

Beyond the Classroom: Mental Health, Academic Experiences and Aspirations of Secondary School Students in Gujarat

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Abstract

This study investigates the mental health, academic experiences, aspiration levels, and problems encountered by secondary school students in Gujarat, India. Using a survey research design, data were collected from 500 secondary school students through a structured questionnaire, a standardized Mental Health Battery, and measures of socio-economic status. The data were analysed using mean, standard deviation, *t*-test, and analysis of variance (ANOVA). The findings revealed significant differences in students' problem scores with respect to socio-economic status, physical structure, and emotional stability. The study underscores the importance of strengthening school-based counselling, emotional support, stress management, and career guidance to promote students' psychological well-being and holistic development.

Keywords: Mental Health; Secondary School Students; Academic Experiences; Aspiration Level; Psychological Well-being

Introduction

Secondary education is a critical transitional stage in which students progress from childhood to adolescence while preparing for higher education, employment, and future responsibilities. During this period, they develop academic competencies alongside self-concept, emotional regulation, social relationships, decision-making skills, confidence, and future aspirations. Mental health is therefore an essential component of adolescent development, encompassing mental balance, overall harmony, autonomy, security–insecurity, self-concept, and intellectuality. Students' mental health and educational experiences are influenced by academic pressure, examination stress, teacher and peer support, family environment, socio-economic status, physical health, emotional stability, and career aspirations. Academic experiences such as school confidence, motivation, goal setting, guidance, career clarity, and supportive relationships may substantially influence students' adjustment and educational well-being. In the present study, the responses of 500 secondary school students indicate considerable variation in their academic experiences, with 24% reporting school confidence, 21% teacher support, 19.6% peer support, and 13% stress while studying. These findings highlight the diverse academic and psychosocial experiences of students and the need to examine factors associated with their mental health and educational adjustment.

Understanding the relationship between mental health, academic experiences, aspirations, and students' problems is essential for promoting their holistic development and well-being. Such evidence can assist teachers, parents, educational administrators, and policymakers in developing appropriate guidance, support systems, and educational interventions. Accordingly, the present study examines the mental health, academic experiences, aspiration levels, and problems of secondary school students in Gujarat, with particular emphasis on factors associated with their well-being, adjustment, and future development.

Review of Literature

Mental health is viewed as a multidimensional concept involving emotional stability, psychological adjustment, self-concept, autonomy, security, and overall well-being. The literature indicates that students' mental health is influenced by school environment, social relationships, socio-economic conditions, and rural–urban background. Ostberg (2018) reported an association between school social relationships and students' well-being. Studies related to Jha (2015) suggest differences in mental health across rural and urban contexts. Chawla (2012) found a positive relationship between mental health and aspiration level, while Nagarathnamma and Thirumala Rao (2013) examined mental health in relation to achievement motivation and aspiration. Previous research also indicates that mental health is associated with students' concentration, motivation, participation, and academic performance. Overall, the literature highlights the need to examine mental health alongside academic experiences, aspiration, socio-economic status, and emotional stability among secondary school students.

Research Gap

Existing literature has examined mental health among students from various perspectives; however, limited research has investigated secondary school students by integrating socio-economic status, physical structure, emotional stability, attachment, mindset, family relationships, wrong activities, and aspirations. The present study addresses this research gap through an integrated approach.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the study are as follows:

- To study the mental health of secondary-level students.
- To study changes over time in students' health and aspiration levels.
- To study differences in students' problems based on socio-economic status.
- To compare mental health and aspiration levels.
- To study differences in students' problems based on physical structure.
- To study differences in students' problems based on emotional stability.
- To study changes in students' attachment to education, society, and parents.
- To study changes in students' thoughts and emotions.
- To study students' involvement in wrong activities.
- To study differences of opinion between students and their parents, society, and relatives.
- To study students' academic experiences, goal setting, motivation, guidance, and career aspirations.

Hypotheses

The following null and alternative hypotheses were formulated in the study.

H1: Health and Aspiration

H₀: There has been no significant increase in the health and aspirations of secondary-level students over time.

H₁: There has been a significant increase in the health and aspirations of secondary-level students over time.

H2: Socio-economic Status

H₀: There is no significant difference in the problems of students belonging to high, medium, and low socio-economic groups.

H₁: There is a significant difference in students' problems based on socio-economic groups.

H3: Mental Health and Aspiration

H₀: The mental health and aspiration scores of students do not differ significantly from the test value of 5.

H₁: The mental health and aspiration scores of students differ significantly from the test value of 5.

H4: Physical Structure

H₀: There is no significant difference in the problems of underweight, normal-weight, and overweight students.

H₁: There is a significant difference in students' problems based on physical structure.

H5: Emotional Stability

H₀: There is no significant difference in the problems of students having different levels of emotional stability.

H₁: There is a significant difference in the problems of students having different levels of emotional stability.

H6: Changes in Attachment

H₀: There is no significant change over time in students' attachment to education, society, and parents.

H₁: There is a significant change over time in these forms of attachment.

H7: Changes in Mindset

H₀: There is no significant change in students' thoughts and emotions due to their changing mindset.

H₁: There is a significant change in students' thoughts and emotions.

H8: Right and Wrong Activities

H₀: Students' involvement in wrong activities does not differ significantly from 50%.

H₁: Students' involvement in wrong activities differs significantly from 50%.

H9: Differences with Parents and Society

H₀: Differences with parents, society, and relatives do not differ significantly from 50%.

H₁: Differences with these groups differ significantly from 50%.

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive and inferential survey method was used in the study. The purpose of the research was to systematically examine students' academic experiences, mental health, aspirations, and various individual and social factors associated with them.

Population

The population of the study consisted of secondary-level students in Gujarat. However, according to the detailed scope of the original research, the sample consisted of students of Classes 9 and 10 from Kapadvanj and Kathlal talukas of Kheda district. Therefore, caution is required when generalizing the findings to secondary-level students across the entire state of Gujarat.

Sample: A total of **500 students** were included in the study.

Table 1

Sample Distribution by Type of School, Gender, and Area

Type of School	Urban Boys	Rural Boys	Urban Girls	Rural Girls	Total
Government	70	50	70	60	250
Non-Government	75	55	60	60	250
Total	145	105	130	120	500

The original study included government and non-government schools as well as urban and rural backgrounds in the sample structure.

Research Instruments

- A structured questionnaire was used to examine students' academic experiences and related factors. A pilot test of the questionnaire was conducted, and modifications were made based on the responses.
- A Mental Health Battery, identified in the book as a standardized instrument associated with Arun Kumar Singh and Alpana Sen Gupta, was used to assess mental health.
- A Social Economic Status Scale available in the Gujarati language was used to assess socio-economic status.

Variables

The major variables included:

- Mental health
- Health
- Aspiration
- Academic performance

- Socio-economic status
- Physical structure
- Emotional stability
- School confidence
- Teacher and peer support
- Goal setting
- Motivation
- Guidance
- Attachment to education and society
- Family relationships
- Wrong activities

Statistical Techniques

The following statistical techniques were used for data analysis:

- Mean
- Standard Deviation
- *t*-test
- Paired *t*-test
- One-sample *t*-test
- Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)
- Frequency and percentage distribution

Data Analysis and Results

Changes in Students' Health and Aspiration

Table 2

Health and Aspiration Scores During 2020–2024

Year	Mean Health Score	Health <i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean Aspiration Score	Aspiration <i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
2020	6.5	—	—	7.0	—	—
2021	6.8	2.8	.005	7.2	2.5	.012
2022	7.0	3.1	.002	7.5	3.0	.003
2024	7.3	3.5	< .001	7.8	3.2	.001

Interpretation: The available source reports a gradual increase in health and aspiration scores from 2020 to 2024, along with statistically significant *t*-values for the years reported. According to the source, the alternative form of H1 was supported.

Socio-economic Status and Problem Scores

Table 3

ANOVA of Problem Scores by Socio-economic Status

Socio-economic Status	<i>n</i>	Mean Problem Score
High	155	4.0
Medium	195	6.5
Low	150	8.0
ANOVA	500	$F = 45.3, p < .001$

The results indicate a statistically significant difference in problem scores among the three socio-economic groups. The low socio-economic group had the highest mean problem score.

Mental Health and Aspiration

Table 4

One-Sample *t*-Test Against the Test Value of 5

Variable	<i>n</i>	Mean	Test Value	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Mental Health	500	4.5	5.0	-4.2	< .001
Aspiration	500	5.0	5.0	0.0	1.000

The mean mental health score was significantly lower than the test value of 5, whereas the aspiration score was equal to the test value.

Physical Structure

Table 5

ANOVA of Problem Scores by Physical Structure

Group	Mean Problem Score	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Underweight	7.0	25.4	< .001
Normal Weight	Full mean not available in the source		
Overweight	Highest problem level according to the source description		

The ANOVA results yielded $F = 25.4$ and $p < .001$. According to the original source, there was a significant difference in problem scores among the physical-structure groups. The source particularly indicates greater problems among overweight students.

Emotional Stability

Table 6

Problem Scores by Emotional Stability

Emotional Stability	Mean Problem Score
Low	7.5
Medium	5.0
High	3.0
ANOVA	$F = 32.1, p < .001$

Students with low emotional stability had higher problem scores, whereas students with high emotional stability had lower problem scores. The difference was statistically significant.

Source-related note: In the original book, the heading/label of this table appears in some places as socio-economic status, whereas the accompanying interpretation clearly refers to low, medium, and high levels of emotional stability. In this paper, the analytical interpretation has been retained and the table is presented according to emotional stability.

Changes in Thoughts and Emotions

Table 7

Paired *t*-Test of Changes in Thoughts and Emotions

Variable	Mean Change	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Thoughts	7.0	3.5	< .001
Emotions	6.5	3.2	.001

Statistically significant changes were recorded in both areas.

Incidence of Wrong Activities

Table 8

One-Sample *t*-Test for the Incidence of Wrong Activities

<i>n</i>	Incidence (%)	Test Value (%)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
500	60	50	4.2	< .001

The incidence percentage was 60%, which was statistically different from the test value of 50%.

Differences with Parents, Society, and Relatives

Table 9

One-Sample *t*-Test for Differences

Relationship	Difference (%)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Parents	55	2.5	.012
Society	50	0.0	1.000
Relatives	45	-2.5	.012

The results showed significant differences from the 50% test value for parents and relatives, whereas the result related to society was not statistically significant.

Aspirations and Career Goals

Table 10

Responses Related to Aspirations and Career Goals

Question	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Aspiration to achieve excellence in education	91	18.2%
Plan for higher education	107	21.4%
Clarity of academic goals	86	17.2%
Clarity of career goals	101	20.2%
Efforts to improve academic performance	115	23.0%
Total	500	100%

The results indicate a need for support and guidance concerning students' aspirations, plans for higher education, and clarity regarding career goals.

Statistical Summary

Table 11

Principal Statistical Findings

Analysis	Result	Statistical Significance
Socio-economic status and problem score	$F = 45.3$	$p < .001$
Mental health against test value 5	$t = -4.2$	$p < .001$
Aspiration against test value 5	$t = 0.0$	$p = 1.000$
Physical structure and problem score	$F = 25.4$	$p < .001$
Emotional stability and problem score	$F = 32.1$	$p < .001$
Wrong activities against 50%	$t = 4.2$	$p < .001$
Differences with parents	$t = 2.5$	$p = .012$
Differences with society	$t = 0.0$	$p = 1.000$
Differences with relatives	$t = -2.5$	$p = .012$

These statistical results indicate significant differences in several dimensions associated with students' mental health and academic experiences.

Discussion

The findings of the study highlight the need to understand the mental health of secondary school students within a multidimensional context. First, an important finding is the statistically significant difference between socio-economic status and problem scores. The mean problem score was 4.0 for the high socio-economic group, 6.5 for the medium group, and 8.0 for the low group. This result indicates that students' socio-economic context needs to be considered when understanding their mental and academic challenges.

Second, the mean mental health score of 4.5, compared with the test value of 5, indicates a challenge related to students' mental health. In contrast, the aspiration score was 5.0. This may indicate that students continue to have aspirations for the future, while mental health-related barriers may exist in the process of achieving those aspirations.

Third, a significant difference was found in problem scores based on emotional stability. Students with low emotional stability had a mean problem score of 7.5, whereas students with high emotional stability had a score of 3.0. This highlights the importance of emotional support, self-regulation, and counselling.

Fourth, statistically significant changes were recorded in students' thoughts and emotions. This finding highlights the need to understand changing mindsets and emotional development during adolescence.

Fifth, the finding that 60% of the 500 students were involved in wrong activities needs to be interpreted carefully. This figure should be understood only in the context of the operational definition of "wrong activity" used in the original study; it should not independently be interpreted as the incidence of any specific type of behaviour.

Similarly, the reporting of differences with parents at 55% and with relatives at 45% demonstrates the importance of communication and relationships between students and their family and social environments.

Conclusion

The mental health of secondary school students is closely connected with their academic experiences, aspirations, emotional stability, social relationships, and preparation for the future. The present study makes it clear that the problems faced by students are not identical across all groups. Significant differences in problem scores were found on the basis of socio-economic status, physical structure, and emotional stability.

In particular, the comparatively higher problem scores among students from low socio-economic backgrounds and those with low emotional stability indicate that, along with providing equal educational opportunities, targeted emotional and social support is also necessary. The study found that the mean mental health score was lower than the test value, whereas the aspiration level was consistent with the test value. This highlights the need to examine students' aspirations in connection with their mental health and available support systems.

Therefore, mental health, academic guidance, career counselling, emotional support, family communication, social inclusion, and a positive school environment need to be integrated into the mainstream of secondary education. Coordinated efforts by schools, families, and communities can strengthen students' self-confidence, motivation, academic achievement, and life skills.

Educational Implications

Based on the findings of the study, the following educational implications emerge:

- Regular mental health and counselling services should be made available in schools.
- Examination and academic stress-management programmes should be organized for students.
- Adolescent mental health and emotional support should be incorporated into teacher training.
- Career and higher-education guidance for students should be strengthened.
- Targeted support systems should be developed for students from low socio-economic backgrounds.
- Parent counselling programmes should be organized to strengthen parent–student communication.
- Schools should develop a safe, supportive, and non-discriminatory environment.
- Sports, arts, yoga, meditation, and co-curricular activities should be promoted as means of supporting mental well-being.
- Activities related to goal setting, time management, and confidence building should be incorporated into school programmes.
- Students' success should not be evaluated solely on the basis of examination results but also in terms of their overall development.

Limitations

The study has the following important limitations:

- The geographical area of the original research was limited to secondary-level students from Kapadvanj and Kathlal talukas of Kheda district.
- The sample consisted of 500 students from Classes 9 and 10.
- Several data were based on self-report questionnaires; therefore, the possibility of self-report bias remains.
- The original study has the limitation associated with a cross-sectional design.
- All possible social, family, and psychological factors were not included in the study.
- Some statistical tables in the source text contain formatting or labelling inconsistencies; therefore, such findings should be interpreted in the context of the original narrative.

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