



SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF THE GRADE FIVE SCHOLARSHIP EXAMINATION ON URBAN CHILDREN IN COLOMBO DISTRICT

D.M.S.P.Dissanayaka

University of Ruhuna, Matara, Sri Lanka

Email : dmspriyadarshani98@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The Grade Five Scholarship Examination is considered as one of the most competitive and stressful examinations in the Sri Lankan primary education system. Although it creates educational mobility, it causes the young students to develop high academic and psychological stresses. The research discusses the social, academic and psychological impacts of the Grade Five Scholarship Examination on the urban children in the Colombo District. Qualitative case study design has been used to examine the experiences of the students, parents and teachers who are part of the examination process. The data were gathered using semi-structured interviews of 100 Grade five students, five parents, four teachers and one Principal in Roman Catholic Maha Vidyalaya in Moratuwa. It has been found that family expectations, peer competition and socioeconomic disparities are major factors in the preparation, motivation and study habits of students. The examination, which was originally meant to foster educational mobility among the gifted and disadvantaged, shows a disconcerting irony: the availability of organized learning schedules and private tutoring in the midst of the present urban socioeconomic reality of Colombo is enormously dependent on family income, so that the exam could now be a mechanism by which social stratification is reinforced instead of eased. Although organized learning schedules and parental guidance may help in building academic discipline and problem-solving skills, the stress and high competition may cause stress, anxiety and less free time among students due to over pressure. The article also points out that the uneven access to the privatized tutoring and learning tools brings inequality in academic opportunities to the urban children. The findings highlight the importance of implementing a balanced approach to parent

supervision, providing fair educational support, and establishing educational support measures such as counseling services, organizing school activities for students, and promoting exam preparation programs that are distributed across various schools, to protect students' psychological well-being and promote academic development. The research has implications to teachers, policy makers and practitioners who are interested in enhancing educational activities and promoting the welfare of children in high-stakes examination situations in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Grade Five Scholarship Examination, urban children, academic pressure, socioeconomic differences, psychological wellbeing.

1. Introduction

It is well known that education is a major tool in terms of social mobility, human development and reduction of social inequalities. Competitive exams are used in accessing good education and future opportunities all over the world. In most parts of the world, high stakes tests are taken as student selection mechanisms, academic assessment and allocation of the scarce educational resources. Although these examinations can promote academic success and discipline, the adverse effects of these examinations, especially on the psychological health and social growth of children, have been noted by scholars more often (Brown and Lee, 2018). Research done in other educational settings reveals that stress, anxiety, and lack of leisure time can be caused by intense competition, parental expectations, and examination pressure among school children (Adams, 2018).

High-stakes testing has also been linked within the global discourse of education to more general causes of educational inequality and social stratification. According to sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu, education systems can help to reproduce the current social inequalities by rewarding the students with more cultural, social, and economic capital. The children of better-off families tend to have more access to educational tools such as tutoring, learning resources, and facilitating study conditions which may have profound effects on academic performance. As a result, competitive tests can be used as both sources of vertical mobility and at the same time preserve existing social inequalities.

Education in the Sri Lankan context has traditionally been considered as a significant path to social progress and national development. Literacy rates and access to education have been relatively high in the country since free education was introduced in the year 1945 as compared to most of the developing countries (De Silva, 1995). Nevertheless, in spite of such success, the struggle to go to good schools and the stages of education is quite high. The Grade Five Scholarship Examination is considered one of the most

important phases in this competition and it is taken by students at the conclusion of primary school.

Grade Five Scholarship Examination was initially known as the scholarship examination that was introduced in order to locate academically gifted students with economic disadvantaged background and offer them financial aid and the opportunity to access more valuable education. In the course of time however, the examination has been developed as one of the most competitive academic examinations that are also stressful in the education system of Sri Lanka. Thousands of Grade Five students take the examination every year with a hope of gaining access to esteemed national schools and get to enjoy the benefits of a scholarship. Consequently, students tend to be subjected to a lot of pre-preparations that comprise of private tutoring, rigorous study schedules and close parental control. It is ironic in modern usage that an exam intended for the benefit of the disadvantaged has become a high-stakes mechanism for selection, requiring tremendous amounts of investment in private tutoring and in strenuous preparation regimes, which are far more accessible to higher income families. The competition to secure positions in the highly sought-after national schools is especially high in Colombo District and these schools have a high academic pressure, little leisure time and low opportunity for social interaction, for young children.

A number of studies in Sri Lanka have already indicated the merits as well as the problems related to Grade Five Scholarship Examination. On the one hand, the test allows the poor students to get a favorable academic institution and enhance their future opportunities. Conversely, researchers have found some number of social and psychological issues associated with the examination. According to the previous research, a substantial number of students suffer immense academic strain, emotional anxiety, and lack of play and social interaction chances during the preparation phase (Silva, 2020; Samarasinghe, 2016). Another aspect that parents have is the tendency to spend a lot of money and emotional efforts on the preparation of their children and this may sometimes result in unattainable expectations and pressure on the young learners.

The consequences of the examination can be now seen especially in urban centers where student rivalry usually tends to be higher. The families in cities tend to be more educational and offer their children access to additional learning facilities, tutoring classes, and learning resources and academic networks. Nonetheless, this enhanced access passes on to the heightened competition and demands. In places like Colombo, the students often attend various tuition classes and formal study regimes that ensure they have minimal time to go out and have fun with other students. Simultaneously, the access to these educational resources by urban families is unequal due to the socioeconomic differences between them, which further exacerbates inequalities in the preparation and results of academic preparation.

Although this issue is vital, much of the available literature on the Grade Five Scholarship Examination has been written about the national trends or policy discussion, and comparatively less attention has been paid to the daily experiences of students within a particular local setting. Specifically, further studies, which examine how urban children feel the academic, social, and psychological stress of this test, are necessary. Knowledge of such experiences can not only assist in enhancing the education practice, but it also assists in the policy and support systems that safeguard the well-being of children. Most importantly, there is a significant absence of qualitative studies that can describe how everyday life of urban children in Colombo is lived within the context of the Grade Five Scholarship Examination. Consequently, knowing the everyday experience of these children within their families, and the effect of peer and socioeconomic pressures on them, offers a more nuanced and contextual explanation for this study.

Thus, this research paper will explore social, academic and psychological impact of Grade Five Scholarship Examination on urban children in Colombo District of Sri Lanka. The study will seek to give a wholesome picture of the effects of family expectation, peer rivalry and socioeconomic conditions on the preparation and wellbeing of children in this crucial period of their education by investigating the views of students, parents, teachers and school administrators.

2. Literature Review

The competitive examinations are important in education systems worldwide especially in the accessibility of scarce educational opportunities and choice of prestigious institutions. High-stakes testing is a student selection, academic testing, and social mobility mechanism that is adopted in most countries. Nevertheless, researchers have been raising more questions about the overall impact of these examination systems on the academic life of learners and their mental health. According to studies, despite the fact that exams can lead to a sense of discipline and academic success, they can also result in significant levels of stress and social pressure among young students (Brown and Lee, 2018).

Among the central topics of world literature, one can distinguish the psychological implication of the academic pressure in regard to high-stakes exams. Research has revealed that children who take tests leading to competitions usually get anxious, emotional strains, and fears of failure. Incidentally, Adams (2018) discovered that learning settings that are based on examination often affect the self-esteem and level of confidence of the children. The researchers noted that children subjected to high academic demands can get a sense of incompetence when they are unable to perform to the expectation of the parents or the institutions. The same authors proved that academic stress and constant competitions in performance may harm the mental well-being of

students and their overall level of academic activities (Brown and Lee, 2018). Their study also pointed out that although structured studying schedules might enhance academic discipline and time management habit, over concentration on score in exams can cause emotional pressure and burn out among the students.

The other important aspect that has been observed in the literature is the influence of parental involvement and expectations in determining the academic experiences of the children. Paternal involvement is able to have a positive effect on academic drive as well as academic achievement; but not all expectations are realistic therefore adding on psychological stress. Johnson (2012) discussed the role of parents in the preparation of their children to competitive examinations and discovered that high parental expectations usually affected the study practices, academic achievement ambitions as well as the emotional reactions of children to examinations. Parental support may boost the confidence and motivation of students, but too much pressure can cause anxiety and decreased psychological health among young students.

In the Sri Lankan education system, the Grade Five Scholarship Examination enjoys a very special and very influential place. The examination was introduced as a part of the free education policy of Sri Lanka and was initially designed to select academically gifted students with poor economic background and offer them monetary support and chances to study well equipped schools (De Silva, 1995). In the course of time, the examination has however, become one of the most competitive phases in the education system of the country. The competition among the students every year is high as there are fewer scholarships and placements to the prestigious national schools. Consequently, this has intensified the preparation exercise to such an extent of private tutoring, orderly study schedules and high level of investment by the parent.

The social and academic consequences of the Grade Five Scholarship Examination have been analyzed by a number of Sri Lankan academicians. Silva (2020) claimed that the test has a two-fold purpose in the school system. On the one hand, it gives a chance to such talented students who are in the disadvantaged background to receive a high-quality education and enhance their future. Alternatively, as a result of the competitive nature of the examination, there is a lot of pressure that is created on young students and their families. Silva (2020) also remarked that in the quest to give their children better opportunities to succeed, most parents spend a lot of money on special classes and study books at the same time.

In a similar way, Samarasinghe, (2016) studied social and emotional experiences of primary school students expected to take the Grade Five Scholarship Examination. The research discovered that academic pressure among students is high because of their parents, teachers, and peers expectations. After a school day, students began to

participate in various tuition classes, which do not allow them to spend much time on leisure and communication. Due to this, children can be left fatigued, stressed and deprived of the chance of holistic development at this crucial phase of their development (Samarasinghe, 2016).

The other critical problem that is raised in the literature is the inequality in education and unequal access to educational resources. Studies have shown that socioeconomic status has a great impact on students in learning processes and academic performances. Dassanayake (2015) explored the issue of educational inequality in Sri Lanka and discovered that students whose families belong to the higher income bracket have a higher probability of accessing privatized tutoring, learning resources and learning conducive conditions. These privileges will help them to achieve higher performance in competitive exams thus reinforcing the existing social inequalities in the education system. Learners with lower-income family backgrounds, on the contrary, might encounter restrictions in the access of such resources and this impact could affect their academic preparation and performance.

These trends in inequality can be more explained in terms of the Social Reproduction Theory proposed by Bourdieu according to which, education systems can reproduce the existing social structures and inequalities (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu argues that families have different amounts of economic, social, and cultural capital, and that affect educational prospects and academic success of children. Students with families that are better in terms of economic and cultural capital tend to have stronger chances of succeeding in the competitive educational setting due to their access to educational resources, parental support, and facilitating academic networks. This theory can be applied in the Grade Five Scholarship Examination context where urban students with relatively better backgrounds might have the advantage of accessing tuition classes, study materials and organized learning environments more than students with less advantaged backgrounds.

Despite the useful information of the earlier researches on the psychological, social, and educational implication of competitive examination, relatively little literature has reported on the lived experience of primary school children in urban areas anticipating the Grade Five Scholarship Examination. The city of Colombo Districts like a typical urban facility has a distinct educational setting marked by a high level of academic rivalry, access to private education, and parental demands. These aspects can both bring benefits to studies and make the children psychologically stressed.

Thus, qualitative studies on how the family structure, peer pressure, and social-economic inequalities affect academic preparation and emotional state of the urban children in preparing to take the Grade Five Scholarship Examination are still needed. The current

research by interviewing students, parents, and teachers in one urban school setting in Sri Lanka will help in the further explanation of the multifaceted social and psychological aspects of this analysis in the country.

3. Objectives

To study the social, academic and psychological impacts of Grade Five Scholarship Examination on urban children in Colombo District of Sri Lanka.

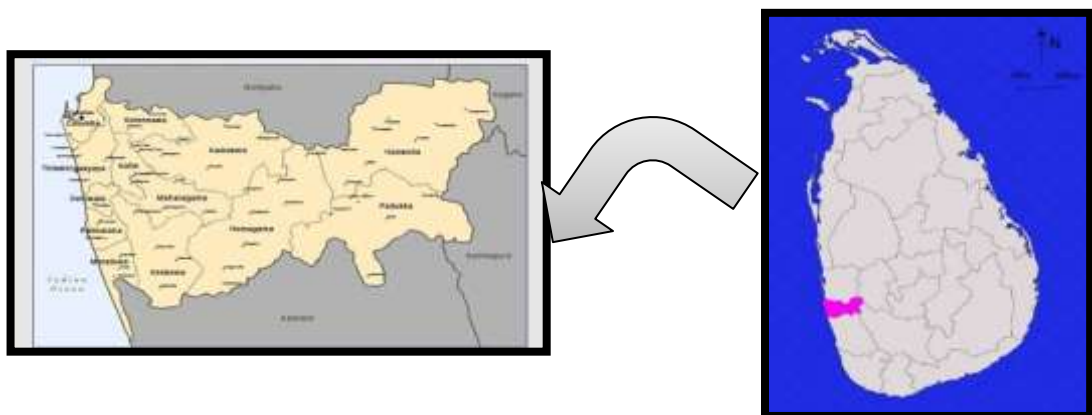
Specific Objectives

1. To test whether family expectations and parental involvement affect children preparing to take the Grade Five Scholarship Examination.
2. To understand the significance of peer competition and social processes in determining the study habits and academic motivation in students.
3. To examine the impact of socioeconomic differences on the access of students to the educational resources in the form of private tuition fees, reading resources, and learning conditions.
4. To determine the psychological and emotional effects of the examination-related stress in primary school children in urban setting.

4. Methodology

This study was a qualitative study to investigate the impacts of Grade Five Scholarship Examination on urban children in Colombo District of Sri Lanka. The research methodology was aimed at collecting rich and descriptive information through several stakeholders on the ground on this high-stakes examination.

Figure 1 Research Area



The area of the research was Colombo District because it is the administrative and commercial center of Sri Lanka, and it has a diversified population of the urban area. This environment helped to explore the particular research question: What are the problems and opportunities of urban children in taking the Grade Five Scholarship Examination?

The sample of the study included Grade Five students, teachers, parents, and the principal of Roman Catholic Maha Vidyalaya, Moratuwa, which is an urban school. Purposive sampling was used to select those who were capable of giving substantive information about the research questions. The sample size was finally 100 students who are of different socio-economic backgrounds, four teachers, five parents, and one principal. Such a diversity of participants made it easier to thoroughly analyze diverse experiences and points of view. Roman Catholic Maha Vidyalaya, Moratuwa was chosen as the research setting due to its being a well-established urban state school with a wide spectrum of students from various socioeconomic backgrounds, serving as a representative school to investigate the relationship between academic pressure and social inequality in the Colombo District. About one-third of the 100 student respondents were from families of higher income and had the option to receive tutoring and study facilities outside of school; about one-third were from middle-income families who were mostly taught at school but occasionally had access to tutors and study facilities; and about one-third were from lower-income families who had less opportunity to receive tutoring and study facilities outside of school. This socio-economic diversity allowed for a more in-depth examination of the factors influencing students' preparation experiences and psychological health based on resource availability.

The researcher developed interview guides, set up ethical procedures, conducted interviews and recorded them and made data analysis. The researcher was neutral to allow the participants to give thorough and open answers. Informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, respect towards the comfort and the language preference of the participants, are all ethics that were strictly maintained during the study.

Semi structured and in-depth Sinhalese and English interviews were used in data collection. This method made it possible to use an open-ended question and probes that allow the participants to elaborate on their experiences. The issues that were discussed during the interviews consisted of academic preparation, stress, parental expectation, availability of study materials, and well-being of students at the time of examination. The number of 100 students interviewed is still considered as a rather extensive number of students for a qualitative study, and the use of semi-structured and in-depth interviews is important to note. Several different methods of data collection were used to effectively manage this scope and to obtain methodological rigor. Apart from the semi-structured interviews conducted with selected students, focus group discussions were also

conducted with small groups of students to reflect on peer dynamics and collective experiences. Classroom and break time observations were also conducted to gather additional data from the interviews. Interviews were conducted with four teachers and the principal, with individual in-depth interviews, and with parents with brief semi-structured interviews examining parents' expectations and their involvement in exam preparation. The multiple methods allowed for triangulation of data and gave a more comprehensive picture of the social and psychological effects of the examination for the student sample. To analyze the data, all the interviews were transcribed, and all interviews in Sinhalese language were translated to English so that accuracy is maintained. Next, thematic analysis was used to code and classify the data in a systematic way. The codes that came up were classified into larger themes to find out the patterns and linkages in the experiences of the participants. The respondents have provided quotes, which were used to demonstrate the main findings and to make the results more authentic.

In general, the strict methodology allowed us to have a comprehensive picture on the influence of the Grade Five Scholarship Examination on the academic, social, and psychological growth of urban children. The results provide practical suggestions to teachers and educators to shape and adjust the policies that are aimed at meeting the special needs and welfare of students experiencing this test.

5. Results and Discussion

This paper has discussed the social, academic and psychological impacts of Grade Five Scholarship Examination (G5SE) on city children in the Colombo District. The discussion is organized based on the four objectives of the research.

5.1 Effects of Family Expectations and Parental Involvement.

The research has also found that family expectations and parental intervention are among the most contributing factors in preparing the students. The majority of the parents participated actively in the observation of school schedules, payments of tuition and high academic achievements. This advice enabled the students to acquire time management, disciplines and good study habits. It was noted by students that planned activities and parental support elevated their confidence and the sense of purpose in the course of preparation.

“My parents insist on revising all that I studied at school before going to bed. I understand sometimes I get more focused with it”. (Student, age 11)

The data have also revealed, however, that high parental expectations may lead to stress and anxiety especially to the children whose performance in school failed to keep pace.

Part of the students confessed that they were overwhelmed with the fear that they would disappoint their parents which, according to the worldwide studies, is closely linked to emotional stress caused by parental pressure in high-stakes tests (Brown and Lee, 2018; Adams, 2018).

“I experience stress when my parents want to get good results. I am nervous even at the smallest mistakes.” (Student, age 10).

These pressures were found by teachers to have a negative effect on children, as they internalized them, which led to lower motivation and self-confidence, which confirms the results of Fonseca (2019) and Silva (2020). Although parental support can improve performance, too much parental expectation can destroy psychological health. This explains why balanced parental guidance, where parental support is applied both academically and emotionally, is crucial.

5.2 Peer Competition and Social Dynamics.

The problem of peer influence also appeared to be a significant social factor that influences the studying habits and the motivation of students. Most children were imitating the study patterns of their peers and were attending numerous tuition classes to compete with peers. Competition among peers promoted discipline and consistency but also anxiety, social comparison, and stress, which are in line with Silva (2020) and Gomes (2018).

“All my friends have extra tuition. If I skip, I feel left behind.” (Student, age 11).

Educators noted that pressure facilitated by peers occasionally created strict and dull study plans that inhibited imaginative thinking, solving problems and exploration of other subjects that were not part of exams. The highly competitive nature in the urban schools may have increased stress levels and social interactions though peer support and collaboration may be advantageous. A number of students made similar points about the emphasis on exam-oriented activities, whereby there was little space for creativity or friendships.

“Some children are too concerned about their peers that they do not take time to relax or play. The impact of this is on their health and friendship.” (Teacher, age 35)

“In the past, I liked to draw and play football, but now that everyone's studying, I study after school so that no one will be the only one not passing. (Student, age 11)

“If I see my classmate getting a better mark, I want to work harder, I don't feel I can be better. (Student, age 10)

The accounts show that peer influence can be positive, for maintaining consistent behaviour when studying, and negative, as a change from a good discipline to social comparison and social withdrawal, which places friendship development and holistic growth at risk. Additionally, the drill-like approach to learning and studying with a focus on exams that peer competition encourages has long-term cognitive drawbacks. Teachers in this study noted that students who were subjected to such limited course sequences over long periods of time were less likely to be able to think creatively about problems, which corroborates the general concern that high-stakes testing stifles students' ability to think differently and prepare them less for flexible, creative thinking, as required in higher education and the workplace.

These results indicate that school should begin encouraging healthy competition, which means that group study, learning, and peer mentoring should be encouraged, as opposed to comparison strategies. Incorporating teamwork activities is likely to minimize poor competition and keep the motivation high.

5.3 Social economic Disparities and Educational Resources.

The socioeconomic status had a very strong influence on the preparatory opportunities of students. The richer students enjoyed the privilege of having the tuition, extra learning facilities, online facilities and comfortable studying time, thus having a clear edge.

“I have my own room to study and tutors who clarify some complicated subjects. It prepares me to have exams.” (Student, age 11)

On the contrary, children in less well-off families tended to have fewer study areas, no personal tuition, and less learning materials, which made the preparation more difficult and stressful.

“I do not have a noisy place to study. In other occasions my siblings cause noise and I am unable to concentrate.” (Student, age 10)

This aligns with the Social Reproduction Theory by Bourdieu (1986) on the fact that it is through education systems that social inequalities are recreated by giving more favor to those with higher cultural and educational capital. Another aspect which was emphasized by Dassanayake (2015) is the effect of inequality in access to resources which reinforces inequality in Sri Lankan education. Likewise, Lee and Kim (2018) demonstrated that in

the world, students with low socioeconomic status report stress and low academic performance because of resource deficiency.

The paper highlights the policy level measures, including the inclusion of free or subsidized tuition, study guides, and special study areas of disadvantaged children. Peer tutoring/mentorship programs may also be introduced in schools, which might lessen the disparities of resources and lead to inclusive education.

5.4 Psychological and Emotional Impacts.

The psychological consequences of the examination pressure were rampant and far reaching. Around 78 of the 100 student participants said that they had at least one major psychosocial problem in the preparation for the examinations, such as anxiety, difficulties in sleeping, fear of failure or a significant decrease in their social life. Of these, more than half said they felt increased stress because of feeling they needed to compare themselves with others or because of pressure from parents; and people from lower income households were more likely to report fatigue and lowered self-esteem due to lack of resources for preparatory work. Most students complained of anxiety, fear of failure, perfectionism, and withdrawal. The students who performed well developed confidence and satisfaction, whereas students with low performance in terms of their academic expectation had stress, fatigue, and low self-esteem.

“I can sometimes be frightened before exams. My heart is a-thumping, and I cannot sleep at night.” (Student, age 10)

These effects were found to be amplified in students who did not receive support at home or had socioeconomic limitations, and so family and community, as well as structural factors, are strongly related. Fonseka (2019) and Adams (2018) also found out that high-stakes exams may have an adverse influence on children, such as sleeping problems, irritability, and social isolation.

The paper dwells on the importance of psychological support just like academic preparation. To lower emotional stress at school, schools might introduce counseling, stress management training, mindfulness training, and parent education. Stress symptoms and supportive interventions can be improved through early detection and identification of their symptoms and help to improve academic performance and overall well-being.

In general, this paper points out the social, academic, and psychological implications of Grade Five Scholarship Examination:

1. **Socially:** There has been the impact of family requirements and peer rivalry on study habits, motivation, and emotional wellbeing.
2. **Academically:** Planned activities enhance such skills as time management and problem-solving and restrict participation in creative or extra-curriculum activities.
3. **Structurally:** Inequalities are structurally perpetuated by the existence of socioeconomic disparities, which result in inequality in accessing learning opportunities.
4. **Psychologically:** The lack of support, competition, and high expectations lead to the stress, anxiety, and emotional weakness.

In these findings, it is demonstrated that high-stakes examinations play not only the role of academic testing but also of social processes which indicate a wider structural and cultural dimension. The interplay of family support, peer relationships, socioeconomic status, and school climate is highly important to determine the experiences of students (which aligns with the works of Silva, 2020, and Jayawardena, 2019).

The research results are significant to parents, teachers, and decision-makers:

- I. **Parental Guidance:** Promote the balance of parental support whether emotional or academic. Keep unrealistic expectations away.
- II. **School Interventions:** Institutionalize mental health support and counseling and stress management, and academic guidance.
- III. **Resource Equity:** To minimize the disparity in education opportunities, policy makers ought to offer tuition aid, study resources, and conducive study environs to the underprivileged students.
- IV. **Community Initiatives:** Facilitate communal learning, peer mentoring and holistic learning, reducing poor competition and keeping the motivation high.

Such approaches have the potential to make urban children successful in their studies in a way that will not lead to a loss of emotional and psychological health and will meet the multidimensional demands of this research.

6. Conclusion

The research paper has analyzed the social, academic and psychological impacts of the Grade Five Scholarship Examination among urban children in the Colombo district in Sri Lanka which has shown the multi-faceted impact on the development and the wellbeing of the students. The expectations and parental engagement were observed to be the most important factors influencing the preparation, studying and motivation of students and positive parental guidance increased discipline, time management and confidence on

academic accomplishments. Nevertheless, too high expectations or parental pressure tended to cause stress, anxiety, self-esteem and even the fear of failing, which proves the complicated role of family factors influencing the educational experience among children. The peer competition and social processes were also dual-purpose, although healthy competition made students stay on track and stick to regular studying schedule, the same process caused a sense of social comparison, stress, social withdrawal and lack of involvement in non-exam-related activities like play, hobbies and creative learning. Another factor that affected the academic experience of the students was the socioeconomic differences, where the children who came to school with higher income enjoyed better access to private tutoring, learning resources, and quiet studying facilities in addition to learning environments that support the students, whereas the children who came to school with lower-income level had to deal with preparation difficulties that increased emotional stress. The research also identified significant psychological and emotional effects of such high-stakes test such as an increase in anxiety, perfectionism, fatigue, and even social isolation that influenced the motivation, interest, and well-being of students. In general, Grade Five Scholarship Examination does not represent only an academic test but rather a more comprehensive social process, which reflects the interaction of family, peer group, community, and structural factors that define the performance of children in education and the process of their overall growth. These results add to the significance of the use of holistic and context-sensitive interventions, such as the two-parent guidance, equal access to education, helpful school cultures, organized mental health care, and programs promoting collaborative and inclusive learning. These approaches are necessary to see that urban children do not only end up with academic performance, but also with psychological stability, social welfare, and personal sustainable growth, which would facilitate equity and child-oriented sustainability in education in urban Sri Lankan settings.

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