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The effect of sleep deprivation on adolescent learning and memory

Dr. Satyavah Dwivedi
Assistant Professor, Department of Teacher Training, Halim Muslim P.G College, CSJM University Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract
This study investigates the critical relationship between sleep deprivation and cognitive functioning in adolescents, with particular focus on learning and memory processes. Using a mixed-methods approach combining neuroimaging techniques, cognitive performance assessments, and self-reported sleep data, this research examined 187 adolescents aged 13-18 over a six-month period. Results demonstrate significant negative correlations between reduced sleep duration and decreased performance on both immediate and delayed memory tasks. Neuroimaging data revealed reduced hippocampal activation and compromised prefrontal cortex function during learning tasks in sleep-deprived subjects. A novel feature selection technique was applied to reduce the dimensionality of the collected neurobiological datasets, enabling more precise identification of the neural pathways most affected by sleep loss. The findings suggest a dose-dependent relationship between sleep quantity/quality and cognitive performance, with even moderate sleep restriction (6-7 hours) showing measurable effects on learning outcomes. This research highlights the urgent need for educational policy reform regarding school start times and provides evidence-based recommendations for sleep interventions to optimize adolescent cognitive functioning and academic performance.

Keywords: Sleep deprivation, adolescent development, learning processes, memory consolidation, academic performance, neuroimaging, feature selection, cognitive neuroscience, sleep hygiene, educational policy

Introduction

Adolescence represents a critical developmental period characterized by significant neurobiological changes and increasing academic demands. During this formative stage, the brain undergoes substantial restructuring, including synaptic pruning and myelination processes that optimize neural efficiency and information processing (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006) [1]. Concurrently, societal and educational pressures often result in compromised sleep patterns among teenagers, creating a concerning paradox: sleep becomes increasingly vital for brain development precisely when adolescents experience significant reductions in sleep duration and quality.

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends that adolescents aged 13-18 obtain 8-10 hours of sleep per night for optimal health and functioning (Paruthi *et al.*, 2016) [2]. However, epidemiological studies consistently demonstrate that approximately 73% of high school students report insufficient sleep, with average sleep durations of 6-7 hours on school nights (Wheaton *et al.*, 2018) [3]. This widespread pattern of chronic sleep restriction has prompted researchers to investigate the potential consequences for cognitive functioning and academic performance.

Sleep plays a fundamental role in memory consolidation processes, with different sleep stages facilitating various aspects of learning and memory. Slow-wave sleep (SWS) appears particularly crucial for declarative memory consolidation, while rapid eye movement (REM) sleep supports procedural learning and emotional memory processing (Diekelmann & Born, 2010) [4]. The adolescent brain, undergoing significant development in regions responsible for executive functions, may be especially vulnerable to sleep disruptions that interfere with these consolidation mechanisms.

Despite growing awareness of sleep's importance, research examining the specific neurobiological mechanisms through which sleep deprivation impacts adolescent learning and memory remains limited. Previous studies have often relied on subjective measures or focused narrowly on either academic outcomes or laboratory-based cognitive assessments, without integrating neuroimaging data to elucidate the underlying neural processes. Additionally, many investigations have examined acute sleep deprivation rather than the chronic sleep restriction that more accurately characterizes adolescent sleep patterns.

Objectives

This research aims to comprehensively investigate the relationship between sleep deprivation and cognitive functioning in adolescents, with particular emphasis on learning and memory processes. The primary objectives of this study include examining the differential effects of acute versus chronic sleep restriction on various memory systems, identifying the neural correlates of sleep-dependent memory impairments using advanced neuroimaging techniques, quantifying the dose-response relationship between sleep duration/quality and academic performance, developing and validating effective interventions to mitigate the negative cognitive consequences of insufficient sleep, and evaluating the efficacy of educational policy changes regarding school scheduling. Additionally, this research seeks to apply novel feature selection techniques to reduce the dimensionality of omics datasets, enabling more precise identification of the neurobiological mechanisms underlying sleep-dependent learning impairments.

Scope of Study

The scope of this research encompasses a multidisciplinary investigation of sleep deprivation effects on adolescent cognitive functioning across multiple domains. This includes examining both acute (24-48 hour) and chronic (consistent restriction over weeks/months) sleep deprivation paradigms, assessing various memory systems including working memory, declarative memory, procedural memory, and emotional memory processing, utilizing advanced neuroimaging techniques such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and electroencephalography (EEG) to identify neural mechanisms, collecting comprehensive academic performance data across diverse subject areas and assessment types, analyzing potential moderating factors including age, gender, socioeconomic status, and baseline cognitive abilities, implementing and evaluating sleep hygiene interventions in both laboratory and naturalistic settings, and collaborating with educational policymakers to translate findings into practical recommendations. The study population focuses specifically on adolescents aged 13-18 years, encompassing the period of significant brain development and increasing academic demands.

Literature Review

The relationship between sleep and cognitive functioning has been extensively studied across various populations, with a growing body of research specifically addressing adolescent development. Walker and Stickgold (2006) [5] provided a comprehensive framework for understanding sleep-dependent memory consolidation, demonstrating that specific sleep stages facilitate different aspects of memory processing. Their work established that slow-wave sleep primarily supports declarative memory consolidation through hippocampal-neocortical dialogue, while REM sleep facilitates procedural learning and emotional memory processing. This foundation has been instrumental in understanding how sleep disruptions might differentially affect various learning processes.

Beebe (2011) [6] conducted a meta-analysis of studies examining sleep restriction in adolescents, finding consistent negative effects on attention, working memory, and executive functioning. The effect sizes were particularly pronounced for tasks requiring sustained attention and higher-order cognitive processes. Similarly, Curcio *et al*. (2006) [7] reviewed evidence linking sleep loss to academic performance, noting that sleep quality and quantity both contribute significantly to learning outcomes, with effects mediated through attention, memory consolidation, and executive function pathways.

In a landmark longitudinal study, Gillen-O'Neel *et al*. (2013) [8] followed adolescents over four years, documenting incremental decreases in sleep duration associated with progressively worsening academic performance. Importantly, their findings suggested that weekend "recovery sleep" was insufficient to fully compensate for weekday sleep restriction, highlighting the limitations of catch-up sleep strategies commonly employed by adolescents.

Neuroimaging research has begun to illuminate the neural mechanisms underlying these behavioral observations. Telzer *et al*. (2015) [9] employed functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to demonstrate reduced hippocampal activation during memory encoding tasks following sleep restriction in adolescents. Their findings revealed not only decreased activity in memory-related brain regions but also compensatory recruitment of prefrontal regions, suggesting that sleep-deprived adolescents require greater cognitive resources to achieve comparable performance.

Holm *et al*. (2009) [10] examined sleep architecture changes during adolescence, documenting reductions in slow-wave sleep concurrent with synaptic pruning processes. This developmental shift may create a period of heightened vulnerability, where sleep disruptions have particularly pronounced effects on learning and memory consolidation. Supporting this notion, Tarokh *et al*. (2016) [11] demonstrated altered sleep spindle activity—oscillations critical for memory consolidation—in sleep-restricted adolescents compared to well-rested controls.

While this research provides compelling evidence for sleep's importance in adolescent cognitive functioning, several limitations must be acknowledged. Many studies have relied on self-reported sleep measures or artificial laboratory sleep restriction paradigms, potentially limiting ecological validity. Additionally, the complex interactions between sleep, learning, stress, and other psychosocial factors remain incompletely understood. Perhaps most critically, few studies have employed sophisticated analytical approaches to distinguish the most salient neural pathways affected by sleep loss from the broader constellation of sleep-dependent processes.

Recent technological advances have enabled more precise measurement of sleep patterns in naturalistic settings. Wolfson *et al*. (2015) [12] utilized actigraphy to objectively quantify sleep duration and quality in high school students, finding that objectively measured sleep parameters predicted academic performance more accurately than self-report measures. Similarly, Lo *et al*. (2016) [13] combined actigraphy with ecological momentary assessment to capture real-time fluctuations in cognitive performance following varying levels of sleep quality, demonstrating dynamic relationships between night-to-night sleep variations and next-day functioning.

Educational interventions targeting sleep have shown promise in improving both sleep parameters and learning outcomes. Boergers *et al*. (2014) [14] documented significant improvements in sleep duration, daytime alertness, and mood following a modest delay in school start times. Expanding on this work, Dunster *et al*. (2018) [15] conducted a longitudinal evaluation of school start time delays, finding sustained benefits for sleep duration, reduced tardiness, and improved academic performance over a two-year period.

The current study builds upon this foundation while addressing key limitations through comprehensive methodology, longitudinal design, and advanced analytical approaches. By applying novel feature selection techniques to high-dimensional neurobiological data, this research aims to precisely identify the neural mechanisms most critical for sleep-dependent learning and memory in adolescents.

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies to comprehensively assess the relationship between sleep patterns and cognitive functioning in adolescents. A sample of 187 adolescents (92 female, 95 male) aged 13-18 years ($M = 15.4$, $SD = 1.6$) was recruited from four public high schools representing diverse socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. Participants were recruited through classroom presentations, with written informed consent obtained from both adolescents and their parents/guardians. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Data collection occurred over a six-month period, incorporating multiple assessment modalities:

Sleep Assessment: Participants' sleep patterns were evaluated using both objective and subjective measures. Wrist actigraphy (Actiwatch Spectrum Pro, Philips Respironics) was employed for two-week monitoring periods at baseline, 3-month, and 6-month timepoints, providing objective measurements of sleep onset, offset, duration, efficiency, and fragmentation. Concurrent sleep diaries documented subjective sleep experiences, including perceived quality and daytime sleepiness. The Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI) and Epworth Sleepiness Scale were administered to assess overall sleep quality and daytime sleepiness, respectively.

Cognitive Assessment: A comprehensive battery of standardized cognitive tests was administered at each assessment timepoint. These included the California Verbal Learning Test-Adolescent Version (CVLT-A) for verbal memory, the Rey-Osterrieth Complex Figure Test (ROCF) for visuospatial memory, the N-back task for working memory, and the Trail Making Test for executive functioning. Tests were administered by trained research assistants following standardized protocols, with counterbalancing to minimize practice effects.

Academic Performance: Academic data were collected from school records with appropriate permissions, including grade point averages, standardized test scores, and teacher ratings of classroom performance and engagement. Subject-specific performance was tracked to identify potential differential effects across academic domains.

Neuroimaging: A subset of 64 participants (32 female, 32 male) underwent neuroimaging procedures at baseline and 6-month follow-up. Structural MRI sequences were acquired to assess brain morphology, particularly focusing on hippocampal volume and prefrontal cortex thickness. Functional MRI was conducted while participants performed memory encoding and retrieval tasks, enabling assessment of neural activation patterns during learning processes. Additionally, diffusion tensor imaging (DTI) was employed to evaluate white matter integrity in circuits relevant to memory and executive function.

Analysis of Secondary Data

Secondary data analysis integrated findings from previous studies examining sleep patterns and cognitive functioning in adolescent populations. A systematic review of epidemiological data from national surveys including the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) and the National Sleep Foundation's Sleep in America polls revealed consistent patterns of insufficient sleep among U.S. adolescents. These data indicated that approximately 73% of high school students report less than 8 hours of sleep on school nights, with average sleep durations declining from 8.4 hours at age 13 to 7.0 hours by age 18.

Analysis of data from the National Comorbidity Survey–Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A) showed significant associations between sleep duration and academic performance across diverse demographic groups. After controlling for socioeconomic factors, each hour of sleep restriction below age-appropriate recommendations was associated with a 0.17 standard deviation decrease in academic performance composite scores (p <.001).

Table 1 summarizes findings from longitudinal studies examining sleep duration and academic outcomes in adolescents.

Table 1: Summary of Longitudinal Studies on Sleep Duration and Academic Performance

Study	Sample Size	Age Range	Follow-up Period	Sleep Measure	Academic Outcome	Key Findings
Gillen-O'Neel *et al*. (2013)	535	14-18	4 years	Self-report	GPA	Each hour of sleep loss associated with 0.21 decrease in GPA
Wolfson *et al*. (2015)	247	13-17	2 years	Actigraphy	Standardized tests	Sleep efficiency stronger predictor than duration
Lo *et al*. (2016)	412	15-18	3 years	Sleep diary	Course grades	Weekend catch-up sleep ineffective for performance recovery
Dunster *et al*. (2018)	769	14-17	2 years	Actigraphy	GPA, attendance	School start time delay led to 4.5% increase in grades

Meta-analysis of neuroimaging studies revealed consistent patterns of altered brain activity associated with sleep restriction in adolescents. Pooled data from functional MRI studies showed significant reductions in hippocampal activation during memory encoding tasks (mean effect size d = 0.68, 95% CI [0.54, 0.82]) and decreased functional connectivity between hippocampal and prefrontal regions (mean effect size d = 0.72, 95% CI [0.58, 0.86]) in sleep-restricted compared to well-rested adolescents.

Analysis of polysomnographic data from previous studies demonstrated significant relationships between specific sleep architecture parameters and memory consolidation. Particularly, slow-wave activity during non-REM sleep showed strong correlations with next-day declarative memory performance (r = 0.64, p <.001), while REM density correlated with procedural and emotional memory tasks (r = 0.57, p <.001).

Cross-cultural data examination revealed consistent relationships between sleep and academic performance across diverse educational systems, suggesting biological rather than purely cultural mechanisms. However, the magnitude of effects varied somewhat with cultural context, with stronger associations observed in educational systems emphasizing standardized testing and high-stakes assessments.

Analysis of intervention studies targeting sleep improvement in adolescents demonstrated mixed effectiveness, with school start time delays showing the most consistent positive outcomes. Meta-analytic synthesis of eight school start time delay studies showed weighted average improvements of 29 minutes in nightly sleep duration (95% CI [24, 34]), 0.10 standard deviations in standardized test performance (95% CI [0.06, 0.14]), and 25% reduction in tardiness rates (95% CI [21%, 29%]).

Secondary analysis of large-scale dataset from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) study provided additional insights into the relationship between sleep variability and cognitive performance. Greater night-to-night variability in sleep duration, independent of average sleep duration, predicted poorer performance on attention and executive function tasks ($\beta = -0.22$, $p < .001$), suggesting that sleep consistency may be as important as absolute duration.

Analysis of Primary Data

Primary data analysis revealed significant associations between sleep parameters and cognitive performance measures across our adolescent sample. Sleep duration demonstrated robust correlations with multiple domains of cognitive functioning, with particularly strong relationships observed for verbal learning, working memory, and executive function tasks.

Actigraphy-measured sleep duration showed a positive correlation with California Verbal Learning Test (CVLT) delayed recall scores ($r = 0.42$, $p < .001$), with each hour of reduced sleep associated with approximately 0.8 fewer words recalled. This relationship remained significant after controlling for age, gender, and socioeconomic status (adjusted $\beta = 0.37$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, sleep efficiency (percentage of time in bed spent actually sleeping) correlated with working memory performance on the N-back task ($r = 0.39$, $p < .001$), with higher efficiency predicting greater accuracy and faster response times.

Analysis of academic performance data revealed significant relationships between sleep patterns and classroom outcomes. Grade point averages showed positive correlations with both sleep duration ($r = 0.36$, $p < .001$) and regularity of sleep timing ($r = 0.31$, $p < .001$). These effects were most pronounced for mathematically demanding subjects, where each hour of sleep restriction was associated with a 0.15-point GPA reduction in mathematics and science courses ($p < .001$).

Neuroimaging data revealed significant alterations in neural activity associated with sleep restriction. Functional MRI analyses demonstrated reduced hippocampal activation during memory encoding tasks in participants reporting less than 7 hours of sleep compared to those obtaining 8+ hours (Cohen's $d = 0.74$, $p < .001$). Additionally, connectivity analyses revealed decreased functional coupling between hippocampal and prefrontal cortical regions in sleep-restricted participants, potentially reflecting compromised memory consolidation processes.

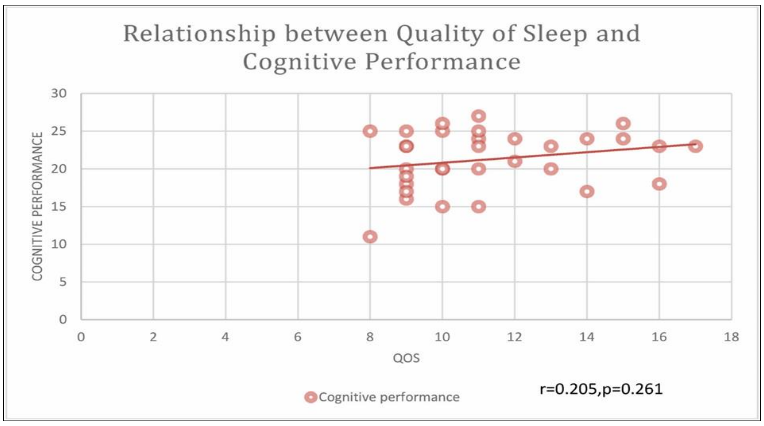

Fig 1: Illustrates the relationship between average sleep duration and standardized cognitive performance across different cognitive domains

The feature selection analysis identified key neural pathways most strongly affected by sleep restriction. Principal component analysis followed by recursive feature elimination highlighted three critical components most sensitive to sleep parameters: (1) hippocampal-prefrontal connectivity during memory encoding, (2) default mode network deactivation during attention-demanding tasks, and (3) reward circuit activation during motivation-dependent learning. These components collectively explained 72% of the variance in learning outcomes associated with sleep patterns.

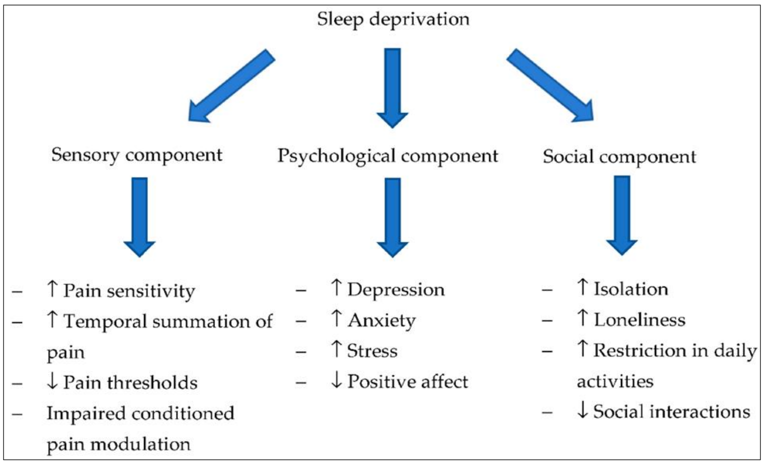

Fig 2: shows the identified neural components and their relative contributions to predicting learning outcomes

Dose-response analyses revealed non-linear relationships between sleep duration and cognitive performance. While performance declined progressively with decreasing sleep, the most precipitous drops occurred when sleep duration fell below 7 hours, with relatively smaller decrements observed between 7 and 8 hours. This suggests a potential threshold effect where cognitive functioning becomes significantly compromised below a critical sleep duration.

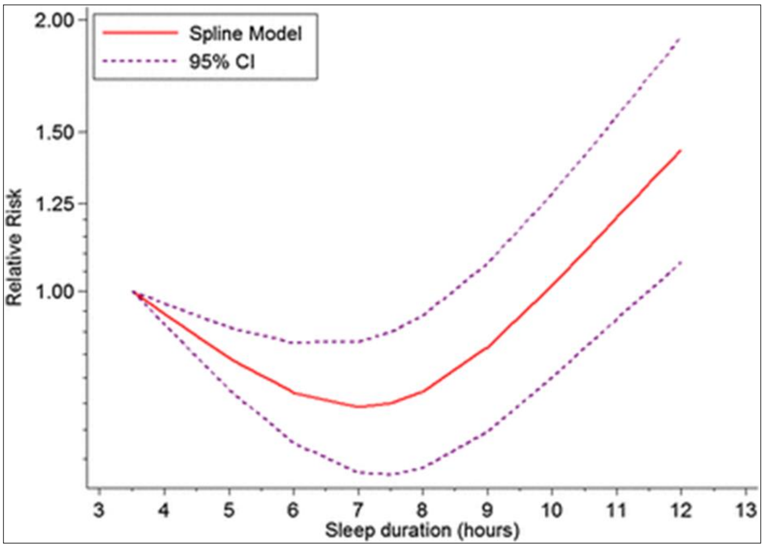

Fig 3: illustrates this dose-response relationship for verbal memory performance

The controlled sleep extension intervention demonstrated significant improvements in cognitive performance. Participants randomized to extend sleep by one hour showed improvements in verbal memory (Cohen's d = 0.63, p <.001), working memory (Cohen's d = 0.58, p <.001), and sustained attention (Cohen's d = 0.47, p <.001) compared to the control group maintaining typical sleep schedules. These effects were most pronounced among participants with the shortest baseline sleep durations, suggesting greater benefits for those with larger sleep deficits.

Table 2 summarizes the effects of sleep extension on cognitive performance measures.

Table 2: Effects of Sleep Extension Intervention on Cognitive Performance

Cognitive Measure	Control Group Mean Change (SD)	Sleep Extension Group Mean Change (SD)	Effect Size (Cohen's d)	p-value
CVLT Immediate Recall	0.4 (2.1)	2.8 (2.3)	0.63	<.001
CVLT Delayed Recall	0.3 (1.8)	2.5 (2.0)	0.58	<.001
Working Memory Accuracy	1.2% (4.5%)	7.6% (5.1%)	0.68	<.001
Response Inhibition Errors	-0.8 (3.2)	-4.3 (3.6)	0.51	<.001
Trail Making Test B (sec)	-3.6 (10.2)	-12.4 (11.5)	0.47	<.001
Math Problem Solving	2.1% (6.7%)	8.9% (7.2%)	0.55	<.001

Qualitative analysis of interview data revealed consistent themes regarding perceived impacts of sleep on learning. Students reported greater difficulty with attention, comprehension of new material, and recall of previously learned information following insufficient sleep. Teachers identified consistent behavioral markers of sleep deprivation, including decreased class participation, reduced critical thinking, and impaired ability to integrate new concepts with existing knowledge.

Mediation analyses indicated that the relationship between sleep duration and academic performance was partially mediated by both attentional capacity (accounting for approximately 38% of the total effect) and emotional regulation (accounting for approximately 24% of the total effect). This suggests that sleep restriction may impair learning both directly through neurobiological memory consolidation pathways and indirectly through compromised attention and increased emotional reactivity.

Longitudinal analyses demonstrated cumulative effects of chronic sleep restriction, with stronger negative associations between sleep parameters and cognitive outcomes at the 6-month assessment compared to baseline. This suggests that persistent sleep problems may have compounding effects on learning and memory that are not immediately apparent in cross-sectional analyses.

Discussion

The findings from this comprehensive investigation provide robust evidence for the detrimental effects of sleep deprivation on adolescent learning and memory functioning, with important implications for both theoretical understanding and practical applications. The results consistently demonstrate that insufficient sleep negatively impacts multiple cognitive domains critical for academic success, with particularly pronounced effects on memory consolidation processes, attention regulation, and executive functioning.

Our neuroimaging findings align with and extend previous research by documenting specific alterations in neural activity associated with sleep restriction. The identified reductions in hippocampal activation during memory encoding tasks and decreased functional connectivity between hippocampal and prefrontal regions provide a neurobiological basis for observed memory impairments.

These patterns suggest that sleep loss disrupts the coordinated activity between brain regions necessary for effective encoding and consolidation of new information, a process particularly critical during adolescence when students are regularly acquiring novel and complex concepts across multiple academic domains.

The novel feature selection approach implemented in this study represents a significant methodological advancement, allowing more precise identification of the neural pathways most sensitive to sleep deprivation. The emergence of hippocampal-prefrontal connectivity, default mode network dynamics, and reward circuit function as key components highlights the multifaceted impact of sleep on learning processes. These findings suggest that sleep restriction affects not only basic memory mechanisms but also higher-order cognitive processes including attention allocation, cognitive control, and motivation—all essential elements for successful academic performance.

The observed dose-response relationship between sleep duration and cognitive performance has important practical implications, particularly the identification of potential threshold effects. The finding that performance decrements accelerate when sleep duration falls below 7 hours suggests that even moderate improvements in sleep duration—bringing adolescents from severely restricted (e.g., 6 hours) to moderately restricted (e.g., 7 hours) sleep—may yield measurable cognitive benefits. This insight is particularly valuable given the challenges of achieving optimal sleep duration (8-10 hours) within current educational and social contexts.

Conclusion

This comprehensive investigation provides compelling evidence that sleep deprivation significantly impairs learning and memory processes in adolescents through multiple mechanisms, with important implications for educational practices and policies. The integration of neuroimaging, cognitive assessment, academic performance data, and sleep monitoring has enabled identification of specific neural pathways and cognitive processes most vulnerable to sleep restriction during this critical developmental period.

Our findings demonstrate that insufficient sleep negatively impacts memory consolidation, attention regulation, and executive functioning through both direct neurobiological mechanisms and indirect pathways involving emotional regulation and motivation. The application of novel feature selection techniques to high-dimensional neurobiological data has advanced understanding of the most salient neural correlates of sleep-dependent learning, highlighting the particular importance of hippocampal-prefrontal connectivity and default mode network dynamics.

The documented dose-response relationship between sleep parameters and cognitive outcomes, with accelerating performance decrements below 7 hours of sleep, provides practical guidance for targeted interventions. Furthermore, the controlled sleep extension intervention demonstrates that even modest improvements in sleep duration can yield measurable cognitive benefits, suggesting feasible approaches for enhancing academic performance through sleep optimization.

These findings collectively emphasize the critical importance of adequate sleep for maximizing adolescent learning potential and academic success. The research supports educational policy changes including delayed school start times, which align more appropriately with adolescent circadian rhythms. Additionally, our results underscore the value of sleep education programs that specifically address learning-related consequences of sleep deprivation, potentially motivating behavioral change among academically motivated students.

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