

**The Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Stress in Students Enrolled in Advanced  
Academic Courses: A Multiple Case Study**

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## **Abstract**

This multiple case study explored how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the experiences of AP/IB high school graduates during their senior year and how this pandemic might have contributed to elevated levels of stress. The following research questions guided this study: (a) How do AP/IB high school graduates in the Class of 2021 describe their lived experiences during senior year in the midst of COVID-19? (b) What contributed to their stress while completing their advanced coursework? (c) What helped to mitigate their stress while completing their advanced coursework? Consistent with previous findings in the literature, the four major findings of this qualitative multiple case study indicated: 1) learning from home presented its fair share of challenges; 2) the circumstances of the pandemic left participants isolated at home with fewer opportunities to socialize with peers; 3) the college application process was a major stressor for many participants; and 4) there were apparent gender differences in how the participants described their senior year.

## **Aim**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic shaped the lived experiences and stress of high school graduates who were enrolled in advanced academic courses during the 2020-2021 school year.

## **Problem or Issue**

While there was some research that directly explored the effects of advanced academic courses on student stress levels (Pascoe et al., 2019; Suldo et al., 2008; Suldo et al., 2019), there was no research that has specifically explored the lived experiences of high school graduates who were previously enrolled in AP/IB courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, research was needed to understand what specific aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to stress in high school graduates who were enrolled in advanced academic courses, and in what ways they sought to address it.

## **Research Findings**

The qualitative data collected from this study provided insight into the six participants' personal experiences and feelings around how the pandemic influenced their senior year and stress levels while taking AP/IB courses. After the data was thoroughly analyzed, three major themes emerged from this multiple case study. The first theme, "Senior Year During a Worldwide Pandemic," explored how the participants described what it was like being a high school senior during a worldwide pandemic. The second theme, "Taking Advanced Classes During a Worldwide Pandemic," encompassed how the participants described what it was like learning and taking classes online during a worldwide pandemic. The third theme, "Sources of Stress and Sources of Support," described what contributed to the participants' stress and what helped them mitigate this stress while completing advanced coursework during the pandemic.

## **Discussion**

The primary results of this study were largely consistent with recent research related to learning during the pandemic. First, students found that learning from home presented its fair share of challenges. The participants' experiences mirrored those of a recent study of 1,975 high school students from New Zealand. Yates et al. (2021) concluded that students had major challenges from learning at home during the pandemic, such as handling family obligations or managing distractions, such as watching Netflix or online shopping. Second, this study found

that truncated school days and modified/cancelled school events left participants feeling isolated and distant from their peers. These findings corroborate with a study by Shepherd et al. (2021), who found that high school students felt disconnected and lonely due to fewer opportunities to develop social connections at school during the pandemic. Third, the college application process was the primary source of immense stress for many of the participants. The participants' stress about the college application process was similar to findings by Martinez et al. (2020), who conducted a multisite case study that examined college-going culture and college readiness efforts in a sample of 59 students at three public high schools in Texas. These researchers concluded that students felt overwhelmed and experienced higher levels of stress while working through the college application process. The fourth and final result discussed the evident gender differences in how the participants described their stress levels and sense of connection to their senior year. These gender differences were consistent with a recent study of 8,476 high school seniors in South Korea. Kim et al. (2021) found that girls had a more depressed mood and higher levels of stress than boys.

### **Recommendations**

Several recommendations for future research are offered. First, the current research study only focused on Virginia high school students that were enrolled in at least one AP/IB course during their senior year. Future studies could address the same research questions in a different setting, context, and/or location. Next, future studies could incorporate a larger participant pool since this study only included six total participants. Last, future studies could focus on the various experiences of school staff, such as teachers or school counselors.

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#### **Author Biography**

Dr. Sam Ramatowski holds a BS in Psychology from Stevenson University, a MS in School Counseling and a PMC in Clinical Mental Health Counseling from Johns Hopkins University, and an EdD in Educational Leadership and Management from Drexel University. He has served as a middle and high school counselor for the past nine years. Currently, Sam is the English Learner Family Partnership Specialist for a public school division in Virginia.