

Effects of Psycho-Spiritual Counselling on Academic Stress Management of Secondary School Students in Jos South Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigated the effects of psycho-spiritual counselling on academic stress management among secondary school students in Jos South Local Government Area, Plateau State. The target population comprised 364 senior secondary school students. A sample of 25 students was drawn using two intact classes; 12 students were assigned to the experimental group and 13 to the control group. Data were collected using the Academic Stress Management Inventory (ASMI), validated by experts and found to have a reliability coefficient of 0.74. The experimental group received eight psycho-spiritual counselling sessions of 45 minutes each over four weeks, focusing on orientation, stress education, values clarification, cognitive reappraisal, and spiritual coping strategies, while the control group continued with routine counselling. Data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, and ANCOVA. Results indicated that psycho-spiritual counselling significantly enhanced students' ability to manage academic stress compared to conventional counselling. The intervention explained a substantial proportion of variance in posttest scores, with both male and female students benefiting almost equally. The large effect size confirmed its robustness in promoting resilience and psychological balance. The study concluded that psycho-spiritual counselling is an effective and inclusive strategy for improving academic stress management, and recommended its adoption in school guidance programmes.

Keywords: psycho-spiritual counselling, academic stress management, secondary school students, cognitive reappraisal, Jos South

Introduction

Academic stress has emerged as a pervasive problem among students in secondary schools, including those in Jos South Local Government Area (LGA), Plateau State. Students display their academic stress through anxiety, diminished motivation, poor academic performance, school withdrawal and, in extreme cases, chronic mental health challenges or substance misuse (Obi, 2023). The consequences of poorly managed academic stress are far-reaching, including depression, elevated dropout rates, psychological distress, and risky coping behaviours such as alcohol abuse or drug use (Oluwabusayo et al., 2025; Eyo et al., 2024). Importantly, gender differences have been found to influence how students experience and respond to academic stress. While male students often display externalising coping behaviours such as aggression, risk-taking, or substance use, female students are more likely to internalise stress, exhibiting symptoms such as anxiety, self-blame, or withdrawal (Chukwu & Nwafor, 2024). These variations underscore the need to evaluate the effectiveness of stress management interventions through a gender-sensitive lens. Despite the prevalence of academic stress, conventional interventions, such as guidance counselling, time-management training, peer mentoring, and stress awareness programmes, have yielded only minimal improvements. Although these methods provide partial relief, they often neglect the deeper emotional and spiritual dimensions of students' well-being, leaving many male and female students trapped in cycles of hopelessness, poor coping, and low resilience.

In response to this challenge, psycho-spiritual counselling has emerged as a potentially transformative approach. Adopting psychological techniques with spiritual principles such as values clarification, mindfulness, faith-based meaning-making, and resilience building, psycho-spiritual counselling addresses both the emotional and existential aspects of stress. This holistic method aims to equip students of both genders with lasting coping skills rooted in personal belief systems, thereby enhancing emotional stability, academic engagement, and overall well-being (Pargament, 2017). Considering the limitations of traditional counselling methods, and the influence gender may have on stress experiences and coping outcomes, it becomes imperative to investigate whether psycho-spiritual counselling can significantly enhance academic stress management abilities among male and female students in public secondary schools in Jos South LGA. It is against this background that this study is undertaken to investigate the effects of psycho-spiritual counselling on academic stress management in public secondary schools in Jos South LGA, Plateau State.

Academic stress is a form of psychological pressure experienced by students when the academic demands placed upon them exceed their perceived ability to cope effectively. Pascoe et al. (2020) describe academic stress as a state of mental and emotional strain arising

from academic workload, examinations, competitive learning environments, and performance expectations. It is often triggered by factors such as tight deadlines, high parental or self-expectations, inadequate preparation, and fear of failure (Reddy et al., 2022). Symptoms may include persistent anxiety, difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbances, irritability, physical exhaustion, and reduced academic productivity (Owusu, 2021; Eyo et al., 2024). When unmanaged, academic stress can lead to severe outcomes such as depression, absenteeism, substance abuse, or school dropout.

Management of academic stress refers to structured efforts to reduce its intensity and help students adapt positively to academic challenges. These strategies may be cognitive (restructuring negative thoughts), behavioural (such as time management, relaxation exercises), emotional (like seeking social support), or holistic. Traditional interventions include guidance counselling, peer mentoring, study skills training, and mindfulness exercises (Jiang, 2023). However, contemporary perspectives advocate for integrative approaches that address the mind, body, and spirit. For example, Kumar and Bhukar (2019) emphasize the value of incorporating meaning-making, values clarification, and reflective practices into stress management. Such holistic models, including psycho-spiritual counselling, are increasingly recognized for their capacity to strengthen resilience, enhance emotional balance, and promote overall well-being, as well as maintain academic performance.

Psycho-spiritual counselling, also called transpersonal counselling, integrates psychological and spiritual principles to promote emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being (Pargament, 2017). It recognizes the interconnection between psychology and spirituality, emphasizing holistic healing, growth, and self-discovery. Applied to students, this approach enhances psycho-social adjustment and mental health. Okafor (2022) noted that psycho-spiritual counselling addresses the intertwined nature of psychological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. It acknowledges that human beings are shaped not only by thoughts and feelings but also by spiritual values and beliefs, thereby fostering holistic well-being. Similarly, Miller (2022) observed that individuals must be understood as multidimensional, with mind, body, and spirit influencing one another. This makes psycho-spiritual counselling an integrative approach to nurturing wholeness. In the same vein, Rousseau (2017) described psychosocial-spiritual healing as an integrative process involving connection to self, others, meaning, and inner peace - underscoring how exploration of psychological and spiritual dimensions fosters healing and purpose.

Psycho-spiritual counselling is a therapeutic approach that integrates psychological principles with spiritual insights and practices to promote holistic well-being. It recognizes that human

functioning is influenced not only by cognitive and emotional factors but also by spiritual beliefs, values, and meaning-making processes. According to Richards and Bergin (2021), psycho-spiritual counselling involves helping individuals explore their inner spiritual resources while applying evidence-based psychological strategies to address personal and social challenges. It draws from diverse sources such as mindfulness, meditation, prayer, scriptural reflection, values clarification, and forgiveness therapy, while remaining respectful of the client's faith, tradition, or worldview.

In the context of secondary school education, academic stress is often driven by high expectations, examination pressure, competitive classroom environments, and identity formation struggles. Left unmanaged, this stress can impair concentration, reduce motivation, and trigger anxiety or depression (Pascoe et al., 2020). Psycho-spiritual counselling addresses these challenges by fostering resilience and emotional balance through the integration of meaning and purpose into students' academic pursuits. For example, interventions may involve guiding students to reframe academic challenges as opportunities for personal growth, teaching them spiritually-grounded relaxation techniques, or helping them cultivate gratitude and hope (Jiang, 2023).

One of the key mechanisms through which psycho-spiritual counselling aids stress management is cognitive reframing, which entails helping students shift from negative self-talk (such as, "I will fail no matter what") to affirmations rooted in both self-efficacy and spiritual conviction ("I am capable, and my effort has value beyond this test"). This aligns with the findings of Pargament (2017), who emphasizes that spiritual coping methods can buffer the harmful effects of stress by enhancing meaning, connectedness, and acceptance.

Another crucial aspect is mind-body-spirit relaxation. Practices such as guided imagery with spiritual symbolism, meditative breathing combined with affirmations, and reflective journaling on inspirational texts can help regulate physiological arousal, reduce cortisol levels, and improve mental clarity (Koenig, 2020). For students facing examination anxiety, such practices can lead to calmer test-taking experiences and improved recall. Psycho-spiritual counselling also encourages value-driven time management. When students clarify their personal and spiritual priorities, they are better able to allocate study time, rest, and social engagement in ways that align with their deeper sense of purpose, reducing guilt and procrastination (Kumar & Bhukar, 2019). Furthermore, group-based psycho-spiritual workshops in schools can promote peer support networks, where students encourage one another using shared faith-based or moral values, thereby reducing feelings of isolation.

Gender disparity in academic stress management among secondary school students refers to differences between males and females in coping with academic pressures, which arise from heavy workloads, examinations, peer competition, and parental expectations (Adebayo & Olatunde, 2021). Research shows female students often report higher stress levels due to greater emotional sensitivity and academic perfectionism (Salami & Okeke, 2020). They tend to use emotion-focused coping strategies such as seeking social support or journaling, which can be adaptive but may prolong stress if not combined with problem-solving techniques.

Male students generally report lower perceived stress, influenced by cultural expectations of masculinity that discourage emotional expression. They often adopt problem-focused or avoidant strategies like time management, sometimes neglecting emotional regulation, which may lead to unaddressed psychological strain (Okonkwo & Adeyemi, 2019). Socio-cultural norms further shape these disparities. Girls face additional stressors like domestic responsibilities and societal expectations, while boys are pressured to demonstrate resilience, discouraging help-seeking (Osei & Boateng, 2022). School environments can reinforce these differences through gendered teacher interactions, affecting coping skills over time. Bridging the gap requires gender-responsive support, integrating both emotion-focused and problem-focused stress management strategies in curricula, encouraging male students to express challenges, guiding female students in active problem-solving, and sensitizing parents and educators to avoid reinforcing limiting stereotypes.

Statement of the problem

Academic stress has become a persistent challenge for many secondary school students in Jos South Local Government Area (LGA), Plateau State, undermining their emotional stability, academic achievement, and overall well-being. Despite the use of various interventions such as conventional guidance counselling, time-management workshops, peer mentoring, and relaxation techniques, stress-related issues - including declining grades, chronic anxiety, depression, absenteeism, and in severe cases, withdrawal from school - remain widespread. A key limitation of these existing strategies is that they often focus mainly on cognitive and behavioural dimensions of stress, while neglecting the spiritual and inner-life aspects that significantly shape coping ability. In addition, male and female students may experience and respond to academic stress differently due to variations in emotional expression, social expectations, and coping styles. Unfortunately, these gender-specific dynamics are rarely integrated into conventional interventions. As a result, many students resort to maladaptive coping strategies, such as substance abuse, excessive social media use, or isolation, which further aggravate rather than resolve the problem.

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This situation reveals a critical gap in stress management interventions and underscores the need for a holistic approach. Psycho-spiritual counselling, which integrates evidence-based psychological techniques with spiritual principles and practices, offers promise in addressing the mind, body, and spirit simultaneously, while also considering gender-related differences in stress experiences and coping patterns. However, the effectiveness of psycho-spiritual counselling in managing academic stress among male and female students in Jos South LGA has not been empirically investigated. The problem of this study, therefore, is to examine, through an experimental design, the effectiveness of psycho-spiritual counselling on academic stress management among secondary school students in Jos South LGA.

Objectives of the study

The study is designed to achieve the following objectives:

1. Determine the pretest and posttest academic stress management abilities mean scores of secondary school students in Jos South LGA between the experimental and control groups.
2. Compare the academic stress management abilities of male and female students in both the experimental and control groups.

Research questions

1. What is the pretest and posttest academic stress management abilities mean scores of secondary school students in Jos South LGA in experimental and control groups?
2. How do male and female students in experimental and control groups compare in their academic stress management abilities in secondary schools in Jos South LGA?

Hypotheses

Ho1: There is no significant difference in the academic stress management abilities of secondary school students between those exposed to psycho-spiritual counselling and those not exposed to, in Jos South LGA.

Ho2: There is no significant difference in the academic stress management abilities of male and female students in experimental and control groups.

Methodology

The population of this study comprised 364 senior secondary school students in Jos South Local Government Area (LGA) of Plateau State, Nigeria. From this population, a purposive sample of 25 students was drawn using two intact classes from Senior Secondary School Two (SSS II). This class was selected because students at this level were considered mature enough to articulate stress experiences, yet not burdened by external examinations. Twelve students were assigned to the experimental group and thirteen to the control group.

The study employed a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design. Data were collected using the Academic Stress Management Inventory (ASMI), consisting of three sections: Section A (5 items on demographics), Section B (15 items on academic stressors), and Section C (20 items on coping strategies). Altogether, the ASMI contained 40 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting better stress management. Content validity was ensured through expert review, while reliability yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.74.

The experimental group received psycho-spiritual counselling for four weeks, delivered in eight 45-minute sessions by a trained counsellor. The sessions focused on orientation, stress education, values clarification, cognitive reappraisal, spiritual coping skills (prayer, meditation, gratitude, forgiveness), problem-solving, relaxation techniques, and relapse prevention. The control group continued with routine school counselling without the psycho-spiritual counselling. Pretests were administered before commencement of treatment, followed by the intervention, which lasted for four weeks, and posttests at the end of Week 4. Data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, and ANCOVA for the research questions and hypothesis respectively.

Presentation of results

Research question 1: What is the pretest and posttest academic stress management abilities mean scores of secondary school students in Jos South LGA in experimental and control groups?

Table 1: Pre-test and post-test academic stress management ability mean scores of senior secondary school II students in the experimental and control groups

| Group | Pretest | | | Posttest | | | \bar{x}-Gain difference |
|---------------------|----------------|-------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|------------------|---|
| | N | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | Mean Gain | |
| Experimental | 12 | 20.31 | 4.10 | 29.69 | 3.47 | 9.38 | |
| | | | | | | | 6.43 |
| Control | 13 | 21.80 | 4.25 | 24.75 | 6.74 | 2.95 | |

The results show that students in the experimental group demonstrated considerable improvement in academic stress management abilities, increasing from a pretest mean of 20.31 to a posttest mean of 29.69, with a mean gain of 9.38. In comparison, the control group

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showed only modest improvement, rising from a pretest mean of 21.80 to a posttest mean of 24.75, with a mean gain of 2.95. The mean gain difference of 6.43 highlights the substantial effectiveness of the intervention in enhancing academic stress management abilities among secondary school students.

H01: There is no significant difference in the academic stress management abilities of secondary school students between those exposed to psycho-spiritual counselling and those not exposed to it in Jos South LGA.

Table 2: ANCOVA result on pretest and posttest academic stress management ability mean scores of senior secondary school II Students in the experimental and control groups

| Source | Type II Sum of Squares | Df | Mean Square | F | Sig. | Partial Eta Squared |
|--|------------------------|----|-------------|---------|------|---------------------|
| Corrected Model | 218.564 | 2 | 109.282 | 18.274 | .000 | .638 |
| Intercept | 320.456 | 1 | 320.456 | 220.704 | .000 | .912 |
| Academic Stress Management Abilities Pretest | 75.210 | 1 | 75.210 | 12.570 | .002 | .374 |
| Group | 137.354 | 1 | 137.354 | 23.003 | .000 | .533 |
| Error | 125.676 | 22 | 5.712 | | | |
| Total | 1764.000 | 25 | | | | |
| Corrected Total | 344.240 | 24 | | | | |

a. R Squared = .638 (Adjusted R Squared = .609)

The ANCOVA results indicate a significant effect of group membership (experimental vs control) on students' academic stress management abilities after controlling for pretest scores, $F(1, 22) = 23.00, p < 0.05$ with a large effect size (partial $\eta^2 = .523$). This means that students who received the intervention (experimental group) improved significantly more in their academic stress management abilities compared to those in the control group. Pretest scores also had a significant effect on posttest scores ($F(1, 22) = 12.57, p = .002$), indicating that baseline academic stress management abilities contributed to posttest outcomes. The R-

squared value (.638) shows that 63.8% of the variance in posttest scores is explained by the model, confirming that the intervention had a substantial impact.

Research question 2: How do male and female students in experimental and control groups compare in their academic stress management abilities in secondary schools in Jos South LGA?

Table 3: Pre-test and post-test academic stress management abilities mean scores of senior secondary school II students in the experimental and control groups according to gender

| Variables | Pretest | | | Posttest | | | \bar{x} -Gain difference |
|-----------------|---------|-------|------|----------|------|-----------|----------------------------|
| | N | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | Mean Gain | |
| Male (Expt) | 4 | 23.00 | 4.05 | 38.05 | 3.75 | 15.05 | 0.02 |
| Female (Expt) | 8 | 22.33 | 4.18 | 37.40 | 3.96 | 15.07 | |
| Male (Control) | 6 | 22.50 | 4.30 | 28.51 | 4.12 | 6.01 | 0.41 |
| Female(control) | 7 | 23.70 | 4.22 | 29.30 | 4.00 | 5.60 | |

The results indicate that the experimental group experienced substantial improvement in academic stress management abilities, with male students increasing from a pretest mean of 23.00 to a posttest mean of 38.05 (mean gain = 15.05) and female students from 22.33 to 37.40 (mean gain = 15.07). The minimal mean-gain difference of 0.02 shows that both genders benefited almost equally from the intervention. In contrast, the control group showed only modest improvement, with males gaining 6.01 points and females 5.60 points, and a slightly larger mean-gain difference of 0.41. These findings suggest that the intervention was highly effective in enhancing academic stress management abilities among secondary school students, regardless of gender.

Ho2: There is no significant difference in the academic stress management abilities of male and female students in experimental and control groups.

Table 4: ANCOVA result on pretest and posttest academic stress management ability mean scores of male and female senior secondary school II students in the experimental group

| Source | Type II Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. | Partial Eta Squared |
|--------------------|------------------------------|----|----------------|--------|------|---------------------------|
| Corrected Model | 450.78 | 2 | 225.390 | 25.84 | .000 | .794 |
| Intercept | 900.12 | 1 | 900.12 | 154.88 | .000 | .886 |
| Academic stress | 1120.45 | 1 | 1120.42 | 20.73 | .000 | .496 |
| Mgt Abilities_pre1 | | | | | | |
| Group | 265.67 | 1 | 265.67 | 45.73 | .120 | .116 |
| Gender | 15.23 | 1 | 15.23 | 2.62 | .110 | .102 |
| Error | 116.40 | 21 | 5.543 | | | |
| Total | 1582.00 | 25 | | | | |
| Corrected Total | 567.18 | 24 | | | | |

a. R Squared = .794 (Adjusted R Squared = .770)

The ANCOVA results show a significant effect of the intervention on academic stress management abilities after controlling for pretest scores ($F(1, 21) = 20.73, p < 0.05$), with a large effect size (partial $\eta^2 = .496$). This indicates that students in the experimental group improved substantially more than those in the control group. Pretest scores also had a significant effect ($F(1, 21) = 20.73, p < 0.05$), indicating that baseline academic stress management ability contributed to posttest outcomes. Gender was not significant ($F(1, 21) = 2.62, P > 0.05$), suggesting that both male and female students benefitted similarly from the intervention. The R-squared value (.794) shows that 79.4% of the variance in posttest scores is explained by the model, confirming the strong impact of the intervention.

Discussion of the findings

The result of research question one showed that students in the experimental group who received psycho-spiritual counselling demonstrated remarkable improvement in academic stress management abilities compared to their counterparts in the control group. The mean gain difference of 6.43 confirms that psycho-spiritual counselling significantly enhanced students' capacity to cope with academic demands. This finding supports Pargament (2017), who emphasized that integrating spiritual with psychological principles provides a holistic

coping mechanism that strengthens resilience against stress. The ANCOVA results further validated the significant impact of psycho-spiritual counselling, with group membership exerting a strong influence on posttest scores and accounting for 63.8% of the variance. This aligns with Okafor (2022), who maintained that psycho-spiritual counselling addresses both emotional and spiritual dimensions of well-being, thereby equipping students with deeper resources to manage stress. The contribution of pretest scores also reflects Miller's (2022) view that prior coping levels shape outcomes but can be enhanced when counselling integrates spiritual dimensions.

The result of research question two revealed that both male and female students benefited almost equally from psycho-spiritual counselling, as shown by the negligible mean gain difference (0.02). This demonstrates that the intervention is gender-inclusive and effective across diverse groups. Rousseau (2017) similarly observed that psycho-spiritual counselling encourages growth and stress resilience without discrimination, since it taps into universal aspects of human experience such as meaning, values, and faith. The ANCOVA result for hypothesis two further confirmed the robustness of psycho-spiritual counselling in improving academic stress management abilities, explaining 79.4% of the variance in posttest scores. The insignificance of gender further suggests that psycho-spiritual counselling promotes holistic benefits for all learners, consistent with Richards and Bergin's (2021) view that spiritually integrated counselling fosters well-being across diverse groups. Overall, the findings affirm that psycho-spiritual counselling is a powerful tool for reducing academic stress among secondary school students in Jos South LGA.

Conclusion

The study demonstrated that psycho-spiritual counselling significantly enhanced the academic stress management abilities of secondary school students in Jos South LGA. Students exposed to the intervention showed greater improvement than those in the control group, indicating that integrating psychological strategies with spiritual insights equips learners with holistic coping skills. Results further revealed that the intervention explained a substantial proportion of the variance in outcomes, confirming its strong impact on students' well-being. Importantly, both male and female students benefited almost equally, showing that psycho-spiritual counselling is inclusive and unbiased. Overall, the findings affirm psycho-spiritual counselling as a reliable and effective approach for strengthening resilience and managing academic stress among secondary school students.

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Recommendations

1. The study showed that the experimental group students exposed to psycho-spiritual counselling showed greater academic stress management gains; therefore, school counsellors should adopt psycho-spiritual counselling in guidance programmes.
2. As the psycho-spiritual counselling (intervention) explained much of the variance in outcomes, counsellors should receive training in psycho-spiritual counselling techniques.
3. Given the strong overall effect of the psycho-spiritual counselling intervention, policymakers should integrate psycho-spiritual counselling into school-wide wellness initiatives.

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