Examination Stress and Stress Resilience: A Qualitative Study of Adolescent Students in Sri Lankan Government Schools

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Introduction
The 21st century world is hyperconnected, fast changing and riddled with complexity more than at any time in the history. As people in this rapidly changing world face many demands and challenges in their lives, stress appears to be a common experience to every individual (Balaji et al., 2019; Sedere, 2010, Sonali, 2018). A particular demographic group with a high stress level is adolescent students in the secondary schools. In addition to the developmental challenges, adolescent students in secondary schools appear to experience enormous stress due to some other major sources of stress in academic environments that may include a heavy academic workload (Sonali, 2018; Suswati & Panggali, 2017), examinations (Attiya et al., 2007; Sedere, 2007, 2010, Sonali, 2018; Suswati & Panggali, 2017), the negative consequences of failures (Attiya et al., 2007; Sedere et al., 2010; Sedere, 2007; Sedere, 2010, Sonali, 2018), and conflicting interests (Sedere, 2010). Of these sources of stress, examinations appear to be among the most significant (Carver & Scheier, 1994; Kai Wen, 2009; Spangler et al., 2002). Of note, public examination is the only means available in Sri Lanka to prove that one has learnt the expected subject content to secure educational opportunities at the next level. Subsequently, examination stress has become a serious issue amongst adolescent students at secondary and collegiate levels in Sri Lanka (Ministry of Education, 2013; Nastasi et al., 2007). A thoughtful evaluation of stress during exam situations, stressors and trigger factors that predict increased stress may inform educators, teachers, counsellors, and policy makers to design evidence-based approaches to better help adolescent students with better stress management.

Methods
This qualitative study used semi structured interviews to collect data from 27 adolescent students from the collegiate level classes in the government schools in Jaffna and Anuradhapura zones in Sri Lanka. The participants cohort consisted of adolescent students from all ethnic (Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim) and religious (Buddhist, Hindu, Christians, and Muslim) groups in Sri Lanka. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio-taped and transcribed for further data analysis. Analysis of interview data was guided by grounded theory, which provides systematic procedure to identify codes and categories. The coding process operated inductively and moved iteratively through three coding stages, namely open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During open coding, each line of the interview transcript was examined phrase by phrase or even word by word (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to identify categories, which refer to groups of concepts or instances (i.e., events, processes, and occurrences) that share common features or characteristics with one another (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Thereafter, axial coding makes connections between categories and subcategories (Creswell, 2012) to form key categories. Finally, selective coding involves the interlinking of the key categories developed in the axial coding to form the initial theoretical framework or tentative model (Creswell, 2012).

Results
Key categories and categories

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<tr>
<th>Examination Stress</th>
<th>Stress at preparation stage</th>
<th>Stress at confrontation stage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stress at waiting stage</td>
<td>Stress at outcome stage</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Seek emotional support</td>
<td>Parental support</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Seek support for learning</td>
<td>Peer support</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teachers' support</td>
<td>Siblings' support</td>
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<td>Father's support</td>
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<td>Teachers' expectation for high achievement</td>
<td>Teachers' expectation for high achievement</td>
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Conclusions
The findings of the study revealed that trigger factors including panic keeping role of exams for students’ career and academic opportunities, fear of failure, competition for admission, and expectations for achievement represent the major stressors for the adolescent students. Students experience stress during all phases namely preparation, confrontation, waiting and outcome stages during exam situations. They appear to use several strategies including seek emotional support, seek support for learning, self-regulated learning, blame self/other, ignorance, spiritual belief, relaxing diversions, positive re-interpretation and acceptance to cope with their stress. Findings of this study may contribute to the development of effective interventions to mitigate stress among adolescent students and help students to develop their abilities to cope with stress during exam situations.

References

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