ARTICULATOR GAZETTE
News, Features, and Essays
2025 Volume 1 Issue 1

# *When Education Becomes a Race: The Toxic Culture of Academic Overachievement*

*Rosita R. Bucoy, Ed.D*
*English Department, Maria Clara L. Lobregat National High School, Zamboanga City, 7000, Philippines*
*Corresponding email: rosita.bucoy001@deped.gov.ph*

In many classrooms today, education is no longer viewed as a process of learning, it has become a race. A race for medals, grades, and titles. A race that rewards only those with the highest grades, not those who truly understand the lessons or grow through the process. In schools across the Philippines, especially in competitive urban environments, students are pushed to chase academic validation instead of growth. This shift in priorities has changed the purpose of learning from understanding to outperforming. What once was meant to empower minds is now a battlefield of sleepless nights, collapsing mental health, and silent suffering. The culture of academic overachievement has turned education into a pressure cooker, and many are cracking under its weight. According to Aquino et al. (2025), the pressure to perform academically in hybrid learning setups has led to a surge in academic burnout among college students, highlighting just how harmful this culture can be.

Students are often expected to be top of the class, maintain perfect grades, lead organizations, join competitions, and meet unrealistic standards, all at once. These expectations are not only placed by schools but by families, communities, and society. It's as if success is defined by doing everything, all the time, and doing it perfectly. The result? Students begin to tie their worth to their academic performance. Failing a test feels like failing in life. Rest becomes a guilt, and any sign of slowing down is mistaken for weakness. What is rarely acknowledged is the emotional toll this toxic cycle takes. Behind honor rolls are stories of anxiety, burnout, and identity crises. Many high-achieving students cry in silence, afraid to admit that they're exhausted and no longer know who they are without their medals. Alibudbud (2021) emphasized that intense academic experiences in Metro Manila are strong predictors of anxiety and depression, especially for students who internalize these high expectations.

The problem deepens when schools reinforce this mindset. Awards and recognitions are treated as the end goals, while learning is sidelined. Teachers, often unknowingly, feed the race by praising only the highest scores, ignoring effort, creativity, or growth. This contributes to a culture where students begin to compete, not collaborate. They fear mistakes, avoid risks, and choose safe answers over meaningful questions. Education becomes less about discovery and more about survival. Pascoe et al. (2019) found that prolonged academic stress affects both emotional well-being and academic motivation, showing that when pressure outweighs purpose, learning suffers. Instead of becoming curious thinkers, students turn into anxious performers afraid of slipping behind.

The most heartbreaking part is how this culture creates a distorted idea of success. It teaches students that they must constantly prove their worth through external achievements. Those who fall behind in the race are labeled as failures, even when they are simply moving at their own pace. This environment not only damages

self-esteem but also discourages students from exploring passions, taking breaks, or choosing alternative paths to success. Terio et al. (2024) reported that high school students who suffer from burnout often experience procrastination and loss of interest in academics, indicating that the pressure to maintain appearances and meet expectations can be counterproductive to real achievement.

The truth is, education should not be a race, it should be a journey. A practical solution starts with changing how success is defined. Schools need to start recognizing not just academic results, but also the consistent effort students put in, their ability to cope with pressure, and how much they've grown personally through their experiences. According to Munar and Rosal (2023), there is a clear connection between mental wellness and academic performance; nurturing students' emotional health supports better learning outcomes. Parents or guardians need to have open conversations about rest, balance, and self-worth. They must remind their children that they are loved beyond their report cards. When students are allowed to learn without fear, they thrive not just academically, but as whole human beings. Ending the culture of overachievement won't happen overnight, but it starts with choosing to slow down and rethink what education is truly for. It's about planting seeds of understanding, not just collecting medals of approval.

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***ARTICLE DETAILS***
*AG-0000004; Received: June 10, 2025; Accepted: June 13, 2025; Published: June 15, 2025*
***CITATION:***
*Bucoy, Rosita R. (2025). When Education Becomes a Race: The Toxic Culture of Academic Overachievement. DOI: 10.62596/art.mjthje72*
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