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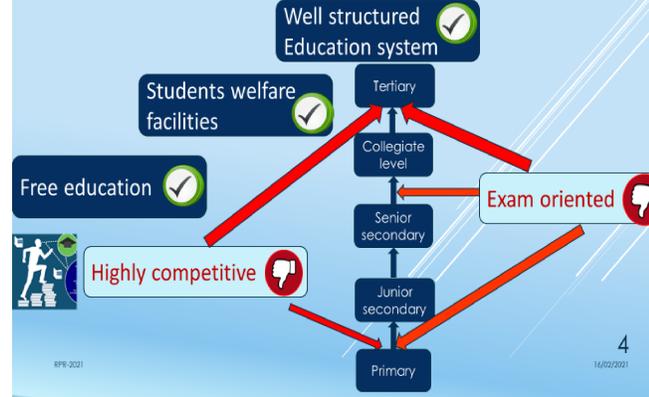
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Introduction

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 & Panggalih, 2017), examinations (Attiya et al., 2007; Sedere, 2010; Sonali, 2018; Suswati & Panggalih, 2017), the negative consequences of failures (Attiya et al., 2007), competition with other students (Attiya et al., 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 Sir 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.

Objectives

The major objectives of this study were:

1. To identify the trigger factors that cause stress among adolescent students in exam situations

2. To explore the levels of stress experienced by adolescent students during different phases of exam situations

3. To examine stress management strategies used by adolescent students to cope with their stress

Context: Examination Stress, Sri Lankan Education System

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 (Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, and Muslims) 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).
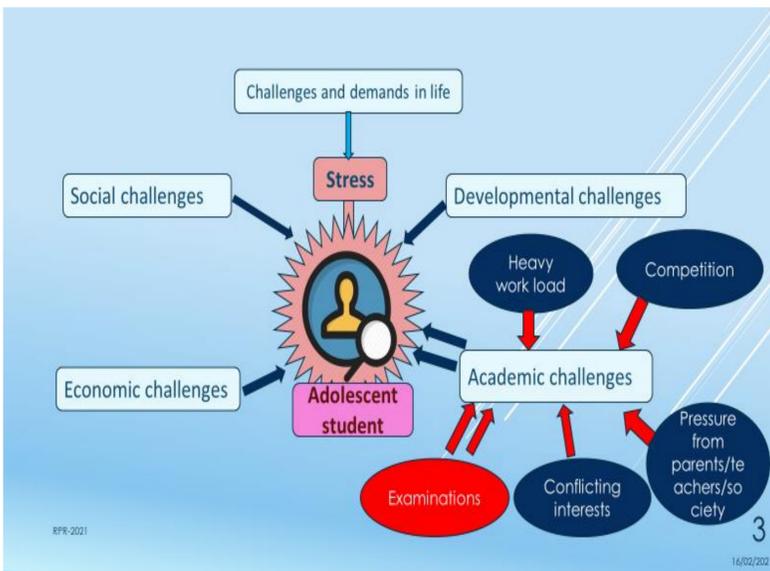

Results
Key categories and categories

Category	subcategory
Stressors	Employment
	Higher education
	Competition for admission
	Fear of failure of ambition
	Social respect
	Expectation for achievement
	Parental expectation for high achievement
	Teachers' expectation for high achievement
	Self-expectation for high achievement
Examination stress	Stress at preparation stage
	Stress at confrontation stage
	Stress at waiting stage
	Stress at outcome stage
Seek emotional support	Parental support
	Father's support
	Mother's support
	Siblings' support
	Peer support
	Teachers' support
Seek support for learning	Seeking Peer support
	Seeking teachers' support
Spiritual/ religious belief	Seek spiritual support
Self-regulated learning	Concentration/Involvement
	Maintain high achievement
	Full preparation for exam
	Practicing for exam
	Collaborative learning
	Work Hard
Relaxing diversions	Recreation activities
	Socio-cultural interactions
	Sports and leisure
Blaming self/others	Self-blame
	Attribute failure to others
Ignorance/avoidance	
Positive re-interpretation	
Acceptance	

Conclusions

The findings of the study revealed that trigger factors including gate 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 their exam situations. They appear to use several strategies including seek emotional support, seek support for learning, self-regulated learning, blame self/others, 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 to help students to develop their abilities to cope with stress during exam situations.

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