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# The Impact of Psychosocial Factors of the Grade 5 Scholarship Examination on Students' Self-Esteem

**Gunasekara, G.D.N.D,[1] and Senarath, S.[2]**

*[1]Faculty of Education, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka*
*[2]Department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka*
** Corresponding Author Email:* pgrsamudra@edpsy.cmb.ac.lk

**ABSTRACT**

This study examined the impact of psychosocial factors associated with the Grade 5 Scholarship Examination on primary school students' self-esteem across four division zones in the Sri Jayawardenepura Education Zone. Utilizing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, a sample of 320 male and female students was selected via stratified random sampling. Quantitative data were collected using the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (CSEI) and a self-developed psychosocial questionnaire, and analyzed using Spearman rank correlation, Mann–Whitney U, and Kruskal–Wallis H tests. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with fifty parents and fifty teachers to obtain deeper insights into students' exam experiences and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) Eight-step thematic analysis framework. The findings indicate that students are exposed to significant psychological pressures, including heavy academic workload, extensive participation in private tuition, high parental expectations, peer comparison, and reduced opportunities for play and rest. These factors contribute to increased psychological stress and negatively influence students' self-esteem. While gender does not show a significant influence, differences are observed across school types, with students from better-resourced schools demonstrating relatively higher self-esteem. The results of the analysis indicate a statistically significant and strong negative correlation between psychosocial factors and self-esteem. The study concludes that the Grade 5 Scholarship Examination functions as a major phycological stressor that affects students' self-esteem. It is recommended that educational policies adopt child-centred assessment approaches, strengthen school-based psychosocial support systems, and promote greater awareness among parents and teachers regarding balanced academic expectations to support children's overall well-being.

**Keywords:** *grade 5 scholarship examination, psychosocial factors, self-esteem, primary education*

## INTRODUCTION

The Grade 5 Scholarship Examination has become one of the most influential educational assessments in Sri Lanka. Originally introduced to promote educational equity by providing opportunities for academically talented children from disadvantaged backgrounds, the examination has gradually evolved into a highly competitive national event shaped by social

mobility aspirations and family expectations (Aturupane et al., 2013). In practice, preparation for the examination often begins at an early stage and involves extensive private tuition, prolonged study hours, and continuous parental supervision. For children in middle childhood (approximately 9–10 years), this creates a highly structured psychosocial environment in which academic performance, rankings, and perceived ability become central to their self-evaluation. During this developmental stage, self-esteem becomes increasingly dependent on external feedback from parents, teachers, and peers. While positive academic experiences may foster a sense of competence, persistent pressure, comparison, and fear of failure may lead to reduced confidence and feelings of inferiority (Harter, 2012; Orth & Robins, 2014).

Despite the equity-oriented intentions of the examination, growing evidence suggests that it generates significant psychological stress among young learners. The expansion of tuition culture, increased parental expectations, and the competitive nature of the examination system have reshaped children's daily lives, often reducing opportunities for play, rest, and social interaction. Such conditions raise important concerns regarding the impact of examination-related psychosocial factors on children's emotional well-being, particularly their self-esteem. However, existing research in Sri Lanka has largely focused on academic performance, examination outcomes, and tuition practices, with comparatively limited attention given to self-esteem as a psychosocial outcome. This represents a significant research gap, particularly given that self-esteem plays a crucial role in children's motivation, emotional resilience, and long-term psychological development. Therefore, the central research problem addressed in this study is to examine how psychosocial factors associated with the Grade 5 Scholarship Examination influence the self-esteem of primary school children.

This study adopts both a theoretical and empirical approach to address this problem. It is grounded in Erikson's theory of Industry versus Inferiority, which explains how children develop a sense of competence through achievement, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which highlights the influence of family, school, and societal contexts on child development. By integrating quantitative data from students with qualitative insights from parents and teachers, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how examination-related pressures shape children's self-esteem.

Based on the research problem outlined above, the study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify the psychosocial factors associated with the Grade 5 Scholarship Examination that affect students' self-esteem.
2. To examine the impact of psychosocial factors on the self-esteem of Grade 5 students.
3. To determine the existing levels of self-esteem among Grade 5 students.
4. To examine the influence of demographic factors (gender and school type) on the relationship between psychosocial factors and students' self-esteem.
5. To explore parents' and teachers' perceptions of the psychosocial issues arising from the Grade 5 Scholarship Examination and their effects on students' self-esteem.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### SELF-ESTEEM IN MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

Self-esteem is generally understood as the overall judgment a person makes about their own worth and competence. It is not an inborn characteristic, but a developmental outcome shaped through experience, particularly in childhood when children are more likely to compare themselves with others and to interpret feedback as a sign of being valued or not (Rosenberg, 1965; Coopersmith, 1967). During middle childhood, self-esteem is strongly associated with the sense of industriousness, social acceptance, and competence in activities that are valued.

School, family, and peer contexts are therefore of particular importance as sources of emotional support or distress.

The literature consistently indicates that academic pressure and high-stakes conditions may undermine children's self-esteem. Repeated testing, public comparison, and competitive ranking in schools can lead children to make academic performance the primary source of their self-worth. Pullmann and Allik (2008) and Joshi (2009) found that children who perceive themselves as less successful academically tend to report lower global self-esteem and higher levels of emotional strain. Similarly, studies grounded in family systems theory demonstrate that anxiety, self-doubt, and negative self-assessments are associated with excessive parental expectations and conditional approval (Rohner and Lansford, 2017; Peng et al., 2021).

## ACADEMIC PRESSURE, EXAMINATION CULTURE, AND PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS

Sri Lankan studies provide valuable contextual insights. Research on the Grade 5 Scholarship Examination reveals that tuition culture, parental pressure, and examination-based schedules reduce children's time for play and peer interaction, and increase fear of failure and emotional exhaustion (Irfana, 2014; Keembiyahetti, 2023). Teacher practices also have a significant impact: constructive feedback and a positive classroom atmosphere can strengthen self-esteem, whereas comparison-based practices may intensify feelings of inferiority (Priyadarshani & Senarath, 2021). These findings indicate that Grade 5 students develop their self-esteem through the combined influence of family, school, and examination culture, rather than through any single isolated factor.

A notable gap in the existing literature is also addressed by the current study. A large portion of Sri Lankan research on the Grade 5 Scholarship Examination has focused on examination performance, tuition practices, or academic stress, with comparatively little attention given to self-esteem as a psychosocial outcome. The present study addresses this gap by directly measuring students' self-esteem and examining its relationship to their examination-related experiences, thereby contributing a more developmental perspective to the field.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory (1968), particularly the stage of Industry versus Inferiority, explains how children in middle childhood develop self-esteem through achievement and social feedback. During this stage, children are highly influenced by parents, teachers, and peers, and excessive pressure or comparison may lead to feelings of inferiority. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) highlights how development is shaped by interactions within family, school, and society. Together, these theories provide a framework for understanding how psychosocial factors related to the Grade 5 Scholarship Examination influence students' self-esteem.

## METHODOLOGY

An explanatory sequential mixed-method and stratified random sampling design was adopted in this study to identify three hundred and twenty male and female (160 males and 160 females) Grade 5 students selected through 1AB, 1C, Type 2, and Type 3 government schools in four divisions named Kaduwela, Kolonnawa, Maharagama, and Nugegoda in the Sri Jayawardenapura Education Zone. The sample was gender-balanced and reflecting variations in resource availability, academic opportunities, and institutional contexts.

The primary quantitative data collection instruments included a printed questionnaire containing the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (CSEI) school form and a

self-developed psychosocial questionnaire. The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory is a standardized and widely validated instrument used to measure self-esteem and was administered in an appropriate form for Grade 5 students, with scoring conducted according to established guidelines. The scale consisted of 25 self-reported items. Each item was answered on a two-point scale 'like me' (1) and 'unlike me' (0). Reliability and validity for this study was ($\alpha = 0.87$).

The psychosocial questionnaire was developed by the researcher based on key factors identified in the literature, including parental expectations, academic pressure, tuition involvement, peer comparison, and emotional and physical difficulties. The instrument consisted of structured 15 items measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" response format, and total scores were calculated to identify the major psychosocial factors experienced by students.

Semi structured interviews were also conducted with fifty parents and fifty teachers using purposive sampling: allowing for an in-depth exploration of their experiences and perceptions and the data were thematically analyzed in a eight-step framework introduced by Braun and Clarke (2016). This approach was particularly appropriate for the present study, as it integrates numerical evidence with contextual understanding, thereby enhancing the validity, depth, and overall explanatory power of the research findings.

Due to nonnormality of the distribution and ordinality of the psychosocial data, the non-parametric tests were utilized: Spearman rank-order correlation was utilized to determine the relationship between psychosocial factors and self-esteem, Mann-Whitney U test was utilized to compare the boys and girls, and Kruskal-Wallis H test was utilized to compare the school types.

**Table 1**

*Study sample and analytic approach*

| Component | Details | Purpose |
|---|---|---|
| Quantitative sample | 320 grade 5 students | Measure self-esteem and psychosocial factors |
| Qualitative sample | 50 parents and 50 teachers | Explain lived psychosocial experiences |
| Measures | Csei; psychosocial questionnaire | Collect comparable student level data |
| Analysis | Spearman, mann-whitney U, kruskal-wallis, thematic analysis | Examine relationships and meanings |

The selected design was appropriate because it allowed the study to capture both measurable patterns and the social meanings behind those patterns. Quantitative analysis identified relationships and differences, while qualitative analysis explained how parents and teachers interpreted the emotional costs of the examination. The design also supported triangulation across instruments, which strengthened the credibility of the findings.

Informed consent was obtained from the participants and their parents and permission was obtained from the school authorities as part of the study process. Because the participants were children, the data collection process was designed to be simple, child-friendly, and respectful of their age and school routines. Ethical clearance was approved by the faculty research committee of the Faculty of Education.

## RESULTS

### RELIABILITY OF RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

Prior to the main analysis, the reliability of the research instruments was assessed to ensure internal consistency. The researcher-developed psychosocial questionnaire, consisting of 15 Likert-scale items, yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .820, indicating good reliability and confirming that the instrument consistently measured psychosocial factors related to the Grade 5 Scholarship Examination. The CSEI, used to measure students' self-esteem, is a standardized instrument with previously established reliability (α = .80–.90; Coopersmith, 2002) and was therefore considered appropriate without further reliability testing.

### PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH THE GRADE 5 SCHOLARSHIP EXAMINATION

Descriptive statistical analysis revealed that students are highly engaged in an examination-oriented routine. A significant majority (87%) of students attended private tuition classes, while 62% reported studying for 6–8 hours daily in addition to regular school hours. Many students also experienced long commuting times and limited access to a quiet study environment. These findings indicate that students' daily routines are heavily structured around examination preparation, reducing opportunities for leisure, rest, and social interaction that are essential for healthy psychosocial development.

A Relative Importance Index (RII) analysis was conducted to identify and rank the psychosocial factors influencing students' self-esteem. RII values ranged from .558 to .664, indicating varying levels of influence. The most influential factors were demanding school routines (RII = .664), fear of disappointing parents (RII = .655), and emotional exhaustion due to continuous studying (RII = .644). Other significant factors included reduced leisure time (RII = .638), sleep disturbances caused by examination-related stress (RII = .634), and peer comparison (RII = .633). In contrast, factors related to social support (RII = .572) and self-belief (RII = .558) were ranked lower, suggesting that external pressures exert a stronger influence on students than internal coping mechanisms. Overall, the RII findings indicate that academic workload, parental expectations, and emotional stress are the most dominant psychosocial factors affecting students' self-esteem.

**Table 2**

*Ranking of Psychosocial Factors Based on Relative Importance Index (RII)*

| Code | Item | F1 | F2 | F3 | F4 | F5 | RII | Rank |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | Opinion about the school routine these days | 47 | 52 | 66 | 62 | 93 | .664 | 1 |
| P2 | Reluctance to play with friends due to studying | 56 | 54 | 61 | 71 | 78 | .638 | 4 |
| P3 | Stopped hobbies (drawing, sports, music) to study | 54 | 55 | 74 | 67 | 70 | .628 | 7 |
| P4 | Difficulty sleeping due to thinking about the exam | 49 | 64 | 71 | 55 | 81 | .634 | 5 |
| P5 | Loss of appetite when thinking about the exam | 63 | 62 | 60 | 57 | 78 | .616 | 10 |
| P6 | Feeling tired or sad while studying for the exam | 58 | 59 | 62 | 63 | 78 | .628 | 7 |
| P7 | Has someone to talk to when feeling stressed | 72 | 72 | 60 | 61 | 55 | .572 | 13 |
| P8 | Feeling tired/unhappy most days due to studying | 41 | 69 | 67 | 65 | 78 | .644 | 3 |
| P9 | Belief in learning and happiness even without passing | 76 | 75 | 56 | 66 | 47 | .558 | 15 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P10 | Confidence in doing well in the examination | 77 | 68 | 70 | 50 | 55 | .561 | 14 |
| P11 | Nervousness when the teacher discusses results | 56 | 68 | 69 | 56 | 71 | .611 | 12 |
| P12 | Worry about disappointing parents | 47 | 61 | 58 | 65 | 89 | .655 | 2 |
| P13 | Attending many tuition classes because of the exam | 63 | 62 | 53 | 60 | 82 | .623 | 9 |
| P14 | Feeling the need to study more because peers do | 56 | 63 | 51 | 73 | 77 | .633 | 6 |
| P15 | Worry about losing friends over poor marks | 59 | 66 | 61 | 60 | 74 | .615 | 11 |

*Note. F1–F5 = response frequencies across the five-point scale (from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'); RII = Relative Importance Index.*

## IMPACT OF PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS ON STUDENTS' SELF-ESTEEM

Spearman's rank-order correlation revealed a strong and statistically significant negative relationship between psychosocial factors and self-esteem ($r_s = -.613$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of psychosocial pressure are associated with lower levels of self-esteem among students.

### Table 3

*Correlation Between Psychosocial Factors and Self-Esteem (Spearman's rho)*

| | | Psychosocial Level | CSEI Level |
|---|---|---|---|
| Psychosocial Level | Correlation Coefficient | 1.000 | –.613** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | — | .000 |
| | N | 320 | 320 |
| CSEI Level | Correlation Coefficient | –.613** | 1.000 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | — |
| | N | 320 | 320 |

*Note. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

## LEVELS OF SELF-ESTEEM AMONG GRADE 5 STUDENTS

The distribution of self-esteem levels, measured using the CSEI, showed that 30.6% (n = 98) of students had low self-esteem, 22.5% (n = 72) had moderate self-esteem, and 46.9% (n = 150) had high self-esteem. Although nearly half of the students demonstrated high self-esteem, a considerable proportion (53.1%) fell within the low-to-moderate range, indicating potential psychological vulnerability among a substantial segment of the sample.

### Table 4

*Distribution of Self-Esteem Levels Among Grade 5 Students (N = 320)*

| Self-Esteem Level | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Low | 98 | 30.6% |
| Moderate | 72 | 22.5% |
| High | 150 | 46.9% |

## INFLUENCE OF DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS ON SELF-ESTEEM

The Mann–Whitney U test was employed to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in the study variables based on gender and school type**.**

**Table 5**

*Mann–Whitney U Test Ranks for Gender Differences (N = 320)*

| Variable | Gender | N | Mean Rank | Sum of Ranks |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Psychosocial Level | Male | 160 | 158.58 | 25373.00 |
| | Female | 160 | 162.42 | 25987.00 |
| CSEI Level | Male | 160 | 163.90 | 26224.50 |
| | Female | 160 | 157.10 | 25135.50 |

Table 5 presents the mean ranks and sum of ranks for psychosocial level and self-esteem (CSEI level) according to gender. For psychosocial level, male students obtained a mean rank of 158.58, while female students obtained a slightly higher mean rank of 162.42. For CSEI level, male students had a mean rank of 163.90, compared with 157.10 for female students. Although these mean ranks indicate small differences between male and female students, statistical significance must be determined using the Mann–Whitney U test results presented in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*Test Statistics for Mann–Whitney U Test (Grouping Variable: Gender)*

| Statistic | Psychosocial Level | CSEI Level |
|---|---|---|
| Mann–Whitney U | 12493.000 | 12255.500 |
| Wilcoxon W | 25373.000 | 25135.500 |
| Z | −.401 | −.704 |
| Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) | .689 | .481 |

Table 6 shows the Mann–Whitney U test results for differences between male and female students. The results indicate that there was no statistically significant difference in psychosocial level between male and female students (U = 12,493.00, Z = −0.401, p = .689). Similarly, no statistically significant difference was found in self-esteem (CSEI level) between male and female students (U = 12,255.50, Z = −0.704, p = .481).

Since both p-values are greater than the .05 significance level, the null hypothesis of no gender difference is retained. Therefore, gender did not significantly influence either psychosocial level or self-esteem among the students in this study. Although the mean ranks differed slightly between males and females, these differences were not sufficiently large to be considered statistically significant.

Table 7 presents the mean ranks of psychosocial level and self-esteem across the four school types. For psychosocial level, the highest mean rank was observed among Type 3 students (186.72), followed by Type 2 students (185.25), 1C students (148.97), and 1AB students (132.49). This pattern suggests that psychosocial difficulties varied considerably across school types.

**Table 7**

*Kruskal–Wallis Test Ranks for School Type Differences (N = 320)*

| Variable | School Type | N | Mean Rank |
|---|---|---|---|
| Psychosocial Level | 1AB | 90 | 132.49 |
| | 1C | 90 | 148.97 |
| | Type 2 | 76 | 185.25 |
| | Type 3 | 64 | 186.72 |
| CSEI Level | 1AB | 90 | 194.58 |
| | 1C | 90 | 169.63 |
| | Type 2 | 76 | 141.06 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Type 3 | 64 | 122.82 |

For self-esteem (CSEI level), 1AB students recorded the highest mean rank (194.58), followed by 1C students (169.63), Type 2 students (141.06), and Type 3 students (122.82). The higher mean ranks indicate relatively higher self-esteem scores among students in 1AB and 1C schools compared with those in Type 2 and Type 3 schools. However, the statistical significance of these differences should be interpreted using the Kruskal–Wallis test results presented in Table 8.

**Table 8**

*Test Statistics for Kruskal–Wallis Test (Grouping Variable: School Type)*

| Statistic | Psychosocial Level | CSEI Level |
|---|---|---|
| Kruskal–Wallis H | 23.604 | 30.995 |
| df | 3 | 3 |
| Asymp. Sig. | .000 | .000 |

Table 8 indicates statistically significant differences in both psychosocial level and self-esteem across the four school types. A significant difference was found in psychosocial level, $H(3) = 23.604$, $p < .001$. Similarly, a statistically significant difference was observed in self-esteem (CSEI level), $H(3) = 30.995$, $p < .001$.

As both p-values are below the .05 significance level, the null hypotheses are rejected. These findings indicate that students' psychosocial experiences and self-esteem differed significantly according to school type. In particular, the differences in CSEI mean ranks shown in Table 7 suggest that students from 1AB schools had comparatively higher self-esteem, whereas students from Type 3 schools had comparatively lower self-esteem. However, the Kruskal–Wallis test only establishes that at least one school type differs significantly from another. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons would be required to determine exactly which school types differ significantly from each other.

**Table 9**

*Summary of Key Quantitative Findings*

| Area | Variables Examined | Statistical Test | Key Results |
|---|---|---|---|
| Psychosocial factor ranking | 15 questionnaire items | RII analysis | Highest: routine (.664), parental pressure (.655) |
| Relationship with self-esteem | Psychosocial level & CSEI | Spearman's correlation | $r_s = -.613$, $p < .001$ |
| Self-esteem distribution | CSEI categories | Descriptive statistics | Low: 30.6%, Moderate: 22.5%, High: 46.9% |
| Gender differences | Gender & self-esteem | Mann–Whitney U | $p = .481$ (not significant) |
| School type differences | School type & self-esteem | Kruskal–Wallis H | $p < .001$ (significant) |

Table 9 summarises the major quantitative findings of the study. The Relative Importance Index (RII) identified routine-related factors (.664) and parental pressure (.655) as the most prominent psychosocial factors among the 15 questionnaire items. Furthermore, Spearman's rank-order correlation revealed a statistically significant and relatively strong negative relationship between psychosocial level and self-esteem ($r_s = -.613$, $p < .001$),

indicating that higher levels of psychosocial difficulties were associated with lower levels of self-esteem.

The distribution of CSEI scores showed that 46.9% of students had high self-esteem, 22.5% had moderate self-esteem, and 30.6% had low self-esteem. Regarding demographic differences, gender was not significantly associated with self-esteem (Mann–Whitney U, $p = .481$). In contrast, school type was significantly associated with self-esteem (Kruskal–Wallis H, $p < .001$). Overall, the findings suggest that school context may play a more significant role than gender in explaining differences in students' self-esteem.

## PARENTS' AND TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PSYCHOSOCIAL ISSUES

The qualitative findings further supported and explained the quantitative results. Parents described daily routines dominated by tuition classes and structured study schedules, while teachers observed increased fatigue, anxiety, and reduced classroom participation among students. Key themes included exam-centred routines, emotional stress and anxiety, parental expectations, peer comparison, and reduced recreational activities. A notable difference was observed between parents' and teachers' perspectives: parents often viewed examination preparation as necessary for future success, whereas teachers emphasized its negative impact on students' emotional well-being and confidence. This contrast highlights how the examination is perceived differently by adults but experienced as a source of pressure by children.

The findings demonstrate that psychosocial pressure is a significant factor influencing students' self-esteem. The results indicate that self-esteem among Grade 5 students is shaped by the combined influence of academic demands, parental expectations, peer competition, and school context, with external environmental factors playing a dominant role. The qualitative analysis of parent responses revealed eight major themes related to the impact of the Grade 5 examination on children, families, and parental experiences as following table 10.

**Table 10**

*Parent responses*

| QN | Parent Responses | Initial Codes | Final Themes |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | "Before this exam, my child used to play every evening. Now almost all the time is spent going to tuition or studying at home." | Reduced playtime; increased tuition | Theme1: Routine and Lifestyle Adjustments |
| | "Our daily routine has completely changed. Everything revolves around study schedules and tuition classes." | Exam-centred daily routine | |
| **2** | "I feel very stressed thinking about this exam. I worry what will happen if my child does not pass." | Parental stress; fear of failure | Theme 2 : Emotional Stress and Parental Anxiety |
| | "Sometimes my anxiety transfers to my child even when I try not to show it." | Anxiety transmission | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **3** | "My child has become more irritable and gets upset easily. There are days he refuses to study." | Irritability; emotional changes | Theme 3: Behavioral and Emotional Changes |
| | "Sleep has reduced a lot. He wakes up early for tuition and studies late at night." | Sleep reduction; fatigue | |
| **4** | "We had to stop extracurricular activities like dancing and sports because there is no time." | Reduced recreation time | Theme 4: Reduction in Recreational Activities |
| | "There is hardly any time for family outings or relaxation anymore." | Loss of leisure | |
| **5** | "Most of our family conversations are now about marks, tuition, and exam preparation." | Exam-centered family discussions | Theme 5: Family Communication Shifts |
| | "Sometimes discussions become tense when results are not as expected." | Family tension | |
| **6** | "When my child looks stressed, I try to encourage and calm him down." | Parental emotional support | Theme 6: Parental Supportive Interventions |
| | "I talk to the class teacher to understand how my child is coping in school." | Teacher collaboration | |
| **7** | "We expect our child to do well because this exam can change their future." | High academic expectations | Theme 7: Parental Expectations and Exam Pressure |
| | "Society and relatives also ask about the exam results, which increases pressure." | Societal pressure | |
| **8** | "The exam has become too competitive for small children." | Exam complexity | Theme 8: Attitudes Toward Examination Reform |
| | "There should be alternative ways to assess children instead of so much pressure at Grade 5." | Need for reform | |

Overall, the findings show that psychosocial pressure is not merely an unpleasant aspect of the examination process; it is closely associated with how children see themselves. The results therefore support the view that the interaction of academic demands, adult expectations, peer comparison, and school context shapes self-esteem among Grade 5 students.

## DISCUSSION

This study frames the Grade 5 Scholarship Examination as a significant psychosocial phenomenon rather than a mere academic assessment, showing that its associated pressures are deeply linked to children's self-perceptions. The findings align with Erikson's (1968) concept of industry versus inferiority and Harter's (2012) assertion that when self-worth depends entirely on external validation, children become highly vulnerable to feelings of inadequacy. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, this research confirms that psychosocial stress is a multi-layered product of interconnected influences across family, school, and societal contexts. Specifically, the finding that parental expectations function as a dominant stressor — marked by a prominent fear of disappointing parents (RII = .655) — directly corroborates Irfana and Kanesarajah (2014), who documented that excessive parental monitoring and performance pressure lead to behavioural difficulties, fear, and reduced self-confidence in primary students.

Furthermore, the study illustrates the heavy toll of Sri Lanka's tuition culture. The quantitative data show that 87% of students attend private tuition and 62% study for six to eight hours daily beyond regular school hours. This directly mirrors Keembiyahetti's (2023) findings that prolonged tuition hours and continuous assessment exposure lead to fatigue, stress, and emotional disengagement by stripping children of opportunities for play and rest. This research extends that work by establishing a statistically significant negative relationship between tuition-related pressures and self-esteem ($r_s = -.613$, $p < .001$). Qualitatively, the results align with Priyadarshani and Senarath (2021), confirming that a competitive classroom environment and performance-comparison practices intensify student anxiety, fatigue, and feelings of inadequacy, underscoring the need to move toward supportive, mastery-oriented instructional settings.

Structurally, the study reveals that resource disparities within the school system translate directly into unequal psychological outcomes. The Kruskal–Wallis test results, $H(3) = 30.995$, $p < .001$, confirm that students from well-resourced Type 1AB schools exhibit significantly higher self-esteem than those from Type 2 and Type 3 schools. This disparity aligns with Keembiyahetti (2023), illustrating that the examination's psychosocial burden disproportionately impacts socioeconomically disadvantaged children. It also confirms Rohner and Lansford's (2017) view that access to supportive school environments can moderate academic stress. Interestingly, the intensity of this examination culture appears to override the gender-based variations often observed internationally, as no significant gender differences in self-esteem were found. Ultimately, these findings echo the World Health Organization's (2021) call for balanced development during middle childhood, suggesting that structural inequalities and excessive academic demands collectively restructure routines and compromise healthy self-esteem formation among primary school children.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the psychosocial impact of the Grade 5 Scholarship Examination on the self-esteem of primary school students in the Sri Jayawardenapura Education Zone. The psychosocial factors associated with the examination that affect students' self-esteem — the study found that demanding school routines (RII = .664), fear of disappointing parents (RII = .655), and emotional exhaustion from continuous study (RII = .644) were the most influential factors. Academic workload, parental expectations, and emotional stress consistently emerged as the dominant psychosocial pressures shaping students' experiences.

The impact of psychosocial factors on self-esteem — Spearman's rank-order correlation revealed a strong and statistically significant negative relationship ($r_s = -.613$, $p < .001$). This confirms that higher levels of psychosocial pressure are directly associated with lower self-esteem among Grade 5 students, reinforcing the view that the examination functions as a significant psychological stressor. The existing levels of self-esteem — the CSEI results showed that while 46.9% of students had high self-esteem, a substantial proportion (53.1%) fell within the low-to-moderate range. This indicates that a majority of students are psychologically vulnerable during the period of examination preparation, signalling an urgent need for supportive intervention.

The influence of demographic factors — the study found that gender did not produce a statistically significant difference in self-esteem (Mann–Whitney U, $p = .481$), suggesting that examination-related pressures are experienced similarly by boys and girls. The study further demonstrated that school type was a significant factor (Kruskal–Wallis H, $p < .001$), with students from better-resourced schools reporting higher self-esteem. This finding highlights the role of institutional context and resource availability and underscores the need for targeted psychological support in under-resourced environments. Parents' and teachers' perceptions of psychosocial issues — qualitative findings revealed a meaningful contrast. Parents tended to frame examination preparation as a necessary investment in their child's future, while

teachers more readily identified signs of emotional fatigue, withdrawal, and declining confidence in their students. Both perspectives together confirm that the examination environment restructures children's daily lives and interpersonal relationships in ways that undermine their psychological well-being.

Taken together, these findings reinforce the view that the Grade 5 Scholarship Examination functions as a powerful psychosocial influence on children's development. While it serves important educational equity purposes, its associated pressures risk undermining students' self-esteem and overall well-being. It is therefore recommended that educational policy adopt child-centred assessment approaches, strengthen school-based psychosocial support systems, and promote greater awareness among parents and teachers of the importance of balanced academic expectations in supporting children's holistic development.

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