

Academic Stress, Social Comparison, and Emotional Distress among School Students: A Comprehensive Review

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ABSTRACT

The intersection of academic pressure, social comparison, and emotional well-being represents one of the most significant yet underexamined domains in school psychology. Educational systems grow increasingly competitive, and students from primary to university levels face chronic stress, self-evaluative pressures, and psychological distress arising from peers and parental expectations. This comprehensive narrative review synthesizes multidisciplinary research on academic stress, social comparison processes, emotional distress, mental health service use, career guidance, and school counselling to provide an integrated understanding of how these factors interact to affect student psychological outcomes. A narrative review methodology is used, drawing on empirical studies, policy documents, theoretical frameworks, and qualitative investigations across several decades. Sources include peer-reviewed journals, WHO reports, national health policy documents, and institutional research from school and university counselling contexts. Key theories reviewed include the Control-Value Theory of achievement emotions (Pekrun and Perry), Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan), Career Construction Theory (Savickas), Social Comparison Theory (Festinger), and Social-Emotional Learning frameworks (CASEL/Weissberg). The evidence demonstrates that academic stress, performance-based social comparison, unmet career expectations, and inadequate mental health support interact in a mutually reinforcing cycle. Achievement emotions such as anxiety, shame, hopelessness, and anger greatly hinder learning and magnify distress when not addressed. Peer comparisons in school settings create self-doubt and lower self-confidence, particularly for students transitioning from high school to college. Insufficient career guidance aggravates emotional distress and leads to study dropout. Psychological need is widespread, yet professional counselling is underutilised due to stigma, poor awareness, and structural barriers. The treatment gap in India for common mental disorders exceeds 90 per cent. Systematic intervention is necessary for effective mitigation. Such intervention includes evidence-based school counselling, career guidance, social-emotional learning programmes, peer support mechanisms, and national mental health policy reform. Recommendations are provided for schools, policymakers, and mental health professionals.

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Received: May 28, 2026; Revision Received: June 21, 2026; Accepted: June 25, 2026

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Keywords: *academic stress, social comparison, emotional distress, school counselling, career guidance, mental health, achievement emotions, social-emotional learning, control-value theory, adolescent well-being*

Education is among the most powerful determinants of an individual's socioeconomic trajectory, health, and life satisfaction (Kingston et al., 2003; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). Yet the very process of schooling is, at its core, a profoundly social-psychological experience in which risks and rewards are shaped not merely by cognitive ability, but by the self-concepts students develop over time and the social comparisons they continuously make with peers (Catsambis, 1994; Marsh et al., 2005). Students who perceive the employment situation as severe, while only some indicate that they understand their own abilities and interests, frequently abandon their goals after sustained effort, choosing to quit rather than pursue the struggle of fulfilling their primary objectives. As a result, the academic credentials become increasingly decisive for post-secondary opportunities and life outcomes, and the psychological cost of navigating this competitive environment has grown substantially.

Academic stress, arising from performance demands, examination pressure, parental expectations, heavy workloads, and persistent fear of failure, is now recognised as a significant public health concern among school and university students globally. It does not operate in isolation. Students simultaneously engage in constant social comparison with peers, measuring their abilities, performance, and futures against others in ways that can powerfully elevate or erode self-esteem, motivation, and emotional stability (Festinger, 1954). When these processes unfold in contexts lacking adequate guidance, counselling, or mental health support, the result is frequently chronic emotional distress — characterised by anxiety, sadness, hopelessness, anger, shame, and, in severe cases, self-harm or psychological breakdown.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being — not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Globally, the prevalence of mental disorders is estimated at approximately 10%, with projections indicating a rise to 15% by 2020 (WHO Mental Health Action Plan, 2013–2020). In India, community-based surveys report rates of 6–7% for common mental disorders and 1–2% for severe mental disorders, with psychiatric disorder rates among children aged 4–16 years reaching 12% (Khurana et al., 2016). Yet treatment gaps exceed 90% for common mental disorders and approximately 50% for severe conditions — reflecting a profound mismatch between need and available professional support.

This review brings together evidence from educational psychology, school counselling research, career development theory, social-emotional learning science, and mental health policy to provide a comprehensive picture of how academic stress, social comparison, and emotional distress interact — and what can be done about it. The paper is organised to move from theoretical grounding, through empirical evidence on each key domain, toward practical implications and policy-level recommendations.

Objectives

The present review pursues the following objectives:

- To synthesise multidisciplinary research on academic stress, social comparison, and emotional distress among school students.

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- To examine established theoretical frameworks that explain how academic environments generate psychological distress.
- To evaluate the effectiveness and utilisation of school counselling, career guidance, and social-emotional learning programmes.
- To review mental health policy infrastructure in India and its implications for school-based support services.
- To provide evidence-based recommendations for schools, counsellors, and policymakers.

Hypotheses

The review is guided by the following working hypotheses:

- **H1:** Academic stress, social comparison, and emotional distress interact in mutually reinforcing cycles that sustain and amplify psychological vulnerability among school students.
- **H2:** Inadequate access to career guidance and school counselling services significantly mediates the relationship between academic stress and emotional distress outcomes.
- **H3:** Structural and attitudinal barriers — including stigma, manpower deficits, and low mental health literacy — substantially reduce the utilisation of available professional support among students in need.

Scientific tools

The following theoretical frameworks constitute the principal scientific tools structuring this review:

- **Control-Value Theory (CVT):** Developed by Pekrun and Perry; predicts achievement emotions arising from students' appraisals of control over outcomes and the value attributed to those outcomes.
- **Self-Determination Theory (SDT):** Introduced by Deci and Ryan; explains how educational environments support or frustrate three basic psychological needs — autonomy, competence, and relatedness — with direct implications for motivation and well-being.
- **Career Construction Theory:** Proposed by Savickas (1997); conceptualises career development as a dynamic, constructive process centred on career adaptability across four dimensions: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence.
- **Social Comparison Theory:** Introduced by Festinger (1954); establishes that individuals evaluate their opinions and abilities through comparison with others, a tendency particularly potent in structured evaluative environments.
- **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Framework:** Institutionalised through CASEL; provides a practical framework for developing competencies needed to manage academic demands and interpersonal challenges.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

This is a comprehensive narrative review; it does not involve primary data collection from human participants. The evidence synthesised is drawn from published empirical studies involving school students (Grades 6–12), university students, school counsellors, teachers, and educational policymakers across national and international contexts, with a particular focus on the Indian school system.

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Materials

The following source categories were consulted:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles from educational psychology, school counselling, career development, and mental health domains.
- WHO reports and policy documents, including the Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2020 and Mental Health Atlas 2011.
- National health policy documents, including publications from NIMHANS, the National Mental Health Programme (India, 1982), and successive Five-Year Plans.
- Institutional research from school and university counselling contexts across Germany, the United States, Japan, Romania, and India.
- CASEL documentation and Social-Emotional Learning programme evaluations.

Data collection

Literature was identified through database searches including PsycINFO, ERIC, PubMed, Google Scholar, and WHO institutional repositories. Search terms included combinations of: academic stress, social comparison, emotional distress, school counselling, career guidance, mental health, achievement emotions, self-determination theory, career adaptability, social-emotional learning, NMHP, and school psychology. No formal date restriction was applied; sources span from the seminal theoretical works (Festinger, 1954; Deci & Ryan, 1970s) through to contemporary empirical literature (2024). Reference lists of key articles were manually searched for additional relevant sources.

Scoring

As a narrative review, quantitative scoring of effect sizes is not applied. Studies are evaluated qualitatively for methodological quality, sample representativeness, theoretical grounding, and relevance to the review objectives. Empirical studies, qualitative investigations, and policy documents are synthesised thematically rather than statistically.

Psychological variables

The following psychological variables are examined across the review:

- Academic stress (chronic and acute manifestations; sources and consequences).
- Social comparison processes (upward, downward, and lateral comparisons; peer benchmarking).
- Achievement emotions (anxiety, shame, hopelessness, anger, pride, enjoyment).
- Career adaptability and career decision self-efficacy.
- Psychological need satisfaction and frustration (autonomy, competence, relatedness).
- Emotional distress (depression, anxiety disorders, social withdrawal, avoidance behaviour).
- Help-seeking behaviour and counselling service utilisation.
- Mental health policy variables (treatment gap, manpower availability, programme funding).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Theoretical framework

1.1 Control-Value Theory of achievement emotions

Control-Value Theory (CVT), developed by Pekrun and Perry, represents the most comprehensive model for predicting emotional reactions to academic experience. CVT proposes that achievement emotions result from students' control and value appraisals — the

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extent to which they feel able to influence performance outcomes and the value they attribute to those outcomes (Pekrun et al.). Achievement emotions — anxiety, frustration, anger, hopelessness, shame, sadness, and disappointment — directly hamper learning, hinder motivation, and degrade performance, establishing a self-perpetuating downward spiral. CVT distinguishes between intrapersonal determinants (individual appraisals, attribution styles, self-efficacy beliefs) and environmental determinants (task demands, evaluation structures, classroom climate, teacher feedback), thereby creating two corresponding intervention pathways: counselling and cognitive restructuring on one hand, and situational modification on the other.

1.2 Self-Determination Theory and basic psychological needs

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), introduced by Deci and Ryan in the 1970s, elaborates how external environments promote or undermine intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being through their impact on three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; J. Zhang et al., 2010). Educational environments that support these needs — through offering choice, providing competence-relevant feedback, and fostering caring relationships — are associated with better academic engagement, intrinsic motivation, and psychological well-being. Conversely, environments characterised by excessive control, performance pressure, and interpersonal coldness frustrate basic psychological needs, generating amotivation, anxiety, and disengagement. The relevance of SDT to academic stress is direct: high-pressure, control-oriented schooling environments systematically thwart need satisfaction, elevating the risk of emotional distress across student populations.

1.3 Career Construction Theory and career adaptability

Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 1997) conceptualises career development as a dynamic, constructive process in which individuals actively build their vocational identities through the ongoing effort to adapt subjective selves to the external world. Central to this framework is career adaptability — defined as the psychosocial readiness and resources individuals bring to cope with current and anticipated career development tasks, transitions, and traumas (Savickas, 1997; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Career adaptability encompasses four dimensions: concern (awareness of and planning for one's career future), control (sense of personal agency over career decisions), curiosity (exploratory behaviour in gathering career-relevant information), and confidence (belief that difficulties can be overcome). Research demonstrates that individual resources including optimism (Santilli et al., 2017), proactive personality (Wang et al., 2024; Green et al., 2020), and psychological capital (Q. Yang et al., 2021; Q. Xu et al., 2024) facilitate career adaptability, while deficits in these resources contribute to career-related anxiety and decision-making paralysis.

1.4 Social-Emotional Learning framework

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), institutionalised through the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), provides a practical framework for developing the competencies students need to manage academic demands and interpersonal challenges (Weissberg et al., 2017). CASEL defines SEL as the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve goals, empathise with others, establish supportive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Niemi, 2020). Durlak et al. (2011) demonstrated that the most effective SEL programmes incorporate four elements: sequenced activities, active forms of learning, focused skill development, and explicit targeting of specific competencies

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(the SAFE framework). Evidence from multiple contexts confirms that SEL-based interventions significantly reduce emotional distress, improve academic engagement, and build foundational competencies for career readiness.

2. Academic stress: sources, mechanisms, and psychological impact

2.1 Defining and understanding academic stress

Academic stress refers to the psychological and physiological strain experienced by students as a result of the demands, pressures, and challenges inherent in educational environments. It is generated by a complex interaction of individual characteristics — prior academic history, self-efficacy beliefs, attributional style — and environmental factors including assessment structures, workload, competitive peer climates, and family expectations. Critically, academic stress is not a discrete event but a chronic condition for many students: a sustained state of physiological and psychological activation that accumulates over the course of a school career. Crow and Crow (1969) defined academic achievement as the extent to which a learner profits from instruction in a given area; when achievement is persistently below expectation, the resulting cycle of frustration, self-doubt, and avoidance constitutes one of the most well-documented pathways to clinical-level psychological distress in student populations.

2.2 Sources of academic stress

Research across school and university contexts identifies several interacting sources of academic stress:

- **Heavy workload and performance pressure:** including multiple concurrent assessment demands, strict deadlines, and the psychological burden of high-stakes examinations.
- **Parental and family expectations:** Karaoglu and Seker (2010) found these significantly predicted both anxiety and depression in medical students, particularly when expectations were externally imposed rather than intrinsically motivated.
- **Unmet expectations and reality mismatch:** particularly prevalent at educational transitions, where students enter programmes with idealised expectations that encounter an academic reality radically different from what was anticipated.
- **Examination failure and repeated assessment attempts:** which generate a profound erosion of self-confidence and initiate a negative academic self-concept.
- **Structural factors:** including perceived lack of control over institutional rules, suboptimal learning environments, and inadequate information about professional pathways following graduation.
- **Financial pressures and socioeconomic vulnerability:** One in five children in many countries lives in poverty (Bureau of the Census, 1993 & 1995), and financial insecurity intersects with academic stress to create compounded psychosocial vulnerability.

2.3 Psychological consequences: the achievement emotion cycle

The psychological consequences of chronic academic stress are both direct and mediated through the achievement emotion cycle described by CVT. Students under academic pressure experience a recognisable trajectory of emotional deterioration: initial anxiety about performance; progression to shame and self-doubt following failure; social withdrawal and avoidance of academic tasks; deepening depressive mood; and, in severe cases, clinically significant anxiety or depressive disorders. Counsellors in university settings report

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observing a clear depressive impression among students facing study failure — a pervasive negative mood that impairs problem-solving capacity. Research consistently shows that students who experience repeated academic failure and lack adequate psychological support are at heightened risk of study dropout, prolonged psychological distress, and adverse long-term outcomes. A striking 72% of students perceive the employment environment as severely challenging, while only 23% report understanding their abilities and interests clearly, and just 19% demonstrate in-depth knowledge of the professional landscape (M. Xu, 2017). More critically, 51% of students abandon their goals after sustained effort — a rate reflecting both academic difficulty and the psychological toll of navigating uncertain futures without adequate guidance.

3. Social comparison in academic settings

3.1 *The role of peer comparison in student psychological experience*

Schooling is an inherently comparative social environment. Students do not experience their academic performance in isolation — they continuously and often involuntarily evaluate themselves against the performance, progress, and apparent ease of their peers (Catsambis, 1994; Marsh et al., 2005). Festinger's (1954) classic Social Comparison Theory established that humans have a fundamental drive to evaluate their opinions and abilities through comparison with others — a tendency that becomes particularly potent in structured, evaluative environments like schools. Qualitative data illustrate vividly how peer comparison shapes the emotional experience of academic difficulty: this self-evaluative framing — measuring personal failure against perceived peer success — is a near-universal feature of academic distress narratives.

3.2 *Educational context and comparative reference groups*

The intensity and impact of academic social comparison is modulated by educational context. Research in Germany reveals that students' prior school type — which determines the comparison group against which they calibrate their sense of academic adequacy — significantly shapes the experience of comparative disadvantage at university entry. Students who performed well in less academically demanding secondary schools face a particularly disorienting adjustment when entering competitive university environments where their previous reference group no longer provides a flattering comparison. Post-secondary credentials in secondary school function as powerful signals for both self-concept formation and peer comparison (Adelman, 1999). Students who perceive themselves as falling behind peers in these credential markers — regardless of absolute performance — show elevated rates of anxiety, reduced motivation, and increased likelihood of study abandonment.

3.3 *Social comparison, self-esteem, and career doubt*

When students observe peers who appear more decided about their future careers, more confident about their professional pathways, or more successful in translating educational performance into career opportunity, the comparative disadvantage they perceive can destabilise occupational self-concept and intensify career indecision. Nancy and Fred (2009) found that structured career assessment interventions could significantly increase career decision self-efficacy — the confidence to make effective career decisions — suggesting that social comparison-related doubts about career ability are amenable to targeted intervention. The dysfunctional cognitive patterns resulting from chronic comparative disadvantage — including catastrophising about future prospects, overgeneralising from specific failures to global incompetence, and minimising personal strengths — systematically impair mental health among students seeking counselling.

4. Emotional distress and mental health among students

4.1 Prevalence and nature of student mental health problems

Mental health difficulties among school and university students represent a significant and growing public health problem. Globally, the WHO Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2020 identified mental, neurological, and substance use disorders as accounting for 13% of the total global burden of disease, with depression alone accounting for 4.3% of the burden — making it one of the leading causes of disability worldwide (Khurana et al., 2016). In India, the rate of psychiatric disorders among children aged 4 to 16 years is approximately 12%, set against a backdrop of severe mental health manpower deficits: only 3,800 psychiatrists against a requirement of 11,500; 898 clinical psychologists against a requirement of 17,250; and 850 psychiatric social workers against a requirement of 23,000. These structural deficits translate directly into treatment gaps exceeding 90% for common mental disorders. Atkins et al. (2005) demonstrated that school-based mental health service models targeting children from high-poverty urban schools could effectively increase access to services and improve classroom and home behaviour — indicating that appropriately designed school-level mental health services can reach populations that would otherwise remain entirely unsupported.

4.2 Emotional distress profiles: qualitative evidence

Detailed qualitative investigation of students experiencing academic difficulty reveals consistent emotional distress profiles centred on anxiety, depression, shame, and helplessness. The trajectory typically begins with performance-related anxiety, which intensifies into pervasive self-doubt and depressive mood as academic difficulties persist. Students describe feeling existentially threatened by the prospect of failure and having no alternative future pathway to turn to. Social withdrawal constitutes a behavioural signature of advanced academic-related emotional distress: students systematically reduce social contact, avoid lectures and seminars, and disengage from academic activities in patterns consistent with clinical avoidance behaviour. Shame — particularly the fear of disappointing family members — further isolates students from the social support that might otherwise buffer their distress. Research by Kimberly et al. (2007), reviewing 24 empirically based studies of school mental health interventions, found that the most effective programmes were intensive interventions targeting both parents and teachers, not students alone — underscoring that individual-level intervention is insufficient when the environments generating distress remain unchanged.

4.3 Mental health and physical well-being: intersecting vulnerabilities

Menninger (1945) defined mental health as the adjustment of human beings to the world and to each other with maximum effectiveness and happiness. This formulation identifies five key characteristics of mental health: the ability to enjoy life, resilience, balance, flexibility, and self-actualisation. Chronic academic stress and emotional distress systematically erode all five characteristics. Students under severe academic pressure describe losing the ability to enjoy present activities, diminished resilience as repeated difficulties accumulate, loss of balance as academic demands crowd out other life domains, cognitive and emotional rigidity under stress, and profound obstacles to self-actualisation as self-belief collapses. The practice of mindfulness meditation has been identified as one mechanism through which students can begin to restore the capacity for enjoyment and self-regulation even under academic pressure conditions.

5. Career guidance, school counselling, and student support systems

5.1 The role and importance of school counselling

Professional school counselling encompasses the process of meeting students' developmental needs across academic, career, and personal domains (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). Expert consensus identifies effective school counselling programmes as comprehensive in scope, preventative in design, and developmental in nature — built to reach all students across the full range of their developmental needs rather than exclusively targeting students already in crisis. Rita (2007) proposed a 'standards blending' approach explicitly linking school counselling programmes to academic achievement missions, demonstrating how counselling directly impacts academic outcomes when it integrates career and personal development with core academic content standards. Denison et al. (2006) evaluated the role of academic guidance interviews in supporting students who had failed formative assessments, concluding that the rescue of failing students requires early recognition combined with tailored intervention.

5.2 Career guidance: information deficits and emotional consequences

A consistent finding across research contexts is that insufficient career information at key educational transitions generates significant psychological consequences. When students enter educational programmes without realistic understanding of the content, demands, or professional destinations involved, the resulting expectation mismatch becomes a primary driver of academic doubt, reduced motivation, and emotional distress. Khodeli et al. (2006) demonstrated that early vocational guidance for students at higher education level produced significantly better outcomes across multiple dimensions: higher theoretical knowledge and practical skill levels, improved academic performance, greater engagement in research, and smoother adaptation to clinical and professional environments. The alignment between personal values and career choices has direct implications for psychological well-being: individuals who choose careers aligned with their personal and vocational values consistently report higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction, and work performance, and exhibit greater career resilience in the face of obstacles (Hartung & Taber, 2008; O'Brien, 2003).

5.3 Social-Emotional Learning in career guidance contexts

Social awareness and relationship skills — core competencies within the SEL framework — function as important precursors to career readiness. Dymnicki, Sambolt, and Kidron (2013) identified these competencies as foundational for developing employability skills including teamwork, collaboration, and effective communication. Digital economy research confirms that jobs requiring a combination of digital and social-emotional competencies command higher market wages (Gonzalez Vazquez et al., 2019), indicating that the development of non-cognitive and transversal skills directly enhances both psychological and economic outcomes of career preparation. Winters et al. (2009), examining vocational training conversations in Dutch vocational education, found that the career dialogue between student, teacher, and practice mentor was in practice poorly utilised, focusing narrowly on pathways to qualification rather than genuine career development — representing both a limitation and an opportunity for improvement.

5.4 Utilisation of counselling services: barriers and facilitators

Despite documented mental health need among student populations, professional counselling services are persistently and substantially underutilised. Qualitative investigations reveal a complex set of barriers: limited awareness of what counselling

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services offer; preference for support from family and close peers; scepticism about the benefit of professional counselling; discomfort discussing personal difficulties with unfamiliar professionals; and the perception that problems are insufficiently acute to justify professional help. Fear of stigmatisation represents a particularly significant structural barrier to help-seeking. Michiko (2005), examining mental health and counselling in Japan, highlighted that existing societal stigma around psychosocial problems constitutes one of the most significant obstacles to psychological well-being at the population level — an observation that applies broadly across Asian educational contexts, including India. Among students who do access counselling services, those who engaged in sustained, individually tailored counselling — particularly mentoring programmes offering structured review of academic and personal time management — reported substantially positive outcomes.

5.5 Family support, peer guidance, and informal networks

In the absence of formal counselling utilisation, students in academic and emotional difficulty primarily turn to informal support networks. Azmitia et al. (2009), studying support and guidance among Latino early adolescents, found that parents and siblings provided the most consistent support across developmental periods, followed by friends and teachers — though only family support significantly predicted academic outcomes. Among peers, informal mentoring and lateral support relationships play a significant role in buffering academic stress; however, peer-based support has inherent limitations: peers share the same stressors and lack the professional training to manage clinical-level psychological difficulties or to provide accurate career information.

6. Mental health policy and service infrastructure: an Indian perspective

6.1 Historical development of mental health services in India

The Bhore Committee Report (1946) first formally recognised the inadequacy of mental health provision in post-independence India, recommending increases in psychiatric beds and the creation of mental health organisations at central and state levels. The Mudaliar Committee (1962) subsequently identified persistent gaps in reliable mental health statistics and the absence of educational provisions for mentally ill individuals. The National Mental Health Programme (NMHP), launched in 1982, represented India's first systematic national-level response to the mental health burden, establishing a framework for integrating mental health care into primary health infrastructure across the country (Khurana et al., 2016).

6.2 The National Mental Health Programme: objectives and challenges

The NMHP was organised around three core objectives: ensuring availability and accessibility of mental healthcare for all people with priority for the most vulnerable; encouraging the application of mental health knowledge in general healthcare and social development; and promoting community participation in mental health service development. Despite these ambitious objectives, the NMHP's implementation has been hampered by chronic underinvestment, administrative fragmentation, and a historic over-emphasis on curative rather than preventive components. Successive five-year plans progressively expanded NMHP funding and scope — from Rs 28 crores in the IX plan to Rs 139 crores in the X plan — while introducing new priorities including centre-of-excellence development and media campaigns to address stigma. The treatment gap remains among the largest in the world, making school-based and community-based mental health initiatives all the more critical as frontline points of contact for children and adolescents.

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6.3 Implications for school-based mental health

The structural mental health manpower deficit in India has direct implications for school-based support: there are simply insufficient trained professionals to staff dedicated school counselling services in all but the most well-resourced urban private school settings. This reality makes the integration of mental health literacy, SEL programmes, and peer support mechanisms into the standard school curriculum all the more important — as these approaches do not require one-to-one professional contact for every student, but rather build population-level psychological competencies that reduce the overall incidence of clinical-level distress. Atkins et al.'s (2005) school-based PALS model provides a practical example of how schools can function as mental health access points through carefully designed service models that bridge school, family, and community systems.

7. Synthesis: integrated model of academic stress, social comparison, and emotional distress

The evidence reviewed supports an integrated understanding of the pathways through which academic environments generate and sustain emotional distress. Table 1 presents the key domains, core mechanisms, psychological impact, and evidence base within this integrated model.

Table 1 Integrated model: key domains, mechanisms, and intervention points

Domain	Core Mechanisms	Psychological Impact	Evidence Base
Academic Stress	Performance pressure, workload, examination failure, parental expectations	Anxiety, shame, avoidance, depression, dropout	Pekrun & Perry; Karaoglu & Seker (2010); Qualitative studies
Social Comparison	Peer performance benchmarking, relative standing perception, career comparison	Self-doubt, reduced self-esteem, career indecision, hopelessness	Festinger (1954); Catsambis (1994); Marsh et al. (2005)
Emotional Distress	Achievement emotion cycles, need frustration, shame, social withdrawal	Depression, anxiety disorders, academic avoidance, life disruption	CVT (Pekrun & Perry); SDT (Deci & Ryan); Kimberly et al. (2007)
Career Uncertainty	Information deficits, unmet expectations, cognitive distortion, value mismatch	Motivational decline, goal abandonment, decision paralysis	M. Xu (2017); Savickas (1997); Hartung & Taber (2008)
Counselling Access	Stigma, poor awareness, structural barriers, preference for informal support	Delayed help-seeking, untreated distress, prolonged crisis	Michiko (2005); Qualitative counselling studies
Policy / System Gap	Manpower deficit, underinvestment, treatment gap > 90%	Unmet population-level need, vulnerable groups unsupported	Khurana et al. (2016); WHO (2011, 2013–2020)

The integrated model reveals that academic stress and social comparison do not generate emotional distress through simple linear pathways, but through mutually reinforcing cycles:

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academic difficulty triggers negative achievement emotions; negative emotions impair performance and motivation; impaired performance intensifies comparative disadvantage perceptions; social comparison deepens self-doubt and shame; shame impedes help-seeking; delayed help-seeking allows distress to deepen and generalise; generalised distress further impairs academic function. This cycle is self-sustaining in the absence of deliberate external intervention. Three leverage points emerge from the evidence as most amenable to intervention: early identification of students at risk through structured multidimensional psychological assessment; high-quality individually tailored counselling and career guidance; and systemic changes to assessment structures that reduce unnecessarily stressful competitive dynamics.

CONCLUSIONS

Academic stress, social comparison, and emotional distress interact in mutually reinforcing cycles that sustain psychological vulnerability among school students.

Achievement emotions — particularly anxiety, shame, and hopelessness — represent the primary psychological mechanism through which academic pressure translates into clinical-level distress and study dropout.

Social comparison processes in school settings systematically erode self-esteem, career decision self-efficacy, and motivation, independently of students' objective academic performance.

Inadequate access to evidence-based school counselling and career guidance constitutes a significant and modifiable driver of student emotional distress at the population level.

The structural mental health manpower deficit in India — with treatment gaps exceeding 90% for common mental disorders — makes school-based, population-level interventions essential rather than supplementary.

Social-emotional learning programmes, when designed according to the SAFE framework, effectively reduce emotional distress and build career readiness competencies across diverse school populations.

Stigma, low mental health literacy, and structural access barriers remain the primary obstacles to professional help-seeking among students who most need support.

Early identification systems, integrated counselling models, and systemic modifications to assessment and feedback structures represent the three highest-leverage intervention points for improving student psychological outcomes.

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Acknowledgment

To the students, school counsellors, and educational psychologists whose experiences and scholarship inform the evidence synthesised in this review. To the institutions and researchers who have contributed to advancing school mental health provision in India and internationally.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Nancy, Rakesh, P., Abhishek, D., & Rohini J. (2026). Academic Stress, Social Comparison, and Emotional Distress among School Students: A Comprehensive Review. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(2), 2494-2508. DIP:18.01.226.20261402, DOI:10.25215/1402.226