

Journal of Religion & Society (JR&S)

Available Online:

<https://islamicreligious.com/index.php/Journal/index>

Print ISSN: 3006-1296 Online ISSN: 3006-130X

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)

Exhausted Minds, Heavy Hearts: Exploring Sleep and Stress among Public College Students

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Abstract

Much less studied but no less essential is the issue of student sleep deprivation, a seclusive determinant of the success of work in educational establishments and the quality of life of the population, in the resource-poor regions. This qualitative research is aimed to explore the lived experience of college attendees in minorities in the region, Khushab, of the Punjab province in Pakistan, in order to learn how sleep pattern disturbances can interact with academic pressure, emotional exhaustion, and institutional indifference. Phenomenological methodology was employed in the implementation of in-depth semi-structured interviews with a purposive selection of study participants (N=12) with the diverse background in academics. Thematic analysis identified three main themes to be: Disrupted Sleep as a Result of Academic Burden, Home Environment and Nighttime Distress and Insensitivity of the institution on the Sleep Health of the Students. The over-scheduled schedules, highly emotional home environments and a lack of sleep discourse or support in colleges were some of the identified sub-themes. The aspect of sleep was discussed by students as being not only a biological requirement but also a psychological escape that was always denied because of systematic and social constraints. Lived experiences reveal the fact that sleep deprivation enhances pre-existing inequalities, cognitive abilities and exacerbates emotional fatigue. The research fills a crucial research gap in literature by giving the voice to students about sleep and stress in a local setting and provides practical and feasible solutions to low-resource education systems. These findings can inform or enlighten decision-makers about the hidden expense of academic requirements and the importance of sleep health as a part of the support structures of an institution.

Keywords: Sleep Deprivation, Academic Stress, Student Well-Being, Qualitative Inquiry, Public Colleges

Introduction

Sleep is an aspect of life that has not received a lot of coverage in academic circles, yet, it is considered of core significance to the cognitive activities of the students, their emotional control, and academic achievements. In underdeveloped areas such as the Khushab district of Punjab in Pakistan with systematically under-resourced educational institutions and a meagre mental health infrastructure, the consequences of sleep deprivation on the life of school going children are even starker. The pressure to do well in academics in this type of environment, with high expectations and little support, does not only take place in classrooms, but also continues into students' nights, robbing them of sleep and draining their health. This is a qualitative research paradigm where the researcher engages in-depth study to learn more about how the students in public colleges of Khushab experience and internalize the emotional and academic strains that disrupt their sleep.

The issue of sleep tends to be the end result of stressors that are entrenched in the lived environment of the students. The combination of academic pressure and relatively low sleep quality among students has been highly documented across many countries in the world and has increased anxiety, emotional burn-out, and academic deterioration rates (Beattie et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2020). Nonetheless, most of this work has been developed out of the developed cultures where counseling services and psychological support systems on campuses are more readily availed. Conversely, Pakistani public college students, especially those in the rural districts, simply do not have access to such services, not to mention the cultural acceptability of discussing their problems related to emotions or psychological issues with others. These students survive in an environment with low relative importance of mental health and its stigma, failure to respond constructively to student distress inside the school even in general, and strong parental pressure on grades. In this regard, the problem of sleep disturbance is not merely a biological process and issue but a representation of structural, emotional and social drifts delving in the lives of students.

Although the sphere of mental health among the students in Pakistan is growing in prevalence, the majority of the available studies promote a quantitative methodology and present mathematical meaning of the research results without touching on the emotional accounts of a student. In some examples, the authors only studied the level of stress amongst the students (Robotham, 2008) or academic burnout (Dusselier et al., 2005) without going further into the factors of stressful experiences creating adverse effects on sleep or how students construct meaning out of the stressful situation within the institutional or family environments where they live. There is, however, still the lack of a contextualized exploration of how the intersection of institutional neglect, socio-emotional pressures, and academic expectations appear in the nightly routine of the students, which are often silent and invisible. This paper takes up this challenge to discover the real tone in the voices of students by analyzing their experiences in a vehement thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

To base this exploration in a theoretical knowledge, the study will rely on three models. The Self-Regulated Learning Theory (Zimmerman, 2002) emphasizes how the learners manipulate challenges of an academic nature using emotional, behavioral, and cognitive strategies. When there are no guidance and

mentorship with respect to emotional issues, particularly in the inflexible and underfunded learning conditions, self-regulation mechanism fails, usually resulting in sleep deprivation and heightened susceptibility to stress. The belief that cognition and emotional regulation are not limited to the brain is further evident in the Extended Mind Theory (Carter et al., 2016) since the individual shares them with the social and environmental structures. In Khushab, where classrooms are usually overcrowded, the teacher is poorly trained, and there is no emotional support system, external environment is akin to active limiting of rather than range of mental regulation. The Theory of Attention Economy (Williams, 2018) is complementary to it, as it relates to how the boundaries of cognitive availability and a student in a highly pressurized environment need to allocate their capacity between academic performance, family obligations, social comparison, and personal anxieties. This atomization causes mental saturation, lack of rest and recovery, and continues reinforcement of disruption of rest patterns.



Figure 1 Theoretical framework

These are theoretical premises that act as the theoretical foundation of this study. The model identifies sleep disturbance as dependent variables, and their inflicting factors are three majors independent variables: academic stress, emotional burden and the institutional environment (Yan et al., 2018). Academic stress is the fear of performance, pressure of an examination, and rigid academic requirements. Emotional burden is the burden that is wrapped around parental expectations, cultural norms of achievements, and internalized shame in case of failure (Carrera & Wei, 2017). Institutional factors, namely, absence of supportive counseling, dearth of resources, outdated teaching module, and unaffectable administration are also taken into consideration. The above independent variables combine to form emotional realities and interfere with the sleeping patterns of students. The cycle is repetitive: the less the students feel supported and less meagre they are, the less they can rest; and the less they rest, the more susceptible to thinking-fatigue and emotional stress they are.

This research is not only intended to determine factors that have contributed to the existence of sleep disturbance but to enlighten the student experiences under these superimposing pressure systems (Dirisala et al., 2025). This study should be of interest to policy makers, administrators, and educators because it fills a gap in evidence on the subject; and by giving voice to the students who are experiencing the pernicious problem of sleep deprivation at Pakistani colleges, the study brings depth and context to a little-known dimension of student well-being in this country. The results are relevant to not only school administrator and policymakers but also mental health professionals and educational administration in institutions (Cummings et al., 2022). Presenting a platform to these unsighted voices, this study expects to take one step further in necessitating a discussion on how student welfare in budget-challenged educational contexts can be holistically addressed (Me & Learn, 2016).

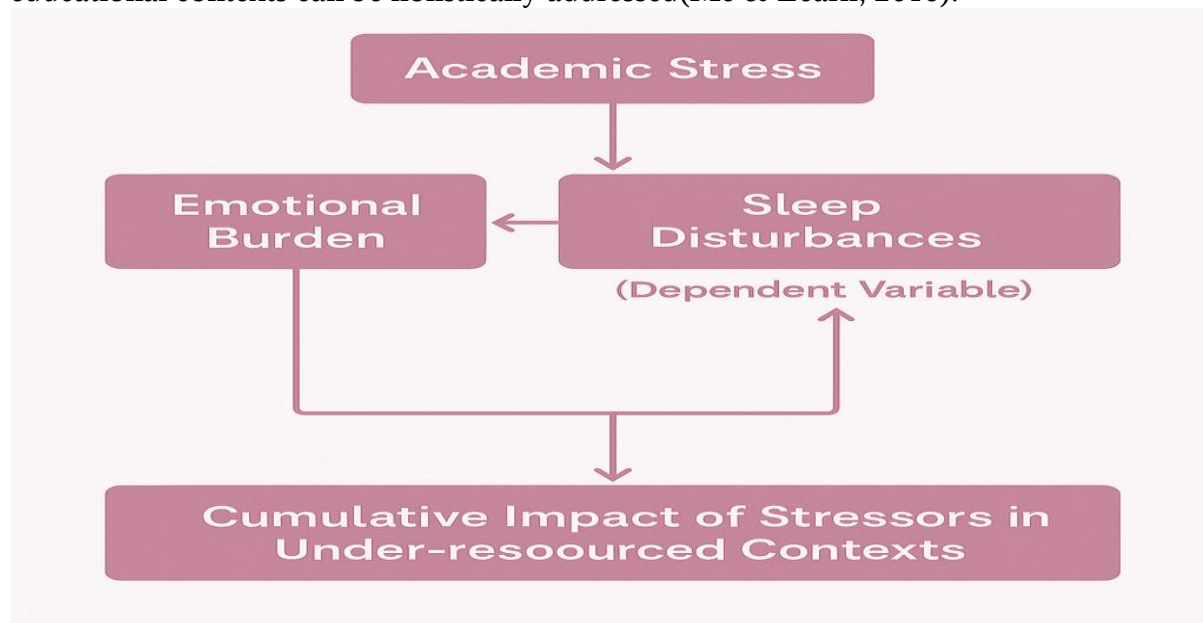


Figure 2 Conceptual framework

Objectives of the Study:

- To examine the impact of academic stress on the sleep patterns of the students in the under-resourced public colleges.
- To learn about first-hand emotional experiences of students connected with disturbed sleep and staying in line in regard to academic expectations.
- To determine systemic, familial, and institutional factors that cause disruption to sleep among college students.
- To provide a voice to the students in terms of how they perceive and deal with sleep deprivation in an academically stressful culture.
- To draw context-sensitive conclusions that can be used to guide both practical interventions and policy reforms that will enhance the well-being of students in the public education systems.

Research Questions:

1. What is the manner in which students pursuing education in public colleges of Khushab feel stressed with regard to their academic commitments and how this affects their sleeping schedules?
2. What are the emotional and psychological problems associated with sleep disturbance in these students?

3. What are the elements of institutions, family, and social situation that lead to sleep disturbances under the pressure of education?
4. What are the reactions or adaptations of students to sleep-related problems in an under-resourced school context?
5. How can the voice of students help in formulating policies in the future and in further support mechanisms of the dreaded issues relating to academic stress and sleep?

Methodology

The research pursued a qualitative research design to examine in-depth the nature of the interaction between scholastic stress and impaired sleep among students in underprivileged learning environments. The target population of the study researched was those students who were enrolled in the public colleges in the district of Khushab. It was a significant setting to research how system and environmental stress variables influence psychological and academic existence of students that fall within this region with limited educational infrastructures and socio-economic problems.

A purposive sampling method was used in order to select a total of 15 respondents who would have good and pertinent information to give. These participants played both the intermediate and undergraduate level and there was a balance in gender to have a heterogeneity in opinion. A semi-structured interview was chosen as a way of collecting the data since it is flexible in terms of the dialogue, but covering the main areas of the research focusing on the stress, academic requirements, emotion management, and sleep schedules.

The process of data collection followed the due ethical procedures. Each of the participants gave informed consent after the purpose of the study, their rights and the utilization of their data had been explained. During the research process anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by use of pseudonyms and storage of data. Participants were also entitled to withdraw at any moment in the study without any repercussions.

Interviews took place in an environment of comfort to the respondents either in the college or alternatively, over the phone in cases where it eluded connectivity. The interviews were conducted via audio recording with the consent of the interviewees, which were transcribed verbatim in order to get accurate information. A close watch was kept on preserving the authenticity and the mood of the speeches of participants.

Thematic analysis has been done through Braun and Clarke six-phase process. This involved becoming acquainted with the data, establishing preliminary codes, searching, reviewing themes, defining themes, naming them and writing a final report. The codes became inductive based on the data and checked continuously by making sure that the emerging themes were created based on the lived actualities of the participants. The themes were facilitated by quotes aimed towards declaring the beauty of the experiences that students have had with stress and sleep problems through thematic identity: that the specific life of Khushab and its public college culture has allotted issues of stress and sleep problems.

Theme 1: Academic Strain and Sleep Disruption

Sub-theme 1.1: Late-Night Study Patterns under Pressure

Students were often saying that they opted to deprive themselves of sleep in order to meet the academic expectations. Studying at night was common since

there were no quiet daytime settings and often household chores proved to be a hustle.

I conduct my studies at night after midnight since the house is too busy during the day and I also have to assist my mother with some household chores. I usually end up being late when I get down to my books.” (P4)

We have interruptions in power supply most of the time. It comes back at night, then it is when we can do up our work.” (P8)

There are times when I feel very sleepy in the classes and I don't have the money to miss studying at night. That is the only time I get it.” (P11)

Such stories indicate the systemic barriers to education in Khushab whereby very few fundamental services and quiet rooms are available.

Sub-theme 1.2: Examination Anxiety and Sleep Deprivation

Students reported increased anxiety accompanied by their inability to fall asleep or sleeping difficulties during the night before taking an examination.

The night before exams I am not able to sleep at all. She just lies awake and thinks of what happens in case she fails and brings shame upon her family. (P9)

I have been doing this so much that even when I sleep early, I just keep on repeating the syllabus over and over in my head. (P7)

When it comes close to exams, my heart beats faster Even during my dreams I feel that I am in exam hall and wake up sweating. (P2)

The psychological effect of performance strain can be traced to these experiences and significantly in the absence of mental health care services.

Sub-theme 1.3: Lack of Academic Counseling and Time Management Support

The study participants identified a total absence of formal assistance with dealing with academic stress, designing a study schedule, or prioritizing tasks.

Nobody in college teaches us how to study time or be smart in preparing. We have to be ourselves.” (P13)

There is no study skill classes or seminars here. It only notes that are given to us and we are instructed to memories. (P1)

Had there been somebody to explain us how to revise properly perhaps we would not spend days up to 3 am every day. (P10)

These, strengthen the repetition of the institutional vacuum related to advancement of academic productivity and health-friendly habits.

Theme 2: Emotional Turbulence and the Invisible Burden

Sub-theme 2.1: Guilt from Economic Sacrifices

Several students wrote about how they could not sleep because they carried the burden of the financial sacrifice of their family in their emotions. They said they felt this guilt as a merciless weight that did not allow them to sleep; they felt anxious.

My father borrowed money through his friend to pay my fee. I think about that over and over when I go to bed, and it is: What will happen to him, should I fail?” (P6)

New books are too expensive. My mother used to sew clothes at late hours of the night to bear the expenses of my college times. I can never concentrate on studies as I feel so bad about it.” (P12)

Whenever I take a rest, I lay down it reminds me of what my father told me, that I was our hope. That hope weighs,” (P3)

Economic hardship has a huge impact of disturbance in the ability to relax and sleep peacefully because the emotional burden is seldom discussed openly.

Sub-theme 2.2: Performance-Linked Parental Affection

According to students, their academic performance had to be good in order to garner approval on the part of the parent. This conditional support made them develop a perpetual fear of disappointing their families even in situations where they had done or performed decently well.

Whenever I used to get top in the class, my family used to treat me with sweets. However, the next time I placed third, I was not asked any question about how it was. (P14)

I feel my parents only pay attention to me when I am good. When they compare me to others, it is out of low scores I receive. (P5)

My habit is always to force myself to study even when I am exhausted and in need of sleeping. I would not like to lose the love that I receive after scoring great. (P9)

This too emotional connection between success and love usually gave rise to feelings of stressful studying and last-minute revision and sleep deprivation

Sub-theme 2.3: Unshared Emotional Distress

Failure to provide emotionally safe spaces led students to internalize much of their troubles. Showing stress especially by boys was perceived as sign of weakness and as such the person would be isolated and emotions repressed.

When I say I am under pressure, my dad tells me that I am overdramatic. So now I just keep it to myself." (P2)

I have nobody to discuss my fears. Even my friends are joking about it just in case I mention it. (P13)

Boys here do not cry or tell each other that they are getting anxious. Even when you feel your worst, you are supposed to be strong and tough. (P7)

Such suppression of vulnerable emotional states aggravates mental woes more because students find it hard to allow their bodies to unwind and achieve a restful slumber.

Theme 3: Fear of Failure and Social Shame**Sub-theme 3.1: Shame as a Public Emotion**

Within Khushab, the academic performance is a topic of conversation between the relatives, and the neighbors. This exposure transforms academic failure at the individual level into a mass phenomenon, to which the students privatize shame as a shared sentiment.

When the success occurs, my name is not as such. It is discussed by all of the neighborhood. (P4)

When I fail, they do not only feel shame but if I fail even my mother can hear the name-calling at the corn-grocer. (P10)

It is not just the fear of low marks but that people will be talking; uncles, cousins etc. (P11)

This fear of humiliating oneself in front of the crowd leads to a source of anxiety and sleepless worry which is pathologically unhealthy as it is obsessive to the point of academic results.

Sub-theme 3.2: Stigma of Academic Help-Seeking

Students did not want to get help, be it academic or emotional because that would be perceived as a weakness on the part of the student or inability to perform. This stigma alienated them further and pushed them into overworking and speaking no more.

I was going to request the teacher to go over it once more but I did not. They will think that I am slow." (P8)

We are not in the counseling business. People say that you are wrong in your brain when you go there.” (P16)

I never seek help even when I feel like drowning in stress. People begin to brand you.” (P3)

The stigma surrounding being vulnerable deprives the students of support systems and leads to chronic stress, sleep disturbance, and lack of academic resistance.

Sub-theme 3.3: Absence of Coping Mechanisms

Most students expressed that they were provided with little in terms of organized emotional and academic coping routines that are balanced at the environment. In an environment where emotional literacy is not given priority in the curriculum, or where the institutional culture does not encourage it, then so much more responsibility is placed on the shoulders of the student to deal with complicated feelings.

We learn to math problem-solving, but we are not taught to cope with panic before the tests. (P5)

There are no classes or teachers to explain how to deal with stress or sleep problems. We just live on our own.” (P13)

We do discuss attendance and grades in our college, but there is nothing relating to taking care of our mental health. (P1)

Such lack of institutional support leaves the students without the necessary emotional equipment's, causing them to bottle up anxieties that are acted upon through insomnia, irritation, and burnout in classrooms.

Discussion

The results of the current research point to the extent of academic stress on the lives of under-resourced PCC students in Khushab. As students explained, pressure to excel in outdated, strict academic systems, not only endangers their regularity in life but also their chances to get rest. The subjects talked of staying up late to study not out of interest but due to fear. The emotional stress goes with disturbed sleep which participants reported on focusing on non-academically based dreams and a lack of ability to sleep as well as restless tensions. These interruptions are not only about study routines- they demonstrate a strained emotional situation influenced consistently by the pressure to perform with assistance, but an insufficient provision of each in an academic setting in which minimal support is provided. It is also worth noting that in the past, research has already demonstrated similar associations between academic pressure and sleep disturbances because scholars found that high academic stress considerably predicted low quality of sleep and well-being in students (ALQarni, 2024).

The reason as to why emotion was imbalanced was sleeplessness. Following the repeated disrupted sleep, students would report having irritability, mood swings, and problem on concertation. Such emotional disorders slowed their academic progress besides putting stress on their relations with others and families. Such observation confirms the study which indicates that sleep quality plays a crucial role in emotional regulation and executive functioning (Guo et al., 2022). These sleep-related disturbances are more severe in the situations found in public colleges in Khushab where affected individuals have no emotional support mechanism (Umar et al., 2022). What is then revealed here is a vicious cycle in the sense that academic strain causes poor sleep that can

subsequently worsen emotional integrity that eventually fuels additional academic stress.

A fundamental problem that arose in the discussions was institutional inflexibility and inattentiveness reflected in their learning conditions. Memorizing, with rather insensitive teaching methods, as well as an absence of academic and emotional support, gave the students a feeling that they were unsupported and not valued. These bits of knowledge strengthen the claim that when poor institutional cultures are added to an integrated low infrastructure issue, they are major stressors to the students and this leads to emotional exhaustion (Aithal & Aithal, 2023). Such systemic problems not only increase the stress levels, but they deny the victims any means of stress release. (Guo & Lee, 2023) According to the Digital Learning Ecology Theory and Network Learning Theory, the learning environment must become dynamic and responsive and provide emotional scaffolds and external tools to help control mental load (Chang & Yang, 2023). However, in such environments, they lack this kind of support mechanisms and therefore students are left to work out stress by themselves.

Additional emotional pressure was created by the parental expectations. The issue was that students tended to internalize the sacrifices that the family made and feel guilty because they did not want to be a disappointment to their family (Abell & Gecas, 1997). The problem was that many shared the view that education was the single ladder of economic uplift and failure was a collective experience. This conditional love has psychological implications that are aligned with the South Asian relative society because of their family respectability being linked to educational success (Silva, 2021). This emotional strain is even great in the low-resource setting where there is limited access to alternative pathways to success (Van Zyl et al., 2021). Therefore, it is not only academic but also emotive pressure as students bear the burden of all the expectations of their families, which greatly affect their health.

The fear of failure, humiliation in front of crowds were referred to as common states of emotions. Students were afraid to be judged against the sibling or chastised by the teachers in the presence of the peers. Such emotional sensitivity is a definite benchmark of the social-emotional spree of these colleges. Emotional distress of shame is minimally addressed and worked with within institutions, in line with the studies that indicated that shame, when internalized and without support, contributes to reduced motivation levels of academic achievements and self-esteem (Oades-Sese et al., 2014). Students of Khushab are not psychologically safe, lack the emotional support of their peers and are therefore left to experience futile cycles of stoic silence. This stress is increased by the absence of trained counselors or safe places to express their emotions which proves to be an extremely crucial oversight as far as current institutional practices are concerned.

Frequently, there were only superficial coping strategies. The largest number of students characterized passive states of behavior such as social withdrawal, holding back feelings, or spending too much time in front of the screen. Very few exhibited active measures of emotional processing and seeking help. This points to the results of research that concluded that in low-resource settings, students tend to embrace poor coping strategies when under a heavy load of stress because of the absence of role models or guidance (Spencer, 2001). Lack of peer-driven support, compassion on the part of the teachers, or counseling-

based services around the cultural backgrounds makes these students unfit to manage emotional distress through sustainable methods.

What comes out in this study is a complex network of emotional, institutional and social factors that determine the well-being of students. These relationships are not straight-line Numerical Independence: There is not relationship or association between the two variables (Wald, 1940). These are instead a psychological-affective landscape determined by the conditions of the immediate academic milieu, by the pressure of a family background, and the lack of orientation systems. The theoretical combination of the Extended Mind Theory and the Network Learning Theory allows seeing these experiences through a different lens since, when their external aid in learning is not in place whether it is social, cognitive, or institutional learners will struggle considerably to maintain their self-regulation skills and coping ability (Newman, 2002). The results help to contribute to the hypothesis that emotional well-being, sleep quality, and academic stress have an ecosystem of disadvantage and are not the independent variables.

These observations indicate the need to introduce institutional reforms that are not just intended to target the curriculum only, but also emotional scaffolding. Formation of peer support groups, offering culturally appropriated counseling services as well as teaching faculty about emotional literacy are not attachments but are needed measures in academia (Aithal & Aithal, 2023). The data provided above shows that students in the state colleges of Khushab do not just feel stressed, but rather their circumstances are such that they are unsupported, burnt out and overloaded (Imtiaz, 2024).

Findings

- The use of antiquated teaching and strict assessment systems is causing the academic related stress in students who do not sleep well and face impaired wellbeing as a result.
- Scarcity of academic facilities (i.e. libraries, electronic devices and silent study areas) in state colleges worsens academic stress and reduces the capacity of students to adapt well.
- Parental expectations run parallel to emotional distress, particularly because students in low income families feel the need to perform well so as to permit the sacrifice they have to make by their families.
- Failure is understood as the public humiliation that leads to the strong suppression of emotions and avouch mentality with the help of them influencing the academic activity and mental health of students.
- There are deadly shortages in emotional outlets and institutional supports systems, and the students find no mobilization in terms of expert help or guidance in how they can deal with academic pressure and sleep deprivation.
- A close relationship exists between stress levels and the quality of sleep, which is very poor; hence it affects the physical and psychological well being of the students negatively.
- Coping behaviors or professional help are systematically unfulfilled in the under-resourced school setting, and thus a stress-silence-academic burnout triad is created.

Conclusion

The paper provides a contextual realization of how the majorities of academic stress, emotional expectations, and the neglects of the system allied to disrupt the sleeping patterns, and the mental state of the learners in the Khushab in the state colleges. Student voices expose their culture of rote learning, infrastructural shortage, constrained emotionality as deep-rooted attributes, which increase anxiety and effect the natural sleep patterns. The effect is reinforced by parental pressure which stems out of economic sacrifice and conditional support to students, which most of the time come in the form of guilt, fear and psychological torture of those being burdened. The lack of institutional systems of support, be it in terms of counseling, or the presence of inclusive pedagogy, deprives the students of outlets that are safe in terms of their emotional expression. These data support the argument of necessary changes to the currently implemented practices in education that should be focused on the well-being of students, inclusion of mental health support in college education, modernization of the teaching process in classes, and reduction in institutional disparities between schools, especially under-resourced districts. The academic prospect and overall wellbeing of the students in underserved areas will continue to be jeopardized, unless such focused initiatives are implemented.

Recommendations

- Appropriate education budgets at district levels to ensure basic facilities at schools like provision of libraries, quiet study rooms and fans in classrooms are provided so as to better the learning environments.
- Recruit part-time or shared trained college counselors in local institutions around to help overcome emotional difficulties.
- Conduct teacher training sessions about formative assessment and stress-free techniques of teaching as part of existing, wider CPD (Continuous Professional Development) programmers.
- Instead of introducing a new subject, inculcate sleep and stress awareness sessions in Pakistan Studies or General Science curriculum.
- Use the currently used parent-teacher meetings to discuss with parents the negative impact of the pressure on performance on their child and how supportive communication will help them.
- Form peer support groups guided by the seniors with minimum facilities and encourage free emotional expression, academic assistance informally.

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