

Academic Distress and Mental Well-Being in Students

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With the increasing academic demands placed on students, more and more students across the world are experiencing an increasing amount of stress during their adolescence. Given the long-lasting impact that academic distress can have on the mental health of youth, there needs to be more insight regarding the specific contributing factors of academic distress that would help raise greater awareness to effectively address and alleviate this widespread issue. Through a narrative review of the literature, this study examines the correlates of academic distress and its impact on adolescent mental health. The literature review underscores that existing studies have consistently found statistically significant relationships between academic distress and well-being amongst students, where high levels of academic distress are associated with lower levels of mental well-being. The specific variables that correlate with higher levels of academic distress are gender, countries with higher GDP, and some interpersonal and social factors. Some of these factors include: family values, parental education, parental pressure, parental support, loneliness, learning in high academically-achieving environments, and immigrant status. However, social support from parents, peers, and teachers appears to be a protective factor that helps to mitigate students' distress. These findings advocate for the need for schools to implement greater support that focuses on a more holistic approach to education and the development of curricula that does not only focus on the singular objective of academic performance of students, but also values their social-emotional wellness.

Keywords: Academic distress, student mental health, academic pressure

Introduction

Student mental health issues are escalating in our world today, with academic pressure serving as a primary catalyst for psychological distress. This research paper will be focused on looking at the association between the state of well-being and level of academic distress regarding students of various backgrounds, including: gifted, minority, and those in the process of college applications. The rationale for examining students from these various backgrounds seeks to explore how academic distress affects all students regardless of background, but also how some students might be particularly impacted by academic distress due to their background. For purposes of clarification, the concepts of academic distress and mental health or well-being will be defined. Academic distress describes "stress responses" to demands faced in relation to adolescents' situation in school, such as the pressure in feeling the need to excel or perform in school in order to be more competitive college applicants¹. The terms, mental health or well-being, will refer to the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition that is commonly used in the established literature, which is defined as "the state in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, copes with the normal stresses of life, works productively and fruitfully, and can make a contribution to her or his community"². The goal is to examine whether there is a correlation between being in these situations and a student's distress while identifying the possible

negative impacts they could lead to across various backgrounds. The association between these two factors will be identified through a literature review that examines data and statistics from around the world, from both recent years and historically. The structure of the literature review will be as follows: provide contextual background regarding the state of mental health amongst adolescents; explanation of the methodology; a presentation of the literature findings explaining the salient social-ecological factors correlating with and contributing to adolescent mental distress; followed by a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the study; and finally, concluding with a consideration of possible recommendations to remediate the issue of academic distress and mental health amongst students.

Mental Health Among Adolescents

Before the methodology and research findings are presented and discussed, it is important to first understand the state of mental health among adolescents today. Having this contextual background will substantiate why researching this topic of academic distress and mental health amongst students is all the more important and necessary today. In recent years, the mental health of adolescents has gained increasing attention, with growing recognition of the unique challenges adolescents face during this critical developmental period³. Despite mental health gaining more attention, a significant portion of adolescents face signifi-

cant mental health difficulties. In 2023, 40% of US high school students reported feeling long-term sadness and hopelessness, while 20% reported a deep consideration of suicide³. This, as previously mentioned, is especially true for students who are getting ready for or in the college admissions process. These statistics reveal and confirm that maintaining mental health is a real and salient struggle amongst youth today. According to the statistics, maintaining mental health is so much of a struggle that two out of ten students believe that ending their lives would be the only way to resolve or escape from their mental health challenges. Additionally, it was estimated by the World Health Organization that 5.5% of 15-19-year-olds had some form of anxiety disorder, and 3.5% of them struggled with depression². Though these numbers might seem lower than expected, they still corroborate the state of mental health amongst adolescents today. Furthermore, these numbers are likely underreported, since not all adolescents were surveyed or properly diagnosed, and some may not have wanted to disclose how they were feeling due to possible stigmas against mental health issues. Over the previous decades, rates of mental health difficulties among adolescents have risen. Studies have shown that from 2009 to 2019, the percentage of high schoolers who felt hopelessness increased from 26% to 37%, not to mention that suicidal behaviors and rates increased substantially as well⁴. The 11% increase, or 42% change from 2009, of reported hopelessness amongst high schoolers within ten years is staggering, and it highlights that the mental health of teenagers is only getting worse and becoming a possible crisis that our society must face. These trends indicate that current awareness efforts have been insufficient in addressing the global mental health crisis facing adolescents⁴.

Methods

This narrative literature review was conducted to examine the relationship between academic distress and mental well-being in high school students. The search strategy involved querying Google Scholar using combinations of the following keywords: “academic distress”, “high school”, “adolescent”, “mental health”, and “well-being”. Google Scholar was used due to limited and restricted access to other paid databases. The search was limited to English-language publications from the past 20 years (2004-2024) to ensure the currency of findings.

Initial articles were identified through mentor recommendations and database searches. Abstract screening was performed to ensure relevance to the research question. Additional sources were identified through reference list searching of included articles. Approximately 25 articles were screened throughout the research process.

Articles were included if they: (1) examined academic stress or distress in adolescent populations, (2) investigated mental health outcomes, or (3) explored factors contributing to aca-

demic distress. Articles were excluded if they did not focus on the aforementioned criteria. The primary reason for exclusion was population mismatch, as many studies focused more on adult learners rather than the target adolescent population.

The final review included peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, and reports from reputable health organizations. Data extraction focused on identifying themes related to the social-ecological determinants of academic distress, using Bronfenbrenner’s model⁵ as the guide, in understanding their relationship with mental health outcomes.

Results and Discussions

Academic Distress and Adolescent Mental Health

Academic distress is common among adolescents and is one major determinant of adolescent distress⁶. Recent studies suggest that concerns related to academics are one of the greatest stressors for high school students⁶. High school students are particularly vulnerable to this sort of stress, with students in their final two years planning to attend college finding academic stressors increasingly intense⁷. Indeed, American four-year colleges or universities have become increasingly selective. Studies indicate that college admissions have become more competitive, which has put greater pressure on high school students’ academic performance⁸.

While many high school students report some worry related to academics, it is important to distinguish between normative levels of worry and significant distress. More specifically, the literature differentiates eustress and distress. These terms represent distinct concepts with different effects on students. Eustress can be defined as “good stress”, which can be adaptive (i.e., encourage students to work harder). On the other hand, distress can be defined as “bad stress”, which can be overwhelming and hurt adolescents. Overall, researchers found that academic distress is growing among adolescents, with approximately 1 in every 6 students exhibiting excessive academic distress in their sampling of students across 17 different countries⁷. This represents 16.6% of students who are facing a debilitating amount of stress. A large portion of students struggling are negatively overwhelmed by the pressures put on them in their academic life, which include grades, classes, homework, exams, etc. Thus, it is understandable that students who are in their final years of high school are especially susceptible to mental health issues as they must simultaneously juggle their academic course load and performance, as well as the added burden of navigating the tedious college admission process. Besides external pressures, there was also evidence that the individual characteristics of students, such as perfectionism, lifestyle, and resilience, were also correlated with varying levels of distress⁷, which will be discussed in depth below. This underscores how the academic distress that students experience is shaped by a complex inter-

play between external factors and internal or individual factors that still requires more investigation.

Social-Ecological Model for Determinants of Academic Stress

There is a range of interconnected factors that contribute to academic distress among high school students, rather than a single, isolated factor. To help understand the complex interplay of determinants of academic stress, this paper uses Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social-ecological theory as the framework in conceptualizing the range of factors that contribute to academic distress. In this context, the term 'ecology' in this context refers to the interconnected environments where students live and develop. This ecological perspective is particularly valuable for understanding academic distress and mental health, since it examines how individual, interpersonal, environmental, and broader social factors can interact to influence and impact student mental health, rather than treating these factors as separate, unrelated factors. Figure 1 below provides an illustration showing how students' experiences are shaped not by a single, isolated source, but by a complex interplay between multiple sources in their environment.

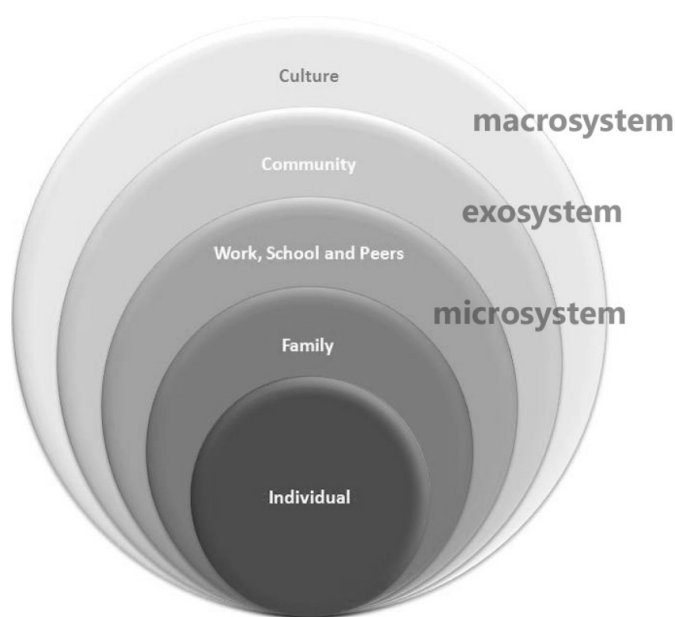


Fig. 1 Social-Ecological Model, adapted from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory as applied to academic distress⁹.

Individual factors

On the individual level of the Social Ecological Model, characteristics such as gender, socioeconomic status, and race are associated with academic distress. For example, studies demon-

strate that females are at greater risk for academic distress. Research has found that female students report higher levels of anxiety, which is consistent with increased stress⁷. While all students are at risk for academic distress, female students face additional social pressures that compound academic stress. These gender disparities may be explained by societal factors: females have been socialized to be more expressive of emotions, whereas males often face social stigma for emotional expression due to traditional masculinity norms that emphasize being "tough" and "strong." This socialization may result in higher reported distress among females, though it remains unclear whether this reflects actual higher distress levels or greater willingness to report symptoms. Additionally, individual factors such as economic growth in society can have a tremendous effect on the levels of academic distress felt by students. A study found that there was indeed a very strong relationship between economic growth, or higher GDP, and increased levels of stress at school¹. To elaborate, when countries become wealthier and more successful, the pressure that is placed on children and their academics grows as well. Högberg's 2021 study also demonstrated a "positive and statistically significant interaction" between stress and GDP, meaning that "stress has a stronger effect on mental health problems when GDP is higher." The results of the study found that GDP was positively correlated with high levels of stress amongst students, in that a "\$1,000 increase in GDP per capita was associated with between 0.009 and 0.017 scale points higher levels of stress"¹. Högberg discusses that these results confirming the positive correlation between GDP and academic stress can be viably explained by his hypothesized mechanism stating that "economic change makes education more important for adolescents' labour market prospects. . . that educational expansion leads to intensified competition for access to (higher) education and thereby an intensified pressure to perform in school." Therefore, it is understandable that countries with higher GDPs are positively associated with higher academic distress amongst students, for these countries typically uphold more academically rigorous standards and foster highly competitive academic environments. As a result, this competition heightens the pressure to perform and succeed, contributing to greater academic stress that can adversely impact students' mental health. Additionally, younger students may also have less stress than older students due to expectations being lower and having lighter consequences for their actions. Older students are not afforded the same light consequences as those who are younger when it comes to academics, for a mistake or a bad grade could ostensibly jeopardize the future they are seeking¹.

Known as testing anxiety, tests often induce academic stress in children¹⁰. Tests are a common stressor that can impact the way that children perform in school. While tests provide important assessment data, they may not fully capture student knowledge or abilities. Many people have anxiety and fear of examinations, which could be due to a myriad of reasons. Some

people simply know that they do not test well; they could know all the material, but when put under timed conditions with an imminent outcome, they fail to accurately demonstrate what they know. Others may have strengths in areas not measured by traditional academic assessments, such as creative arts. People with neurodivergencies who learn and think differently may not be able to accurately explain their thinking during tests, and may learn to fear them due to the repeated negative outcomes they have experienced. Testing anxiety is a large spectrum; people could simply be anxious, like anyone else would be, or they can experience severe distress and have symptoms such as sweating, shaking hands, and forgetting material.

Interpersonal factors

At the interpersonal level of the Social-Ecological Model, interpersonal factors can be defined as an individual's relationships with others, such as friends, family members, and teachers. Some studies have examined the association between peer relationships and academic distress. In one study, McIntyre and colleagues found that loneliness was the strongest predictor of distress. Notably, a strong identification with peers at school was protective against distress¹⁰. Social support is a significant predictor of mental health outcomes and is a marker for knowing one's state of well-being. Receiving social support from not only friends but parents, classmates, and teachers have the power to influence mental health and life satisfaction. However, not all of these have an equal effect on one's mental health. It is shown that parental support is the stronger predictor of mental health¹¹.

Classmate support is unique compared to that of parental support. It helps predict internalized symptoms of distress compared to external ones. It is even shown to be very beneficial for both average and high-achieving students¹¹. With students having peers their age going through the same experiences as them creates a bond and security net for people to fall back on.

Teacher-student relationships are also to be considered. Teachers who simply teach students and have no further interaction that creates an emotional connection or one of trust between the two are not setting their kids up to do well or have healthy relationships with their academics¹¹. Teachers who care for their students and take the time to get to know them and support them in any way that they can are showing that they care for their students. A teacher can heavily influence how students feel in the classroom, academics, subjects, and stress. If you deal with a teacher who only cares about the letter that is written on a finished exam, then you are likely to be under more stress to perform better, versus having a teacher who cares more about the process of your learning and how you got to where you are.

Family Values Around Academics

Being a central component of the interpersonal level within the Social-Ecological Model, research suggests that parents of adolescents play a significant role in adolescent academic distress¹². Alongside greater academic pressure, parents may help to reduce academic distress or exacerbate academic distress. Many studies indicate that parents may place additional pressure on their children to perform. Indeed, among a sample of 190 eleventh and twelfth-grade students across three public and three private schools in Kolkata, India, 63.5% of the students reported experiencing academic pressure, and 66% of the students reported feeling pressure from their parents to perform academically¹². Academic stress was positively correlated with parental pressure. Additionally, academic stress was correlated with self-reported distress. Additionally, the mother's and father's education status was also associated with perceived parental pressure, such that 81.3% and 85.9% of students with mothers and fathers, respectively, who were not college-educated reported perceived parental pressure¹². Additionally, the mother's occupation type was associated with perceived parental pressure, such that 88.9% of high school students in the sample with mothers in the business industry were more likely to report greater perceived parental pressure¹². This higher percentage of students with less educated parents who perceived greater academic distress might possibly be explained by the parents' belief that education and academic success are the essential means by which their children can improve their socioeconomic status and secure a better future, given the parents' own economic hardships due to a lack of education. Likewise, having mothers working in business industries might result in their kids feeling greater academic pressure, possibly because the mothers had to work extremely hard themselves and felt greater pressure to perform to prove their worth in a male-dominated business industry, which in turn, has manifested into higher expectations and pressure through transference to their children.

Immigrant Family Values

Additionally, immigrant family values are another interpersonal factor of the Social-Ecological model that can influence the impact of academic stress and mental health of students. Adolescents who have migrated from another country may experience heightened academic pressures and distress^{13,14}. Specifically, immigrant adolescents in another country may experience a greater sense of familial obligation compared to their non-immigrant counterparts, as discussed in Ma's research, indicating that "immigrant students consider it more important to support their families than do non-immigrant students"¹³. The pressure to conform and meet familial obligations is mostly due to their families placing a high value on education and seeing it as a means to an end for living a good life. Therefore, their

academic success is a form of retribution to their parents, allowing them to repay the sacrifices made by their parents, which can be a great motivator for them to work harder, though potentially leading to higher cases of burnout and overwhelming amounts of stress to be the best and achieve the most. When these immigrant children succeed in school, it will most likely give them a great sense of accomplishment, whereas if they were to do poorly, it could lead to anxiety and depression. Given this dynamic between immigrant children and their parents, it is understandable why immigrant family values emphasizing the importance of education would correlate with immigrant students' academic distress.

Academic distress in high-achieving students and environments:

At the environmental level of the Social-Ecological Model, studies show how institutional aspects can also play a role in contributing to students' academic distress. According to Almousa et al.'s 2022 study of 353 high-achieving undergraduate and graduate students at the Amman Arab University and Balqa Applied University in Jordan, their results indicated a positive correlation between high-achieving students and their reported levels of academic pressure and emotional distress. High-achieving students were identified as being students with cumulative GPAs of 3.7/4 or higher. From this sample, 68.8% of the students reported having moderate to high levels of academic distress¹⁵.

The respondents in the sample also reported higher levels of emotional distress and anxiety, though there is a disparity between female and male respondents. Of the females in the sample, 80.5% of them, or a mean score of 2.31, reported significantly higher levels of emotional distress and anxiety, whereas only 19.5% of the male students, or a mean score of 1.91, reported the same¹⁵. This higher academic and emotional stress amongst higher-achieving students can be attributed not only to the typical stress and demands of managing a college course load, but also the additional worries and strains of internalized high

expectations to perform and excel, the pressure to maintain their GPAs, perfectionist tendencies, a heavier and more rigorous workload in more difficult majors, and the challenges of juggling everything on their plate, which altogether, creates significant academic distress and puts them at higher risk for psychological burnout¹⁵.

Relationship between Academic Distress and Mental Health:

Based on the research found and reviewed, there is a clear negative association between levels of academic distress and the mental well-being of students. Specifically, the research provides substantial evidence that the higher the levels of academic distress, the lower the state of well-being among students. This

indicates that academic environments can play a significant role in impacting students' mental health, for better or worse. Furthermore, there is a statistically significant correlation between academic distress and a decrease in mental health, even more so in the students who are in high-achieving or gifted programs, part of a social minority, or are first-generation college students, and those getting ready to apply to colleges. This highlights the idea that environmental, interpersonal, and personal factors all play a significant role in their potential to impact students' mental health, for better or worse. However, it is important to note that the findings from the literature are correlational in nature, thus limiting the ability to establish causal relationships. Additionally, there is evidence that suggests a bidirectional and cyclical relationship between academic distress and mental health, rather than a simple unidirectional relationship. In one direction, academic pressures can trigger mental health difficulties through multiple mechanisms. For example, chronic academic stress activates physiological stress responses, disrupts sleep patterns, and often leads to social isolation as students sacrifice relationships for study time^{7,16}. Conversely, pre-existing mental health conditions can amplify academic stress. Students with anxiety may experience greater worry and impaired cognitive function that makes academic tasks objectively more difficult, while those with depression may struggle with motivation and concentration, leading to missed classes and mounting academic pressure^{7,16}.

Even more, these bidirectional pathways create self-reinforcing cycles: academic stress triggers mental health symptoms, which can impair academic performance, and lead to increased stress and further mental health decline. This "vicious cycle" may be particularly evident in vulnerable populations such as female students, who may be more likely to internalize stress, and high-achieving students whose self-worth is closely tied to academic success¹⁵. When academic distress becomes overwhelming, adolescents often lack the coping mechanisms to manage it independently, which can lead to deteriorating mental health that can impact all areas of students' lives and future prospects.

Understanding this bidirectional relationship has crucial implications for intervention design, since it suggests that approaches targeting either academic stress or mental health in isolation may be insufficient. Comprehensive interventions that simultaneously address both domains, such as cognitive-behavioral approaches that reframe academic catastrophizing while teaching stress management, seem to be more effective in breaking these destructive cycles¹⁷.

Given that most existing research employs cross-sectional designs that limit the ability to establish causation, longitudinal studies are essential to better understand the temporal dynamics underlying this relationship. Future research utilizing longitudinal designs and experimental interventions is crucial for clarifying causal mechanisms, particularly across different

cultural contexts where academic expectations may vary significantly^{13,14}.

Strengths and Limitations

This literature review is one of the few papers that focus on mental distress and well-being, primarily focusing on high school students, and provides an overview of this topic. This is arguably important due to the increasing rates of mental health distress amongst youth today. Having more information available on this subject will be crucial to better understand students and aid them. This review is also largely applicable as it includes studies from students across the globe and in many different environments, including economic, cultural backgrounds, and academic prowess. There will be more research needed to understand just how cultural differences experienced by students affect their mental distress in terms of academics, but this review is a good starting point.

Though this paper aims to provide a current, up-to-date literature review on academic distress in high school students, there are some limitations in what was able to be done for this literature review. The focus of this paper was a topical review, and as such, it is intentionally not systematic in nature. This narrative review was chosen to provide a broad exploratory overview of the topic, allowing for flexibility in examining diverse aspects of academic distress. However, this approach may have missed relevant studies that a systematic search would have identified. Additionally, this paper aims to provide a broad overview of academic distress mostly amongst high school students, but it does not provide an in-depth analysis of the challenges, nor does it explore positive experiences that high school students may have. The focus on negative aspects was intentional to highlight areas needing intervention, though future research should examine both positive and negative academic experiences to provide a more balanced understanding of student well-being. Furthermore, this review's broad scope limited the depth of analysis for specific student populations, particularly those from marginalized communities who may face unique stressors not fully explored here.

Conclusion

The findings of this literature review demonstrate a consistent inverse relationship between academic distress and student mental well-being, particularly among high school students. Many factors influence how mental health is impacted by cultural, familial, and interpersonal factors, such as parents, friends, environment, etc.

To advance this field of study, future research should employ several specific methodological approaches, such as:

1. Design and utilize longitudinal studies using mixed methods, such as surveys combined with in-depth interviews,

that track students throughout their high school careers to identify when and how academic stress peaks and what protective factors emerge. Since high-achieving high school students still have not been thoroughly studied before concerning academic distress and mental health, future studies may explore other factors that are associated with distress within this population.

2. Comparative ethnographic studies could examine how different cultural communities conceptualize academic success and stress, using community-based participatory research methods to ensure cultural sensitivity. This can also allow for an examination of cross-cultural differences between the different groups of students to provide a more nuanced understanding of how dynamics of cultures, family values, and lived experiences can impact students' well-being, both academically and emotionally.
3. To assess the effectiveness of interventions, randomized controlled trials should test specific interventions such as mindfulness programs, peer support groups, and modified assessment strategies, measuring both academic and mental health outcomes over time.
4. Incorporate the study of positive academic experiences among students, rather than focusing solely on negative ones. Rather than focusing solely on negative academic experiences, incorporate the study of positive ones. Adopting an appreciative inquiry approach can provide researchers with valuable insights into the conditions that promote meaningful academic engagement while preserving students' mental health, by examining those who are able to achieve academic success while preserving their mental well-being.

Overall, the findings from this literature review underscore that the academic environments and pressures experienced by students are causing them a great deal of distress that has a detrimental impact on their mental health and general well-being.

Schools should prioritize the goal of educating students to encourage their engagement with academic work and success, but it should not come at the expense of overwhelming students or jeopardizing their mental health. Instead, school and academic environments should function to nurture and cultivate students' learning and overall well-being, rather than being a place that induces distress and dysfunction amongst students. Thus, this literature review recommends a call for action in implementing greater support in schools and education systems that focus on a more holistic approach to education that considers not only the academic performance of students but also their social-emotional wellness. Some possible recommendations include:

1. **Curriculum integration:** Schools should embed holistic, social-emotional learning programs into their core curricula, teaching stress management techniques, emotional regulation, and mindfulness practices as part of regular coursework. Adopting a perspective of “whole school well-being” and incorporating emotional wellness and mental health education into the school curricula so that students learn cognitive behavioral supports and strategies like mindfulness and meditation, equipping them with the knowledge and tools to effectively cope with their stress^{16,17}.
2. **Assessment reform:** Implement alternative assessment methods, including portfolio-based evaluation, collaborative projects, and untimed assessments to reduce test anxiety while maintaining academic rigor. Modifying various assessment techniques to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and mastery of material through means other than traditional, timed exams, which have been linked with greater test anxiety and stress^{16,17}.
3. **Support systems:** Establish multi-tiered support systems, including peer mentoring programs, accessible counseling services, and teacher training in recognizing signs of academic distress.
4. **Parent education:** Develop workshops for parents on supporting academic achievement without creating undue pressure, particularly in immigrant communities where cultural expectations may intensify stress.
5. **Policy changes:** Advocate for educational policies that limit homework hours, ensure adequate break times, and promote balanced academic schedules.

Ultimately, education should be rethought and reshaped in a way that prioritizes and regards students’ emotional well-being alongside academic success, rather than undermining their mental health. By creating supportive learning environments and adapting how education is delivered, students can not only perform better academically, but also build the skills and resilience needed for long-term achievement and positive personal growth throughout their lives.

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