OXFORD JOURNAL
OF STUDENT
SCHOLARSHIP

Good Challenge, Bad Challenge? Socioeconomic Influences On High School Students' Sources and Responses to Academic Pressure

Milo Linn-Boggs and Teagan Peabody
26mlinnboggs@derryfield.org

ABSTRACT

Persistent disparities in academic achievement remain a defining feature of U.S. secondary education, appearing linked to socioeconomic strata. Prior research emphasizes objective SES indicators and material proxies, often overlooking students' psychological appraisals and subjective definitions. This study: 1) gathered baseline qualitative data on how high-schoolers define academic success and academic pressure across public and private settings; 2) built an explanatory framework using grounded theory; 3) interpreted emergent patterns and mechanisms statistically and theoretically; and 4) derived practical guidance. Using a hybrid design, Straussian grounded theory integrated with inductive thematic analysis, phenomenologically informed, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 students (ages 15–18; grades 9–11) from nine schools. Subjective social status was measured with the MacArthur Ladder for Home and School. Academic pressure was near-universal but not uniformly experienced: students who perceived higher standing at school and had clear task pathways more often described pressure as motivating, whereas lower standing and opaque criteria were associated with mixed or stressful appraisals. Interventions that increase assessment transparency, reduce public comparison, and build in structured recovery can preserve rigor while channeling pressure into productive effort.

INTRODUCTION:

Across the United States (U.S.), conversations surrounding the "achievement gap" often revert to objective indicators—grade point average (GPA), standardized testing scores, course difficulty, graduation rates, and college enrollment (1). While such metrics hold significance, they offer limited insight into how students themselves conceptualize "academic pressure," what they prioritize, and their underlying reasons. In practice, initiatives designed around external criteria may fall short if they do not align with students' personal objectives and standards for achievement. The central issue this study addresses is that previous scholarship has predominantly focused on structural determinants of academic performance, while insufficiently examining students' subjective definitions of success and how these vary according to social location.

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a well-established predictor of educational access and outcomes, shaping resource availability, school environments, and postsecondary trajectories (2). Yet SES captures tangible conditions more than it reflects how adolescents interpret their societal placement. Subjective social status (SSS)—an individual's self-assessed position within the social hierarchy—introduces this overlooked psychological layer. Typically measured using the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (3), commonly known as the MacArthur "ladder," SSS may influence motivation, aspirations, stress perception, and the value students assign to academic milestones in ways that objective metrics cannot (4,5). A more nuanced understanding of how SES and SSS jointly intersect with students' own interpretations of academic success can shed light on mechanisms that perpetuate educational disparities and highlight areas for intervention that honor students' perspectives.

Although literature on achievement gaps is expanding, relatively few investigations center high school students' own conceptions of what constitutes success (6), and fewer still explore how those perceptions differ systematically by SSS. Existing research often treats success as a singular outcome (e.g., "earn good grades and attend college") rather than a multidimensional construct encompassing mastery, curiosity, self-development, social contribution, wellness, or preparedness for future challenges (7). This oversight limits both policy and practice: when schools prioritize only what is externally mandated, they risk reinforcing narrow success paradigms—especially for students who encounter distinct obstacles, possibilities, or interpretations of academic achievement.

Through semi-structured interviews with high school students, we elicited detailed narratives regarding what "academic success" signifies, why it holds value, and how it is actively pursued. These interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (TA) (8) to identify shared and divergent themes in students' definitions, and grounded theory (GT, Straussian tradition) (9) to develop a conceptual model linking these definitions to contextual influences. The MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status – Youth Version (3) was administered to each participant to assess SSS, enabling thematic comparison across perceived social hierarchies while also considering SES as an environmental frame.

This approach advances existing discourse in three distinct ways. First, it reorients the definition of success to students' lived realities, rather than from adult-imposed standards, offering a more authentic foundation for student-centered educational practice. Second, by integrating SSS with TA and GT, it connects meaning-making processes to perceived social rank, revealing why similar institutional settings may foster varying goals, coping mechanisms, and motivational responses. Third, it translates qualitative findings into actionable recommendations for educators and policymakers aiming to expand metrics of success, bolster student motivation, and mitigate inequities without compromising academic rigor.

Accordingly, our objectives are: 1) to identify the drivers that compel high school students to pursue success and assess the effect of this pressure, and explore how individuals navigate success and failure within academic environments; 2) to analyze how these motivating forces and adaptive responses differ across levels of SSS; and 3) to construct an explanatory framework that accounts for observed variation and offers practical implications for assessment, guidance, and educational design. Throughout the

manuscript, we consistently employ the following abbreviations: socioeconomic status (SES), subjective social status (SSS), subjective social status in societal context (SSS-Home), subjective social status in school context (SSS-School), thematic analysis (TA), and grounded theory (GT).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data Source and Variable Selection

Design:

This study was conceived within the framework of realist epistemology (10), predicated on the assumption that empirical evidence may, to some extent, reflect an objective external reality. In light of the absence of prior literature, a grounded theory methodology was deemed appropriate. As such, the study's aim is exploratory: it seeks to generate theoretical insights rather than to test predefined hypotheses. Data used for the present analysis was collected as part of the author's multi-stage research project related to the Definitions of Academic Success. All stages of the research process adhered to the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) guidelines (11).

A multilevel ("Mehrebenen") mixed-methods design, as articulated by Schoonenboom & Johnson, structured the study. This approach integrated qualitative interviews (TA/GT) and quantitative MacArthur SSS assessments from the same participant sample, with analytical integration occurring at the interpretation stage (12). The first level focused on individual narrative accounts, while the second sought cross-case patterns connecting subjective social status (SSS) to students' conceptualizations of success (12). Within this concurrent design, both qualitative and quantitative elements were engaged at multiple analytical stages. Each dataset was first examined independently, then synthesized to illuminate complementary aspects of a unified research question or sequence thereof.

Recruitment:

Initial contact with prospective participants was facilitated through the Messages application (Apple, 2025) to assess interest in participation. Students were informed of the study's objectives, the nature and scope of their involvement, their right to withdraw or decline any question without penalty, the secure and confidential handling of their data in accordance with relevant ethical and legal standards, and the $15 gift card offered as compensation. This incentive was calibrated to reflect a $15/hour wage, aligning with typical compensation rates for high school-aged individuals in the Northeastern United States (13), and acknowledged the time participants voluntarily contributed during their summer break.

Upon obtaining written consent, interview appointments were scheduled at the participants' convenience. Participation was entirely voluntary. All affirmative responses were manually screened by a single researcher to verify eligibility. Every individual who expressed interest and met the criteria was invited to participate. Saturation was achieved after 12 interviews; an additional 6 were conducted to ensure

comprehensive data coverage, yielding a total of 18 interviews. Approximately 48 hours prior to each session, participants received a detailed message outlining the interview logistics, time expectations, rights, confidentiality protocols, and compensation details.

Interview Procedures:

Interviews were conducted between June 20, 2025, and August 2, 2025, via Google Meet (Google, 2025), chosen for its encrypted security and accessibility—it requires no downloads and functions reliably over Wi-Fi. There were no imposed time limits; the median interview duration was 28.24 minutes, ranging from 11.55 to 45.26 minutes. The interview protocol was designed to reduce potential response biases, with particular attention to avoiding leading questions (through neutral, open-ended phrasing), redundancy (through diverse prompts), and interviewer influence (through neutrality of tone and affect) (14).

Each interview used a semi-structured guide with 18 core prompts centered on academic pressure—its sources (e.g., parental expectations, peer comparison, course rigor/tracking), appraisals (motivating, stressful, or both), coping responses, and perceived academic/psychological consequences—alongside two single-item subjective social status (SSS) ladders (School/Home). Three brief rapport-building openers preceded the core prompts to acclimate participants and keep a conversational tone. For analysis, we prioritized prompts that directly addressed the research questions on sources of pressure and student responses. Several items (e.g., schooling history, general "definitions of success," resource inventories) were used only to contextualize quotes or triangulate themes and thus are not summarized as stand-alone results. Because optional probes were used and not all participants offered content-rich answers to every prompt, descriptive counts and examples are reported only for items with complete, substantive responses. The full guide appears in the Appendix.

Ethical Considerations:

Ethical approval was granted prior to commencement by the Pearl Independent IRB. Participants consent was obtained in two forms: in writing (either via text message or email) and verbally. At the start of each interview, individuals were reminded that their participation was entirely voluntary. They were told they may skip any questions that they wished, were free to stop the interview at any time, for any reason, without penalty, and that any questions they chose to answer did not have a right or wrong answer. They were made aware that anything shared during the interview would remain strictly confidential and that only the research team would have access to their responses. Further, that their name and any identifying details would be removed from the final data (quotes are presented with pseudonyms (P1–P18)). Participants names were replaced with randomized numbers to maintain deidentification. Finally, they were notified that upon the termination of the study, all records would be adequately destroyed following standard research protocol.

Analytic Strategy:

The study employed a two-phase integrated approach, moving from descriptive strategy patterns to a process-oriented theory.

Phase 1: Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA). Following Braun and Clarke (8), TA was used to systematically map the dataset. This phase involved open coding to identify recurring 'Emotional Textures' and 'Sources of Pressure.' These themes provided the essential descriptive components of the student experience.

Phase 2: Straussian Grounded Theory (GT). These themes then informed the GT phase, where axial coding was used to determine the relationships between them. Specifically, GT moves beyond the themes provided from Phase 1 to offer potential explanations how a student's SSS may function as a pivot point between the 'Challenge' and 'Protective' loops (see Discussion section).

Methodological Decisions. Analytical decisions regarding the identification of patterns (e.g. 'Domino Cascades') belonged to the TA tradition. Decisions regarding the directional flow of the theory and the selection of the core category (status-calibrated pressure) followed GT protocols of constant comparison.

Theoretical Saturation. Saturation was assessed iteratively during Phase 2. The research team determined that saturation was reached when the final three interviews yielded no new properties or dimensions for the 'Challenge' and 'Protective' loops, indicating that the relationship between SSS-School and task controllability was conceptually dense and required no further data collection.

Statistical Analysis

Data Storage:

All data were analyzed using Google Sheets (Google, 2025), Voice Memos (Apple, 2024), and Google Drive (Google, 2025). Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed via Voice Memos, and securely stored in a password-protected Google Drive folder. At the conclusion of the study, all materials were deleted in accordance with standard research protocols. Limited identifying information was collected—name, school of enrollment, gender, academic year, and interview responses—with all but names gathered during the interview itself.

Spread of Data:

Participants represented nine distinct schools. Of the 18 students, 27.77% attended alternative private schools (n=5), 33.33% attended traditional college-preparatory institutions (n=6), and 38.88% attended public high schools (n=7). The gender distribution was 44.44% male (n=8) and 55.56% female (n=10). By academic year, the sample included 22.22% freshmen (n=4), 33.33% sophomores (n=6), and 44.44%

juniors (n=8); seniors were excluded as they had already graduated high school, given that data was collected in the summer months of June and August, and thus fell outside the scope of the study.

Geographically, 77.77% of participants resided in New Hampshire, 16.66% in Massachusetts, and 5.55% in Vermont. However, the majority of schools were located in New Hampshire, establishing a consistent educational context. Race was not a focus of this study due to the small sampling size and was therefore not recorded (see Limitations section).

Subjective social status (SSS) was assessed using the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status. For SSS-Home, scores ranged from 1 to 9, and for SSS-School, from 6 to 10. One participant declined to complete the survey, resulting in 17 valid responses. The most frequently reported SSS-Home values were 5 (n=4) and 7 (n=4); the least common was 6 (n=1). For SSS-School, the most common scores were 8 (n=8) and 10 (n=1). In total, 23.53% (n=4) of SSS-Home responses were at or below 5, while 76.47% (n=13) were above. Conversely, no SSS-School ratings fell below 5, with 100% (n=17) above that threshold. The average score for SSS-Home was 6.882 (SD = 1.278) and for SSS-School was 7.882 (SD = 0.993) (n_1 = SSS-Home; n_2 = SSS-School). These data were used to explore potential correlations between perceived social status and participants' conceptualizations of academic success.

Saturation:

Thematic saturation was assessed using Good–Turing sample coverage (15), treating each coded reference as a "token" and each normalized code label as a "type." This yielded N = 22 total mentions and $n_1 = 0$ singletons, so the estimated unobserved mass was $p_0 \approx n_1/N = 0$, and sample coverage $\hat{C} = 1 - p_0 = 1.00$. Thus, at the level of these labels, the probability that the next coded mention would introduce a new label is approximately zero. Because coverage speaks to label-level completeness rather than the absence of finer nuance, we interpret this as category saturation for this domain rather than conceptual exhaustion. As an additional check, the observed sample size and the point at which codes stabilized are consistent with the benchmarks reported by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) (16).

Data Analysis:

Interview transcripts were subjected to a structured thematic analysis grounded in the principles of grounded theory. This entailed a multi-step process: open coding (fragmenting the data into discrete units), axial coding (identifying relationships among emergent codes), and selective coding (synthesizing overarching categories into a coherent theoretical framework). Upon completing each interview, participants filled out the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status – youth version. This two-item instrument assesses self-perceived placement within broader U.S. society (based on education, income, occupational prestige, and respect) and within the student's school (based on academic performance, peer reputation, and social standing), using a visual ladder with ten rungs (17). The tool has demonstrated strong reliability in adolescent populations (18) and convergent validity with objective socioeconomic measures (19).

By employing a semi-structured format—anchored by a pre-established series of open-ended questions (e.g., "Do you feel like you have the resources you need to achieve your definition of academic success?") and followed by responsive prompts dictated by participant answers—and administering the SSS scale post-interview, this study aimed to explore how subjective social standing relates to students' understandings of success through a rich, layered framework. This allowed for the identification of quantifiable themes that transcend individual experiences.

In addition to qualitative analyses (TA/GT), we computed descriptive effect sizes to summarize patterns between pressure appraisals (motivating-only vs both motivating and stressful) and SSS. Specifically, we report Cohen's d and Cliff's δ for group differences in SSS-School, SSS-Home, and the School–Home gap, and point-biserial correlations between appraisals and these SSS indices. These statistics are exploratory, unadjusted, and hypothesis-generating given the small sample and qualitative design; no null-hypothesis significance tests were conducted. Analyses were computed from n=17 complete SSS cases where indicated.

It is important to note that not all data gathered in interviews are presented in the results section. Exclusions were made to ensure analytic coherence and relevance. All material was systematically reviewed, and decisions regarding omission were made with full transparency and adherence to ethical guidelines. Content was excluded only if it 1) did not pertain directly to the central research question regarding students' conceptualizations of academic success, with a particular focus on how this related to academic pressure; 2) duplicated insights already represented more effectively by other quotes; or 3) failed to meet minimum quality standards due to technical issues, off-the-record remarks, or incomplete data—especially when recontact for clarification was not possible. Questions are presented verbatim to preserve authenticity.

RESULTS

On average, participants located themselves one rung higher in the school context than in the broader U.S. context (SSS-Home: M = 6.88, SD = 1.28, range = 5–9; SSS-School: M = 7.88, SD = 0.99, range = 6–10). In 12 of 18 cases the school rating exceeded the U.S. rating, 3 were equal, and 2 were lower; the association between the two ladders was near zero ($r \approx -0.06$). This local status lift, higher perceived standing inside school than in society at large, was a salient, data-driven pattern which had not been pre-specified but observed consistently in this sample.

Figure 1: Summarizes the created themes and sub-themes

Figure 2: Reviews the code frequency of the sources of academic pressure. Students most often attributed pressure to self-imposed standards (10 mentions), but school ecology (public comparison/competitiveness; 7 mentions) and external expectations (5 mentions) were also

salient—supporting a dual-provenance model in which internally endorsed goals and socially cued evaluation co-produce "motivating-yet-stressful" pressure.

Figure 3: Covers the code frequency of the different emotional textures of achievement. Achievements were primarily narrated as pride and validation (16 mentions), often linked to renewed effort; smaller but notable threads involved anxiety/impostor cognitions (3 mentions) and obligation to meet standards (2 mentions), indicating positive valence frequently coexisted with vigilance. One (1 mention) participant was unsure.

Figure 4: Summarizes the code frequencies of the emotional textures of setbacks. Setbacks most often elicited a bounce-back orientation (8 mentions), but a comparable share described less adaptive patterns—domino spillover, situational shutdown, or feeling stuck (12 combined)—highlighting heterogeneity in post-failure trajectories. Two (2 mentions) participants were either unsure or declined to answer the question.

The weight of expectation: pressure as a double-edged sword

Self-imposed pressure:
I probably self- driven also, like I said, like, I want to graduate, I want to go to college. Like, maybe if I don't, like, I want to have a job, and then, like, I won't be able to make money. - P3

I'm probably the biggest person, like, who's like, I want to get these good grades and I'm always the most upset when I don't get the results that I want, but and I never feel like other people are like, upset. - P6

I want to challenge myself and do better, like, all the time. - P12

Maybe just me. I think...I think because I've always been good at school, the fact that there's, like, something to prove I can be better at. - P13

I would say it's like a internally I like to like succeed for me to be successful in the future, but like also…I want to…live up to expectations in all that. - P14

External pressure:
You don't want people that I know that you're doing bad in school, you know, it's it's kind of not cool or whatever to be failing...it's not the greatest thing to always care about other people think, but I feel like there's a point where you should. - P2

I don't like let them down, like, get a bad grade you if it's just like my teacher whatever and they like, I didn't know my teacher like work more personally so I feel like I don't want to let them down or whatever I' grade. - P8

I think it's a lot of just my friends than I feel like my parents have also spent just like, just for like colleges, more and like the SAT, they've definitely been pressuring me on, like that, and just like studying a lot for that to get like a really good score on that. - P16

I guess just like, my teacher's parents, oh, I feel like, the most. And also, like, working in a group project, like all your teammates are counting on you and, like, maybe even from school counseling, they're always like, oh, or ask me how I'm doing. - P18

Competitive school environment:
I'm in all the honors classes and everything, so I always feel like, oh, if I get, like, a low score, like, everyone else in there is gonna judge me 'cause everybody's in those classes because they're really smart in everything and then I'm like, oh, do am I, like, stupid or whatever. - P9

We do get a lot of pressure from our school to succeed…it feels really hard because like, we feel like we really want to succeed and then…we'll have some like assignments or tests or like, things that are coming up that, like, they're just so ridiculously hard. - P10

my friends to go,Oh, what'd you get? What'd you get? And then I'll be like, "Oh, I don't think I did so well getting like a 93 on assignment…peer pressure. - P16

I do get kind of like competitive with my friends, especially when I hear how well they're doing. - P17

I think a lot of my academic pressure comes from the fact that I go to a private day school, you know, and everyone there, we're all like, really smart individuals. And then I'm not the smartest in the room, and that has become, like, going from like public school where I was always, like, in the highest setting, you know, one of the smartest in the room to going to where I'm like middle of the, not saying I'm like the dumbest kid I've like ever met, but like, I'm like middle of the pack now. - P18

Connotations surrounding pressure
6 interviews said the pressure to succeed academically only felt motivating, while 12 found it both stressful and motivating.

Emotional texture of achievements
Pride & validation:
I think I'm satisfied, I'm hopeful. Like I'm glad that I'm actually learning something that like, hopefully apply and the next thing keep going. - P3

Yeah, I honestly didn't know how happy I felt or how, like my happiness, like, connected to my academic success until this year, because when I'd stopped struggling and at the end of this year, I saw all my grades go back up. I was like, ecstatic. Like, I remember, like, seeing my grade go to, like, an 89.9 and I'm like, yes, it rounds up to an A. - P4

I feel really proud of myself, and I feel like, oh, okay, so we'll got hard work, good payoff...And, yeah, I just feel very happy about it. And like, okay. So now I can push myself to be, like, do more. - P9

Good. Yeah, just motivating it, like, motivates me to do better, I guess...But, like, I know I can do better. Like, next time I, like, push myself even more. Got Catching I, like, know where, like, my limits are. - P15

But when I do really well on a test, it is so rewarding. Like, oh, I don't get too well enough. So it's like, oh my God, I study for this. Like, I deserve this. It feels good. - P18

Anxiety & imposter feelings:
I feel like I don't deserve it sometimes. Like, I't try like I I kind of feel like I don't deserve it sometimes, but I mean, it's nice to I degrees that my parents do get happy and whatnot. - P8

I then ask, like others, like, how did you do on this test? Because I want, I kind of like, want to see if this like, the test, like, was easy or if it was, like, actually because of, like me, like, being able to understand this topic and being able to, like, it was, like, my work….climate competition where it's like, I want to see, like how like I compare, like, square, like, add up so like others. - P14

Living up to standards:
I'm really proud. Yeah, yeah. Because it only on me, but it also reflects on my mother and my family, everybody else, so I feel like that's a good outlook for everybody. - P2

Really good. Yeah, makes me so. I like, I always like instantly text, like, my dad, because he's like, always, like, on his phone checking, especially when I'm in school. But it just makes me happy for the whole day because I feel like it's like a standard. And it's kind of like emotional relief. - P18

Emotional texture of setbacks
Domino effect; one thing goes bad and rest will follow:
Well, not good, and also, but if, like, the opposite, like, I might start doing worse, and then I like other things. my math is bad, like, my English look bad, my history be free, so I kind of like, it make it domino effect and keep, like making me feel worse with other classes and stuff. - P3

It's hard not to look back and say, "Oh, I should have done that." And it's equally hard to do some things that are difficult now that I have to do, that I know will pay off in the future-shirt.. So I think there's that kind of disconnect between what I didn't do and what I can do now. It's kind of very hard. - P5

it's rough. I had to do a thing I can of just ignore it if it's really stressing me out so I don't feel bad...Sometimes it's definitely a lot of work and it can be hard to kick the stress out, but sometimes I'll just have a hard time doing anything at all. - P8

Then I just sat there and like, cried for five hours. I just sat in my room and was like, upset. So it was like how like dumb am I to get like a 16% on a seminar. Yeah. I feel like that's.. God. I feel like that's definitely affected me a lot. I just, like, I just get so, like, dead inside. - P18

Bounce Back:
Like, I don't feel good when I'm struggling and it makes me to lose all my motivation. And it's hard, like, to buy myself be able to, like bring myself back from that, but, like, with all the resources we have, I'm able to - P4

I've been stressed out, but I don't really feel either...I feel like it pushes me to do better. - P7

Frustrating and motivating...motivating. I guess, like... I don't want to check. That kind of sense. I'm stupid, but, like, uh, I just. I think, like, um, when I struggle, like, I'm, like, annoyed, but, like, I guess I get at the same time, like, I'll try to like use that as motivation. - P15

Situational:
So I'm like, okay, I like this class, I put in the work and now I'm not getting. the results I want, like, what's wrong?...but if it's in a class where I just, I really have no idea what's going on, like, I don't even know how to figure out what's going on, like math or something. Then I'm just like shut down and I give up. It's just not a good strategy. - P6

Like, if it were something like that paper, where for like my English class, I take a lot of pride in my English. Yeah. And I love, like, I love writing. I love that type of stuff. And I think that if I spent all that time on that and I did horrible, then I would be, like, I would, I would be very unhappy. - P10

Stuck:
I tried to, like, understand it, but then when it's hard to understand, I'm like, oh, what am I doing around? When I understand this, and I feel like disappointed in myself because I'm a lot of the other subjects that come so easy.. And then I'm like, okay, why am I struggling with this? It's like, the same as like, it's like lock the math concept. I'm bad math. Why can't I do this? Or I'll do really good on the lessons, and then I get a test and I'm like, okay, why do I understand this at all? - P9

I guess it's kind of kind of stuck. You know, yeah... It's like, I know that I can do better. - P11

I think it's really difficult…whenever everyone's stressed or stressed and you're like, wait, I can't escape this because now I'm stressed out at home doing my school work, and I'm stressed out at school. So where's my happy medium and you kind of lose it? - P18

Letting people down:
And there's a lot of stress upon me and just nagging to that teachers even though I really don't like doing it sometimes. But you're like, yeah, I just want to kind of figure it out...You're like, I don't want to let them down. - P2

Explanatory Grounded Theory

The data suggests that students navigate school through a process of status-calibrated pressure: demands arise from intertwined self-imposed standards and socially cued expectations, then are appraised through (a) perceived standing in school (SSS-School) and (b) task controllability/fit (clarity of criteria, visible pathways). SSS-School is the primary lens; the School–Home gap modulates but is secondary. Appraisals sort experience into two recurrent loops. In the challenge loop (higher SSS-School, clear paths), pressure is theorized to focus attention, guide targeted strategy use, and yield validating feedback; emotions appear to stabilize effort, and students keep performance central while adding mastery/application.

In the protective loop (lower SSS-School, opaque criteria, public comparison) it is speculated that pressure is mixed, motivating yet stressful, prompting triage, comparison-avoidance, or withdrawal, with risk of domino spillover across courses. Emotions appear to feed rumination and depress subsequent appraisals. Bounce-back, it is suggested, occurs when relational and structural supports (transparent criteria, low-stakes practice, structured reattempts) restore control and shift students from protective to challenge trajectories. The theory predicts that small, local changes that elevate perceived standing and control—reducing public ranking signals, clarifying success paths, normalizing recovery—convert the same pressure from strain into productive effort.

DISCUSSION

In this sample, the valence of academic pressure, whether students experienced it as primarily motivating or as simultaneously motivating and stressful, tracked closely with SSS-School and, secondarily, with the School–Home SSS gap (SSS-School minus SSS-Home). Among students who characterized pressure as either "motivating" or "both" ($n = 16$), the "motivating-only" group reported substantially higher SSS-School ($M = 8.75$) than the "both" group ($M = 7.35$), a large standardized difference (Cohen's $d = 1.71$; Cliff's $\delta = 0.82$). SSS-Home showed limited corresponding advantage for the motivating group ($M = 6.58$ vs 7.05; $d = -0.34$). The School–Home SSS gap was also larger for the motivating group ($M = +2.17$ vs $+0.30$; $d = 1.20$; $\delta = 0.62$). Point-biserial associations (motivating = 1, both = 0) were $r = .66$ with SSS-School, $r = -.17$ with SSS-Home, and $r = .53$ with the School–Home gap ($n = 16$). One additional respondent described pressure as neutral ($n = 1$), and one "both" response lacked SSS data.

Two inferences follow. First, perceived standing in the school ecology, not home standing, emerged as a primary lens through which students appraised whether pressure functions as challenge or threat. Students who see themselves near the top of the school ladder seem to be more likely to experience pressure as

energizing and competence-affirming; students situated lower (or without a relative "lift" at school) are more likely to experience the same pressures as mixed, with stress and self-doubt co-present. Second, a positive School–Home SSS gap aligns with more favorable appraisals of pressure. Feeling relatively elevated at school (compared with one's home/broader context) may buffer social comparison rituals, reframe difficult coursework as opportunity, and help contain the "domino" cascades (where one "bad" result will lead to more) students described after setbacks.

Theoretically, the suggested central role of SSS-School in this model can perhaps be viewed through Folkman's psychology of appraisal, which posits that stress is not just the event itself but an individual's interpretation of it (20). In other words, SSS may be part of the cognitive process of evaluating a situation's significance to a student's well-being when it comes to academic pressure. Rather than just a measure of social position, SSS, particularly SSS-School, may act as a psychological "internal compass" that adolescents use to evaluate academic pressure. When a student perceives themselves as high-status in their school environment, academic pressure could be classified as a challenge, and it could be viewed as a manageable task as they feel they have the relational capital (e.g. support and respect) to succeed. However, for students with low SSS-School, the same pressure is perhaps appraised as a threat to their social standing. This may trigger a protective psychological state—where avoiding failure and embarrassment becomes crucial. This theory may explain why two students in the same classroom can experience the exact same assignment in opposite ways: one may find the pressure brought on by the assignment motivating and the other may interpret the pressure as demotivating.

These quantitative patterns clarify the qualitative accounts. In competitive and honors settings—where public comparison ("What'd you get?") and identity tests are salient—students with high SSS-School often reported pride, validation, and renewed effort after success, and framed pressure as a spur to growth. Conversely, when SSS-School was lower or task paths were opaque, the same contexts were described as anxiety-laden, with impostor feelings, avoidance, and difficulty "bouncing back."

Translation of research into practice

Importantly, these findings do not suggest lowering academic standards. Rather, they imply design moves that may encourage appraisals toward manageable challenges. This appears to be particularly relevant for students with lower SSS-School or a small/negative School-Home gap.

1. Make "difficult" academic tasks feel controllable. Provide annotated examples, explicit success criteria, and revision cycles that convert pressure from one-shot threat to iterative challenge.
2. Interrupt pressure cascades. Build brief, structured recovery opportunities (targeted reattempts, short reflective planning) to prevent a single miss from generalizing across courses.
3. Encourage students to explore challenging academic tracks. Normalize struggle, model help-seeking, and pair students with peers to encourage collaboration to manage the workload effectively..

LIMITATIONS

There are five key limitations to this research, the majority of which are inherent to qualitative research, but are clearly outlined here to verify the usability of this research for a general audience. Firstly, given the qualitative, exploratory design and small, regionally bounded sample (N=18; SSS n=17), findings should be treated as hypothesis-generating rather than confirmatory. Coverage estimates refer to label-level completeness and do not preclude finer-grained nuance.Similarly, as with all participant recruitment via individual connections, there is a high risk of sampling impacting results. Consequently, the transferability of the sample's findings to the larger population is unknowable. For those assuming a positivist view, it cannot be concluded that the experiences represented in this study are universal or that they are applicable to a broader population.

Secondly, due to the nature of thematic coding, results derived from the study may be missing slight nuances as they might have been overshadowed by the codes identified. In essence, data not pulled from interviews, due to the fact that it did not pertain to the codes or themes identified, could have a transcending pattern, thus revealing an unknown conclusion. Good-Turing coverage (15) was found by counting total mentions across codes (N) and the number of singletons (f_1, codes observed exactly once). Coverage is $\hat{C} = 1 - f_1/N$. In this dataset, $N = 22$, $f_1 = 0$, yielding $\hat{C} = 1.00$, i.e., an estimated 0% probability that the next coded mention would introduce a previously unseen code in this category. A coverage estimate near 1.0 indicates that, at the level of these normalized pressure-source categories, additional interviews are unlikely to add new labels; however, it does not guarantee that finer-grained subthemes or nuances were fully captured. In other words, high coverage can reflect the coarseness of the category scheme as much as true thematic closure. Coverage should therefore be interpreted as codebook completeness for this domain (pressure sources) rather than proof that no additional nuance exists.

Thirdly, the study failed to represent individuals who categorized themselves on the extreme poles of the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status. Specifically, no individuals in the study identified themselves, within the context of American society, as having a status of 1-4 or 10. This can be partially attributed to the fact that no assumptions or investigations into the individuals' socio-economic backgrounds were made (which would ensure we had an adequate spread of individuals from every standpoint on the scale) to remain ethically fair and limit bias. Furthermore, when contextualized within the low standard deviation in score (n=1.278), this lack of representation can also be explained by humans' natural desire to "say what is right"; participants' scores could have been influenced by an unconscious, predetermined assumption that a score of 6 or 7 was "fair" or "modest."

Fourthly, the study had little ethnic and racial diversity. This is because, due to the small sample size and of the study, as well as wanting to maximize the personal privacy of participants, race and ethnicity data were not recorded. In terms of the diversity of grades, no seniors (Grade 12) were present in the study due to the timing of data collection. Therefore, the study's findings have limited generalizability to the broader population, as the group might not be representative of the diversity that exists within the given population (21). The fact that the study's locus was New England (primarily New Hampshire) also

exacerbates this issue, reducing the study's generalizability to a geographically diverse population. All this said, for future analysis, and to make the results more generalizable, the authors would like to encourage a study with a larger, more broadly representative population.

Finally, effects may be sensitive to single cases and "mention" ≠ "priority"; what individuals mention once may not be entirely the truth or just part of the truth. Because SSS likely covaries with school type, grade level, and resources, mixed patterns should be confirmed in the forthcoming survey with appropriate covariate controls.

CONCLUSION

To our knowledge, few studies have examined how high school students simultaneously construct definitions of academic success and appraise the pressure surrounding those aims in relation to their perceived social standing. In this sample, most students held plural definitions, typically anchoring on grades/college and layering mastery/application; a smaller subset emphasized balance/well-being to prevent overload. Pressure was pervasive yet heterogeneous in valence: many students described it as both motivating and stressful, with SSS-School, not SSS-Home, most closely tracking whether pressure felt like challenge or strain. Students who perceived higher standing at school, and to a lesser extent a positive School–Home gap, were more likely to experience pressure as energizing; when standing felt lower or task paths were opaque, pressure tipped toward rumination and "domino" cascades. These patterns complement the qualitative accounts of comparison rituals in selective tracks and suggest that clarity, controllability, and status-safe supports may convert pressure into productive effort without diluting standards. Given the modest, regionally bounded sample and qualitative design, these results are hypothesis-generating rather than definitive. A larger, preregistered study—pairing longitudinal measures of SSS and pressure appraisals with classroom experiments that reduce ranking cues and increase assessment transparency—is needed to test these associations with adequate power and to specify how schools can broaden students' feasible goals while preserving rigor.

DATA AVAILABILITY

De-identified transcripts, codebook, and analytic memos are retained on an encrypted drive and can be shared on reasonable request subject to participant privacy constraints and school policy.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Appendix I: Full Interview Guide

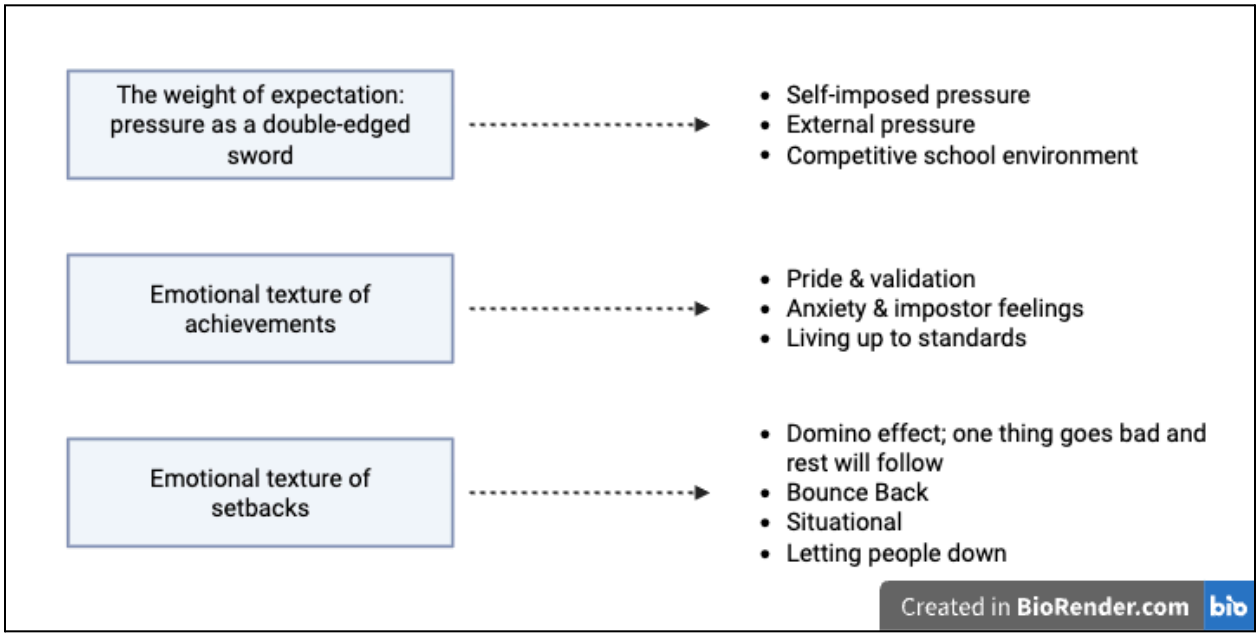
REFERENCES

1. EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT Accountability, State Plans, and Data Reporting: Summary of Final Regulations. *U.S. Department of Education*. https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essafactsheet170103.pdf (accessed on 2025-08-10)
2. Sirin, S. R. (2005). Socioeconomic Status and Academic Achievement: A Meta-Analytic Review of Research. *Review of Educational Research*, 75(3), 417–453. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543075003417
3. MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status – Youth Version | SPARQtools. *Stanford University*. https://sparqtools.org/mobility-measure/macarthur-scale-of-subjective-social-status-youth-version/. (accessed on 2025-01-10)
4. Goodman, E., Adler, N. E., Kawachi, I., Frazier, A. L., Huang, B., & Colditz, G. A. (2001). Adolescents' Perceptions of Social Status: Development and Evaluation of a New Indicator. *PEDIATRICS*, 108(2), e31. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.108.2.e31
5. Destin, M., Richman, S., Varner, F., & Mandara, J. (2012). "Feeling" hierarchy: the pathway from subjective social status to achievement. *Journal of adolescence*, 35(6), 1571–1579. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2012.06.006
6. Cook-Sather, A. (2006). Sound, Presence, and Power: "Student Voice" in Educational Research and Reform. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 36(4), 359–390. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873X.2006.00363.x
7. Cachia, M., Lynam, S., & Stock, R. (2018). Academic success: Is it just about the grades? *Higher Education Pedagogies*, 3(1), 434–439. https://doi.org/10.1080/23752696.2018.1462096
8. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
9. Strauss, Anselm L, and Juliet M Corbin. Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory. Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 1998. ISBN: 978-1412997461
10. Maxwell, J. A. (2013). Qualitative research design: An interactive approach (3rd ed.). Sage Publications. ISBN: 978-1412981194
11. O'Brien, B. C., Harris, I. B., Beckman, T. J., Reed, D. A., & Cook, D. A. (2014). *Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research*. Academic Medicine, 89(9), 1245–1251. https://doi.org/10.1097/acm.0000000000000388
12. Schoonenboom, J., & Johnson, R. B. (2017). How to Construct a Mixed Methods Research Design. *Kolner Zeitschrift fur Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 69(Suppl 2), 107–131. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11577-017-0454-1
13. Rodriguez, N. (2017). Teens, Employment, and the Minimum Wage. *Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center*. https://massbudget.org/reports/pdf/MWTeens%2012.22%20-%20FINAL.pdf
14. Tourangeau, R., Rips, L. J., & Rasinski, K. (Eds.). (2000). The psychology of survey response. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511819322 ISBN: 9780511819322
15. Gale, W. A., & Sampson, G. (1995). Good‐turing frequency estimation without tears. *Journal of Quantitative Linguistics*, 2(3), 217–237. https://doi.org/10.1080/09296179508590051
16. Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How Many Interviews Are enough? an Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903

17. Goodman, E., Adler, N. E., Kawachi, I., Frazier, A. L., Huang, B., & Colditz, G. A. (2001). MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status--Youth Version [Database record]. *APA PsycTests*. https://doi.org/10.1037/t75111-000
18. Ritterman et al., 2009. M.L. Ritterman, L.C. Fernald, E.J. Ozer, N.E. Adler, J.P. Gutierrez, S.L Syme. Objective and subjective social class gradients for substance use among Mexican adolescents. *Social Science & Medicine*, 68 (10) (2009), pp. 1843-1851, 10.1016/j.socscimed.2009.02.048
19. Cundiff et al., 2013. J.M. Cundiff, T.W. Smith, B.N. Uchino, C.A. Berg. Subjective social status: Construct validity and associations with psychosocial vulnerability and self-rated health. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 20 (2013), pp. 148-158, 10.1007/s12529-011-9206-1
20. Folkman, S. (1984). Personal control and stress and coping processes: A theoretical analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46(4), 839–852. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.46.4.839
21. Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), Handbook of qualitative research (pp. 105–117). Sage Publications, Inc. ISBN: 978-0761915126

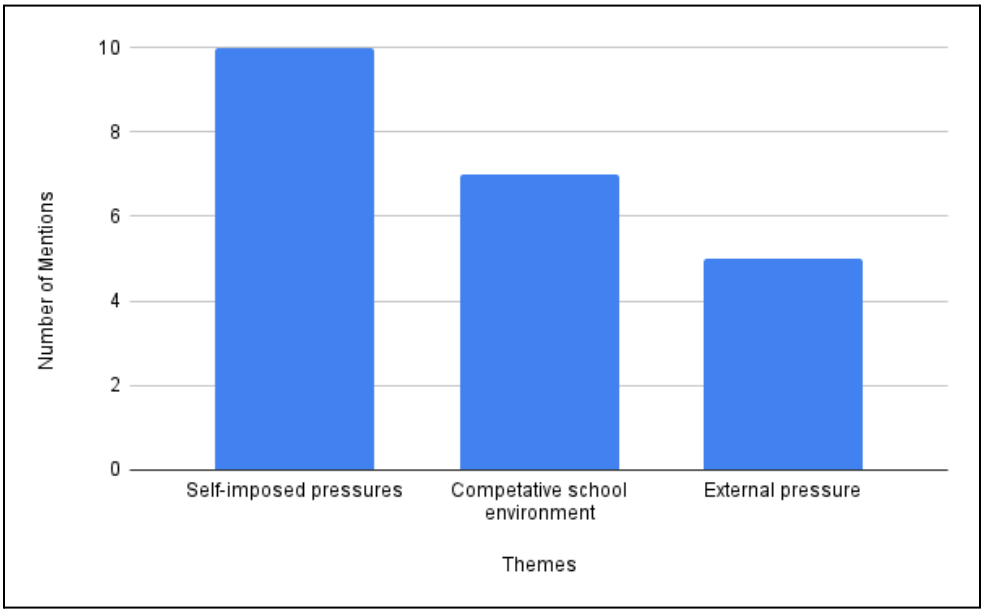
APPENDIX

Figure 1: Main themes and sub-themes



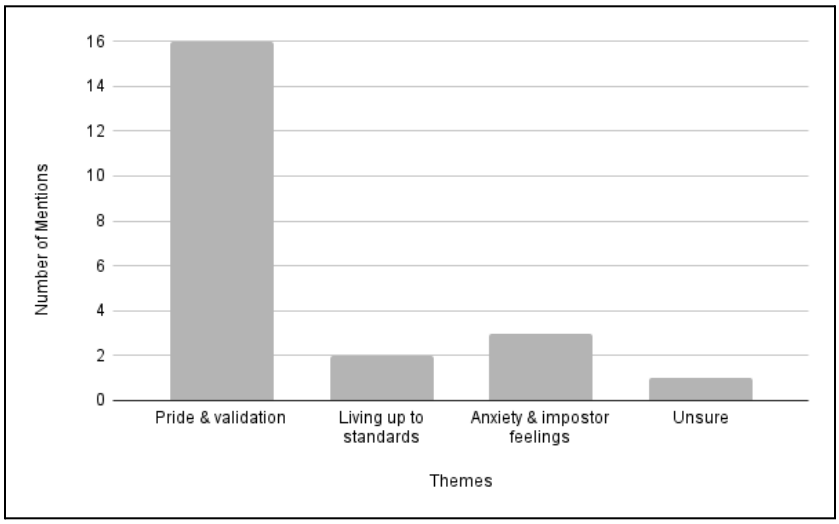
Three analytic families are depicted: (A) Sources of academic pressure (self-imposed pressure; external pressure; competitive school environment), (B) Perceptions surrounding academic achievement (pride & validation; anxiety & impostor feelings; living up to standards), and (C) Perceptions surrounding academic setbacks (domino effect; bounce back; situational; letting people down).

Figure 2: Sources of academic pressure (code frequency)



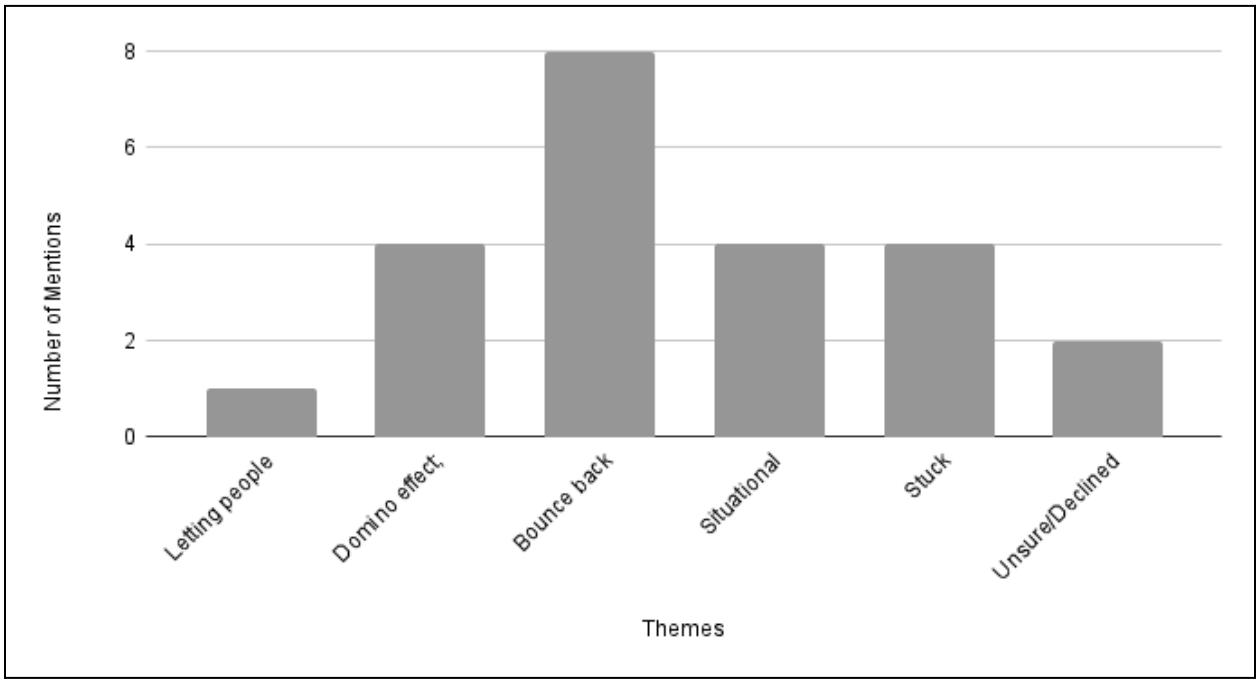
Mentions of pressure sources across interviews (N=18; multiple codes per respondent possible). Self-imposed pressures (e.g. setting high standards for oneself) were most frequent (10 mentions, 45%), followed by competitive school environment (e.g. desire to perform as well as high-achieving peers) (7 mentions, 32%) and external pressure (e.g. parents set high standards) (5 mentions, 23%). Counts reflect coded mentions, not unique participants.

Figure 3: Emotional textures of achievement (code frequency)



Mentions of achievement affect across interviews (N=18; multiple codes per respondent possible). Pride/validation dominated (e.g. all the studying was worth it) (16 mentions, ~73%), with smaller frequencies for anxiety/impostor feelings (e.g. a student does not feel they deserve their academic success) (3 mentions, ~14%), living-up-to-standards (e.g. make parents proud) (2 mentions, ~9%), and unsure (1 mention, ~5%). Counts reflect coded mentions, not unique participants.

Figure 4: Emotional textures of setbacks (code frequency)



Setback-related affect/themes across interviews (N=18; multiple codes per respondent possible). "Bounce back" was most frequent (e.g. work to turn "things" around and get better grades next time) (8 mentions, ~35%), followed by domino cascades (e.g. the perception that one bad grade will lead to more bad grades) (4 mentions, ~17%), situational shutdown/variability (e.g. if I enjoy a class, it it really frustrating but if it is in a class I don't care about, it does not matter) (4 mentions, ~17%), "stuck"/inefficacy (e.g. don't know where to go from there) (4 mentions, ~17%), unsure/declined (2 mentions, ~9%), and "letting people down" (e.g. I let my parents down) (1 mention, ~4%). Counts are mentions, not unique participants.