

STUDENT STRESS IN PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL EDUCATION

O ESTRESSE DISCENTE NA EDUCAÇÃO PROFISSIONAL E TECNOLÓGICA

ESTRÉS ESTUDIANTIL EN LA EDUCACIÓN PROFESIONAL Y TECNOLÓGICA



Andressa Lima da SILVA¹
e-mail: andressa.lima.silva.2021@gmail.com



Tailor Alves CABRAL²
e-mail: tailoralvescabral010411@gmail.com

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¹ Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Rio Grande do Norte (IFRN), Natal – RN – Brazil. EBTT teacher at the Federal Institute of Rio Grande do Norte (IFRN) - Natal Central Campus. Member of the Multidisciplinary Research Group on Education and Childhood - EDUCA.

² Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Rio Grande do Norte (IFRN), Natal – RN – Brazil. EBTT Professor at the Federal Institute of Rio Grande do Norte (IFRN) - Natal Central Campus. Member of the Gender, Education and Diversity Research Group (NEGEDI).

ABSTRACT: This research aimed to identify and analyze the prevalence of student stress in the technological professional education of the Subsequent Course of Occupational Safety of the Federal Institute of Rio Grande do Norte, Natal Central Campus, in a sample of 113 students, enrolled from the 1st to the 4th semester of the course. The questions are: what are the stressful factors that students face in their daily school life? What are the students' suggestions regarding the institutional actions to be taken to reduce student stress? In methodological terms, we used bibliographic research and field research based on an online questionnaire, composed of objective and subjective questions. In view of the above, it was possible to observe the incidence of stress symptoms in the students and the predominance of symptoms in certain school periods experienced by them.

KEYWORDS: Mental health. Stress. Professional education.

RESUMO: Esta pesquisa objetivou identificar e analisar a prevalência do estresse discente na educação profissional tecnológica do Curso Subsequente de Segurança do Trabalho do Instituto Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, Campus Natal Central, em uma amostra de 113 discentes, matriculados do 1.º ao 4º semestre do curso. As indagações são: quais são os fatores estressantes que os discentes enfrentam no cotidiano escolar? Quais são as sugestões discentes quanto às ações institucionais a serem tomadas para diminuição do estresse discente? Em termos metodológicos, utilizou-se pesquisa bibliográfica e pesquisa de campo a partir de questionário online, composto por perguntas objetivas e subjetivas. Diante do exposto, foi possível observar a incidência de sintomas do estresse nos discentes e a predominância dos sintomas em determinados períodos escolares por eles vivenciados.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Saúde mental. Estresse. Educação profissional.

RESUMEN: Esta investigación tuvo como objetivo identificar y analizar la prevalencia del estrés de los estudiantes en la formación profesional tecnológica del Curso Posterior de Seguridad en el Trabajo del Instituto Federal de Rio Grande do Norte, Campus Central de Natal, en una muestra de 113 alumnos, matriculados del 1º al 4º semestre del curso. Las preguntas son: ¿cuáles son los factores estresantes a los que se enfrentan los estudiantes en su vida escolar diaria? ¿Cuáles son las sugerencias de los estudiantes con respecto a las acciones institucionales que se deben tomar para reducir el estrés de los estudiantes? En términos metodológicos, se utilizó la investigación bibliográfica y la investigación de campo a partir de un cuestionario en línea, compuesto por preguntas objetivas y subjetivas. En vista de lo anterior, fue posible observar la incidencia de síntomas de estrés en los estudiantes y el predominio de síntomas en ciertos períodos escolares experimentados por ellos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Salud mental. Estrés. Formación profesional.

Introduction

Faced with the social context in which we find ourselves, with the constant need for further qualifications in order to compete in the job market, young people and adults who have already graduated from high school are returning to school with the aim of pursuing professional education in subsequent courses.

The field of education, through the Federal Institutes of Education, Science and Technology, provides the community with higher, basic and professional formation "[...] in the different teaching modalities, based on the combination of technical and technological knowledge with their pedagogical practices, under the terms of this Law" (BRASIL, 2008, our translation), according to the second article of Law 11,892 of 29 December 2008. In this context, we highlight vocational education.

Art. 36-A. Without prejudice to the provisions of Section IV of this Chapter, secondary education, taking into account the general education of the student, may prepare him/her for the exercise of technical professions. (Included by Law n. 11,741 of 2008).

Sole paragraph. General preparation for work and, optionally, professional qualification may be developed in the secondary schools themselves or in cooperation with institutions specializing in professional education (Included by Law 11,741 of 2008) (Brasil, 1996, our translation).

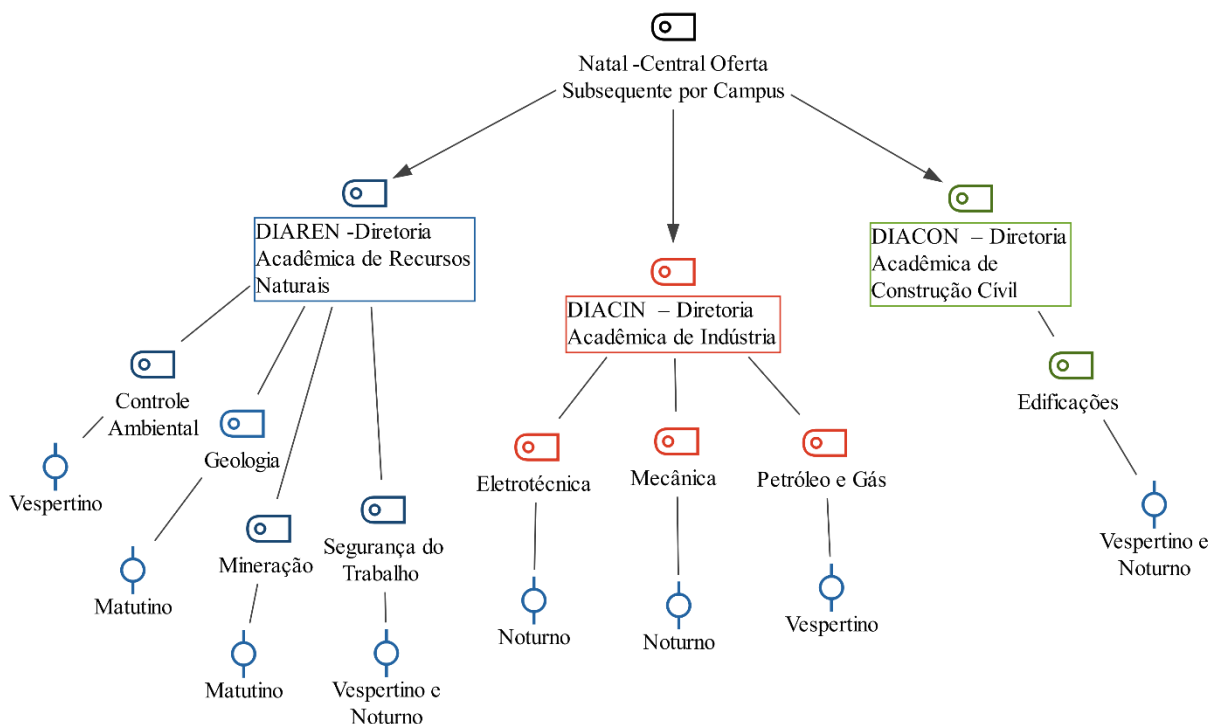
According to the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education, n. 9394/1996, high school technical professional education can be developed in conjunction with high school, or subsequent to high school, in which it meets the profile of young people and adults who have already completed high school (Brasil, 1996). It is in this latter form of professional education that our research is located.

Sole paragraph. The high school technical professional education courses, in the concomitant and subsequent articulated forms, when structured and organized in stages with terminality, will make it possible to obtain qualification certificates for work after the successful completion of each stage that characterizes a qualification for work (Included by Law n. 11,741 of 2008) (Brasil, 1996, our translation).

The implementation of subsequent technical courses, as one of the possibilities for obtaining technical vocational training at secondary level in Brazil, occurred with Decree n. 2,208/1997 of the National Education Council and allows the young person or adult, having already completed secondary education, to return to a vocational education institution to qualify as a technical professional (Viana, 2012, p. 18, our translation).

Of the 31 subsequent courses offered by the Federal Institute of Rio Grande do Norte (IFRN), 12 are offered at the Natal Central Campus, located in the municipality of Natal, in the state of Rio Grande do Norte. Of the twelve subsequent courses offered by the Natal Central Campus, four are part of the Natural Resources Directorate, including the Work Safety Subsequent Course, with eight classes distributed over the afternoon and evening periods, as shown below.

Figure 1 - Classes of the Subsequent Courses of the Natal Central Campus



Source: Organized by the authors according to the institution's Public Notice 2023 and IDP (IFRN, 2023).

We would like to highlight the Occupational Safety course, since in this research we had the participation of students enrolled in this course in 2023. Offered since 1990, the course has a duration of four semesters and a total duration of two years, being offered in the afternoon and evening. The total course load is 1200 hours, plus 400 hours for professional practice.

Since its creation, it has always been among the most popular courses at the institution. In 2023, both in the afternoon and evening, it was the most popular course among the subsequent courses, with competition in the afternoon of one place for every six candidates and, in the evening, one place for every 11.

When the student joins the course, the challenges of academic life begin, and with them come the demands, such as assessments, work presentations, reading and interpersonal

relationships with classmates. In this effort to adapt to the new reality, stressful situations arise which students do not always know how to deal with.

With this in mind, this research aimed to identify and analyze the prevalence of student stress in professional technological education in the Subsequent Work Safety Course at the Federal Institute of Rio Grande do Norte, Natal Central Campus, in a sample of 113 students enrolled from the 1st to the 4th semester of the course.

Methodology

This is a qualitative educational study focused on everyday school life, using a questionnaire with open and closed questions to gather data. Of the sample, 69% were female and 31% male. In terms of race, 1% considered themselves to be yellow, 35% white, 19% black and 46% brown.

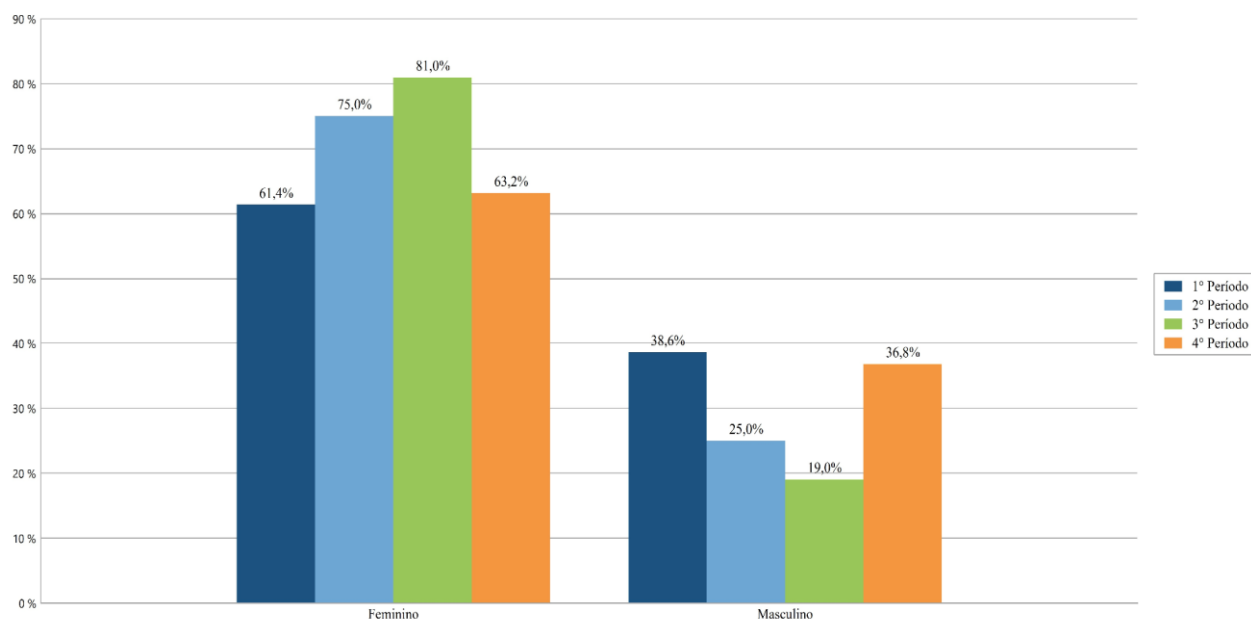
Data was collected online using a questionnaire drawn up on Google Forms and shared via a link circulated in WhatsApp groups and emails among the students enrolled on the course. The questionnaire used for data collection consisted of 25 questions, 24 of which were objective and one subjective.

The questionnaire was organized into five sections: i) identification, which was aimed at characterizing the profile of the participants; ii) frequency of stress in school life, including questions about stress in students' daily lives; iii) physical and emotional symptoms in recent weeks in relation to school life, constituting questions about the physical and emotional symptoms experienced by students; iv) support from the institution in the face of student stress, referring to how the student perceives the institution's actions in relation to stress and suggestions of preventive actions that should be taken by the institution in the student's view; v) measures adopted by the student to deal with school stress, consisting of measures taken by students in their daily lives in the face of stress experienced in the school environment.

In the questionnaire, the Individual Term of Free and Informed Consent (ICFIC) was presented for reading, understanding and, if accepted, signing, in accordance with Resolution 196/96 of the National Health Council. The questionnaire was answered individually. The students who took part in the study were those who expressed an interest and answered the questionnaire, which was made available for ten days, between 10 and 20 May 2023.

Of the 113 participants in the survey, there were 78 women and 35 men. The graph shows the percentage of students taking part in the survey by gender and period enrolled.

Graph 1 - Survey participants by gender and period



Source: Devised by the authors according to research data.

The Workplace Safety course has a larger female than male audience. In the sample of 50% of students, this female majority is mainly in the 3rd period, at over 80%. The female majority reflects the profile of the course, since the total number of students enrolled is also mostly female.

Between mental health, stress and professional education

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2002), mental health refers to a person's general state of psychological and emotional well-being. It involves the ability to cope with stress, face challenges, maintain healthy relationships, make effective decisions and deal with emotions in a balanced way. Mental health is not only the absence of mental illness, but a state of positive mental functioning that allows a person to reach their potential, cope with the demands of everyday life and contribute to their community.

We highlight how the relationship between mental health and poorly managed school life can be a factor in the development of stress symptoms among students.

[...] academic life can become a source of stress due to the pressures of the teaching environment, the fear of failure, the difficulties in dealing with curricular transitions and academic assessments, which are strong stressors for students, since they act directly on the consequences of their future (Sturion; Boff, BOFF, 2021, p. 154, our translation).

The day-to-day life experienced by students can present stressful situations, since they are being assessed and this assessment can have a positive or negative influence on their future. This fine line represents threats and can cause distressing feelings, which, when poorly managed, can lead to stress and all its physical and psychological symptoms.

Stress is a reaction of the body to situations that are either too difficult or too exciting, which can occur in anyone, regardless of age, race, gender or socio-economic situation. Due to the constant contact with stressors, most people experience different reactions that can lead to overload, which varies from person to person. However, once a certain limit is exceeded, the body goes into stress (Lipp, 2006, p. 16, our translation).

The first appearance of the term stress in relation to mental health was in 1936, by the author Hans Selye, who entered the words of physics and used the term stress to designate tension and wear and tear. According to Selye

The term stress was first used in physics to translate the degree of deformity suffered by a material when subjected to an effort or tension and this term was transposed to medicine and biology, meaning the organism's effort to adapt to situations that it considers threatening to its life and internal balance (Selve, 1926, p. 2, our translation).

Stress is the body's reaction to an event that can change the individual's routine and usually occurs when there is a need to adapt to a change. When adaptation occurs satisfactorily, stress becomes something beneficial to the individual, as they understand that they have managed to cope with the new situation (Everly, 1989). However, when the adaptation effort is not sufficient to deal with the stressful situation, the individual feels pressured, fatigued, uncomfortable and this movement can develop physical and mental symptoms and hinder the learning process (Tabaquim; Marquesini, 2013).

The most common physical and mental symptoms of stress in students are increased sweating, dry mouth, muscle tension, nausea, stomach pain, tingling, and headaches; the psychological symptoms are: interpersonal difficulties, excessive worry, anxiety, tension, anguish, mood swings, lack of concentration (Milsted; Amorim; Santos, 2009; Monteiro; Freitas; Ribeiro, 2007).

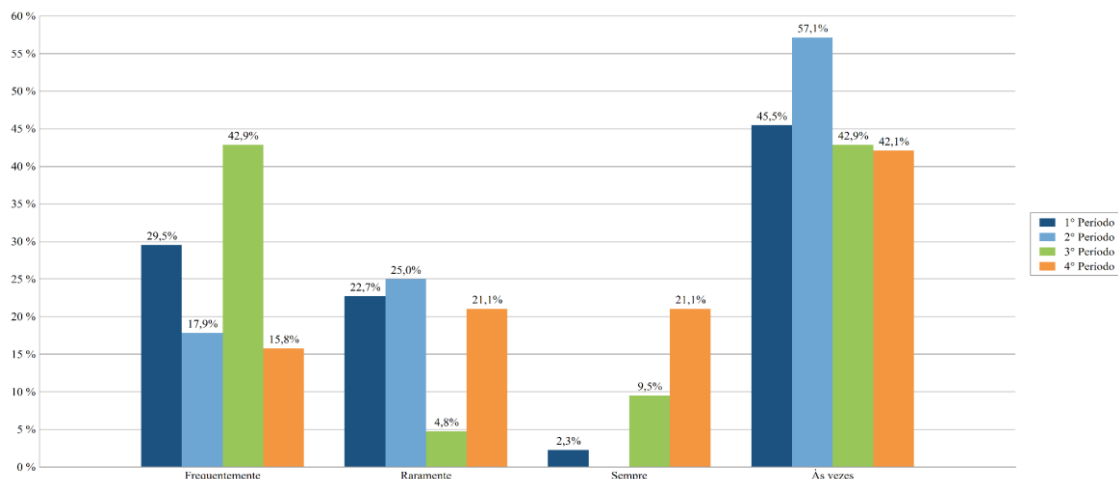
In the course under study, there is a diverse and plural audience in terms of age, gender, social class, professional activity and school life. If, on the one hand, we have students who have just finished high school and have already joined the courses, on the other, we also have individuals who were away from academic life and have returned to school.

In the sum of these factors, this course is a totally different reality from high school, with subjects that are biased towards the professional world of occupational health and safety. Even if the student has not been away from school or has not attended school for some time, in any case, both are in situations of adaptation. Considering the characteristics of subsequent professional courses as a new reality, the difficulty in dealing with this new reality stands out and, as a result, this adaptation can result in physical and mental symptoms of stress.

Between data and analysis: student stress

When asked about the frequency of stress in their school life, as shown in Graph 2 below, students in the 2nd period were the ones who complained most: 42.9% answered frequently, followed by the 1st period with 29.5%, the 2nd period with 17.9% and, lastly, the 4th period with 15.8%. When the frequencies of often, always and sometimes are added together, the prevalence of stress in the school life of 3rd period students is 95.3%. In this same sum, 79% of 4th period students highlighted the presence of stress. This was followed by the 1st period with 77.3% and, lastly, the 2nd period with 75%.

Graph 2 – Frequency of stress in school life by school term

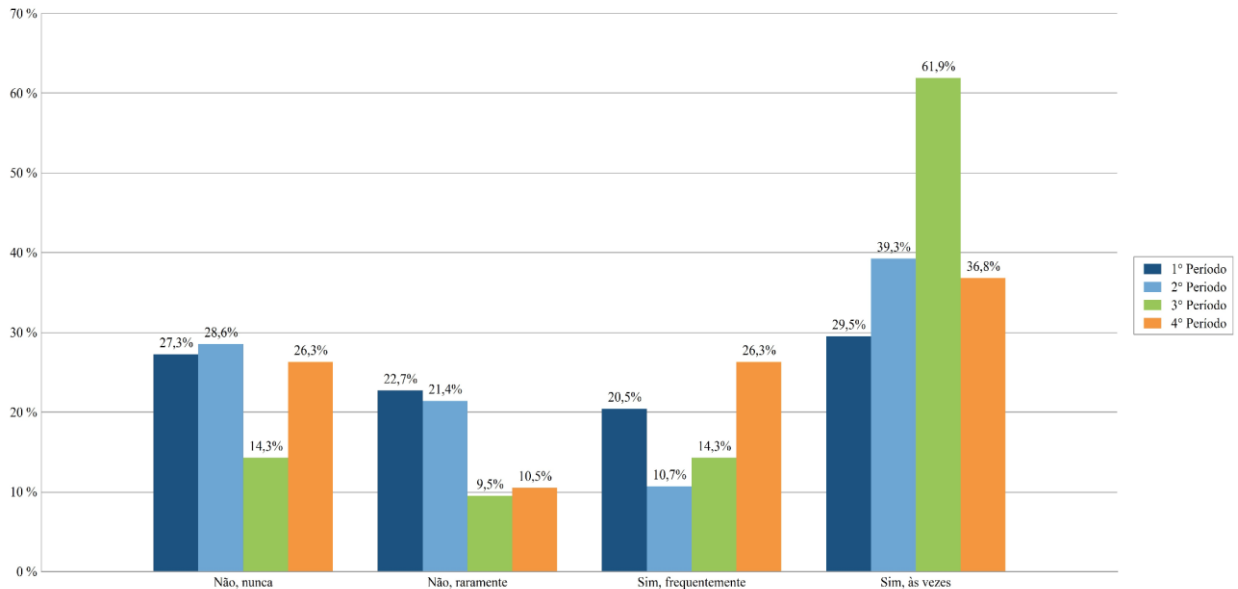


Source: Devised by the authors according to research data (2023).

It is important to note that in the last periods of the course (third and fourth), where students have a high percentage of stress, when asked about the desire to give up related to stress and academic pressure, the percentages continue to rank, in the same order, third and fourth periods, when we add up the answers attributed to yes, often, and yes, sometimes, we

arrive at a percentage of 76.2% in the third period and 63.1% in the fourth period, respectively. In the first periods, 50% of students responded. This percentage can be seen in the graph below.

Graph 3 - Dropping out of school due to academic stress and pressure and the school term



Source: Devised by the authors according to research data (2023).

It's important to note that the 3rd and 4th terms are the last terms of this course and that students are nearing the end of their training and, consequently, entering the job market. Career doubts and insecurity begin to emerge, generating symptoms of stress. Current research into student stress and vocational formation has linked student dropout to insecurity about entering the job market (Fonseca *et al.*, 2019; Ariño; Bardagi, 2018; Almeida *et al.*, 2018; Campos *et al.*, 2016).

When the participants were asked about these stress factors present in school life, they highlighted the following factors, according to Chart 1.

Chart 1 - Sources of stress in school life by shift

Sources of stress in everyday school life	Frequency	Percentage
Workload and schoolwork	7	6.3
Workload and schoolwork, lack of time for extracurricular activities.	11	9.8
Workload and schoolwork, insecurity about professional future.	1	0.9
Workload and schoolwork, interpersonal relationships with teachers and classmates.	2	1.8
Lack of time for extracurricular activities and hobbies.	4	3.6
Lack of time for extracurricular activities and hobbies, insecurity about their professional future.	5	4.5

Insecurity about their professional future.	4	3.6
Others.	2	1.8
Pressure for grades and academic performance.	5	4.5
Pressure for grades and academic performance, workload and schoolwork.	40	35.7
Pressure for grades and academic performance, lack of time for extracurricular activities.	12	10.7
Pressure for grades and academic performance, insecurity about professional future.	13	11.6
Pressure for grades and academic performance, among others.	1	0.9
Pressure for grades and academic performance, interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers.	2	1.8
Interpersonal relationships with teachers and colleagues, lack of time for extracurricular activities and hobbies.	2	0.9
Interpersonal relationships with teachers and colleagues, insecurity about professional future.	2	1.8
TOTAL (valid)	113	100.0
MISSING:	0	0.0
TOTAL	113	100.0

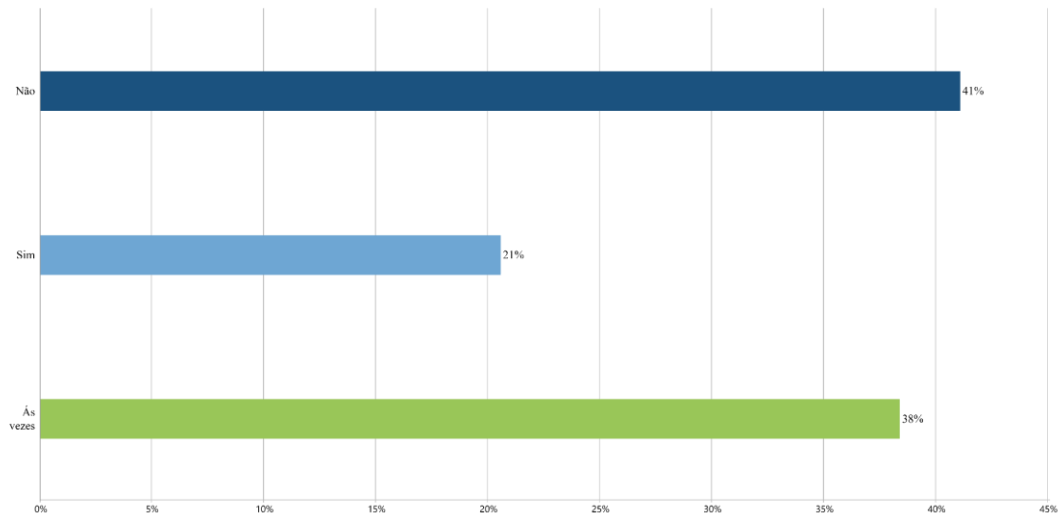
Source: Devised by the authors according to research data (2023).

According to the table above, the most prominent stress factors are "pressure for grades and academic performance, workload and schoolwork". Stress factors are prevalent in academic life according to specialized literature: time management, personal and professional demands, expectations, pressure for grades and academic performance, all of which are the origins of stress symptoms. (Fonseca *et al.*, 2019; Vieira; Scherman, 2015).

Daily challenges caused by stress symptoms in the school environment

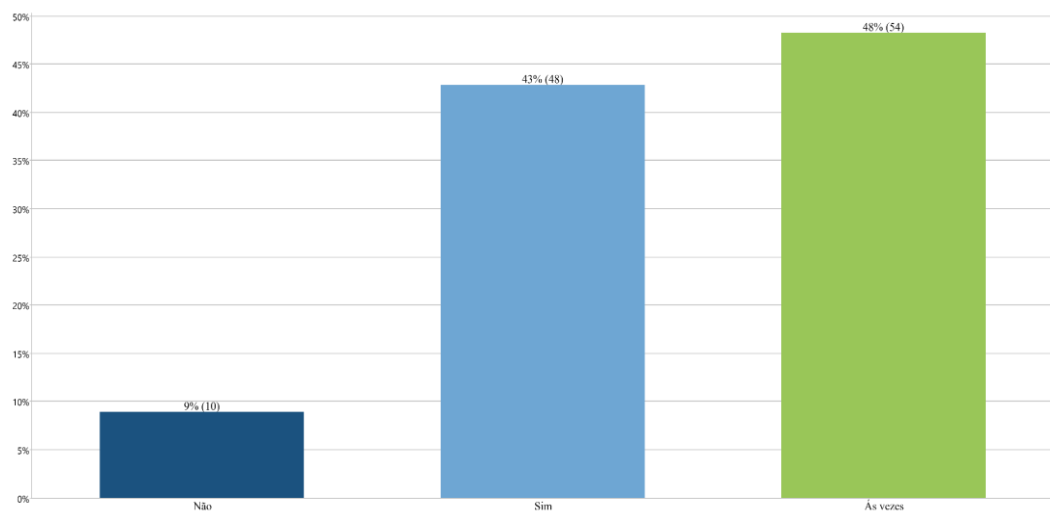
According to Lipp (2002, p.52), stress-related factors can trigger both physical and emotional symptoms. According to the author, the most prevalent are: difficulty concentrating, headaches, dizziness, shortness of breath and exhaustion. Emotional symptoms include anxiety, lack of motivation, school difficulties, insomnia and irritability. We highlight the physical and emotional symptoms cited by the students in this survey, as shown in the following graphs.

Graph 4 – Headaches



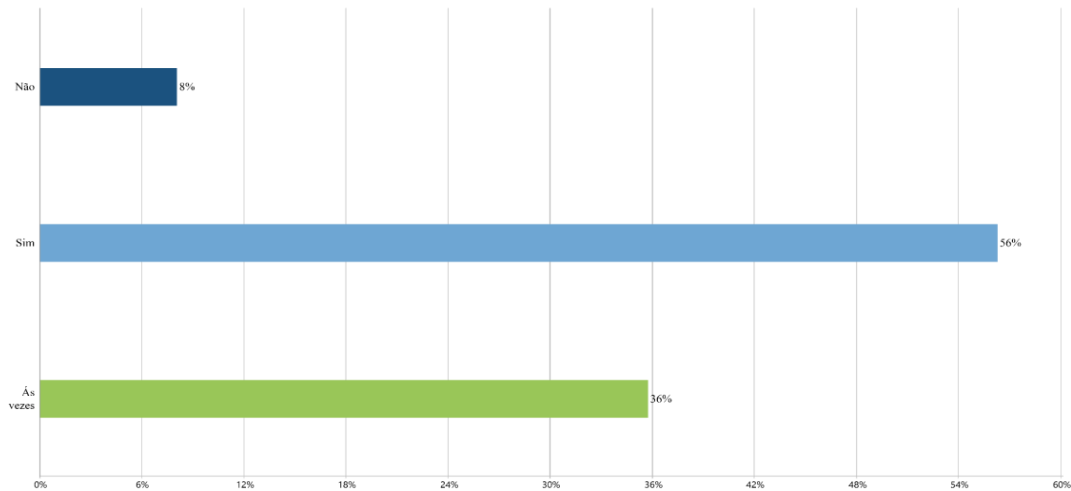
Source: Devised by the authors using the *software Maxqda 2022 (2023)*.

Graph 5 - Difficulty in concentration



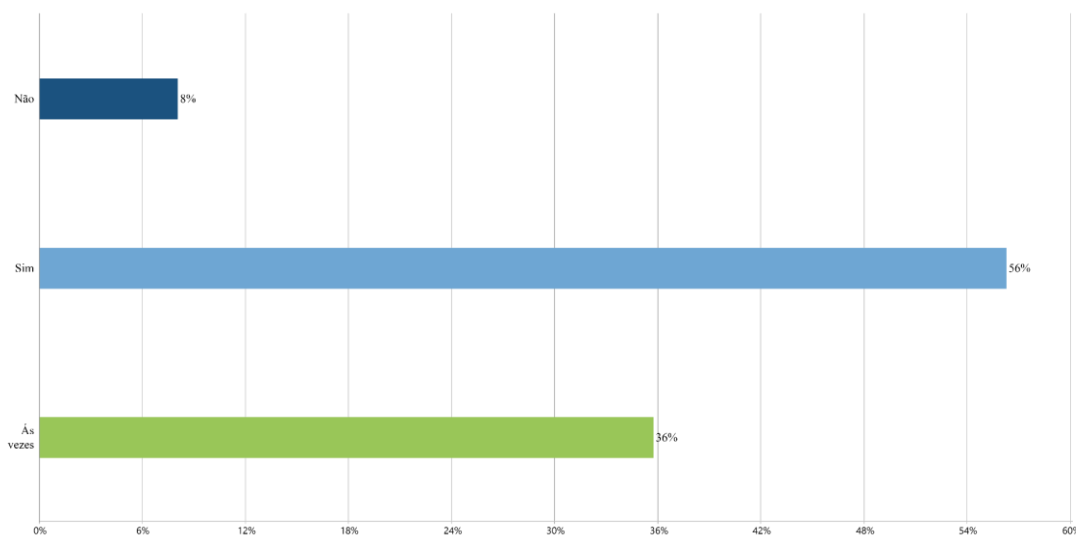
Source: Devised by the authors using the *software Maxqda 2022 (2023)*.

Graph 6 - Tired even after a night's sleep



Source: Devised by the authors using the *software Maxqda 2022 (2023)*.

Graph 7 - Dizziness and shortness of breath



Source: Devised by the authors using the *software Maxqda 2022 (2023)*.

According to the graphs above, it can be seen that physical symptoms are present in students' daily school lives in general, in more than 50% of the students' narratives. When referring to headaches, 59% of students said they had this symptom, 21% said they felt it and 38% felt it sometimes.

With regard to difficulty concentrating, 91% of students said they had this symptom, 43% of whom said yes and 48% said sometimes. The percentage increased when asked about the symptom of tiredness, even after a night's sleep, which is related to exhaustion. In this way, 92% of the respondents said they felt it, with 56% answering yes and 36% answering

sometimes. It can be seen that this symptom has seen a marked increase in the presence of this symptom in everyday school life, since the answer yes had a higher rate.

Regarding dizziness and shortness of breath, the percentage of 92% remained, with 56% answering yes and 36% answering sometimes. In the same situation, this symptom presents itself in an affirmative way in everyday school life.

These physical symptoms, related to everyday school life, can cause students to have difficulty participating in classes, following the content and school organization, which can reflect on school performance, learning, grades and assessments. Faced with these challenges, it can lead to feelings of demotivation and a desire to give up, difficulty learning and concentrating. These physical symptoms are related to the emotional symptoms. In the narratives, as shown in the table below, the emotional symptoms reported by the students are as follows.

Chart 2 - Emotional symptoms

Symptoms	Frequency	Percentage
Anxiety or excessive nervousness	9	8.0
Anxiety or excessive nervousness, lack of motivation	5	4.5
Anxiety or excessive nervousness, Irritability or frequent impatience	39	34.8
Anxiety or excessive nervousness, Feeling of hopelessness or despair	5	4.5
Anxiety or excessive nervousness, sadness or depression	1	0.9
Anxiety or excessive nervousness, sadness or depression, lack of motivation	2	1.8
Anxiety or excessive nervousness, sadness or depression, Feeling of hopelessness or despair	3	2.7
Lack of motivation	11	9.8
Frequent irritability or impatience	7	6.3
Frequent irritability or impatience, lack of motivation	4	3.6
Frequent irritability or impatience, Feeling of hopelessness or despair	6	5.4
Frequent irritability or impatience, sadness or depression	5	4.5
No answer	4	3.6
Feeling of hopelessness or despair	4	2.7
Feeling of hopelessness and despair, lack of motivation	5	3.6
Sadness or depression	3	1.8
TOTAL (valid)	111	98.2
TOTAL	113	100.0

Source: Devised by the authors using the *software Maxqda 2022* (2023).

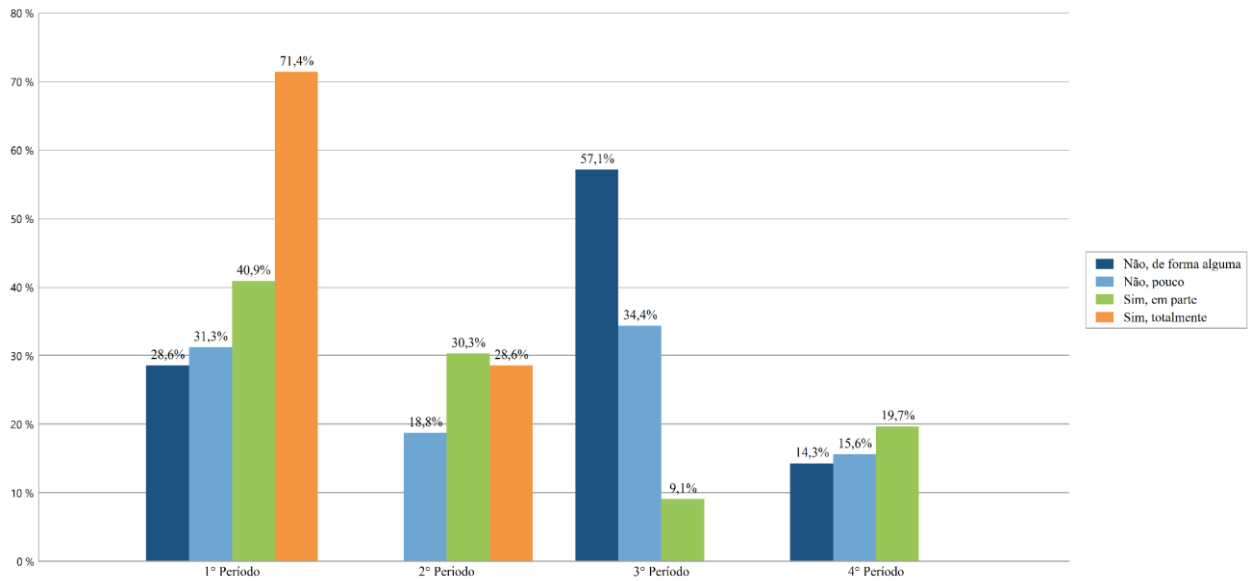
Among the students' responses to emotional symptoms, the combination with the highest responses stood out, with 34.8% for "Anxiety or excessive nervousness, Irritability or frequent impatience", and in second place, with the highest response, 9.8% for "lack of motivation". We return to the perspective highlighted by Ariño and Bardagi (2018), who point out that student concern about the job market can reveal emotional symptoms related to stress.

It should be emphasized that the physical and emotional symptoms described here by the students are symptoms of stress that can trigger other mental health problems. The students' responses reflect the need to observe the extent to which emotional symptoms are triggering physical symptoms and, consequently, hindering their schooling process and generating stressed, demotivated and exhausted students.

Looking from the inside, possibilities that can help reduce student stress within the IFRN, student proposals

The proposals were identified and analyzed from the students' perspective, mentioning how they perceive institutional action to reduce stress. From this point of view, the students' perspective is problematized in suggestions for possible proposals to be made by the IFRN to help students cope with stress in the school environment.

The students were asked about the existence of institutional support for student mental health. Among the first terms, the presence of institutional support appears more present, as more than 70% of students say they have the necessary support, yes, totally. Towards the end of the term, there was a change in student perception, with more than 57% of students saying they had no support at all. The rest of the answers were only between not at all and yes in part.

Graph 8 - Institutional support for student mental health

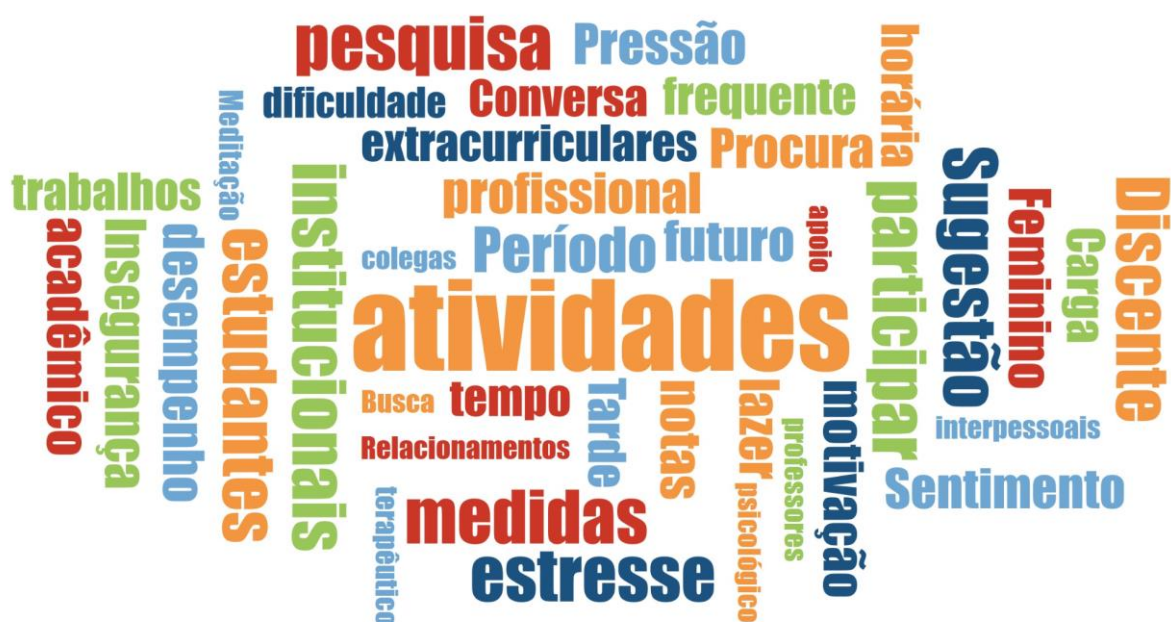
Source: Devised by the authors using the *software Maxqda 2022 (2023)*.

We noticed that in the last few terms, students feel less assisted in their mental health needs. In general, institutional measures are concerned with students entering the school; when they arrive, they feel welcomed. However, the idea that in later semesters the student would already be adapted becomes a refuted piece of information, because the support provided must continue in order to prioritize not only admission but, above all, success and permanence at the institution. The institution has a health team, with psychologists, however, the number of requests for help from students in this department is low or almost non-existent.

A study published in the *Revista brasileira de saúde e educação* (Brazilian journal of health and education) (Costa *et al.*, 2020) shows that there is a high rate of young people in educational institutions in Brazil with symptoms related to stress. However, it highlights the scarcity of students seeking help from psychological departments. According to the study, the main cause would be the fear of most students to seek psychological help, due to the stigma related to mental health, that is, the old, outdated thinking, which believes that emotional instability is something easy to manage and solve alone.

Finally, the participants highlighted points that they believe should be proposed by the institution in favor of student mental health, as shown in the word cloud below.

Figure 2 - Cloud of words, student suggestions for institutions to deal with stress in everyday school life



Source: Devised by the authors using the *software Maxqda* 2022 (2023).

In the cloud, the word that appears most often is "atividades" (activities) and is directly related to "medidas, pesquisa, apoio, sugestão, conversa, participar" (measures, research, support, suggestions, conversation, participation) which, when interconnected, contextualize what the students expect as institutional measures for the benefit of the students. The word "frequência" (frequency) refers to the need for these activities to take place frequently in everyday school life, and "tarde, noturno, feminino, estudantes" (afternoon, evening, female, students) refers to the institution's view of students, and that this view is loaded with specificities, whether for the audience of students in the afternoon, evening, or female, male, among others.

Regarding the content of the suggested actions, we highlight issues related to "motivação, insegurança, relacionamento interpessoal, sentimento, estresse, terapêutico, lazer, meditação, extracurricular" (motivation, insecurity, interpersonal relationships, feelings, stress, therapeutic, leisure, meditation, extracurricular). In this way, the student suggests the need for extracurricular activities that address student mental health, that diversified activities are proposed, consisting of listening, conversation circles, meditations, therapeutic and leisure activities.

When it comes to the punctuality of help with student school organization, "carga e notas" (workload and grades) stands out. The students' point of view suggests that these actions

could be mobilizations that involve not only the administration, but also the psychological sector with preventive actions against stress, as well as help with teachers in everyday school life. Finally, the word "futuro" (future) presents itself as hope, in which finishing the course would be the possibility of a better future.

There is a clear need to focus on interventions aimed at reducing stress in students, such as [...] relaxation practices aimed at reducing stress and promoting physical activity and actions that encourage task management and time management. In addition, it is essential to offer psychological support to students from public schools and/or women, as well as spaces for listening and support so that they can work through the stigmas and develop coping strategies throughout their education. Actions to encourage better sleep should also be promoted. Another point is the need to identify students with emotional vulnerabilities so that they can be listened to, monitored and referred for psychological support. This can be done through teachers or the Student Support Service, through interviews with first-year students in order to welcome them, establish a bond and accompany those who may have a previous history of mental disorders (Costa *et al.*, 2020, p. 8).

Studies like these are essential if we are to develop a sensitive view of students and, in this way, problematize mental health, measures and actions that can contribute to students' mental health, success and permanence at school.

Conclusion

The prevalence of student stress is a reality in the daily school life of young people and adults enrolled in the Subsequent Work Safety Course. According to the data, stress is more prevalent among students enrolled in the last periods of the course. The consequences of stress are related to the desire to give up and are linked to school organization, the daily routine of classes, schoolwork and assessments, the difficulty in managing these demands, as well as concern for the future professional, which trigger physical and emotional symptoms. These elements add up to stress.

Knowing the factors of student stress, sensitizing oneself to listen sensitively to these factors, as well as being able to listen to the paths suggested by students to combat stress at the institution, are essential developments in understanding this reality. Listening to the voice of students can serve as a way of preparing professionals involved in the psychology, pedagogical and administrative sectors of student care for actions that make it possible to reduce or control these stress factors. Since the symptoms caused by stress can lead to relationship difficulties,

lack of motivation, difficulties with everyday school life in the midst of assessments, grades and school performance, with the consequence of dropping out.

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