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Parental Perceptions of Academic Stress in Early Childhood: A Case Study of Mothers in Cibeunying Kidul District, Bandung

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ABSTRACT	ARTICLE INFO
Academic Stress in Early Childhood Education is rarely identified, as learning for young children is expected to be enjoyable. However, several cases indicate that early childhood students may experience academic stress. This study aims to explore how parents, particularly mothers, perceive academic stress in early childhood. The research adopts a qualitative approach with a case study method. Three mothers with children aged 4–6 years who are enrolled in kindergarten were selected as participants. The study was conducted in the Cibeunying Kidul District, Bandung City. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, and thematic analysis was used to analyze the findings. The results reveal that parents, especially mothers, acknowledge that early childhood children can experience academic stress due to various factors. Additionally, the study identifies several signs and symptoms exhibited by children when experiencing academic stress. The findings also highlight how parents, particularly mothers, perceive and implement preventive efforts to help young children avoid academic stress.	Article History: <i>Submitted/Received 06 Jan 2025</i> <i>First Revised 09 Feb 2025</i> <i>Accepted 05 Mar 2025</i> <i>First Available online 30 Apr 2025</i> Keyword: <i>Parental perception,</i> <i>Academic stress,</i> <i>Early childhood.</i>
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1. INTRODUCTION

Academic stress is a subset of stress that individuals may experience in relation to academic activities. Rahmawati (2016) states that academic stress can occur when students feel pressured due to a mismatch between their abilities and the demands they are expected to fulfill. In line with this, Oljenik and Holschuh (as cited in Nurcahyani and Prastuti, 2020) further emphasize that when students are burdened with an excessive number of school assignments, academic stress is likely to arise as a reaction.

Bedewy and Gabriel (as cited in Mamahit, 2021) state that academic stress can be triggered by various factors, both academic and non-academic. Additionally, cultural, social, environmental, and psychological factors also contribute to the occurrence of academic stress. American College Health Association (as cited in Kadapatti and Vijayalaxmi, 2012) further adds that academic stress has negative impacts on individuals experiencing it, affecting them physically, mentally, and in their daily learning activities.

Academic stress is not a new issue in Indonesia. The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (Komisi Nasional Perlindungan Anak Indonesia (KPAI)) reported in 2012 that cases of stress among children increased by 98% each month throughout 2011 (Barseli et al., 2020). In 2020, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (KPPA) conducted a survey involving more than 3,200 children across Indonesia. The survey results revealed that many children exhibited symptoms indicating mild to severe depressive disorders, with a prevalence rate of 13%. Furthermore, the survey indicated that as children grow older, the likelihood of experiencing academic stress also increases. Specifically, 93% of cases were found in the 14–18 age group, while the remaining 7% were in the 10–13 age group (Wijaya, 2021).

The data indicate that as children grow older, their risk of experiencing academic stress increases. Based on the available sources, there is still limited evidence of academic stress cases at the early childhood education level. However, at the elementary school level, indications of academic stress among students begin to emerge. This aligns with research conducted by Palupi (2020), which examined stress levels among elementary school students during the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately two years ago. The study found that elementary school students experienced academic stress while learning from home. The results revealed that the average stress level among lower-grade students was 29.67%, while upper-grade students experienced an average stress level of 32.79%.

The available data, supported by findings from international journal reviews, indicate that cases of academic stress are still rarely identified at the early childhood education level. This is not without reason, as kindergartens are fundamentally designed to be environments where children can develop their full potential and abilities in an enjoyable setting. All learning activities are intended to be conducted through play (Musa, 2019). Therefore, it can be argued that early childhood students have not yet experienced or felt the impact of academic stress.

However, in reality, early childhood children also have the potential to experience academic stress. Wulansuci (2021) states that one of the contributing factors is the expectation for young children to master basic *calistung* (*baca, tulis, hitung*) or reading, writing, and arithmetic. Furthermore, Wulansuci (2021) emphasizes in her study that the potential for academic stress arises when the implementation of these skills is inconsistent with the child's developmental readiness and individual abilities.

Another study on the inappropriate implementation of *calistung* in Early Childhood Education (ECE) was presented by Asiah (2018). Her research indicates that several elementary schools impose requirements mandating that children entering elementary

school must already possess reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. This situation has led some kindergartens (Taman Kanak-Kanak) to introduce formal literacy and numeracy instruction at the request of parents. However, the issue lies in the fact that these lessons are conducted in a purely instructional manner, with specific time allocations and no incorporation of play-based activities. Consequently, this approach often induces fear in children when attending school and may serve as a potential indicator of academic stress in early childhood.

Based on the background of the problem described earlier, this study focuses on exploring in greater depth how parents' (particularly mothers') perceptions, as the individuals closest to the child, reflect whether early childhood children are indeed at risk of experiencing academic stress from the perspective of parents (particularly mothers).

2. METHODS

In this study, the researcher employed a qualitative approach using a case study method. The selection of this research design aligns with the study's objective, which is to explore in greater depth how parents (particularly mothers) perceive academic stress in early childhood children. Wardani and Ayriza (2020) state that the direct involvement of the researcher in a particular case is a distinctive characteristic of the case study research method. The researcher will work intensively to investigate and examine all aspects within the case.

The participants in this study were mothers with children aged 4–6 years who were enrolled in Early Childhood Education (PAUD) or Kindergarten. In total, three mothers with different educational and occupational backgrounds were selected as participants. The first participant was a mother with a six-year-old child, holding a bachelor's degree in education and working as a teacher at an elementary school. The second participant was a mother with a six-year-old child, holding a Diploma 3 (associate degree) and working as a financial staff member at a company. The third participant was a mother with a five-year-old child, with a high school (SMA) educational background and working as a homemaker. This study was conducted in the Cibeunying Kidul District, Bandung City.

The data collection technique in this study employed in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview approach. A semi-structured interview is a process where the researcher poses questions derived from the development of pre-prepared interview guidelines, which are then asked to the participants. This method is typically more flexible compared to structured interviews, allowing the researcher to explore information more deeply from the participants (Sugiyono, 2015). In this study, the researcher acted as the human instrument, meaning the researcher themselves determined the research focus, selected participants as data sources, collected data, conducted analysis, examined and interpreted findings, and formulated conclusions at the end of the study (Sugiyono, 2015). Thus, throughout the data collection process, the researcher was highly engaged directly with the participants or informants.

The data analysis technique used in this study is thematic analysis. Thematic data analysis is a technique where the data previously collected by the researcher is identified, and patterns within the data are subsequently discovered (Blaun and Clarke, as cited in Heriyanto, 2018).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Factors Contributing to Children's Academic Stress According to Parents' Perceptions

3.1.1 Demands from Parents

Based on the interviews conducted regarding the perceptions of academic stress in early childhood with three mothers who have children aged 5–6 years, the findings reveal that all three respondents share a similar perception regarding the primary factors contributing to academic stress in children, with the most significant factor being parental influence. All three respondents mentioned that demands, pressure, coercion, overemphasis on achievement, and the requirement for children to master *calistung* before entering elementary school are key reasons why children may experience academic stress. Notably, these pressures predominantly originate from parents.

According to the respondents, this is due to the prevailing paradigm within society that early childhood children who have mastered *calistung* are perceived as smart and impressive, while those who have not are considered less intelligent and unable to keep up with the learning process. Consequently, the primary goal of many parents enrolling their children in Early Childhood Education (PAUD) is to ensure that their children master literacy and numeracy skills before advancing to a higher educational level, namely elementary school (Wulansuci, 2021).

The introduction of *calistung* to early childhood children is certainly not a negative practice, whether carried out by parents or teachers. However, attention must be given to how these skills are introduced to young children. The process should involve play, engaging and enjoyable activities, a non-coercive approach, and should be adapted to the child's abilities. This stands in contrast to the findings of a previous study by Asiah (2018), which indicated that several elementary schools in Bandar Lampung required literacy and numeracy skills as an admission criterion. This condition inevitably leads parents and teachers to unintentionally pressure children to master these skills while they are still in Early Childhood Education (PAUD).

In addition, all three respondents mentioned that it is not uncommon for many parents to compete with one another to showcase their children's achievements. It is natural for parents to feel a sense of pride and hope when their children achieve success. However, such hopes must be accompanied by a thorough understanding of each child's condition and abilities. Children should not be forced to meet all of their parents' expectations, as this could lead to internal pressure within the child and, in more severe cases, result in academic stress during early childhood.

3.1.2 The Presence of Comparisons within the Family

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher discovered that, in addition to parental factors, academic stress from the parents' perspective can also be influenced by the presence of additional family members. When a nuclear family (consisting of the father, mother, and child) includes extended family members such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, or others, differing opinions within the family are inevitable. Fathers, mothers, grandparents, and other family members naturally have distinct characteristics and parenting styles. Disagreements regarding child-rearing practices and educational approaches are also quite common.

This situation often leads to extended family members intervening more in the child's upbringing than the father or mother, who should ideally play a more dominant role within the family (Yulion, Lestari, and Rakhmad, 2013). Such circumstances can cause the child to feel confused about whose guidance or advice to follow. It is also not uncommon for extended family members outside the nuclear family to compare the child's abilities with those of other children, which can instil fear in the child or even lead to academic stress.

3.1.3 Teaching Style of Teachers

Based on the interviews conducted with the participants, the findings revealed that, in addition to family factors, the school environment can also contribute to academic stress in children. The three participants mentioned that the teacher's teaching style and demeanor in the classroom are among the factors causing academic stress, as part of the school environment. The teacher's ability to deliver lessons, as well as their attitude and demeanor, play a crucial role in the children's learning experience at school.

Rusman (in Kirom, 2017) stated that teachers play a dominant role in schools, including acting as demonstrators, classroom managers, mediators and facilitators, as well as evaluators. All these roles significantly influence the learning process of children at school. Sabri (in Sanjani, 2020) further added that one of the teacher's roles is as a psychologist in the field of education. Therefore, teachers are also responsible for children's mental health, including ensuring that children are protected from academic stress. Consequently, to support their role as educators, teachers must possess several competencies, including pedagogical competence, personal competence, social competence, and professional competence.

Furthermore, it is widely accepted that teachers should possess the necessary competencies required to become effective educators. One of these is pedagogical competence, which refers to a teacher's ability to understand the characteristics of each student, including moral, emotional, and intellectual aspects. When teachers can comprehend each child's unique traits, the learning process can be tailored to match the individual abilities of the students. Additionally, when teachers understand the characteristics of each child, it becomes easier to optimize the potential of each student according to their interests and talents, ensuring that no student feels left behind compared to their peers. This is because each child has their own portion, especially in the development of their abilities and potential (Direktorat Tenaga Kependidikan in Andina, 2018).

3.1.4 Peer Pressure

Based on the results of the interviews conducted, all three respondents mentioned that peer influence can significantly affect children. Although learning at the early childhood education level is not too academically challenging, peers can still exert various influences on children.

This is in line with the theory presented by Ng Lai Oon (in Mulyadi, 2020), which states that academic stress can be influenced by social pressure. Peers, as part of a child's social life, can indeed be a factor contributing to academic stress. In daily life, children often engage in the process of imitation, or mimicking what others do. This process can occur as children observe various individuals, including parents, neighbors, and peers. Barida (2016) mentioned that in the 20th century, psychologists argued that every individual has an innate tendency to imitate actions they observe from others. Furthermore, Bonner (in Utami, 2018) added that peer environments involve interactions between two or more children of relatively the same age, where a process of mutual influence and change occurs between them. From this perspective, it is evident that peers exert a strong influence on children's social lives, whether positive or negative, depending on the child and how parents respond to these influences.

Furthermore, the researcher also inquired about the preventive measures taken by parents to ensure that their children are not easily influenced by negative peer environments. One of the strategies suggested by parents is to become familiar with their child's peers. When parents know who their child's peers are, it becomes easier for them to

monitor the child's activities and ensure that the child is consistently engaged in positive activities (Lad and Hart in Santrock, 2007; Sarmin, 2017). Another approach is for parents to intentionally select a positive peer environment for their child, accompanied by clear explanations for why this is necessary. This process is expected to serve as the foundation for good communication, fostering openness among parents, children, and peers. Such openness can act as a preventive measure to help children avoid experiencing academic stress.

3.2 Characteristics of Children Experiencing Academic Stress According to Parents' Perceptions: Exhibiting Frequent Rejection and Avoidance

The next question posed by the researcher to the participants was about the characteristics displayed by children when experiencing academic stress, according to the parents' perceptions. The findings revealed that all three participants stated that when children experience academic stress, they tend to exhibit frequent rejection and avoidance.

This is in line with the theory presented by Ng Lai Oon (2004), which states that when children experience stress, they tend to reject and avoid many things. In the long term, unmanaged stress can affect students' mental well-being, leading to mental fatigue, discouragement, and various behavioral issues, such as mischief towards peers or in the classroom, lack of self-love, self-blame, passivity, emotional outbursts, antisocial behavior, and withdrawal. This matter certainly requires parents' attention regarding how to address it.

Parents can engage in heartfelt conversations with their children about the feelings they are experiencing. Parents should also provide opportunities for children to choose what they enjoy and allow them to feel comfortable when engaging in activities, whether in learning or daily life. This approach helps foster good communication between parents and children, promoting openness between both parties. It is hoped that this synergy and collaboration between parents and children can help prevent academic stress in early childhood.

3.3 Efforts to Address and Prevent Academic Stress in Early Childhood According to Parents' Perceptions

3.3.1 Choosing the Appropriate Parenting Style

Based on the results of the study, the researcher found that selecting an appropriate parenting style can be one of the ways to prevent children from experiencing academic stress. If a family applies an inappropriate parenting style, it could potentially become one of the factors causing academic stress in children. For example, placing excessive pressure on the child, forcing the child to perform everything perfectly, and the absence of effective communication between parents and the child regarding their academic situation.

The three participants provided relatively similar responses, stating that the parenting style they applied at home was one that granted freedom to the child, without imposing demands or pressure, yet without entirely leaving the child on their own — there was still guidance from the parents. Based on the interviews conducted, the researcher obtained information indicating that the parenting style described by each participant aligns with a democratic parenting style. Democratic parenting is characterized by parents acknowledging the child's abilities, giving the child the opportunity to choose what is best for them, listening to the child's opinions, and involving the child in discussions, especially those concerning the child's life. Additionally, the child is given the opportunity to develop internal control, allowing them to take responsibility for themselves (Ayun, 2017).

Niaraki and Rahimi (in Ulfah and Fauziah, 2020) also stated that a democratic parenting style leads to a better quality of life for children compared to authoritarian or permissive parenting styles. From this statement, it can be understood that a democratic parenting style is an ideal approach to be applied within families. This is because both children and parents benefit from this approach. Children feel valued for their thoughts and opinions when expressed to their parents and do not feel pressured by their parents' expectations or hopes. Likewise, parents can still monitor and provide guidance to their children without disregarding the children's rights to express their opinions and be heard by their parents.

Furthermore, it turns out that an inappropriate parenting style can also be a contributing factor to children's academic stress. Ng Lai Oon (in Ariyani, 2016) stated that an authoritarian parenting style can lead to academic stress in children. Authoritarian parenting is characterized by parents setting strict boundaries and imposing punishments if children fail to follow parental directions (Santrock, 2011). This approach can make children feel pressured, depriving them of the opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions to their parents. It also violates children's rights, including their right to freely express their feelings and preferences. If left unchecked for too long, this could have various negative impacts on a child's life, one of which is the potential development of academic stress.

3.3.2 Participating in Interest and Talent Tests for Children

Based on the results of interviews conducted with the respondents, another effort that parents can make to prevent academic stress in early childhood is to guide their children to participate in interest and talent tests. The respondents mentioned that one way to prevent children from experiencing academic stress is by having them take interest and talent tendency tests to identify their learning styles or abilities. Once parents understand their child's learning style, it becomes easier for them to provide appropriate treatment tailored to the child's needs. When parents are aware of their child's tendencies or inclinations, they are more likely to be cautious and less inclined to impose pressure during the learning process. This approach is beneficial for ensuring that children do not feel burdened and continue to feel happy and worry-free, reducing the likelihood of experiencing academic stress.

For early childhood, interest and talent tests are highly beneficial in identifying the direction of a child's interests (Daulay, 2014). Additionally, the function of these tests for parents is to help them understand their child's learning style — whether it falls into the visual, auditory, or kinesthetic category. This understanding makes it easier for parents to adjust to the different abilities of each child. Children with a visual learning style tend to grasp lessons more easily through colors or appealing images. Children with an auditory learning style absorb information better through sounds. Meanwhile, children with a kinesthetic learning style need to engage their entire body to understand and retain the material more effectively (Tyas, 2016). After a child takes the interest and talent test, it certainly helps parents optimize their child's potential to excel in their respective fields by aligning with the child's preferred learning style. This approach ensures that the child does not feel pressured and serves as a preventive measure against academic stress.

3.3.3 Collaboration between Teachers and Parents

Based on the findings of the research, it was revealed that another effective way to prevent children from experiencing academic stress is by establishing good communication and collaboration with all parties involved with the child. This includes the father, mother, other family members, as well as teachers and the school.

Parents and all parties involved with the child must establish good communication to create effective collaboration. There must be transparency among all parties regarding the child's condition both at home and at school. This aligns with what was stated by Triwardhani et al. (2020), emphasizing that a good relationship between the school and parents can foster effective communication among various educational components, including students, teachers, and other school parties, to achieve an optimal teaching and learning process and maximize results. Once this relationship is well-established, it becomes easier for all parties to understand all aspects related to the child.

Good collaboration between teachers and parents can also provide tremendous benefits for children. One of these benefits is that children's learning needs can be met, and all the potential possessed by each child can be optimally developed. Thus, both children and parents can experience comprehensive and targeted support (Hernawati and Kurniasih, 2021). In this way, all parties directly involved with the child can work together to prevent academic stress in early childhood.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion presented in this study, it can be concluded that parents (particularly mothers) who participated as respondents share a similar perception that early childhood children can indeed experience academic stress, with various contributing factors. These factors include: (1) parental expectations regarding the child's ability, where early childhood children are expected to master *calistung*; (2) familial comparison; (3) teaching style of the teachers; and (4) peer pressure. Furthermore, all three respondents expressed the view that when children experience academic stress, they tend to exhibit avoidance and rejection behaviors. In addition, the respondents also shared their perspectives on strategies that parents can implement to manage and prevent academic stress in children. These strategies include: (1) adopting an appropriate parenting style; (2) enrolling children in interest and talent assessments; and (3) fostering collaboration between teachers and parents to work together in preventing academic stress in early childhood, both at home and at school.

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