

SCHOOL CULTURE AND THE NORMALIZATION OF TOXIC PRODUCTIVITY: A REVIEW OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL LITERATURE ON PERFORMANCE PRESSURE AMONG STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of increasing academic pressure in schools has normalized *toxic productivity* as the ideal identity of students. A culture of meritocracy and excessive competition forces students to constantly pursue productivity without considering mental well-being. This study aims to analyze sociologically how school culture shapes and legitimizes performative pressures that negatively impact students' emotional health. The method used is a systematic literature review with a qualitative approach based on the perspective of educational sociology and critical sociology. Data sources were obtained from relevant journal articles, academic books, research reports, and conference proceedings, especially publications of the last ten years, through searches on Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and DOAJ. The analysis process is carried out thematically and narratively to identify conceptual patterns, using the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault. The results show that the ranking system, high expectations, and emphasis on academic achievement create a competitive atmosphere that triggers chronic stress, anxiety, and identity crises among students. The role of teachers and schools as agents of normalization reinforces this cycle, often unconsciously. In conclusion, a more balanced transformation of the educational paradigm is needed by emphasizing mindful learning, psychosocial support, and policies that prioritize students' mental health holistically.

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INTRODUCTIONS

Social changes in the world of education underscore the significant transformations that have occurred in the context of digitalization and information capitalism. In the era of globalization, the pressure on students' academic performance increases drastically, driven by increasingly fierce global competition. Schools, as the primary institutions, play a role in shaping student values, norms, and behaviors, often by prioritizing a work ethic based on high academic achievement. This phenomenon not only shapes the identity of students but also shapes society's expectations for the younger generation. (Jamaludin et al., 2019; Ridho et al., 2018)

The phenomenon of excessive productivity among students is becoming more and more visible. Students often get caught up in cycles of excessive hard work, often sacrificing rest time and mental health in order to achieve higher achievements. This tendency creates what is now known as *toxic productivity*, where individuals feel pressured to always look productive, even in contexts that do not support their well-being. The term is often misunderstood as a high enthusiasm for learning, when in reality it is constant pressure that negatively impacts the mental and physical well-being of students. (Afandi , 2018; Jamaludin et al., 2019)

School culture also contributes to normalizing *toxic productivity*. The ranking, award, and heavy workload system creates an atmosphere where students feel pressured to compete with each other. This internalization of competitive and perfectionist values not only encourages students to work harder but also neglects their psychological well-being. School, as a place of character and value formation, sometimes fails to recognize the psychic impact that pressure in academic achievement is exaggerated. (Afandi , 2018; Leithwood & Sun, 2018)

Unfortunately, unawareness of these impacts is often seen in various circles, both students, teachers, and parents. This pressure is considered the norm, so fatigue and stress become part of the identity of a "successful" learner. Many individuals are receptive to this circumstance, understanding that the challenges and difficulties they face are part of the process to success. In this case, schools serve as agents of normalization and social discipline, where the mindset regarding success is measured by academic achievement and not individual well-being. (Afandi , 2018; Jamaludin et al., 2019)

As a result of the school's culture, many students experience burnout and decreased mental health without realizing it. The set of expectations and pressures enforced by schools can create situations where students feel that productivity is the only measure of success. This is not motivating, but can lead to feelings of anxiety, depression, and lack of motivation. In this context, schools should act more sensitive to students' emotional needs and adopt a more holistic approach in curriculum development and learning environments. (Afandi , 2018; Jamaludin et al., 2019)

On the other hand, it is also important to consider alternative approaches to educating students, where a balance between academics and mental health is a priority. This could include developing programs that prioritize mindful learning, where students are trained to become more aware of their limitations and health. In this way, it is hoped that the school can produce individuals who are not only academically competitive but also emotionally and mentally healthy. (Ismail et al., 2022; Jamaludin et al., 2019; Ridho et al., 2018)

Gaps in the literature regarding toxic productivity among learners are often centered on psychological aspects such as stress, burnout, and the individual impact of academic stress. Although understanding this issue from a mental standpoint is crucial, there is still a lack of sociological studies that explore the role of school culture and social structures in creating unhealthy performance pressures. Existing research has more highlighted individual student experiences without considering how the norms, institutional practices, and social structures that exist within schools can contribute to this excessive productivity. The availability of information as well as accountability systems in education can exacerbate the situation, where schools struggle to meet the expectations of society and authorities, which in turn creates an unhealthy competitive atmosphere. (Browes , 2021; Rouse et al., 2013)

The aim of this study is to analyze sociologically how school culture functions in shaping and normalizing performance pressures among students, emphasizing the importance of evaluating the underlying social structure and educational practices. Through a comprehensive literature review, this study will explore how competitive values and a high work ethic are embedded in the education system, as well as how these contribute to negative impacts on

students' mental health and wellbeing. By filling in the existing research gaps, this study aims to provide a more holistic insight into the social dynamics that affect student productivity, as well as offer recommendations for creating healthier and more sustainable educational practices. (Doğan & Doğan, 2023; Hanberger et al., 2016; Moksnes et al., 2016)

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a systematic literature review method based on the perspective of sociology of education and critical sociology. As a literature study, this research does not involve the collection of primary data through the field, but focuses on the process of searching, selection, and analysis of scientific documents that are relevant to the theme of school culture, academic pressure, and the phenomenon of *toxic productivity* among students. The main objective of this study is to identify thematic patterns, theoretical approaches, and conceptual gaps in the existing literature, so as to strengthen the foundations of theoretical understanding and open up space for the development of further research related to the dynamics of performance pressure in educational institutions.

The data sources in this study come from various scientific literature including journal articles, academic books, research reports, and conference proceedings that discuss themes around school culture, academic perperitvity, student mental health, and normalization of excessive productivity in the context of education. The literature was collected through systematic searches on a number of academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and DOAJ. The search was carried out using keywords tailored to the study issue, such as "*school culture*", "*academic pressure*", "*toxic productivity in education*", "*student mental health*", "*meritocracy and education*", and "*educational sociology*". The selection of literature was focused on publications in the last ten years in order to maintain relevance to the dynamics of contemporary education, although some classical literature that had strong conceptual value remained used to enrich the framework of analysis.

The data collection process is carried out through literature selection based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria include literature that explicitly reviews the main theme of the study, namely the relationship between school culture and performative pressure on students. Meanwhile, literature that emphasizes more on the technical aspects of education management or is individual psychological in nature without any connection to social or structural contexts were excluded from the review. Each selected literature is then critically reviewed to understand the context of its arguments, theoretical foundations, methodological approaches, and key findings offered.

The data obtained were analyzed through thematic and narrative approaches. The analysis process was carried out by identifying and grouping recurring themes in the literature, such as the culture of meritocracy in education, performative pressure on learners, the internalization of excessive productivity values, and the role of school institutions in shaping the normalization of fatigue. In this process, a critical sociological framework is also used to provide a deeper meaning to the existing findings. Some of the key concepts used in the analysis include the habitus and cultural capital of Pierre Bourdieu, the discipline and normalization of Michel Foucault, and the critique of neoliberalism in education. By combining thematic approaches and critical theory, this study seeks to construct a complete conceptual narrative of how school culture plays a role in creating and normalizing the phenomenon of *toxic productivity* among students.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Meritocratic Culture and Competitive Pressures in Schools

Meritocracy in educational institutions is often considered a fair system, where individuals who work hard and compete well are expected to be rewarded based on their academic achievements. However, this approach has the potential to instill the notion that academic grades are the only measure of student success. The ranking systems implemented in schools tend to view students through a numerical lens, without considering other talents and potentials that are not always measured through exams or grade points. According to Batruch et al., meritocracy-

focused achievements can serve to legitimize social and income inequality by encouraging the belief that only those who achieve high deserved are entitled to success. (Batruch et al., 2023)

In this context, educational institutions play an important role in shaping students' attitudes to define themselves based on academic achievement. A lot of time and effort students spend studying for high grades, often overlooking other aspects of life, such as mental health and social skills. Investigations show that the pressure to achieve high academic grades can contribute to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression among students. As a result, students' potential in non-academic fields is often hampered, which makes them feel powerless when unable to meet set academic expectations. (Abubakar & Maishanu, 2020)

A meritocracy-based culture of appreciation can create a social hierarchy within schools. Inequities in access to educational resources and emotional support can exacerbate the negative impact of this meritocratic culture, creating ongoing inequities in education. While some schools strive to emphasize values such as resilience, hard work, and responsibility, there is often a neglect of developing social and emotional skills. This can lead to situations where students who have strong social skills but inadequate academic performance feel isolated. (Zhang, 2021)

The importance of social and emotional support for students is getting more and more attention. A study by Nyström et al. shows that a perspective on success in a leading educational environment often implies exciting achievement without realizing the consequences of excessive academic pressure. When students feel that academic grades are the only way to be recognized, their mental health can be threatened. (Nyström et al., 2019)

Meritocracy, in practice, often exacerbates gaps in academic achievement. Research shows that students from lower social backgrounds often face more obstacles in achieving good grades, despite having equivalent abilities. Inequalities in access to educational resources, family support, and a learning environment can exacerbate the negative impact of this meritocratic culture. (Tan & Cost of Living, 2024)

An education system that focuses heavily on meritocracy without considering external factors that affect student achievement can distract from a more inclusive approach. Educational success should be measured not only by academic results, but also by personal progress and contribution to society, leading to a school environment that is more supportive of students' holistic development.

Therefore, a renewal in the view of the cultural values of meritocracy is urgently needed. Promoting a more holistic approach to education, which recognizes and values the diversity of students' abilities will be essential to creating a more just and equal society. An education system that celebrates diversity in students' talents and intelligence can produce individuals who are more balanced and ready to contribute positively to society, rather than just focusing on numbers and rankings. (Batruch et al., 2023)

Normalization of Excessive Productivity as the Ideal Student Identity

The normalization of excessive productivity among learners has become a significant phenomenon in the world of education. Many students feel guilty when they take time off or do activities that are not directly related to their studies. This tendency often arises from a school culture that prioritizes hard work and academic achievement as a sign of dedication. In this context, burnout, overwork, and loss of life balance are not only seen as risks, but are also often considered indicators of discipline and commitment to academic goals. (Calarco et al., 2022)

Schools tend to reinforce the idea that excessive productivity is a must for success. Students are taught, directly or indirectly, that free time should be used for productive activities, thus eliminating moments for relaxation or self-recovery from academic pressure. In this view, being in a state of "busyness" and fatigue is already an accepted social norm. Research shows that learners are increasingly accustomed to ignoring physical and emotional signals that require attention, such as prolonged fatigue, in order to pursue higher grades or rankings. (Batruch et al., 2023; Doyle et al., 2023)

As a result, many learners experience poor psychological conditions, such as chronic stress, anxiety, and depression, which in turn can be fatal to their mental health. Some studies suggest that excessive productivity can lead to burnout, a condition that arises as a result of the constant pressure to achieve increasingly lofty goals. When fatigue

becomes part of students' daily identities, they tend to feel worthless if they don't meet the standards set by teachers, parents, and themselves. (Chen, 2020)

This performative culture is often reinforced by external narratives from society and educational institutions, where academic success is narrowly measured. This creates the perception that individuals who are unable to compete in highly competitive contexts are seen as lacking discipline or even failing. The loneliness and isolation that students often experience who feel abandoned from these norms are also one of the social consequences. Research shows that school-based norms of hard work can increase stigma against those who have difficulty meeting those expectations. (Caruthers et al., 2021; Sun & Shi, 2025)

The freedom to rest or enjoy one's own time is now seen as a weakness, which further reinforces the cycle of overproductivity. Learners who feel guilty when they aren't "productive" often get stuck in endless anxiety, creating a cycle of stress that makes stress an integral part of their learning experience. The belief that academic success is the only measure by which to judge a person creates a mentality in which rest or leisure time is perceived as a barrier to success, rather than part of the recovery process holistically. (Elmgren, 2019; Ghidina, 2019)

Some studies show that, in an environment that prioritizes meritocracy, learners feel pressured to continue to show dedication, even if it means sacrificing their mental health. Thus, burnout and excessive productivity become part of a culture where learners are seen as "the best" only if they are always available for academic activities. This research reflects on the importance of understanding the impact of these norms in order to create a healthier and more sustainable learning environment. (Batrach et al., 2023; Chen, 2020)

This condition not only persists in the classroom, but also affects students' social interactions. When the focus shifts from collaboration and mutual support among students to who is more productive, the sense of community can be diminished and create destructive competition. Therefore, it is important for schools to consider how they approach learning and provide space for students to take a break without feeling guilty. (Calarco et al., 2022; Doyle et al., 2023)

By understanding the consequences of normalizing excessive productivity, educators and policymakers can design more humane strategies in education. Updates in this approach may include the integration of contemplative practices that prioritize more balanced mental health and behavior. By creating space for students to take a break and reflect on their experiences, schools can help change the narrative about academic success that isn't always measured by how hard someone works, and lead them toward long-term well-being. (Elmgren, 2019; Sun & Shi, 2025)

In conclusion, while a culture of excessive productivity may have been installed in our education system, there is an urgent need to overhaul those norms and create an environment that allows students to grow and develop across the board. Towards the future of education, it is necessary for all stakeholders to create a new paradigm that recognizes the importance of balance in life, where productivity is no longer the only measure of academic value. (Clever & Miller, 2019)

The Role of Teachers and Schools as Agents of Normalization

The role of teachers and schools as agents of normalization in the context of *toxic productivity* is increasingly receiving attention in educational research. In many cases, educators encourage student activeness and responsibility by assigning stacked tasks and setting high expectations without considering their emotional abilities. As a result, students feel chased by the demands to always be productive, gradually lose balance in their lives, and often negatively affect their mental health. Research shows that a lack of attention to students' emotional health can lead to prolonged stress, which in turn worsens their learning experience. (Kuppens et al., 2018)

Within the school environment, many teachers unconsciously reinforce the concept of *toxic productivity* through their teaching methodologies, which often focus solely on assessing academic performance, suggesting that achieving high grades is the only way to be recognized. This puts students in a situation where they have to constantly express their "productivity", even if it means sacrificing their mental health and personal time. Research by Nogueiro and his colleagues shows that the high pressure of outcome-based teaching creates an atmosphere where students feel responsible for demonstrating their dedication through extra work, and any sign of weakness or burnout is perceived as a personal shortcoming. (Nogueiro et al., 2022)

Schools often do not provide adequate recovery space for students. For example, the absence of clear policies regarding the balance between learning and mental health has a prolonged negative impact, where students feel that they should fuel productivity even if they are on the verge of burnout. In many situations, teachers and schools may not be aware of the impact of normalizing these conditions, potentially creating a culture where burnout and stress become the norm in students' daily lives. As Zhang explains, academic-related stressors often prevent students from enjoying the learning process and can result in far more harm than good. (Zhang, 2021)

Furthermore, when this condition lasts for a long time, it can affect the way students view themselves. They begin to see academic skills as the primary measure of their self-worth and, as Araki points out, this can reinforce an individualistic attitude that ignores the importance of collaboration and social assistance among students. Emotional expressions, such as burnout or an inability to keep up with academic pace, are often considered signs of failure, exacerbating a stigma that can undermine social interactions between them. (Rick, 2023)

Teachers, as agents of change, must realize how important balance is in education. The existence of programs that support mental health, such as counseling sessions or relaxation activities, should be an integral part of the educational curriculum. As Tan and Kostat show, strengthening a balanced educational culture can create a more positive environment for students, where mental health and academic achievement support each other, rather than contradicting each other. (Hsieh et al., 2021)

Additionally, it is important to involve parents in this process, explaining the importance of a balance between academic achievement and mental health to them. When parents understand and support this approach, they will be better able to help students to not only judge success based on grades and academic achievement alone. This kind of learning can also change their expectations of children, where success in education is not only seen from the achievement of numbers but also from their holistic health and social performance. (Rick, 2023)

In a broader scope, schools must adapt to create spaces where students can feel safe to explore their interests beyond academic success. This includes providing adequate policies to support student well-being and encouraging the mentality that it's okay to rest and take care of yourself. Research shows that education cannot be limited to the achievement of values alone, but must also include the full development of the individual. (Zhang, 2021)

In the midst of increasing demands, schools as social agents must play an active role in encouraging dialogue about the importance of mental health and balance in learning activities. With a more humane approach, it is expected that students will not only become successful learners but also emotionally and socially healthy individuals, able to contribute positively to society. (Krisnawati, 2022)

Social and Psychological Impact on Students

The literature has noted that the stress experienced by learners today can contribute to a number of serious social and psychological impacts, including burnout, anxiety, and decreased interest in learning. Students often feel alienated from a supposedly meaningful learning experience, creating a deep identity crisis. In this context, the social and emotional impact of a stressful educational environment can be seen as a reflection of a system that demands academic success above individual well-being. As academic demands grow, more and more learners are trapped in a prolonged cycle of stress, thus neglecting their psychological needs. (Ferdian et al., 2024)

Burnout among learners is often expressed as feelings of emotional exhaustion and an inability to meet academic demands. According to Ferdian et al.'s research, when students are faced with an excessive workload in the absence of emotional support, they may experience decreased academic performance and lower quality of life. This fatigue not only impacts academic ability, but also spills over into other aspects of students' lives, such as social interactions, giving them a feeling of isolation and disconnection from the surrounding environment. (Ferdian et al., 2024)

Anxiety is also one of the common responses to systemic pressures in education. Research shows that learners experience increased anxiety related to academic performance, which can lead to symptoms of depression and other mental health problems. Students who are trapped in these negative thoughts often feel incapable of meeting

expectations, both from themselves and those around them, which contributes to their decreased interest in learning. This creates a vicious cycle, where anxiety and uncertainty only increase the pressure they feel. (Ruskandi, 2021)

One of the unsettling impacts of this situation is the emergence of an identity crisis among students. Faced with very high social and academic expectations, many students begin to define themselves based on their academic achievements. In a study conducted by Adnan et al., it was revealed that too much emphasis on values can erode confidence and obscure other values that are important in their self-development. They become alienated because personal success is measured only through academic parameters, ignoring other talents and potentials. (Adnan et al., 2023)

In this context, it is important to highlight the relationship between existing systemic pressures and the identity crises experienced. The inability to balance between academic demands and emotional needs can lead to long-term dissatisfaction, in which students feel that they are never good enough. The mental well-being of students is threatened by often unrealistic expectations, both from themselves and from the surrounding environment. This shows the urgent need for a more comprehensive reflection on the education system and a focus on the integration of mental health in the curriculum. (Rahmawati & Khairina, 2021)

Research shows that schools that provide compassion and understanding in teaching approaches can help reduce students' potential burnout and anxiety. Schools can act as agents of providing not only formal learning, but also crucial emotional support for students. By creating a space where students are allowed to discuss their struggles openly, schools can act as advocates that allow them to build a positive identity and recognize self-worth beyond mere academic success. (Reasonable & Hamzah, 2020)

As collective awareness of the broad social impacts of an overly results-oriented education system increases, it is important for educators and policymakers to develop strategies to support students' mental health and emotional development. Integrating programs that emphasize the importance of a balance between personal and academic life in the curriculum can relieve the pressure felt by students. With this holistic approach, it is expected that students will not only gain academic knowledge but also healthy and useful life skills. (Rizki et al., 2023)

In building a better future for students, partnerships between schools, parents, and the community need to be strengthened to create a culture that supports student well-being. Having a solid support system can reduce academic stress, change perceptions of success, make mental health a top priority in education, and help students realize that learning experiences should be meaningful and valuable. Through this collaboration, a realistic spirit and greater connection with society can be built, and the identity crisis is expected to be minimized in the future. (Akbar et al., 2024)

Finally, it is important for all stakeholders in education to understand that mental health and the quality of the learning experience must be given more attention. Building a mentally healthy environment within the school will not only benefit students as individuals but also society as a whole, with a more prepared and empowered generation. Awareness of the systemic impact on students' mental well-being must be integrated into every aspect of their educational experience, in order to achieve more holistic and meaningful educational goals. (Zuroida et al., 2021)

CONCLUSION

This study shows that school culture full of meritocratic values has contributed significantly to the normalization of *toxic productivity* among students. The overemphasis on academic achievement encourages students to view excess productivity as a standard of success, even if it negatively impacts their mental health. Ranking systems, value-based awards, and high expectations from both schools and families create an atmosphere of intense competition, making students feel guilty at breaks and forcing them to continue working beyond reasonable limits. This phenomenon gives birth to a cycle of chronic stress, anxiety, and even identity crisis, because students define their self-worth only from academic achievement.

The role of teachers and schools as agents of normalization further reinforces performative pressures, often without considering emotional well-being. As a result, many students experience burnout and social isolation. This research emphasizes the urgency of a more balanced approach to education, integrating psychosocial support, mindful

learning, and policies that prioritize mental health. A paradigm transformation of education is needed so that schools are no longer just a competition arena, but a growth space that humanizes students, values diversity of potential, and supports their holistic well-being.

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