

School performance anxiety in adolescents

Ioannidis Nikolaos

Phd, Sociology Teacher, Directorate of Secondary Education of Magnesia,
nioand@yahoo.gr

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate anxiety in senior high school adolescents, and particularly the stress related to school performance and examination requirements in the current educational system. We hypothesized that examinations, and particularly the Greek school final examinations, cause intense stress to students, because they are directly related to school performance. Adolescents are expected to select an academic sector and a future profession, a remarkably stressful situation combined with adolescence itself. After defining the concepts of anxiety and school performance, we examined and analyzed the correlation with the attitudes of parents, educators and peers to reach to conclusions. The results of this study provide some evidence that our initial hypothesis was confirmed, although differences were recorded between students. The main factor of adolescent anxiety is the feeling of not possessing the adequate skills to fulfill the requirements of the examination. Their self-esteem was affected by their performance in the examinations and their success in examinations was extremely associated because they were affected by the criticism from their social environment and family.

Keywords: anxiety levels, school performance, adolescents, final examinations.

Introduction

The Greek term “άγχος”, deriving from the ancient Greek verb “άγχω” which means “strangle” or “suffocate,” describes an unpleasant feeling of stress, a suffocating pressure to the throat (Plykandrioti, 2014). The vernacular term “stress” also refers to this feeling of pressure. Anxiety is a common undisputable fact in human life’s that constitutes a universal cause of poor academic performance among students worldwide (Dawood *et al.*, 2016). Test anxiety, in particular, refers to the specific issue of anxiety related to achieving high test scores in educational careers and as it was previously shown in literature that type of anxiety has a negative impact on school performance (D’Agostino *et al.*, 2021).

Examination performance anxiety represents a distinct form of anxiety, studied systematically since the 1950’s. Its most recent versions are based on the cognitive interference model, according to which anxiety causes reactions irrelevant to the solution of the school task, interfering and affecting the course of solution, and thus the performance quality (Metallidou, 1995). These reactions are combined with the concern for a potential failure. The stimulus triggering anxiety is related to the perception of evaluation, the underlying concern and fear of a current or future crisis (Zagklara, 2014).

School performance encompasses the actions and activities a student engages in at school, including the reproduction and utilization of information acquired during the educational process. The term refers to the obligation to produce work in the classroom and focuses on individual student learning and development. School performance is related to cognitive characteristics and particularly to the notions/knowledge and skills to use them in arduous/challenging situations. Student performance is among the essential subjects of the educational community and concerns all the interested parties in the learning process, while the complexity to interpret is attributed to its inextricable association with the school objectives and values (Vasiloudis, 2010).

However, school performance is associated and directly dependent on anxiety, which may function as a stimulating or an inhibitory factor. The positive dimension of anxiety appears as

hyperstimulation assisting students to perform even under stressful conditions (Zagklara, 2014). Thus, the “natural” or “creative anxiety” stimulates the students preparing for examinations, to help them work and organize their studying, minimizing the risk of failure and increasing the possibility for positive outcome. Conversely, “pathological anxiety”, which is exaggerated in relation to the stimulus inducing it, often affects the ability to respond to daily activities. It is related to internal insecurity and conflicts, rather than environmental factors (‘Positivus’, 2011).

Nevertheless, the causal association between anxiety and performance remains to be fully defined/determined. Studies have shown that scholar failure may be at the origin of the vicious circle of anxiety-performance-failure (Zagklara, 2014). There are references stated that students face two types of anxiety, a general test anxiety, and anxiety of a specific teaching subject, usually witnessed at school (Chishti, & Rana, 2021). Other researchers mention that the participants’ anxiety levels do not exceed the level which would have a negative impact on their academic results (Tóth, A., 2021).

Adolescents with high levels of stress often perform more poorly than those who manage it. Stressful situations limit the capacity of the working memory to follow the required procedures to process information and control its execution. The working memory describes a system of short-term memory controlling, regulating and storing specific information. In case the information stored in the working memory is disturbed, performance may be impaired due to distraction because the individual focuses on its anxiety rather than information management. Students experiencing strong anxiety tend more to experience memory loss, are incapable of processing the knowledge taught and associate it with reality (Zagklara, 2014).

Background

The role of family in school performance

School performance, particularly in adolescence, may be affected by a series of endogenous or exogenous factors. Endogenous factors include the students’ personal characteristics, attitudes and habits, while exogenous factors refer to their developmental and social environment (Vasiloudis, 2014). The main exogenous factors include parents’ participation to school life, follow-up of the students’ efforts and parental bond. Autonomy, awareness and sense of adequacy in adolescents may represent the most essential prognostic elements of school success (Zagklara, 2014).

Furthermore, freedom and autonomy contribute markedly as a reference framework of parental behavior toward adolescents. Parents should respond to the adolescent need for freedom, autonomy and self-expression, by showing acceptance and flexibility. The sense of being trusted and treated as responsible and mature individuals increases markedly adolescents’ self-esteem, thus ameliorating their school performance (Makri-Mpotsari, 2008), because they feel more capable and confident about their abilities (Zagklara, 2014). Conversely, parental behavior control and regulation via orders, instructions, or even threats of deprivation of parental love, pressures adolescents to yield specific results such as school success. Parents who control their children behavior without intervening in their autonomy tend to have more adapting adolescents, with good social skills, less behavioral issues and less depression. Moreover, supportive parents are more likely to positively evaluate the academic abilities and school performance of their children. Students with supportive parents internalize the need for school success while showing strong persistence and resilience to school requirements (Zagklara, 2014).

The type of parental bond affects markedly the students’ results and school performance. Parental involvement promotes school success in adolescents when occurring within a strict child rearing framework. Studies have shown that child rearing characterized by high acceptance, supervision and psychological autonomy leads to better school performance and

stronger commitment to school. Children raised in authoritative family environments may show fairly good behavior but more limited social skills; they tend to suffer from anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and present psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches and dizziness. In contrast, children from tolerant families have higher self-esteem, lower rates of depression and anxiety, but are more likely to get involved in problematic situations while showing poor school success. Students with disengaged parents have more problems and poor academic achievement. (Zagklara, 2014)

The role of educators in school performance

Differences in school performance had been long attributed to the presence or absence of intellectual ability, rather than to external factors. More recently, it has been reported that the social background of students affects their school performance to a great extent. However, it appears that, in addition to family, school contributes equally in shaping school performance (Theodosiadou, 2013).

Educators are among the most important assets of the education system, contributing to the learning process together with the students. Professors' knowledge and behavior determine the quality of the educational outcome and affect students' performance. Therefore, the quality of teacher-student relationships is of paramount importance; mild education practices are more likely to stimulate students to perform their school duties. Thus, good school performance is motivated by both family and educator behaviors. (Theodosiadou, 2013)

Within the context of educator-student relationships, students seek to satisfy their basic needs, such as security, love, participation in the community, but also differentiation, independence and need for self-determination. The last three needs, those of self-regulation, determine students' self-awareness and self-esteem. Thus, educators' attitudes and personality affect the developing relationships within the classroom and students' self-awareness. Educators should be aware of the importance of self-esteem for the learning process and behavior of students (Rapti, 2003). Research has shown that positive comments and encouragement for classroom participation by educators affects students' self-esteem, creating a relationship of commitment to school and educational work (Zagklara, 2014).

The role of peers in school performance

Studies have reported a correlation between peer relationships and school performance. Students rejected by their peers show higher rates of school failure, reflected in low grades, poor performance in examinations and higher rates of dropout. Additionally, students who are victims of school violence and bullying show reduced academic performance and behavioral problems (Vasiloudis, 2014).

Inter-student relationships contribute markedly to the fulfillment of students' academic, social, and emotional needs, and the shaping of self-perception. Peer acceptance is of particular concern to students and affects their self-esteem and behavior accordingly. A training program on students' interpersonal skills, conducted by O'Neil Tremblay, has revealed that children's self-esteem and interpersonal relationships are directly related. Furthermore, another study has demonstrated the correlation between self-esteem, social prestige and academic achievement. (Rapti, 2003)

Friends play a positive role in the socio-psychological health of adolescents. Most adolescents seek to discuss their choices with peers beforehand, avoiding making impulsive decisions. Adolescents choose friends based on characteristics and talents they admire, which in turn motivates them to succeed and act similar. They may be encouraged by them to study efficiently for school and think creatively. Friends with high school achievement affect positively adolescents' satisfaction with school, educational expectations, grades and test scores. Students with friends who like school show higher grades and interest in school, while minimizing the possibility of not graduating (Zagklara, 2014).

Finally, the impact of friends is a moderating factor, reducing or increasing the positive influence of parents. Adolescents whose friends and parents support academic achievement perform better than those receiving partial or no support (Zagklara, 2014).

Research data

Initial hypothesis

We hypothesized that examinations, and particularly the Greek school final examinations, cause intense stress to students, because they are directly related to school performance. Entrance examinations to higher education represent an opportunity for adolescents to prove to themselves and others their ability and worth; thus, they display high levels of anxiety. The fear of disappointing their close environment and insecurity of not meeting their expectations induce negative thoughts and anxiety about their final performance.

Methods

A questionnaire form was created in Google Drive and distributed electronically to high school students of Volos and Larissa, via email, social media, secondary school teachers' websites and, in some cases, within the school premises in the laboratory of the computer science course.

The form included an introduction stating the purposes and the framework of the study, while highlighting the protection of the participants' anonymity at the submission of the questionnaire. All answers were mandatory; however, no answer was considered correct or wrong. A total of 100 questionnaires were completed and analyzed. The sample was stratified according to the gender and to the students' school performance, in order to achieve a better understanding on their attitude towards final exams.

The questions included in the questionnaire were common for all students and were grouped according to the following themes:

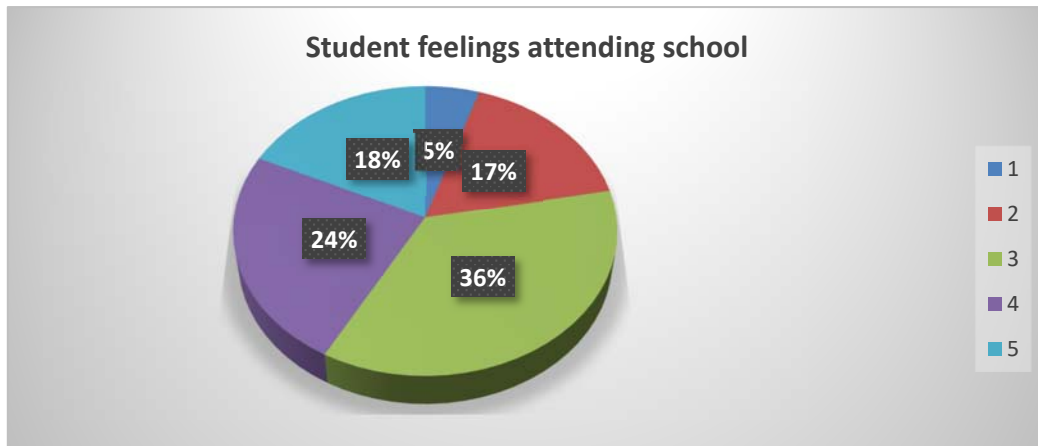
- 1) Students' relationship with the school environment
- 2) Extracurricular activities not related to school and examination requirements
- 3) Performance in the Greek school final examinations
- 4) Students' attitudes toward school and examination requirements

After collecting the questionnaires and performing an initial analysis of results, we carried out interviews with 12 students, six girls and six boys, from the 2nd grade of the 4th Senior High School of Volos. We deemed it good to define in more detail the way students think and what are the particular characteristics that differentiate stress in terms of school performance by adding open ended questions. We tried to base the research on the data of the Greek experience by taking into account at the same time the general theoretical framework that concerns the subject (D'Agostino, *et al.*, 2021; Bagana, *et al.*, 2011; Lazaratou, *et al.*, 2013). They were all asked to comment on a part of the study results and express their views regarding examinations, anxiety, family and other factor's impact. The interviews were focused on estimating the critical factors which influence student psychology either negatively or positively by delineating the stressful conditions during the final exams and the extent of that influence to students' self-esteem.

Results

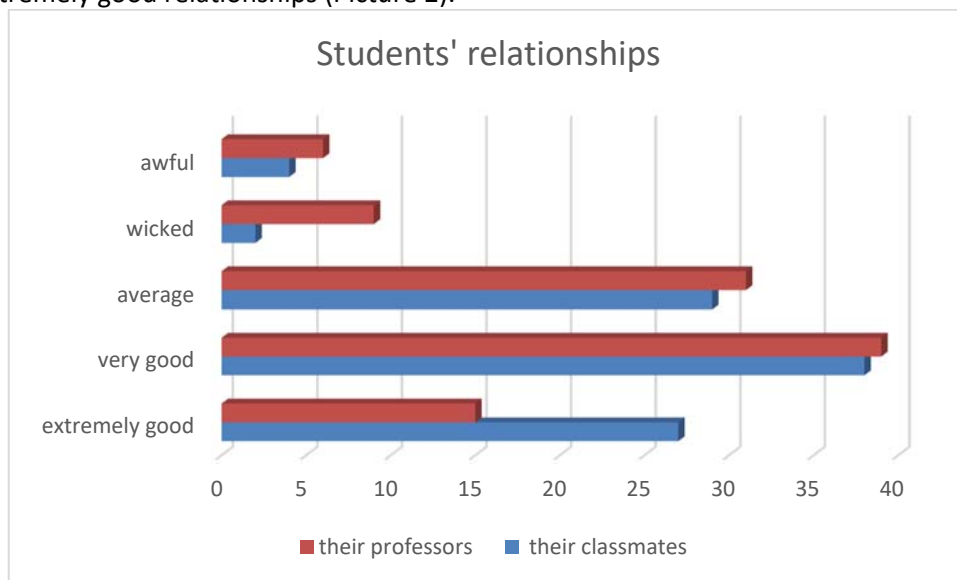
Questionnaires

Most students were not satisfied with school. Most participants (36%) moderately enjoyed attending school, while 24% and 18% reported enjoying it slightly and not at all, respectively. Only five of 100 adolescents were very satisfied with their school. This result provides an initial insight on how students feel about school, and what that entails (Picture 1).



Picture 1. Students' feelings about high school

Although students were unhappy with school, they maintained good relationships with their peers. Thirty-eight (38%) reported they had very good, 29% average, and 27% extremely good relationships with their classmates. Similar, most students have below average relationships with their professors; particularly, 39% have very good, 31% average, and 15% extremely good relationships (Picture 2).



Picture 2. Students' relationships with their classmates and their professors.

Although test anxiety can affect male and female adolescents and middle school and high school students, many studies worldwide suggest that female adolescents and middle school students are possibly at a greater risk of developing test anxiety (Lowe, 2021; Zile *et al.*, 2021, Torrano *et al.*, 2020). In this study differences were recorded between senior high school female and male students regarding the anxiety prior to examinations, choice of studies and future profession.

Girls stated feeling pressure because of school requirements, being extremely concerned about their performance in examinations and experiencing negative emotions due to examinations, while boys did not feel pressure, were moderately concerned and did not experience negative emotions. (Figure 1)

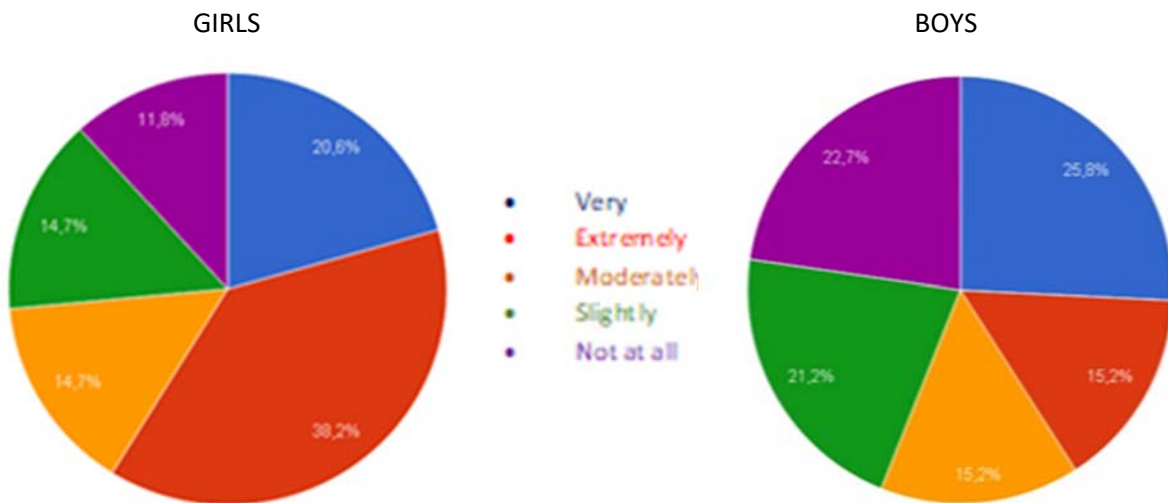
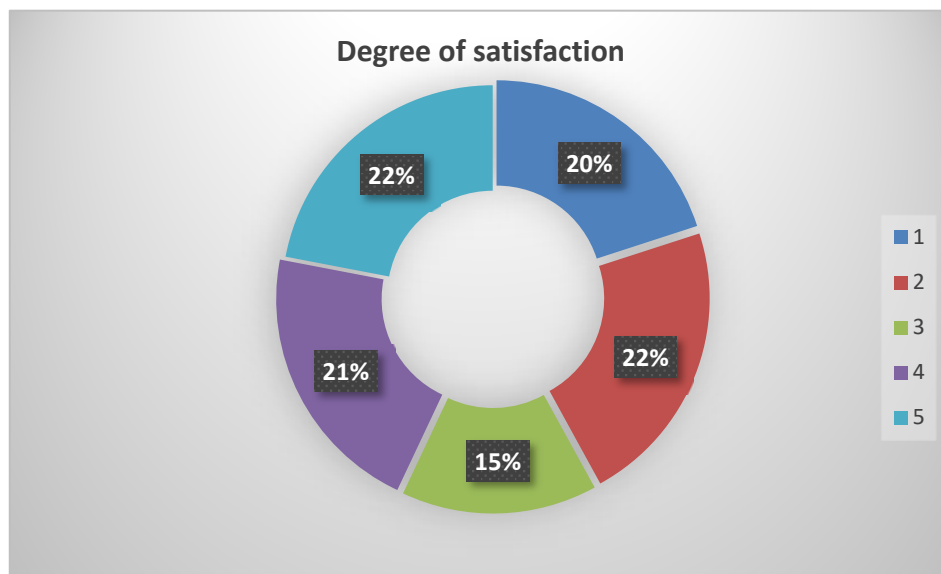


Figure 1. Assessment from 7. To what extent do you believe are true the following sentences regarding your performance in the school final examinations? [I am concerned about my performance in them.]

Regarding adolescents' extracurricular activities such as sports, dancing, music and others, the responses were approximately evenly split when asked about the degree of satisfaction. Twenty-two (22%) students responded “not at all,” while the same number (22%) reported being “very satisfied,”; twenty-one reported being “slightly satisfied” and 20 “extremely satisfied”. The lowest, yet not small, percentage (15%) of students reported being “moderately satisfied” with the hours spent on extracurricular activities (Picture 2).

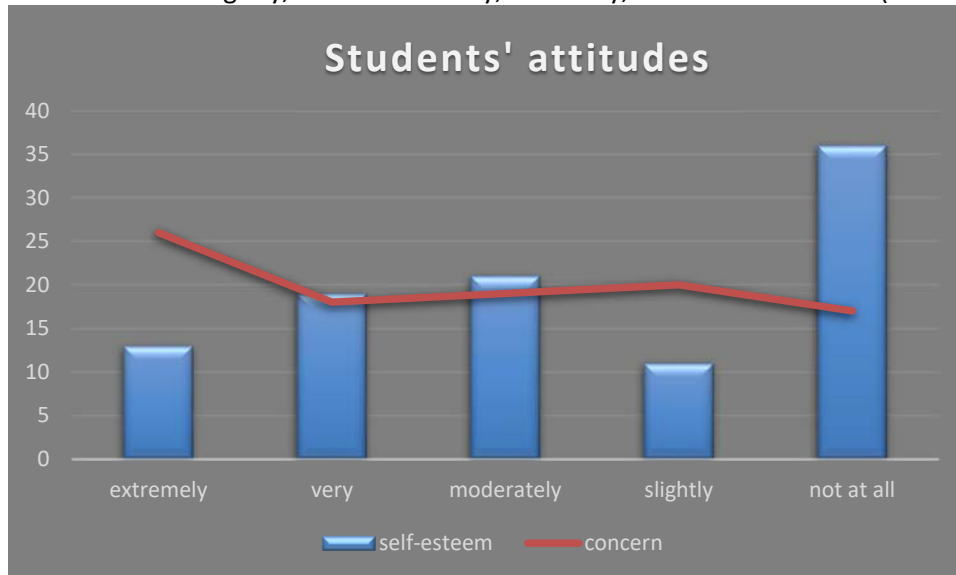


Picture 3. Students' degree of satisfaction for their extracurricular activities.

Furthermore, adolescents' non-school-related activities were very essential for their psychological balance. Approximately 3 out of 5 students, i.e., 64%, did not wish at all to reduce the hours they spent on extracurricular activities. Interestingly, eight students reported they wanted to reduce the time spent on these activities; two “a lot”, and six “extremely”. Thirty participants wanted to increase their involvement in extracurricular activities “extremely”, 21 “a lot” and the same number of students did not express the need for extra time for activities that were not related to school or examinations. The positive aspect of extracurricular activities is that most students consider that these are their own choice. They represent the free time of adolescents, during which they have the opportunity

to escape from their problems and concerns, both in and out of school, and to boost their mood and strength. Thus, 42% answered “extremely,” 27% “a lot”, and 16% “moderately.”

Although the most predominant answer to the question on whether adolescents' self-esteem depends on the final examinations was “not at all” (36%), the percentages of the other answers should not be ignored. One out of three students answered “a lot” or “extremely,” (19% and 13%, respectively), while 21 answered “moderately.” Furthermore, most (26%) students reported being “very concerned” about their school and examination performance. However, the percentages of the remaining four options were quite similar; thus, 20 participants answered “slightly,” 19 “moderately,” 18 “very,” and 17 “not at all.” (Picture 4).



Picture 4. Students' self-esteem dependence with final examination in relation with their concern about the examination performance.

Half of the students felt their effort was “moderately” or “very” reflected on their school performance. Twenty students considered their school performance does not at all reflect their studying. Conversely, 12 students believed it “extremely” reflected their effort. Regarding the experience of negative feelings due to examination requirements, no wide variations were recorded between the five response options. Twenty-nine adolescents felt no anxiety, anger or desperation, 21 “extreme,” 19 “slight” and 18 “a lot.”

Regarding the ways of coping negative emotions, most (29%) participants never sought their parents' support, 27 “sometimes” did, and 24 “rarely.” Only 20 students when feeling stress, pressure and frustration “usually” or “always” sought support from their parents. Students preferred to seek support from their siblings and friends rather than from their parents; particularly, 46% “usually” or “always” needed the help of their close environment, which represents the double of the percentage seeking parents' support.

Interviews

Out of twelve students who participated in the research, 8 were not influenced psychologically either negatively or positively by the stressful conditions during the final exams. As a matter of fact, they reported reduced to no stress levels in final exam situations. Four students reported an influence ranging from slight to strong. In every case the students have effectively managed to create the mental structures that allow them to either reduce stress levels to manageable by taking breaks from studying or by using the feelings to further motivate and fuel their studying efforts. In that manner, extra curriculum activities seem to play an important role in their psychology.

Out of twelve students only three reported a negative impact on their self-esteem. In one case these negative feelings were followed by the believe for strengthening of resolve and for increasing efforts to successfully pass the exams. One student found the whole final exam process frustrating and ineffective. Another mentioned feeling of discouragement, despair and hopelessness that leads to a retrospective reflection of partly efforts that in turn leads to a further effort. In most of the cases a possible success in the final exams will have a positive impact on the self-image. It gives a sense of reward for the efforts and satisfaction for all the hard work that has paid off. On the contrary, two students mentioned that although success will have a positive impact, a possible failure will have a negative, disappointing effect.

Discussion - Conclusion

The results of this study provide some evidence that our initial hypothesis was confirmed, although differences were recorded between students. Adolescents attending general senior high schools were either consciously or unconsciously critical toward the current education system, as shown by the answers in the questionnaire and the interview. They do not like attending school, although their relations with their teachers and peers are good, i.e., their socialization in school is good. This dissatisfaction may be attributed to the practices resulting from the education system in Greece. It seems that students who spend more time to school-related activities, as well as students insecure about their knowledge, tend to face higher anxiety levels and therefore they are not satisfied in school. These findings are in accordance with relative literature about Greek students, where it is stressed that excessive time spent on studying for the exams increased anxiety (Lazaratou, *et al.*, 2013).

Their self-esteem was affected by their performance in the examinations, which is evident from their conflicting answers to the questionnaire on this topic, and from the interview. One female student said: "Since I currently have no self-esteem, succeeding will increase it,"; another female student explained that adolescents' self-esteem and their success in examinations were extremely associated because they were affected by the criticism from their social environment and family. In case of failure, they reported being "stigmatized," which impeded their self-esteem. Other studies also showed a negative relationship between self-esteem and optimism and anxiety (Bagana, *et al.*, 2011).

Our results showed parents were supportive, encouraging adolescents to make a great effort, but they went beyond the limits by directly or indirectly expressing their expectations of their performance in examinations. Parent-child communication was not ideal during this difficult period of examinations, owing to the characteristics of adolescent thinking and behavior; thus, students reported lack of interest in seeking their parents' support. Therefore, parents were not able to assist them, nor could they show them ways to manage their anxiety. It has been reported that previous good communication and relationship positively affects the student's developing self-esteem, which in turn reduces their anxiety.

High-achieving adolescents consider that success in examinations will reward them for their efforts, but good preparation does not imply lack of anxiety prior to the final examinations. One interviewed male student mentioned that "If you have put in a lot of effort, you get anxious about wasting your effort, whereas if you have put in a little effort you don't need to be anxious because you know you haven't worked." Furthermore, a female student added that "Even if you are a good student, you may 'blank out' and not perform well," suggesting that anxiety results from a non-objective view of the situation.

It is evident in literature that anxiety plays a crucial role in test scores regardless of the specific area of study, and it negatively impacts individual performance. In this respect, the negative association between anxiety and academic achievement is not confirmed, but there are evidences that afford mainly students with higher school performance. Consequently, it is reasonable that high-performing students are more worried about achieving poor grades and have a greater fear of failure than low-performing students. Additionally, parents can help

children to manage anxiety by encouraging them to have more faith in their ability to accomplish school tasks (D'Agostino *et al.*, 2021).

Peers seem to contribute remarkably to adolescents' efforts for high performance, owing to the competition that is created between them; one student reported that "High goals in the group inspire you and you try harder; it is not absolute but it happens, as well as the opposite." The need for acceptance by peers may affect adolescents positively or sometimes negatively, while they usually fear that "Maybe my friends will get accepted in a higher education institution and I won't," as one female student reported.

This factor of parent – student relationship, their influence and their desires and the interdependence that this relationship creates plays a crucial role in igniting this stressful situation (Giannousis, 2018). Not fulfilling their targets can be interpreted as failure of their trust on them. Despite this, adolescents will continue to depend on them, since they lack the ability for self- definition, the beginning of an autonomous destination. For the majority of them, appropriate choices are few and their desires are plenty. The choice of a university department which can guarantee future development is a crucial factor which can lead in the students' process of autonomy, their independence of family 'nestle' and at the same time it rewards and improves their relationship with them. They are primarily responsible for planning and gradually intensifying this effort since adolescents can hardly 'define their limits and coordinates'.

The basic hypothesis of the research that adolescents in senior high school feel intense anxiety about their performance in the Greek school final examinations seems to be confirmed and is in line with other similar studies (Kurt, *et al.*, 2014).

School anxiety, often manifested at school age, refers mainly to difficulties in school life. However, Mpimpou-Nakou (2004) reports that school anxiety is related to various factors, including the individual characteristics of the child, family, social conditions, school curriculum, practices of the educators and other members of the school community. All these factors should be accounted for when investigating strategies to reduce students' anxiety. Paraskevopoulos (2005) argues that many of the problems children face at school may result from anxiety or phobia. Furthermore, he highlights that medication is not an appropriate treatment for phobias in children, but other ways and techniques should be preferred and applied, based on a team effort between the child, educators and parents.

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