
The Psychology Study of Assessment: How Testing Effect Student Stress, Performance, and Self Belief

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates how academic assessments shape students' psychological experiences, focusing on stress, test anxiety, academic self-concept, and performance. Grounded in the psychology of assessment and learning, the study recognizes testing as both an academic and emotional experience for learners. Through semi-structured interviews with 18 high school and undergraduate students, the research explores how testing environments, feedback, and personal coping strategies intertwine to influence learners' emotions and self-perception. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), major themes emerged, including: "fear of failure," "identity through grades," "coping mechanisms," "feedback and efficacy," and "long-term psychological effects." These themes illustrate how repeated assessment experiences gradually shape students' beliefs about their abilities and academic worth. Findings highlight that assessment practices function not just as evaluative tools but as significant psychological agents that influence self-concept and emotional well-being. The paper discusses implications for educators, school psychologists, and policymakers, calling for assessment reform that integrates emotional support and promotes self-efficacy. Such reforms are essential for fostering psychologically safe learning environments that balance academic rigor with student well-being.

Keywords: Qualitative Study, Assessment, Psychological Experience, Anxiety, Phenomenological Research, Semi Structured Interview, Policymaker.

1. Introduction

Assessment is a cornerstone of educational systems globally: it provides a measure of student learning, validates achievement, and guides instructional decisions. In contemporary education systems, assessment outcomes increasingly influence academic progression, institutional accountability, and students' future educational and career trajectories. However, beyond its pedagogical functions, assessment exerts a powerful psychological influence on students. For many, tests are not only measures of academic ability but also mirror reflecting their self-worth, competence, and future opportunities. This dual nature of assessment as both tool and psychological agent raises important questions about how testing affects students' emotional health and self-concept.

In educational psychology, growing attention has been paid to test anxiety, a phenomenon characterized by worry, physiological arousal, and performance impairments in evaluative situations. Recent studies emphasize that test anxiety is not merely an individual deficit but a context-sensitive response shaped by assessment

design, classroom climate, and feedback practices (Putwain, 2020; von der Embse et al., 2018). Test anxiety can significantly impair students' cognitive functioning, disrupt working memory, and negatively impact academic performance (Duraku & Hoxha, 2018; Zeidner, 1998). Moreover, students frequently internalize assessment feedback in ways that influence their long-term self-image: high-stakes exams may reinforce self-perceptions, impacting how learners view their academic identity (Malik, Fatima & Hussain, 2016). Repeated exposure to judgment-oriented assessments may gradually shape students' beliefs about their intelligence, competence, and academic worth.

While quantitative studies have documented associations such as the negative correlation between test anxiety and self-esteem (Akyuz & Akyuz, as cited in PubMed; see also test anxiety vs. self-concept research) such findings often fail to capture the subjective meanings students attach to assessment experiences. There is a pressing need for qualitative inquiry. Such inquiry enables a deeper exploration of the lived experiences behind statistics: how do students interpret their emotional responses? How do assessment practices shape their self-conception? And how do they manage the psychological burden of testing? Qualitative approaches allow students' voices to illuminate the emotional and identity-related dimensions of assessment that remain hidden in large-scale surveys (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2021).

This study addresses these questions by exploring the personal narratives of students who undergo regular assessments. Drawing on theories in educational psychology, particularly Pekrun's control-value theory of achievement emotions (Pekrun, 2006, 2018) this research examines how students' perceived control and subjective value attached to assessments mediate their emotional responses and sense of academic identity. According to this framework, emotions such as anxiety, pride, and hopelessness emerge from students' appraisals of control over learning outcomes and the personal importance they assign to academic success. Ultimately, the study aims to offer insights and practical recommendations for designing assessments that are not only valid measures of learning but also psychologically supportive environments.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How do students describe their emotional and cognitive experiences around assessments?
2. In what ways do assessment outcomes shape students' self-concept and academic identity?
3. What coping strategies do students use before, during, and after tests, and how effective do they feel they are?
4. How can assessment practices be adapted to support students' psychological well-being and self-efficacy?

1. Literature Review

Test anxiety is broadly defined in educational and psychological literature as the set of phenomenological, physiological, and behavioral responses that accompany concern about possible negative consequences or failure in an exam (Sieber, O'Neil & Tobias, 1977; as cited in the Indian Journal of Indian Psychology) It is not simply nervousness: high levels of test anxiety can interfere with cognitive functions such as working memory, concentration, and problem-solving, which are critical for effective performance under assessment conditions (Duraku & Hoxha, 2018)

A cross-sectional study among high school students in Turkey found a significant negative correlation between test anxiety and self-esteem: higher anxiety was associated with lower self-esteem. This aligns with research from other contexts highlighting that test anxiety has pervasive impacts on psychological well-being. Self-concept, particularly academic self-concept, refers to how students perceive their competence in academic domains (Marsh & Craven, various works). It is a multifaceted construct that influences motivation, academic engagement, and emotional responses to learning.

Research conducted in a Pakistani context (Malik, Fatima & Hussain, 2016) shows a meaningful relationship between self-concept and test anxiety: B. Ed Honors students' anxiety levels were linked with their self-concept profiles.

Self-efficacy, a closely related construct in educational psychology (Bandura, 1997), captures beliefs about one's capacity to perform specific tasks. Academic self-efficacy has been shown to predict emotional experiences and academic outcomes: for instance, a structural equation modeling study with medical students found that self-efficacy positively influences positive emotions and metacognitive strategy use, which in turn predicts performance.

A foundational lens for understanding how assessment affects student emotions is Pekrun's Control-Value Theory. According to this theory, students' appraisals of control (their perceived ability to influence outcomes) and value (the significance they attach to tasks) give rise to different academic emotions, such as enjoyment, pride, or anxiety. When students believe they can control the outcome and place value on the task, they are more likely to experience positive emotions; conversely, if they doubt their competence or feel overly pressured by the stakes of assessment, they may experience debilitating anxiety.

This theory has been empirically supported in various educational contexts. For instance, a recent latent profile analysis found that self-efficacy mediates the relationship between student engagement and learning-related anxiety, consistent with the control-value framework.

While quantitative research provides correlations and predictive models, qualitative studies offer rich, nuanced narratives. For example, Yusoff, Abdul Rahim & Nik Lah (2022) conducted a phenomenological study with medical students and identified major themes such as self-care vs. self-negligence, the role of social support, and the impact of examiners' behavior on anxiety. Their findings show that students do not only struggle with internal worry but also with external pressures stemming from curricular demands and evaluation behavior.

In their thematic analysis of focus group discussions with 45 medical students, Yusoff, Abdul Rahim & Lah elaborated three major themes: "the students" (internal thoughts, self-care), "academic resources" (curriculum, peer learning), and "the examiner" (feedback style, strictness). These themes highlight how anxiety is deeply embedded in both personal psychology and institutional contexts.

Interventions aimed at reducing test anxiety often engage with cognitive appraisals and self-efficacy. For instance, a pilot study used Inquiry-Based Stress Reduction (IBSR) to help students re-evaluate worry thoughts about tests. This intervention significantly reduced test anxiety and academic procrastination, with improvements partially mediated by enhanced self-efficacy.

These empirical and theoretical findings underscore that test anxiety is not only a personal problem but also a systemic issue. Assessment practices, feedback mechanisms, and institutional structures all contribute to shaping students' emotional and self-related responses.

Gaps in Literature

While prior research has shed light on important relationships, several gaps remain:

Limited first-person narrative accounts beyond medical education: Most qualitative studies focus on medical or professional students; less is known about how test anxiety and self-concept play out among high school or general undergraduate students.

Assessment feedback: There is less qualitative work on how different types of feedback (constructive, punitive, indifferent) affect students' self-efficacy and identity.

Long-term identity formation: Research rarely explores how repeated assessments influence students' evolving academic self-concept over time.

This study addresses these gaps by exploring students' lived experiences across diverse academic contexts.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in Pekrun's Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions (Pekrun, 2006, 2018). According to this framework: which provides a robust psychological explanation of how learners experience emotions in academic settings, particularly in assessment contexts. The theory posits that students' emotional

responses to learning and testing situations are not random but are systematically shaped by their cognitive appraisals of control and value. According to this framework:

- Control appraisals refer to students’ judgments of their ability to influence learning outcomes (closely related to self-efficacy).
- Value appraisals refer to how much importance, interest, or utility students attach to the task or its outcome.
- These appraisals generate discrete academic emotions (e.g., anxiety, boredom, pride), which then influence cognitive, motivational, and behavioral outcomes.
- The interaction between control and value appraisals generates discrete academic emotions (e.g., anxiety, boredom, pride, enjoyment), which then influence cognitive processes (such as attention and working memory), motivational orientations (such as persistence and effort), and behavioral outcomes (such as engagement, avoidance, or academic performance). These emotions also play a critical role in shaping students’ academic self-concept and long-term beliefs about their abilities.

By interpreting students’ narratives through this lens, the study seeks to understand how their perceptions of control and value around assessments contribute to their emotional experiences and self-conception. This framework is particularly suitable for a qualitative, phenomenological inquiry, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of how students make meaning of assessment experiences within their personal, social, and educational contexts.

2. Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed. IPA is particularly suitable for exploring how individuals make sense of their lived experiences, focusing on the meaning they assign to significant life events (e.g., exams).

Participants

- **Sample Size:** 18 students (10 from high school, 8 undergraduates).
- **Sampling Method:** Purposive sampling, selecting students who had recently taken high-stakes exams (finals, board exams, or semester finals).
- **Inclusion Criteria:** Students who self-reported test anxiety or stress, willingness to discuss their experiences, and ability to communicate in English.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

ID	Educational Level	Gender	Age	Recent High-Stakes Exam Taken	Self-Reported Anxiety Level (1-5)
P1	High School	F	17	National Board Exams (Science Stream)	5
P2	High School	M	16	Final Year Exams	4
P3	High School	F	17	College Entrance Mock Test	5
P4	High School	F	16	Mathematics Olympiad Qualifier	3
P5	High School	M	17	Physics Final	4
P6	High School	M	16	Chemistry Board Exam	5
P7	High School	F	17	Biology Semester Final	4
P8	High School	F	16	English Literature Final	3
P9	High School	M	17	History Final	4

P10	High School	F	17	Social Studies Board Exam	5
P11	Undergraduate	F	20	Psychology Midterm	4
P12	Undergraduate	M	21	Engineering Calculus Final	5
P13	Undergraduate	F	19	Biology Lab Practical Exam	3
P14	Undergraduate	M	22	Business Statistics Final	4
P15	Undergraduate	F	20	Literature Theory Semester Exam	4
P16	Undergraduate	F	21	Chemistry Organic Final	5
P17	Undergraduate	M	20	Computer Science Programming Exam	3
P18	Undergraduate	M	22	Economics Capstone Exam	4

Source: Author's illustration

Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews: Each student was interviewed for about 45–60 minutes. The interview guide included questions on pre-test feelings, test-taking experiences, feedback, coping strategies, and self-perceptions.

Ethical Considerations: Participants gave informed consent. Interviews were recorded, anonymized, and participants were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw. Psychological support resources were offered in case interviews triggered distress.

Table 2: Interview Protocol Structure

Phase	Focus Area	Sample Questions	Theoretical Link
1. Pre-Assessment	Anticipatory emotions	"What goes through your mind in the days before an important test?"	Control-Value Theory: Value appraisal
2. During Assessment	Cognitive-emotional experience	"Describe what you feel physically and mentally during the exam."	Test anxiety phenomenology
3. Post-Assessment	Feedback processing	"How do you typically receive and interpret your grades/comments?"	Self-efficacy reinforcement
4. Identity Reflection	Long-term impact	"How do you think repeated testing has shaped how you see yourself as a student?"	

Source: Author's illustration

Data Analysis

Transcription: Interviews were transcribed verbatim.

IPA Process: Following IPA steps, transcripts were read repeatedly, significant statements identified, emergent themes developed and finally clustered into higher-order themes.

Trustworthiness: Ensured via member checks (participants reviewed their transcripts and emergent themes), peer debriefing (colleagues reviewed theme development), and reflexive journaling by the researcher to account for bias.

Findings

From the IPA analysis, five superordinate themes emerged, each with several subthemes. The thematic map is given in Figure 1. Below is a detailed discussion of each theme:

Table 3: Summary of Emergent Themes and Frequencies

Superordinate Theme	Subthemes	Participant Count (n=18)	Percentage	Representative (Participant)	Quote
Fear of Failure	Internal Pressure	15	83.3%		“I’m failing as a person.” (P2)
	External Expectations	14	77.8%		“Studying more for them than for me.” (P7)
	Identity & Self-Worth Linkage	12	66.7%		“Maybe I was just lucky to get here.” (P12)
Identity Mirror	Grades as Validation	12	66.7%		“Felt powerful with 90+.” (P11)
	Negative Feedback Impact	10	55.6%		“Thought I was just not smart enough.” (P5)
	Long-Term Self-Concept	13	72.2%		“I’m just ‘not a math person’.” (P9)
Coping Mechanisms	Preparatory Strategies	16	88.9%		“Chart helps me feel in control.” (P3)
	Emotional Regulation	14	77.8%		“Tell myself I’ll do my best.” (P14)
	Avoidant Strategies	7	38.9%		“Scroll on my phone to forget.” (P17)
Feedback & Efficacy	Constructive Feedback Value	15	83.3%		“Felt like I could actually grow.” (P8)
	Teacher-Student Relationship	11	61.1%		“My teacher knows me... helps a lot.” (P16)
Long-Term Impact	Lingering Anxiety	12	66.7%		“Replay questions in my head.” (P4)
	Resilience & Growth	9	50.0%		“Feel slightly more capable.” (P13)

Source: Author’s illustration

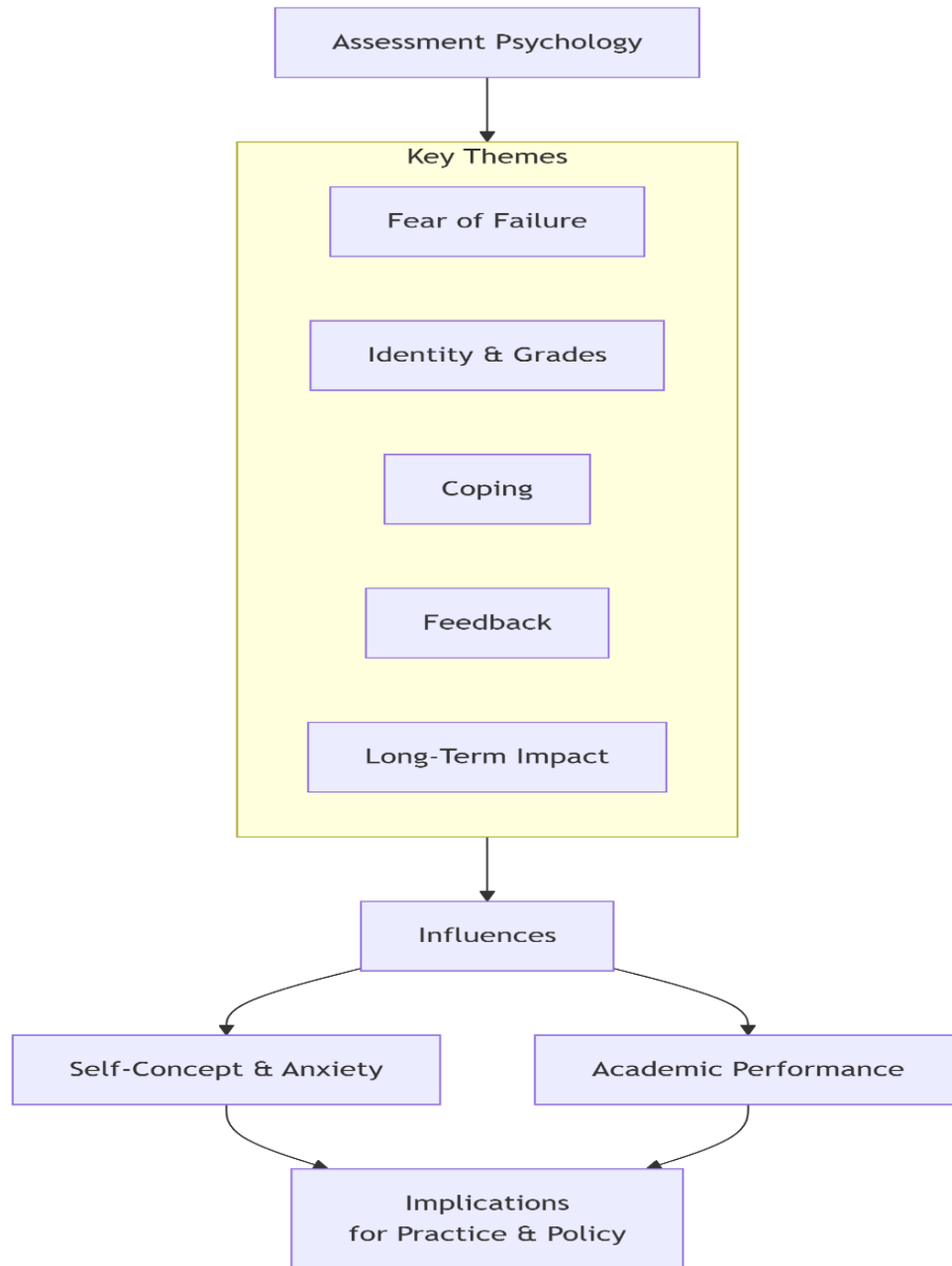


Figure 1: Thematic map

1. Fear of Failure: The Weight of Expectations

a. Internal Pressure

Many students expressed a pervasive fear of failing. One high school student shared:

“When I sit for the exam, I feel like if I mess up, I’m not just failing a test I’m failing as a person.”

This quote reflects deep self-judgment. Students often saw a poor performance not as a momentary setback but as a reflection of their inherent ability.

b. External Expectations

Students reported significant pressure from parents, teachers, and peers:

“My parents keep saying this exam will decide my future. sometimes I feel I’m studying more for them than for me.”

These expectations heightened anxiety, as students believed their self-worth was closely tied to their grades.

c. Identity and Self-Worth

Several participants linked assessment results directly to their self-concept:

“If I didn’t get a good grade, I wondered if I even belonged in college like maybe I was just lucky to get here.”

For such students, assessments functioned as identity checkpoints: success validated belonging, while failure threatened exclusion.

Table 4: Control-Value Theory Coding Framework

Appraisal Type	Student Expression Example	Coded Emotion	Frequency
High Control + High Value	"I prepared well and this matters for my future"	Anticipatory Pride/Confidence	6 (33%)
Low Control + High Value	"This decides my future but I don't feel ready"	Debilitating Anxiety	9 (50%)
High Control + Low Value	"I could do well but this test doesn't matter much"	Boredom/Indifference	3 (17%)
Low Control + Low Value	"I'm not good at this and it's not important"	Hopelessness/Resignation	

Source: Author’s illustration

2. Assessment as an Identity Mirror

a. Grades as Validation

Many students viewed their test scores as external validation of their competence. A second-year undergraduate said:

“When I got 90+ in my midterms, I felt powerful, like I could do anything academically.”

The high grades boosted not just their academic standing but their self-image.

b. Negative Feedback and Self-Efficacy

Conversely, some students reported that negative or vague feedback undermined their self-efficacy:

“After that poor test, the teacher just said, ‘needs improvement’ I didn’t know what I did wrong, so I thought I was just not smart enough.”

This lack of clarity damaged their confidence and fueled self-doubt.

c. Long-Term Self-Concept

Repeated assessments, according to participants, shape a stable academic identity:

“Over the years, I realized I’m just ‘not a math person’ every test reinforced that feeling.”

Such internalization shows how assessments contribute to long-term self-concept formation.

3. Coping Mechanisms: Navigating Stress

a. Preparatory Strategies

Students described proactive strategies to manage anxiety: organized study schedules, peer-led study groups, mock tests, and strategic breaks.

“I make a chart. I know which topics to revise two days before the test. It helps me feel more in control.”

b. Emotional Coping

Emotional regulation was central. Techniques included mindfulness, journaling, positive self-talk, and seeking reassurance from friends or family:

“Sometimes before an exam, I just sit quiet for five minutes, tell myself I’ll do my best, and calm down.”

Some students also mentioned self-care practices: proper sleep, nutritious food, and physical activity. This contributed to decreased pre-test anxiety.

c. Avoidant or Negative Strategies

Not all coping was healthy. A few students admitted to procrastination, denial, over-reliance on stimulants (like coffee), or even wishing for distractions to avoid thinking about the test:

“I know it’s wrong, but I sometimes just scroll on my phone to forget that I have a test the next day.”

One participant confessed to more extreme self-criticism when things went wrong:

“After a bad test I feel like I should just drop that subject. it’s too painful otherwise.”

4. Feedback, Self-Efficacy, and Reinforcement

a. Importance of Constructive Feedback

Participants consistently highlighted feedback as a turning point:

“When the teacher wrote detailed comments what to improve, what was good I felt like I could actually grow.”

This articulate feedback bolstered self-efficacy and reduced future anxiety by clarifying areas for improvement.

Table 5: Feedback Type and Self-Efficacy Responses

Feedback Type	Description	Student Self-Efficacy Response	Count
Constructive Detailed	Specific comments, improvement areas	"Felt I could actually grow"	8
Minimal/Grade Only	Just a score or "needs improvement"	"Thought I was just bad at the subject"	6
Personalized Verbal	Teacher discusses results personally	"Helps a lot more than just notes"	

Source: Author’s illustration

b. Negative or Minimal Feedback

Conversely, when feedback was absent or harsh, students felt discouraged:

“No comment just a grade makes me think I’m just bad at the subject, not that I can learn more.”

This eroded their motivation to engage further.

c. Role of Teacher-Student Relationship

Several students pointed out that when teachers knew them personally, feedback was more meaningful:

“My English teacher knows me she calls me after the test; we talk about what went wrong. That helps a lot more than just writing notes.”

These interactions-built trust, reinforced competence, and supported adaptive emotional response.

5. Long-Term Psychological Impact

a. Lingering Anxiety

Some students reported that anxiety did not end when the test did:

“Even after the exam is over, I replay questions in my head What if I did that wrong? What if I misread?”

This rumination often continued until results came, keeping stress alive beyond the test day.

b. Evolving Self-Concept

Repeated testing shaped how students viewed themselves academically over time:

“Each test built that part of me my academic self I know who I am as a student because of these scores.”

For some, repeated success strengthened their identity; for others, repeated struggle reinforced negative self-belief.

c. Resilience and Growth

Despite anxiety, some participants reported psychological growth:

“I used to panic badly, but I learned how to deal now, after each test, I reflect, learn, and feel slightly more capable.”

These students saw testing not just as challenge but as opportunity for self-reflection and incremental growth.

Discussion

Interpretation Through Theoretical Lens

Applying Control-Value Theory, the data suggests that students' emotional reactions to assessment are deeply rooted in their appraisals of control and value. For instance; Students who reported high perceived control (through preparation, study strategies) felt more confident and less anxious. Their self-efficacy gave them a buffer against the fear of failure. Moreover, when students assigned high value to assessment outcomes (e.g., parental approval, future opportunities), but lacked a sense of control, anxiety levels surged. The discrepancy between value and control seems to intensify emotional stress. However, feedback functions as a mechanism to recalibrate control appraisals: meaningful, specific feedback helped students regain or strengthen their sense of competence. Hence, these findings align with Pekrun's control-value theory, as well as empirical research showing that self-efficacy mediates the relationship between control appraisals and academic emotions.

Comparison with Existing Literature

This study's findings resonate with previous qualitative research among medical students (Yusoff, Abdul Rahim & Lah, 2022), who identified themes such as self-care/self-negligence and the impact of examiners. However, this research expands the context to include high school students, pointing to universal psychological dynamics across educational levels. Quantitative studies also align: Duraku & Hoxha (2018) found that self-concept significantly predicts test anxiety, and social support and self-esteem act as protective factors. The present qualitative data provides depth to these findings, showing how self-concept is internalized, often in relation to test outcomes, and how social support (teachers, peers) contributes to more adaptive coping. The intervention research using IBSR (inquiry-based stress reduction) further supports the importance of shifting cognitive appraisals: by working on self-efficacy, students' anxiety and procrastination reduced. Our participants' own narratives about changing self-talk, self-care, and emotional regulation echo the mechanisms of such interventions.

Practical Implications

For Teachers and Educators:

- Provide detailed, constructive feedback rather than just grades. Feedback should highlight strengths, identify areas for improvement, and suggest actionable steps — this supports students' self-efficacy.
- Build relational trust: knowing your students personally helps in understanding their fears and tailoring support.
- Encourage low-stakes assessments or formative assessments, reducing pressure from high-stakes tests and realigning the value students place on evaluation.

For School Psychologists / Counselors:

- Implement coping-skills workshops: training students in mindfulness, positive self-talk, and cognitive reappraisal can help them manage anxiety.
- Use interventions like IBSR, which address cognitive appraisals and build self-efficacy.
- Offer reflective sessions post-assessments, where students can process feedback, reflect on performance, and set realistic goals.

For Policymakers and Institutions:

- Reconsider assessment policy, balancing high-stakes and low-stakes assessments to reduce students' emotional burden.
- Prioritize teacher training in giving effective feedback and understanding student emotions.
- Provide structures for ongoing psychological support, such as access to counselors and peer support networks.

Limitations

- With 18 participants, the findings are not generalizable. The sample may not reflect the full diversity of student experiences (e.g., different cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds).
- Students who volunteered may be more aware of, or willing to talk about, their emotions than those who declined.
- Participants' recollections may be influenced by memory bias or post-hoc rationalization.
- As with IPA, interpretation depends on the researcher's lens. While reflexivity and member checking help, some bias may remain.

Recommendations for Future Research

- Track students over multiple years to explore how repeated assessment influences evolving self-concept.
- Investigate similar psychological experiences in different cultural, socio-economic, and educational contexts, including non-academic assessments.
- Use qualitative methods to explore students' experiences before and after anxiety-reduction interventions (e.g., IBSR) to understand not just outcomes but process.
- Explore how teachers perceive their role in students' emotional experiences related to assessment and how they deliver feedback.

Conclusion

This qualitative study highlights that assessments are more than academic checkpoints; they are deeply psychological experiences that shape students' emotions, self-perceptions, and identity. Through semi-structured interviews and IPA, the research uncovered how students experience fear, validate themselves through grades, cope with stress, interpret feedback, and grow psychologically over time. By interpreting these experiences through Control-Value Theory, this study reveals that perceived control and value are central to students' emotional responses: when students feel capable and believe their work matters, they navigate assessment with more confidence. Conversely, when value is high, but control feels low, anxiety intensifies and self-concept may suffer. The findings call for more emotionally informed assessment practices: detailed feedback, relational support, coping-skills interventions, and policy shifts that recognize the psychological dimensions of testing. Educational institutions must consider not only what assessments measure academically, but also how they shape students' inner lives.

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