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The Impact of Academic Pressure on Learning Autonomy Among Adolescents: The Mediating Role of Growth Mindset

Yufei Yang

New Channel, Wuhan, Hubei, China 430000
eastshark@163.com

Abstract:

In contemporary society, amid intensifying competition and evolving educational landscapes, adolescents face unprecedented academic pressures that profoundly impact their psychological well-being and learning behaviors. Academic autonomy, a cornerstone of individual growth and development, now confronts severe challenges from these pressures. Recent research indicates that a growth mindset, as a positive psychological trait, can play a crucial moderating and mediating role between stress and academic performance. This paper integrates cutting-edge domestic theories to explore how academic stress influences learning autonomy, with a particular focus on the mechanism of growth mindset in this process. Strategies are proposed from both educational intervention and mental health promotion perspectives, aiming to provide robust support for adolescents' healthy development.

Keywords: Academic pressure, Self-directed learning, Growth mindset, Mediating effect

1. Introduction

Within the grand panorama of adolescent holistic development, mental health shines like a brilliant star, playing an irreplaceable central role. Its importance is self-evident, profoundly intertwined with their developmental trajectories and the vast horizons of their future prospects. Guided by the 2012 revision of the "Guidelines for Mental Health Education in Primary and Secondary Schools," our education system has been entrusted with a sacred mission: to dedicate efforts to enhancing every student's psychological well-being, meticulously cultivating their optimistic and proactive mental character, and further unlocking their psychological potential to achieve comprehensive improvement in mental health. Yet examining today's educational landscape reveals intensifying academic competition and soaring societal expectations, which have made the learning pressures borne by adolescents increasingly acute and prominent. As revealed in the China National Mental Health Development Report from 2019 to 2020, adolescents' mental health levels show a concerning downward trend as they progress through grades, with academic pressure emerging as the dominant factor affecting their psychological state.

Academic autonomy serves as a crucial measure of students' potential and developmental prospects. Yet in recent years, this vital capacity has been severely

undermined by academic pressures. Modern educational perspectives emphasize that learning autonomy is not only a vital driver of academic achievement but also an indispensable foundation for building lifelong learning capabilities. Yet the reality is concerning: many students exhibit "superficial autonomy," appearing to engage in self-directed learning while lacking genuine internal motivation and struggling to sustain it. The root of this problem may lie in the increasingly heavy academic burden.

Social learning theory provides a robust framework for analyzing this issue. This theory emphasizes that individuals adjust their learning strategies by observing and emulating others' behaviors. Within this process, a growth mindset plays a pivotal role, empowering students to navigate academic pressures more effectively. By enhancing self-efficacy and psychological resilience, a growth mindset indirectly fosters greater learning autonomy. Empirical research further reveals that a growth mindset may transform academic stress into positive motivation through mediating factors like self-efficacy, thereby boosting self-directed learning capabilities.

Therefore, delving into the mediating role of growth mindset between academic pressure and learning autonomy not only enriches theoretical frameworks but also holds significant implications for educational practice. This paper aims to synthesize existing research findings, comprehensively analyze the intrinsic connections among these three elements, and provide valuable reference for advancing adolescents' psychological growth and academic progress.

2. Conceptual Definitions and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Nature and Structure of Learning Autonomy

Learning autonomy is a complex concept encompassing multiple dimensions and levels. Academics typically define it through three dimensions: process, scope, and structure. Its core essence lies in learners possessing proactive awareness of their own learning behaviors and implementing continuous self-management based on this awareness. This includes a series of dynamic processes such as planning, progress monitoring, outcome evaluation, feedback acquisition, and strategy adjustment.

Specifically, learning autonomy encompasses three major aspects: First, based on intrinsic motivation, learners independently set clear learning goals and plans. Second, during the learning process, they implement effective self-monitoring and flexible strategy adjustments, including time management and environmental optimization. Third, after completing learning tasks, they conduct comprehensive summaries, evaluations, and necessary self-corrections. This all-encompassing autonomy not only significantly enhances learning efficiency but also lays a solid foundation for lifelong learning.

One commonly used tool for assessing learning autonomy is the "English Autonomous Learning Ability Scale" designed by Xu Jinfen. This scale features 28 carefully crafted items scored on a five-point scale, offering high reliability and validity to accurately measure students' autonomous learning capabilities and proficiency levels.

2.2 Theoretical Framework of Growth Mindset

The concept of a growth mindset, proposed by psychologist Carol Dweck, stands in stark contrast to a fixed mindset. While a fixed mindset views abilities as static and unchangeable, a growth mindset emphasizes that abilities can be continuously enhanced through persistent effort, ongoing learning, and rich practice—without fixating on outcomes or failures during the process.

The core tenets of a growth mindset include: believing in the malleability of ability, valuing the learning process and effort, viewing challenges and setbacks as opportunities for growth, and actively seeking feedback while pursuing excellence. This concept is often assessed using Dweck's Growth Mindset Scale (GMS), a 20-item questionnaire employing a four-point Likert scale with reverse-scored items. Higher total scores indicate a stronger tendency toward a growth mindset.

2.3 Sources and Effects of Academic Stress

Learning pressure refers to the psychological tension individuals experience when encountering challenges in academic settings. It originates from multiple dimensions, encompassing diverse aspects such as the academic tasks themselves, exam requirements, teacher expectations, family pressure, social expectations, personal standards, and learning content.

The formation of academic pressure results from the interplay of internal and external factors. Internal factors involve personal goals and motivation, while external factors include family expectations, school demands, and societal pressures. Moderate pressure can stimulate learning enthusiasm; however, excessive or prolonged pressure may trigger anxiety and burnout, leading to a significant decline in learning efficacy.

Academic pressure exerts negative effects primarily through three mechanisms: it depletes cognitive resources, weakens self-regulation, and externalizes learning motivation while reducing autonomy. Simultaneously, it triggers

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negative emotions that hinder the effective selection and implementation of learning strategies.

3. The Relationship Between Academic Pressure and Learning Autonomy

3.1 The Double-Edged Sword Effect of Academic Pressure

Research indicates that academic pressure exerts a dual nature on autonomous learning. Moderate pressure can positively stimulate learning motivation, helping learners clarify goals and flexibly adjust learning strategies (Zheng, 2024). Conversely, when academic pressure becomes excessive or prolonged, its negative effects become pronounced, suppressing intrinsic motivation, leading to learning burnout, and ultimately reducing autonomy. Guo Zhen's (2024) specialized study on junior high students revealed a significant negative correlation between parental academic pressure and students' academic resilience ($r = -0.41$, $p < 0.01$). This finding strongly indicates that external academic pressure significantly impacts students' ability to recover from learning setbacks.

Pressure primarily generates negative consequences through three pathways: depleting cognitive resources, leading to mental fatigue; inducing emotional exhaustion, diminishing learning interest and motivation; and prompting students toward surface learning rather than deep exploration and self-directed learning.

3.2 Mediating Mechanisms

Academic pressure does not directly affect learning autonomy but exerts indirect influence through mediating factors such as self-efficacy, learning motivation, and psychological resilience. Self-efficacy serves as the core mediating variable, reflecting students' confidence and willingness to tackle challenges. Learning motivation influences the intrinsic drive behind behavioral autonomy, while psychological resilience helps students withstand pressure, ensuring the stability of the learning process.

4. Mediating Mechanisms of Growth Mindset

4.1 Modulation of Academic Pressure

Through cognitive reappraisal, a growth mindset transforms perceptions of pressure, reframing it as an opportunity for growth rather than a negative threat, thereby promoting adaptive coping strategies. When students believe their abilities can continually develop, they tend to view stressful situations as chances for self-improvement rather than threats to their capabilities. This shift in mindset enables students to maintain more stable emotional states when facing pressure. Guo Zhen (2024) similarly revealed that a growth mindset partially mediates (20%) the relationship between parental stress and student resilience, effectively mitigating the negative effects of stress.

4.2 Enhancing Learning Autonomy

A growth mindset promotes learning autonomy through three key mechanisms: enhancing self-regulation to improve learning process monitoring, boosting intrinsic motivation to sustain strong learning interest, and guiding the setting of mastery-oriented learning goals. Students possessing this mindset exhibit higher levels of learning autonomy. For instance, when tackling practice problems, those with a growth mindset focus more on whether they truly grasp the solution methods rather than merely counting correct answers. Second, this mindset encourages students to embrace challenging tasks, viewing difficulties as opportunities for growth. Finally, it helps students learn from setbacks and continually refine their learning strategies.

4.3 Multiple Mediating Pathways

A growth mindset mediates the relationship between academic pressure and learning autonomy through three key pathways: enhancing psychological resilience, boosting self-efficacy, and promoting adaptive learning strategies. Collectively, these pathways reveal the dynamic and multifaceted psychological mechanisms of growth mindset, explaining why cultivating it effectively improves students' learning performance under stress.

5. Educational Implications and Intervention Measures

5.1 Cultivating a Growth Mindset

Educators should prioritize process-based praise, foster a culture of tolerance for mistakes, utilize growth-oriented language, and share inspirational stories to comprehensively cultivate students' growth mindsets. First, teachers' evaluation methods are crucial. Rather than simply praising students for being "smart," it is more effective to specifically acknowledge the effort and methods they employ during the learning process. Secondly, schools should foster a learning environment that permits mistakes. Students should understand that making errors is a normal part of learning; the key lies in learning from and progressing through those mistakes. Students who are willing to share

their errors and learn from them often advance more rapidly.

5.2 Learning Stress Management

Effectively managing academic stress requires collaborative efforts from schools, families, and students. We should strive to help students accurately identify their stress levels, carefully teach effective stress management techniques, meticulously build diversified evaluation systems, and actively promote deep cooperation between home and school to jointly safeguard the health of students' learning environment.

5.3 Fostering an Environment Supporting Learning Autonomy

To foster student autonomy, educators must create supportive environments. First, students should be granted meaningful choices in their learning. For instance, in research-based learning, allowing students to independently select their investigation topics can ignite their initiative. Second, schools should design more authentic learning contexts. Rich learning experiences often leave lasting impressions, motivating students to engage more proactively. Additionally, guiding students in learning reflection is crucial. Regular learning journals can be assigned, where students document their progress toward learning goals, challenges encountered, and solutions implemented. This metacognitive practice empowers students to better manage their learning processes. Finally, establishing learning communities can effectively promote student autonomy. Through collaborative group learning and learning achievement presentations, students can enhance their motivation through peer support. By systematically implementing these measures, we can help students develop positive thinking patterns, effectively manage academic stress, enhance learning autonomy, and ultimately achieve balanced development in both academic performance and mental well-being.

6. Research Prospects

Future research designs should skillfully integrate longitudinal tracking with ecological momentary assessment strategies to deeply reveal the intricate and rapidly changing dynamic relationships among variables. Greater emphasis should be placed on analyzing cross-cultural differences and heterogeneous groups to ensure broad applicability and precise targeting of research findings. Furthermore, rigorous empirical research should actively advance the development and evaluation of growth mindset interventions tailored to this context. Efforts should also focus on integrating and refining theoretical frameworks, particularly under the new "Double Reduction" policy, to explore emerging relationships between academic pressure and growth mindset. A multidimensional, multi-level comprehensive research approach will provide more scientific and effective theoretical and practical guidance for optimizing adolescent education.

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