagement, academic adjustment, and emotional functioning. Roorda et al. (2011) found that positive affective teacher–student relationships were associated with school engagement and achievement,

while Lei et al. (2018) found that teacher support was associated with positive academic emotions and lower negative emotions.

The relatively lower level of emotional-regulation and coping support is educationally important. General encouragement may be common in classrooms, whereas direct guidance in how to manage academic pressure may require additional teacher knowledge and time. The implication is not that teachers should lower academic standards; rather, supportive communication can coexist with clear expectations, constructive correction, and academic accountability.

The second major finding was that students reported moderate academic stress, with examination stress and anxiety being the most prominent dimension. This result is plausible within the secondary-school context, where Grade 9 and Grade 10 students face important examinations and decisions about further educational pathways. The finding also supports the thesis's argument that academic stress is not solely a classroom phenomenon; family expectations, fear of failure, teacher expectations, homework, and examination demands can operate simultaneously.

The central finding was the moderate negative association between teachers' emotional support and students' academic stress. Students who reported higher levels of emotional support tended to report lower academic stress. This direction is compatible with social-support theory, which proposes that supportive relationships can buffer the adverse effects of stressful experiences (Cohen & Wills, 1985), and with self-determination theory, which emphasizes the role of relatedness, competence, and autonomy in adaptive functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The finding also aligns with international evidence. Kristensen and Jenø (2024) found developmental associations between teacher autonomy support and adolescent academic stress, while Lei et al. (2018) documented relationships between teacher support and academic emotions across a large body of studies. However, the present study's dimension-level pattern is particularly informative: respect, fairness, and emotional safety were among the strongest teacher-support correlates of overall academic stress, while encouragement and confidence building, despite being highly rated, had a smaller correlation. This suggests that the behaviours most frequently perceived by students are not necessarily the behaviours most strongly associated with variation in stress.

The negative relationships between emotional support and the five academic-stress dimensions further suggest that teacher support may be relevant across multiple sources of academic pressure. The strongest dimension-level association was with parental expectations and family academic pressure ( $r = -.423$ ), followed by teacher expectations ( $r = -.407$ ) and examination stress and anxiety ( $r = -.404$ ). Teachers cannot directly control family expectations, curriculum load, or examination stakes. Their potential contribution is therefore better understood as one protective interpersonal resource within a broader school–family system. Granziera et al. (2022) similarly emphasized that teacher support is embedded within wider motivational and academic processes.

### **Educational Implications**

The findings support several practical implications, subject to verification of the underlying data. First, teacher professional development should address emotional support as an explicit component of classroom practice. Training can emphasize active listening, respectful

communication, empathy, fair correction, constructive feedback, and recognition of effort. Second, teachers should receive practical guidance on helping students develop coping strategies for academic demands.

Third, schools can strengthen psychologically safe classroom climates in which students can ask questions, acknowledge mistakes, and seek help without humiliation. Fourth, examination preparation should include clear expectations, realistic revision planning, formative feedback, and opportunities for students to identify manageable next steps after poor performance. Fifth, schools should coordinate academic workload and deadlines to reduce unnecessary accumulation of assessment demands. Finally, school–family communication should encourage realistic expectations and reduce harmful comparison and fear-based communication.

These implications should not be interpreted as suggesting that teacher emotional support can replace counselling, mental-health services, curriculum reform, or changes to assessment systems. Academic stress is produced through multiple interacting factors and that supportive teaching should be viewed as one component of a broader school and family response.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Several limitations constrain interpretation. First, the design was cross-sectional and correlational; therefore, the direction of the relationship cannot establish causality. Second, both constructs were measured through students' self-reports, which may be influenced by social desirability, recall, mood, or response style. Third, the sample was restricted to male students in government boys' high schools in one district, limiting generalization to female students, private schools, other districts, and other educational levels. Fourth, the analysis did not control for potentially important factors such as prior achievement, socioeconomic conditions, parental pressure, peer support, study time, or school climate. Fifth, students were nested within schools, but the analysis used simple Pearson correlation rather than a multilevel approach.

Future research should extend the sample to female students, private and higher secondary schools, and other districts. Longitudinal studies could examine changes in teacher support and academic stress over time, while mixed-methods studies could explore how students interpret specific teacher behaviours during examinations and academic failure. Multilevel modelling could account for school-level clustering, and mediation or moderation analyses could examine whether academic buoyancy, self-efficacy, school belonging, coping, family support, or socioeconomic factors help explain the relationship.

### **Conclusion**

The study addresses an important educational issue: how students' experiences of teachers' emotional support relate to academic stress during secondary education. The findings indicate favourable perceived emotional support, moderate academic stress, and a significant moderate negative association between the two constructs. Respect, fairness, emotional safety, approachability, and supportive communication appear particularly relevant. The findings are theoretically compatible with social support and self-determination perspectives and suggest that emotionally supportive classrooms may constitute an important interpersonal resource for students facing academic demands.

The study employed a cross sectional correlation design, the findings donot demonstrate that teachers' emotional support causes lower academic stress.The results should therefore be interpreted as an evidence of association rather than a causal effect.

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