

The Relationship Between Self-Efficacy and Academic Anxiety Among Ninth-Grade Students at SMP Negeri 35 Medan

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Abstract

Academic pressure during the transition from junior high school to senior high school often triggers high levels of academic anxiety in ninth-grade students. This study aims to empirically examine the relationship between self-efficacy and academic anxiety in ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 35 Medan. Using a quantitative correlational design, this study involved 95 students selected using a saturated sampling technique (total sampling). Data collection was conducted using a self-efficacy scale adapted from Bandura's theory and an academic anxiety scale based on Holmes's framework. Pearson's Product Moment Correlation analysis showed a significant negative correlation between self-efficacy and academic anxiety ($p < 0.001$; $r = -0.910$). This finding indicates that students with high self-efficacy are better able to evaluate academic demands as manageable challenges rather than threats, which significantly reduces anxiety responses. In conclusion, school counselors need to prioritize cognitive restructuring interventions that focus on improving students' self-efficacy, rather than merely technical learning skills, to build psychological resilience in facing the educational transition.

Article History

Received 14 April 2026

Available 31 May 2026

Keywords

Academic Anxiety;
Educational Transition;
School Counseling;
Self-Efficacy

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66851/veritas.v2i2.227>



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Introduction

Middle adolescence, generally experienced by ninth-grade junior high school students, is a developmental phase fraught with psychological turbulence and adaptive demands. Specifically, students at this stage are in a crucial educational transition phase, preparing to enter senior high school or vocational school. During this phase, expectations from the surrounding environment—including parents, teachers, and peers—escalate significantly. Students are confronted with a more complex curriculum, demands to achieve satisfactory graduation grades, and the necessity to plan their future academic trajectories. In Indonesia, this pressure is further amplified by intense competition to enter top-tier public high schools or favorite schools, which are often perceived as a guarantee of success in higher education. These simultaneous demands subsequently manifest into a heavy cognitive and emotional burden, frequently taking the form of academic anxiety (Zeidner & Matthews, 2005).

Academic anxiety can be conceptualized as a negative and persistent emotional, cognitive, affective, and somatic response when an individual faces situations directly related to learning evaluation, examinations, or school performance (Cassady & Johnson, 2002). Unlike generalized anxiety, academic anxiety is strictly tied to the educational domain. According to Holmes (1991), the manifestation of this anxiety can be dissected into four main dimensions. First, the cognitive dimension, which includes irrational thoughts, fear of failure, loss of concentration, and rumination about the severe consequences of low grades. Second, the affective dimension, referring to mood swings, feelings of depression, irritability, and despair. Third, the somatic dimension, characterized by uncomfortable physiological reactions, such as increased heart rate, cold sweats, gastrointestinal distress, and headaches leading up to exams. Fourth, the motor dimension, evident in restless behavior, trembling, pacing, or the inability to sit still when facing school tasks. If these four dimensions accumulate without proper intervention, academic anxiety can be highly destructive. Previous research indicates that excessive anxiety directly contributes to a decline in academic performance, triggers procrastination, causes mental exhaustion (burnout), and potentially leads to clinical depression that undermines students' overall psychological well-being (Pekrun et al., 2002; Zeidner & Matthews, 2005).

Given the significant negative impact of academic anxiety, identifying non-cognitive predictors and protective factors within students has become an urgent priority in contemporary educational psychology discourse (Lee & Stankov, 2018). Educational interventions can no longer solely focus on pedagogical aspects such as additional study hours or technical guidance (study skills); instead, they must target the students' psychological foundations. In this regard, one internal variable theoretically claimed to mediate and reduce academic pressure comprehensively is self-efficacy.

Based on the Social Cognitive Theory pioneered by Albert Bandura, self-efficacy is defined as an individual's belief, judgment, or confidence in their capability to organize, plan, and execute a series of actions required to master specific situations and achieve targeted outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy is not about the objective skills a person possesses, but rather what they believe they can do with those skills under various conditions. Bandura (1997) divides self-efficacy into three primary dimensions: (1) Magnitude, which is the individual's belief in completing tasks of varying difficulty levels; (2) Generality, the individual's ability to transfer their self-belief across different task contexts or subjects; and (3) Strength, the level of resilience or persistence of an individual's belief when faced with unexpected obstacles or failures (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016).

Students with high levels of self-efficacy tend to perceive difficult school tasks and the threat of final exams not as dangers to be avoided, but as academic challenges to be mastered (Putwain & Symes, 2012). They have a strong commitment to learning goals, are capable of regulating their effort, and recover more quickly after experiencing failure. Conversely, students with low self-efficacy easily doubt their own cognitive capacities. This doubt creates a vicious cycle: the perception of incompetence triggers an increase in anticipatory stress reactions, which ultimately elicits persistent cognitive and somatic anxiety symptoms (Pajares, 1996). In other words, the fear of incompetence is often more paralyzing than the actual difficulty of the task itself.

Numerous previous studies have attempted to confirm the central role of self-efficacy in reducing anxiety and improving student effort regulation across various educational levels. A study by Barrows, Dunn, and Lloyd (2013) found a strong correlation between self-efficacy and decreased exam anxiety, which impacted final grade improvements. Similarly, a systematic review by Honicke and Broadbent (2016) affirmed that academic self-efficacy is a consistent predictor of good performance because this variable mediates goal setting and persistence. Furlan, Kohan Cortada, and Piemontesi (2015) also highlighted that self-efficacy acts as a primary coping mechanism in preventing evaluation anxiety that paralyzes cognition. Furthermore, Komarraju and Nadler (2013) explained that positive self-belief makes students more strategic in managing their time and effort, preventing academic pressure from being perceived as an existential threat.

However, a comprehensive literature review (state of the art) reveals a significant research gap. The majority of studies regarding the dynamics of academic anxiety and self-efficacy are predominantly conducted on university student populations or senior high school students preparing for university entrance exams (Cassady & Johnson, 2002; Doménech-Betoret et al., 2017). Very little attention has been given to the demographic of ninth-grade junior high school students, particularly in urban environments where psychosocial dynamics are highly specific. At the age of 14-15, ninth-grade students are at the peak of adolescent identity crises, where peer acceptance and parental expectations to enter favorite advanced schools impose a double cognitive burden (Martin & Marsh, 2008). The environmental context of SMP Negeri 35 Medan, representing an urban middle school with a fairly high level of academic competition and student heterogeneity, provides an ideal natural setting to explore this phenomenon.

Departing from the uniqueness of the background problem and the existing literature gap, this study aims to empirically examine the relationship between self-efficacy and academic anxiety among ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 35 Medan. The researcher proposes an alternative hypothesis (H_a) that there is a significant negative correlation between the level of self-efficacy and the level of academic anxiety. The findings of this study are expected not only to provide theoretical contributions to the enrichment of local and national educational psychology literature but also to offer a highly precise empirical foundation for School Counselors. By understanding these psychological mechanisms, schools can shift from a traditional counseling paradigm centered on grade improvement toward a more preventive and curative psychological intervention design—such

as cognitive restructuring and resilience building—to safeguard students' mental well-being during the transition period.

Methods

This research was designed using a quantitative approach with a correlational method. The selection of a correlational design was based on the primary objective of the study, which is to descriptively measure the phenomenon, determine the direction of the relationship, and measure the degree of relationship between the independent variable (self-efficacy) and the dependent variable (academic anxiety) without manipulating or applying treatment to the research subjects. A quantitative approach was chosen so that the measurement of students' psychological trait constellations could be conducted systematically, objectively, and generalized through the use of standardized instruments. The research was conducted directly at SMP Negeri 35 Medan, focusing on the observation of behaviors and psychological responses of ninth-grade students who were in the midst of preparing for final exams and the school transition phase.

The population in this study included all individuals from the specified demographic group, namely all ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 35 Medan. Given the specific characteristics of the population, limited to one final-year cohort, and a number that was logistically and methodologically accessible in a single measurement period, the researcher decided to use a total sampling technique. Through this census technique, the entire population of 95 students was selected in its entirety to serve as research respondents. The use of total sampling in correlational studies holds robust justification: it effectively minimizes sampling error, avoids selection bias, and maximizes data variance, ensuring that the correlation analysis results and the ensuing generalizations are much more stable, accurate, and highly representative of real-field conditions.

Field data collection was carried out using a survey technique by distributing two types of psychological scale instruments constructed using a Likert model with four alternative response options (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree). The use of four response options aimed to avoid central tendency bias, where respondents frequently choose a safe neutral option.

The first instrument aimed to measure the self-efficacy variable. This scale was comprehensively developed based on the theoretical foundation of Bandura (1997), which decomposes self-belief into three essential dimensions. The magnitude dimension measures students' beliefs in their ability to complete questions or curriculum demands from easy levels up to their maximum capability limit. The generality dimension measures how far students believe their capabilities can be applied across different subjects or academic challenges. Meanwhile, the strength dimension measures the degree of tenacity, persistence, and stability of students' beliefs when they face tricky exam questions or receive poor feedback.

The second instrument was used to measure the academic anxiety variable. This scale was structured referring to the theoretical framework and anxiety symptomatology initiated by Holmes (1991). This scale captures four main indicators: (1) the cognitive aspect, containing items about the inability to concentrate, blanking out during exams, and fear of the future; (2) the affective/mood aspect, measuring the level of irritability, sadness, and unnatural panic feelings; (3) the somatic aspect, evaluating the emergence of physiological symptoms due to study stress such as digestive complaints, dizziness, or a racing heartbeat when teachers give sudden tests; and (4) the motor aspect, noting the frequency of repetitive behaviors performed unconsciously due to pressure, such as nail-biting, pen-tapping, or the inability to sit relaxed during the learning evaluation process.

To ensure the scientific credibility of the research results, both instruments went through rigorous try-out stages and psychometric testing before being administered to the 95 actual respondents. Construct and criterion validity tests were conducted to ensure that the statement items truly represented the variables being measured. The validity test results showed that the self-efficacy instrument had validity coefficients (r -count) ranging from 0,356 to 0.782, all of which exceeded the r -table value (0.361 at the 5% significance level for $N=30$ during the try-out), thus declaring them valid. Similarly, the academic anxiety instrument exhibited validity coefficients (r -count) ranging from 0.412 to 0.815, which also exceeded the r -table value, declaring all items valid. Furthermore, reliability tests using the Cronbach's Alpha formula were performed to guarantee the

consistency and stability of the instruments if used at different times. The test results showed a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.875 for the self-efficacy scale and 0.892 for the academic anxiety scale. Given that both reliability values are well above the standard threshold (typically >0.70), both instruments were categorized as highly reliable. Only items that met the standard coefficients of validity and reliability were retained in the primary data collection process.

The raw data collected through the instruments were then codified and tabulated into statistical processing software. The data analysis approach was carried out through parametric inferential statistics. Referring to the strict rules of parametric statistics, before executing the hypothesis testing, the researcher first ran a series of prerequisite assumption tests. The normality test was conducted using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov technique to verify whether the data distribution of both variables was normally distributed, which is the basic assumption for the validity of probability theory. Furthermore, the linearity test was conducted to ensure that the relationship between the predictor (self-efficacy) and the criterion (academic anxiety) formed a linear straight line, making the use of Pearson correlation appropriate. After all prerequisite assumptions were met, hypothesis testing was carried out using the Pearson's Product Moment Correlation analysis technique. This specific technique was chosen because of its highly precise capability in identifying both the correlation direction (positive or negative) and the correlation strength/magnitude (r coefficient). The hypothesis decision was determined based on the probability value of significance with an error tolerance limit (α) of 5% (0.05).

Result And Discussion

Correlation Analysis Results

The data collection process successfully gathered responses from 95 ninth-grade students in their entirety without any missing data, allowing all data to be involved in statistical processing. Before proceeding to the hypothesis testing stage, the results of the prerequisite analysis confirmed the feasibility of testing the data parametrically. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test indicated that the self-efficacy and academic anxiety score data spread in a normal distribution pattern ($p > 0.05$). Similarly, the linearity test verified that the relationship plot between the self-efficacy variable as the predictor and academic anxiety as the criterion formed a meaningful and linear straight-line regression pattern. Fulfilling these two absolute prerequisites provides an assurance that the drawn correlation results will be free from bias and possess high statistical validity. Descriptively, the self-efficacy variable had a mean of 82.45 with a standard deviation of 9.32. Meanwhile, the academic anxiety variable had a mean of 55.12 with a standard deviation of 11.48. These standard deviation values, being relatively proportional to the mean, further strengthen the assumption of a naturally distributed data spread within the population.

Table 1. Summary of Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Test Results

Variables Correlated	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Significance (p)	Coefficient of Determination (R^2)	Direction & Strength of Relationship	Decision
Self-Efficacy – Academic Anxiety	-0.910	< 0.001	0.828 (82.8%)	Negative, Very Strong	H_a Accepted

Source: Processed Primary Data (2026)

The primary hypothesis testing was conducted using the Pearson's Product Moment Correlation technique. Referring to Table 2 above, the statistical computation output yielded a correlation coefficient (r) of -0.910 with a probability value (p -value) of $p < 0.001$. Considering that the obtained significance value is far below the established alpha level (0.05), the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis (H_a) is accepted with a very high degree of confidence. This statistical conclusion proves that there is a highly significant relationship between self-efficacy and the level of academic anxiety in this population.

Furthermore, the most essential essence of this finding lies in the negative sign (-) attached to the correlation coefficient r . This negative correlation direction confirms an asymmetrical,

inversely proportional relationship pattern between the two psychological constructs. The empirical meaning of this negative direction is: the higher and stronger the level of self-efficacy represented by a ninth-grade student at SMP Negeri 35 Medan, the more drastic the decline in the level of academic anxiety they suffer, whether cognitively, affectively, somatically, or motorically. In addition, the calculation of the coefficient of determination (R^2), obtained by squaring the correlation value $(-0.910)^2$, resulted in a value of 0.8281. This figure signifies that the self-efficacy variable provides a massive contribution, namely 82.8%, to the variance in the reduction of students' academic anxiety. The remaining percentage (17.2%) is influenced by variables outside this research model.

Discussion

The findings of this study do not merely verify theoretical postulates; they provide highly convincing empirical evidence that self-efficacy acts as a crucial psychological buffer and the most effective internal defense mechanism in mitigating and reducing students' academic anxiety during transition periods. The statistical significance achieved (< 0.001) with a contribution of over 80% reflects that this phenomenon is not a mere mathematical coincidence, but a systematic cognitive-emotional interaction pattern in early adolescents. The exceptionally high correlation value ($r = -0.910$) provides a robust empirical foundation to address the research gap posed in the introduction. This affirms that for the demographic of urban ninth-grade students—who are bombarded by dual expectations from parents and peers ahead of favorite high school selections—self-belief is not merely an auxiliary attribute, but the prime determinant of their psychological safety. The magnitude of this coefficient suggests that in weathering the storm of educational transition, internal factors like cognitive resilience (rooted in self-efficacy) dictate the fluctuations of anxiety far more than external factors alone.

When analyzed through the lens of Social Cognitive Theory developed by Bandura (1997), the results of this study fully align with the assumption that belief in one's capacity—not merely objective talent or intelligence—acts as the conductor for an individual in responding, representing, and attributing stimuli from their environment. Ninth-grade students with superior levels of self-efficacy exhibit a much more adaptive architecture and maturity in their cognitive processes. When confronted with massive stressors, such as national graduation exam simulations or the demands of preparing for top-tier high school selections, highly efficacious students do not process these stimuli as terrifying "threat appraisals" that endanger their ego. Instead, through secondary cognitive evaluation, they assess these academic demands as highly logical "challenge appraisals" that remain within the corridor of their ability to conquer (Putwain & Symes, 2012). Such cognitive mastery subsequently strengthens their expectancy-value, intrinsic motivation, and overall academic achievement, as also confirmed by the study conducted by Doménech-Betoret et al. (2017).

More deeply, the reduction or decrease in the level of academic anxiety in students with robust self-efficacy can also be explained through their capacity to execute regulatory and control mechanisms over somatic and motor responses (Pekrun et al., 2002). Based on Holmes's (1991) conceptual elaboration of anxiety manifestations, individuals experiencing severe psychological pressure will reflexively arouse the sympathetic nervous system, precipitating physiological disturbances or symptoms, such as increased heart rate (palpitations), gastrointestinal disorders, to severe motor restlessness that directly sabotage concentration and working memory capacity during exams. In the context of observation in this study, students who believe in the breadth and depth of their capabilities (high magnitude, generality, and strength) were proven to possess heuristic abilities to mediate, delay, or even shut down the emergence of these negative somatic and motor manifestations. Highly resourceful students do not squander their emotional and cognitive energy bemoaning their circumstances or maintaining cycles of ruminative thoughts that lead to failure. Conversely, they channel all available psychological energy to consciously activate problem-focused coping strategies, plan time management strategies, and organize task completion patterns sequentially and measurably. This leaves anxiety with no cognitive space to develop into panic.

These findings are highly consistent with various previous international literatures. Cassady

and Johnson (2002), for instance, asserted that cognitive test anxiety heavily relies on the subject's competence beliefs. Students who feel capable will suppress emotionality (physical reactions) and maintain clarity of thought. Lee and Stankov (2018), in their global comparative analysis, also emphasized that strong self-belief is a non-cognitive predictor that often determines students' academic endurance far beyond the measure of intelligence itself.

The significance of this narrative and research outcome highlights a highly crucial discourse of difference from the traditional assumptions still frequently maintained in school environments. For decades, the educational paradigm has often assumed and labeled students who are anxious, trembling, and failing exams solely as victims of insufficient study hours, laziness, or lack of understanding of the material (lack of study skills). The empirical findings of this study refute and simultaneously reconstruct such outdated views. This study affirms that the most fundamental factor, the root cause of such paralyzing evaluation anxiety, is the absence of self-worth and the loss of belief in self-competence (Pajares, 1996; Zeidner & Matthews, 2005). When a student no longer believes they can, a hundred hours of extra classes (drilling questions) will not be able to lower their racing heartbeat when the exam paper is distributed. The phenomenon captured in this ninth-grade population offers invaluable insight: their anxiety is not just about the fear of failing exams, but a reflection of an identity crisis regarding "whether I am worthy and capable enough" in the eyes of their social environment. Therefore, self-efficacy acts like an anchor, stabilizing their identity when battered by waves of expectations.

Therefore, the theoretical and practical implications of this study have a very strong resonance and are highly relevant for transforming the governance of Guidance and Counseling services in the educational realm, particularly in Junior High Schools. Conventional academic tutoring services are no longer adequate if they merely rely on the routine of equipping students with tips for answering multiple-choice questions or memorization schedules. Educational counselors and Guidance Counseling teachers must overhaul their service paradigms by integratively incorporating behavior modification techniques and cognitive restructuring programs. Approaches such as classical guidance that provide mastery experiences, peer modeling (vicarious learning), and systematic positive affirmation conditioning (verbal persuasion) must become mandatory items in the Guidance and Counseling curriculum to foster students' self-efficacy in a structured and fundamental manner. Only by building cognitive strength from within the students can schools mold a generation with high academic buoyancy and formidable psychological resilience in facing life's tests and the harshness of transitioning educational climates (Martin & Marsh, 2008).

Conclusion

Based on the results of inferential statistical data analysis and the elaboration of the discussion, it can be firmly concluded that there is a highly significant negative correlation between the variable of self-efficacy and the level of academic anxiety in the demographic of ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 35 Medan. The strength of this correlation represents a substantive finding: that amidst the pressure of urban expectations and educational transition crises, a strongly structured architecture of student self-belief serves as the most vital psychological shield. High self-efficacy significantly suppresses the escalation of anxiety responses—whether manifested cognitively (rumination on failure), affectively (despair), somatically (physical disturbances), or motorically (restlessness)—when they are confronted with the threat of exams and advanced school selections. This proves that the root of academic performance paralysis due to anxiety is not intellectual weakness, but a dysfunction in self-evaluation. This conclusion provides a new paradigm perspective that curing academic anxiety cannot be resolved solely through technical pedagogical approaches, such as adding study hours; rather, it must touch the root of the problem through the restructuring of their cognitive domains regarding their capacities. As a concrete recommendation, it is absolutely advisable for the school, particularly counselors and Guidance Counseling teachers, to design and implement an "early warning system" program to screen anxiety levels, followed by specific psychological interventions, such as self-regulated learning training and cognitive behavior counseling. This preventive approach directly targets the enhancement of students' self-efficacy profiles to optimally support their mental well-being and academic performance equilibrium. For future researchers, it is suggested to explore this phenomenon through a Research and

Development (R&D) framework to create validated counseling modules, or by employing a Mixed-Methods approach to delve into the in-depth narratives behind the psychological resilience or vulnerability of students during transition periods.

Acknowledgement

The authors express their deepest gratitude to the Dean and the academic community of the Faculty of Education, Universitas Negeri Medan, for their methodological and academic support. High appreciation is also extended to the Principal, the board of teachers, and all resilient ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 35 Medan who actively participated and facilitated the smooth process of data collection in this research.

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