The Correlation between School Climate and Stress, Anxiety, and Depression among High School Students in Delhi, India

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Abstract: **Adolescent mental health is a growing concern, with issues like stress, anxiety, and depression increasingly prevalent due to societal changes, academic pressures, and limited access to mental health resources, particularly in India. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this study examines the relationship between school climate and mental health outcomes among high school students in Delhi. Using a cross-sectional design, data were collected from 72 students using the Delaware School Climate Scale (DSCS) and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21). Key school climate factors such as teacher-student relationships, peer interactions, school safety, and academic expectations were analyzed about stress, anxiety, and depression levels. Gender differences were also explored to understand disparities in mental health outcomes. Preliminary findings reveal that a positive school climate acts as a protective factor, reducing stress, anxiety, and depression while highlighting gender-based variations in these associations. This study emphasizes the critical need for school-based interventions that foster supportive, inclusive, and safe environments tailored to India's unique socio-cultural context. Educators and policymakers can enhance adolescents' mental well-being and resilience by improving the school climate.**

Keywords: **adolescent mental health, school climate, stress, anxiety, depression, gender differences, ecological systems theory, India, school-based interventions.**

INTRODUCTION

Humans are especially susceptible to mental health issues during adolescence, a critical developmental stage marked by significant physical, emotional, and cognitive changes. Adolescent mental health problems are becoming more common worldwide; according to UNICEF and WHO data from 2019, 20% of the 1.2 billion adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 worldwide suffer from mental health disorders. These problems cause 16% of illnesses and injuries in this age range. Rapid globalization, technological development, and growing social pressures are some of the factors that have made these difficulties worse and increased anxiety, sadness, and suicidal thoughts.

The situation is particularly concerning in India. Approximately 7.3% of adolescents (ages 13 to 17) have a psychiatric condition, according to the National Mental Health Survey of India (2015–2016). With one student reportedly dying by suicide every hour, suicide is the top cause of death among Indian adolescents, accounting for 25% of deaths among boys and 50% to 75% of deaths among girls (National Crime Records Bureau, 2015). During this crucial stage of development, depression, anxiety, and behavioral problems like substance addiction, eating disorders, and suicidality are common (Mehra et al., 2022; Nebhinani & Jain, 2019). Adolescents' mental health situation is made more difficult by comorbid mental illnesses, such as behavior problems and personality disorders.

Adolescents' mental health is shaped by a complex interaction of biopsychosocial factors, including a tendency to experiment, desire for independence, low perception, search for identity, neurobiological and physical maturation, as well as peer school, community, familial, and other external influences ((Nebhinani & Jain, 2019)). Adolescent susceptibility is significantly increased by risk factors such as substance addiction, the disintegration of extended family structures, a lack of social support, and the widening gap between desired and achievable results. On the other hand, protective factors can increase resilience and lessen these dangers.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory states that schools are essential microsystems that significantly impact adolescents' mental health. Bronfenbrenner's model emphasizes that human development is shaped by interactions within the immediate environment, referred to as microsystems, such as school and home (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). These microsystems have a significant impact on

psychological consequences such as sadness, stress, and anxiety. For example, unfavorable home or school circumstances may increase susceptibility to psychological discomfort by causing dysregulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis (Rayan et al., 2022).

The school setting's connections, norms, and values are all part of the school climate, significantly impacting students' learning results, emotional health, and engagement (Lehenová, 2013). A strong foundation is laid by a positive school climate, which promotes inclusivity, respect for one another, emotional safety, and a positive learning environment for adolescent development (Hackman et al., 2022). On the other hand, a lousy school atmosphere, which is marked by strained relationships, a lack of emotional stability, and intense academic pressure, can make mental health conditions like stress, anxiety, and depression worse.

In India, the academic setting of schools frequently contributes to the mental health burden of adolescents because of things like stress from exams, poor facilities, and strict disciplinary measures. However, school climate treatments have shown promise in resolving these problems by creating a caring and supportive atmosphere. These initiatives improve pupils' academic performance while reducing emotional and behavioral difficulties.

There is still much to learn about the relationship between particular elements of school environment and anxiety, stress, and depression despite mounting evidence of the crucial role that school climate plays in shaping teenage mental health. This study addresses this gap by investigating the relationship between school climate and these mental health outcomes among high school students in Delhi. By examining this relationship, the research aims to contribute to understanding how school climate influences psychological distress and emotional well-being among adolescents, providing a foundation for future interventions tailored to India’s unique socio-cultural context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The quality and character of school life, which reflects interpersonal connections, norms, values, and the organizational environment that influences students' experiences, is referred to as the school climate. Fostering the social-emotional well-being of adolescents requires a positive school climate. According to Wong et al. (2021), adolescents' social-emotional health is greatly enhanced by an authoritative school environment, which lowers stress, hopelessness, and depressive symptoms. In a similar vein, Singla et al. (2020) stress that positive school environments that are marked by connections of support and a feeling of community are predictive of reduced rates of violence, bullying, and depressive symptoms. These results highlight the importance of providing a learning atmosphere in schools where students feel engaged, safe, and appreciated.

Longitudinal studies further support the crucial effect of the school atmosphere. For example, a teacher-rated school atmosphere affects mental health outcomes, significantly lowering internalizing issues like anxiety and depression, according to László et al. (2019). Additionally, according to Sahib et al. (2023), a supportive school environment helps children feel more connected and resilient, which in turn helps them cope with anxiety and depression. According to Urke et al. (2022), impressions of a caring school climate may be influenced by mental health rather than the other way around. These studies highlight how school atmosphere and mental health outcomes interact dynamically.

Adolescents' high rates of stress, anxiety, and depression are a growing problem, especially in India. According to Mitra et al. (2024), anxiety affects 35.7% of adolescents in rural West Bengal, whereas depression affects 30% of them. Higher rates are seen among female adolescents. According to Shrivastava et al. (2024), adolescents in Central India have anxiety rates of 68.33% and depression rates of 14.16%. There are apparent gender differences, with women continuously reporting more mental health issues (Mitra et al., 2024; Mallya et al., 2024).

COVID-19 has made these problems much worse. According to studies, family illness and pandemic-related bereavement are essential indicators of elevated anxiety and sadness (Mitra et al., 2024; Garg et al., 2024). Prakash et al. (2024) note geographic differences, with depression more prevalent in rural areas (39.3%) compared to urban areas (24.2%), while urban adolescents report higher anxiety (50.6%). These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of stress, anxiety, and depression and the necessity for targeted interventions.

The interaction between school climate and adolescent mental health is well-documented.

Positive school environments mitigate mental health challenges and enhance overall well-being. Rayan et al. (2022) assert that school climate and family functioning significantly influence levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among adolescents. This claim is expanded upon by Yin et al. (2024), who show that while creating a sense of belonging might mitigate the consequences of depressed symptoms, bad school climates exacerbate them.

The results of interventions aimed at improving the school atmosphere have been encouraging. An enhanced school climate results in higher mental health literacy and less stress, as demonstrated by the SEHER intervention in Bihar, India, as described by Shinde et al. (2018). This is further supported by Feiss et al. (2019), who point out that while school-based interventions are effective in treating anxiety and depression, their long-term effects are still modest. To prevent teenage mental health problems, these findings support systemic initiatives to create inclusive and supportive educational environments.
Different studies reveal that school climate significantly influences adolescent stress, anxiety, and depression. Positive school climates characterized by supportive relationships, engagement, and safety are protective factors, while unfavorable climates exacerbate mental health challenges. Given the high prevalence of these issues among Indian adolescents and their exacerbation by factors such as gender disparities and COVID-19, comprehensive strategies are imperative. Integrating mental health education, fostering school belonging, and implementing evidence-based interventions can create a conducive adolescent growth and resilience environment (BANGGAWAN et al., 2024).

AIM OF THE STUDY

This study examines the relationship between school climate and stress, anxiety, and depression among adolescents in Delhi, India, with a focus on identifying regionally relevant factors for potential interventions. It explores how teacher-student interactions, peer relationships, school safety, and academic expectations impact mental health outcomes. By addressing these localized dynamics, the study aims to provide insights into how school climate shapes adolescents' psychological well-being, offering a foundation for interventions tailored to India's unique socio-cultural context.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the correlation between school climate and stress levels among adolescents in Delhi.
2. To investigate the relationship between school climate and anxiety levels among adolescents in Delhi.
3. To assess the association between school climate and depression levels among adolescents in Delhi.
4. To examine gender-based differences in how school climate relates to stress, anxiety, and depression among adolescents.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between school climate and stress among adolescents in Delhi?
2. How does school climate correlate with anxiety levels among adolescents in Delhi?
3. What is the association between school climate and depression among adolescents in Delhi?
4. Are there gender differences in the correlation between school climate and stress, anxiety, and depression?

Hypotheses

1. H1: There is a significant correlation between school climate and adolescent stress levels in Delhi.
2. H2: There is a significant correlation between school climate and anxiety levels among adolescents in Delhi.
3. H3: There is a significant correlation between school climate and depression levels among adolescents in Delhi.
4. H4: The relationship between school climate and stress, anxiety, and depression differs between adolescent boys and girls in Delhi.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a quantitative cross-sectional design to assess the relationship between school climate and mental health outcomes (stress, anxiety, and depression) among seventy-two high school students in Delhi.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected through structured questionnaires distributed to students. The following instruments were used.

2.1. Instruments:

1. Delaware School Climate Scale (DSCS): The scale was adapted by Tej Singh & Kumar (2024) in the Indian Context to assess the school climate as perceived by students. The scale has good reliability with an overall reliability coefficient of 0.875. The subscales also demonstrated acceptable reliability, with coefficients ranging from 0.747 to 0.894 for dimensions such as teacher-student relationship, student-student relationship, fairness of rules, school safety, and liking of school. The scale was also tested further, and a good validity score was obtained. The scale has twenty-three questions on a four-point scale from strongly disagree to agree (1 = strongly disagree strongly, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree). The scale is split into five subscales: teacher-student relationship, student-student relationship, fairness of rules, school safety, and school liking.
2. Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21): The DASS-21 is a widely used self-report tool for assessing depression, anxiety, and stress. Known for its strong psychometric properties, it has been validated in various populations worldwide (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), including Indian communities (Al-Zahrani et al., 2015). The scale uses a four-point Likert format, where participants rate the frequency of experiencing negative emotional states over the past week, from 0 (did not apply) to 3 (applied most of the time). Higher total scores indicate greater levels of severity for depression, anxiety, and stress.

Procedure

72 (N=37 girls, N = 35 boys) adolescents aged 15-18 from Delhi, India, participated in the study. Clear instructions, informed consent, and information about the goal of the study were given to the participants. They received guarantees that all information gathered would be kept private and used only for research. The participants were thanked for their cooperation and time, and the Delaware school climate scale and DASS 21 Scale were given out.

Data Analysis

The data was tested for normality and presented as non-normal data. Further, the degree and direction of the association between school climate and mental health were assessed using Spearman's rank test. The differences between the two genders were calculated and described through a t-test. Jamovi software was used for analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1

Independent t-test results of boys and girls

		Statistic	p-value
DSCS	Mann-Whitney U	532	0.097
Depression	Mann-Whitney U	491	0.035*
Anxiety	Mann-Whitney U	573	0.225
Stress	Mann-Whitney U	531	0.094

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

The Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to examine differences between girls and boys on the Delaware School Climate Scale (DSCS) and mental health variables (depression, anxiety, and stress subscale).

The results indicate a significant difference in depression scores between girls and boys ($U=491, p=0.035$), suggesting that girls may report higher depression levels than the other. However, no statistically significant differences were observed for school climate ($U=532, p=0.097$), anxiety ($U=573, p=0.225$), or stress ($U=531, p=0.094$) scores between girls and boys.

These findings suggest that while school climate, anxiety, and stress levels are comparable across genders, depression may differ significantly, warranting further investigation into gender-specific factors influencing depression.

Table 2

Correlations between the Delaware School Climate Scale, Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale

	DSCS	Depression	Anxiety	Stress
DCST				
Depression	-0.572***			
Anxiety	-0.609***	0.248*		
Stress	-0.237*	0.147	0.135	

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Spearman's correlation analysis reveals significant relationships between the Delaware School Climate Survey (DSCS) and the measures of mental health (depression, anxiety, and stress subscale). DSCS scores are negatively correlated with depression

(ρ=−0.572,p<.001\rho = -0.572, p < .001), anxiety (ρ=−0.609,p<.001\rho = -0.609, p < .001), and stress subscale scores (ρ=−0.237,p=.042\rho = -0.237, p = .042). These results suggest that a more positive school climate is associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among participants.

In terms of interrelations between mental health variables, depression is positively correlated with anxiety (ρ=0.248,p=.033\rho = 0.248, p = .033), indicating that individuals with higher depression scores also tend to report higher anxiety levels. However, no significant relationships were found between the stress subscale and either depression (p=.212p = .212) or anxiety (p=.252p = .252).

Overall, the findings underscore the protective role of a positive school climate in reducing symptoms of psychological distress, particularly depression, anxiety, and stress. These results highlight the importance of fostering supportive school environments to promote mental well-being.

DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to explore the relationship between school climate and mental health variables, specifically stress, anxiety, and depression, among adolescents in Delhi. Additionally, it sought to examine gender differences in these relationships.

School Climate and Stress (H1)

The results partially support H1, as a weak yet statistically significant negative correlation was found between school climate (measured by DSCT) and stress levels (ρ=−0.237,p=.042\rho = -0.237, p = .042). This suggests that a more positive school climate is associated with lower adolescent stress levels. This is supported by studies conducted by Kaur & Kumar (2024) and Tong et al. (2019). A supportive school environment may buffer stress by providing adolescents emotional security, stronger peer relationships, and better teacher-student interactions. However, the strength of this association was relatively low, indicating that other factors, such as family dynamics or individual coping mechanisms, might also play a significant role in stress regulation, as supported by a study conducted (Filippsen & Marin, 2020).

School Climate and Anxiety (H2)

The findings strongly support H2, with a significant negative correlation observed between school climate and anxiety levels (ρ=−0.609,p<.001\rho = -0.609, p < .001). This result highlights the protective effect of a positive school climate on anxiety, emphasizing the importance of nurturing environments where adolescents feel safe and valued; this was also seen in studies by Franco et al. (2022) and Macedo (2014). High anxiety levels are often linked to feelings of insecurity or academic pressures, which can be alleviated by a climate that fosters open communication, inclusivity, and trust. These findings align with previous research demonstrating that school climate is critical in shaping adolescents' emotional well-being.

School Climate and Depression (H3)

The results also support H3, with a significant negative correlation between school climate and depression (ρ=−0.572,p<.001\rho = -0.572, p < .001). This indicates that adolescents perceiving a more positive school climate tend to report lower levels of depressive symptoms. A positive school climate may reduce feelings of loneliness, exclusion, and helplessness, all of which are key contributors to depression in this age group (Urke et al., 2022). This finding underscores the role of school policies and programs in fostering mental well-being by addressing emotional and psychological needs.

Gender Differences (H4)

The Mann-Whitney U test revealed no significant gender differences in school climate scores (p=.097p = .097), anxiety levels (p=.225p = .225), or stress levels (p=.094p = .094). However, significant differences were observed for depression scores (U=491,p=.035U = 491, p = .035), with girls reporting higher depressive symptoms. This partially supports H4, indicating that while school climate and its associations with stress and anxiety are similar for boys and girls, depression may be influenced by gender-specific factors (Pătrașcu et al., 2024; Su et al., 2024). Girls are often found to be more vulnerable to internalizing disorders like depression due to sociocultural expectations, greater academic and social pressures, or biological predispositions (Pătrașcu et al., 2024; Gonzalez, 2024).

Implications

The findings have practical implications for school administrators, counselors, and policymakers. Schools can enhance mental health outcomes by fostering a positive school climate through anti-bullying programs, teacher training, peer support groups, and inclusive policies. Specific interventions

addressing the unique challenges faced by girls may help mitigate depressive symptoms and promote overall well-being.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The study has a few limitations. Using self-reported measures may introduce biases, such as social desirability or recall errors. Additionally, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causality. Future studies should adopt longitudinal methods to explore the causal pathways between school climate and mental health variables. Further research might examine other demographic variables, such as socioeconomic status or cultural factors, to better understand these relationships.

CONCLUSION

The study underscores the importance of a positive school climate in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression among adolescents in Delhi, with significant gender-specific differences in depression. Schools play a pivotal role in shaping students' mental health, making it imperative to foster environments that prioritize emotional and psychological well-being.

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